'Space is the Place:' Afrofuturism in Black Popular Music

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‘SPACE IS THE PLACE:’ AFROFUTURISM IN BLACK
POPULAR MUSIC

A Dissertation

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Louisiana State University and
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by
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ABSTRACT

The dissertation focuses on developing a theory of Afropoturist music. Afropoturism is an umbrella term used to describe black cultural productions that reflect on the African diasporic culture of the past while imagining potential futures, often while appropriating imagery of technology and science-fiction tropes. With the intent of redefining notions of blackness, Afropoturist artists create alternative historical narratives and speculative future projections. These productions create space that allows the Afropoturist to discorporately negotiate the limits of black subjectivity. Using selections from popular artists Erykah Badu, OutKast, and Janelle Monáe as case studies, I demonstrate how these artists use Afropoturist speculative thought to inform their music, videos, and overall aesthetic, especially as it relates to style, form, and temporality.

Scholarship of black popular music in general, specifically rap and hip-hop, is typically musicological or ethnomusicological in nature, focusing on extra-musical aspects like history, linguistics, and cultural impact. This project incorporates theoretical analysis so as to bring into sharper relief the complex intertextualities within black popular music. My methodology melds pre-existing interdisciplinary literature with traditional and non-traditional musical analysis to better analyze unique sonic phenomena employed by Afropoturist musicians as well as contextualizing these phenomena in what I call “Afropoturist space.” These analyses demonstrate how future scholarship on Afropoturist music can remain sensitive to its Afropoturist context, while expanding theoretical frameworks to better deal with issues of teleology, cyclicity, and interconnected musical narrative in black popular music.
CHAPTER 1. SPACE IS THE PLACE

1.1. Introduction

Music can break down
Any door.
Be it stone or iron.
— Sun Ra
“Brother of the Sun (1989)”

The opening minutes of *Space is the Place* (1974) are perplexing. A peculiarly shaped orange spaceship sails through deep space, suddenly accompanied by a booming, female voice chanting: “It’s after the end of the world! Don’t you know that yet?” As the orange vessel glides into nothingness, the scene shifts to an alien planet filled with unusual, colorful flora. A trumpet nervously sputters over a discordant organ. Synthesized whirring and wheezing snakes in and out and a hand drum plays irrespective of all. Suddenly, a Black man dressed in ancient Egyptian iconography with an outlandishly adorned headdress appears. The man, who is followed by a nail-shaped floating droid and a figure clad in all black with a mirror for a head, silently inspects the strange planet. The man hums to himself and finally speaks:

The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth. Planet Earth sound of guns, anger, frustration. There was no one to talk up on planet Earth who’d understand. We’ll set up a colony for Black people here. See what they can do on a planet all on their own without any white people there. They could drink in the beauty of this planet. It would affect their vibrations. For the better of course... Equation wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We’ll work on the other side of time. We’ll bring them here through either isotope, teleportation, transmolecularization or better still, teleport the whole planet here through music.³

After deciding on the appropriate method of resettlement, an image of Ra with crossed arms spins as the title card finally appears. The movie properly begins as the initial cacophonous music begins to fade out while a honky tonk piano fades in, transporting the viewer to 1940s Chicago.

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² *Space is the Place*, directed by John Coney (1974; Plexifilm, 2003).
³ Ibid.
The regally dressed man is American avant garde jazz musician and poet Sun Ra. The booming voice belongs to June Tyson and Ra’s big band, credited here as the Intergalactic Solar Arkestra, provided the free jazz that accompanies this scene. This experimental blaxploitation film is partially based on a lecture series Ra gave at the University of California at Berkeley in 1971 entitled “The Black Man in the Cosmos.” The sights, sounds, and speech presented in the preamble of Space is the Place falls under the umbrella of Afrofuturism—an aesthetic and critical viewpoint that sits at the “intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.”

Three key moments from this film personify Ra’s ideology.

The first occurs immediately after the cold open where we see Ra (called Sonny Ray here) playing piano at a lounge bar, a reference to the early days of his career playing in and around Birmingham and southside Chicago. The audience is somewhat diverse and appears to be sophisticated (Youngquist refers to them as uppity) with one white woman commenting on Ra’s talent. However, a Black man dressed in a white suit named the Overseer (played by Ray Johnson) calls the owner over to complain about Ra’s playing and demands that the show begins. The owner obliges and introduces the Ebony Steppers. Ra continues to play lounge jazz, however, confusing the audience and the dancers. He eventually begins to play a boogie woogie and the dancers begin to dance. Ra’s playing suddenly becomes cacophonous and the scene quickly devolves into chaos as Ra’s piano begins to smoke while drink glasses shatter and the lounge patrons scream and head for the exits. Once the bar has been cleared out, Ra stops playing and turns to address the Overseer asking him “Are you ready to alter your destiny?” They then discuss what card game to play with Ra suggesting a game called “the end of the world” while holding up a tarot deck. The Overseer agrees and the scene abruptly transitions to a desolate, desert environment. The two characters are

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seated at a table and Ra’s modern clothes have transformed into a costume more akin to the beginning of the movie. The scene references Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* as Ra and the Overseer play for the fate of Black people and the world. After the Overseer draws The World, Ra ominously draws the Judgment card which bears the image of his spaceship, portending the imminent arrival of the Arkestra from outer space.

This scene establishes the Overseer as Ra’s natural antagonist. Ra’s intention is to prepare the souls of Black folks for his alternative to the “guns, anger, and frustration” of planet Earth. Like the biblical Lucifer, the Overseer seeks to disrupt that plan. His title is not accidental. As plantations grew in size in the antebellum south, it became routine for planters to employ laborers to act as administrators to relieve them of certain duties. Their responsibilities and compensation varied according to the size and location of the plantation.⁵ The majority of overseers were semi-professional men who were using the position to save enough money to eventually move on from the position, or close relatives of the planter who were learning how to be planters themselves. However, it was the class of men known as “poor, white trash” that contributed to the common perception that overseers were overzealous minions with a reputation for cruelty towards enslaved Blacks.⁶ Phillips comments on this reputation stating that “[a]s a rule…[overseers] were crude in manner, barely literate, commonplace in capacity, capable only of ruling slaves by severity in a rule-of-thumb routine, and needing fairly constant oversight by their employers.”⁷ Many planters, however, relied on enslaved foremen to perform the job of an overseer and research and slave narratives suggest that they did so competently, sans the cruelty associated with white

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Enslaved foremen did not typically carry the title of Overseer, possibly to avoid awkwardness and to preserve the racial hierarchy. Knowing this, we can understand Ray Johnson’s villainous portrayal of the Overseer as a caricature; an arrogant, libidinous Uncle Tom who lords his power over fellow Blacks, ignorant to the fact that he is an exploited tool used to reinforce white hegemony. Youngquist explains:

The Overseer…accepts material reality on its own terms and exploits its every potential for worldly gain and happiness[…]The Overseer’s identity indicates that, historically considered, life for Blacks occurs on a plantation of now planetary proportions. The best they can hope for is the dubious reward of proxy domination, the Overseer’s Black rule over Blacks, sustained, of course, by a white state and its security network. Alter-destiny advances an… alternative, spiritual in aspiration and mythological in means.

Johnson’s Overseer, then, ultimately functions as a cautionary tale. In Ra’s eyes, those that accept the reality of this world and reject myth are doomed.

The next pivotal moment occurs at the film’s climax. After three young Black men help Ra escape being held against his will by NASA agents, Ra and his Arkestra can be seen performing a concert in full Egyptian themed regalia. The NASA agents lurk backstage, waiting for an opportunity to shoot Ra. As the Arkestra’s improvisations become more and more intense, Ra loudly intones “I hate your positive, absolute reality!” One of the young men intervenes, taking a bullet for Ra and dies on the spot, while the Overseer observes. While the second young man comes over to help his fallen friend, Ra extends a hand in their direction. They instantly vanish and reappear aboard Ra’s spaceship. The third young man who was shown wrestling with the agent who shot his friend gets the same treatment from Ra and vanishes. The second NASA agent looks

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9 Ibid., 439.
on in disbelief as Ra smirks and vanishes himself. The improvisations on the Minimoog synthesizer that were playing during these events abruptly stop as Ra disappears.

Finally, in the last five minutes of the film, Ra appears outside of his ship accepting Black people who choose to believe in his message. The owner of the lounge Ra was playing at earlier tries to negotiate his way onto Ra’s ship. Ra responds by saying “I will measure you by the dispense of your Black ancestors. Your acceptance might not be what you expect.” “I’ll take my chances,” says the lounge owner as he turns to walk away. Ra stops him saying that he cannot take the Black part of him (lounge owner) with him. That part will instead leave with Ra. With the same gesture Ra used to transport the young men, the “Black part” of the lounge owner appears on the ship. The “white part” then goes to confront the Overseer. The lounge owner now refers to the Overseer as “colored” and leaves with the Overseer’s (white) girlfriend. Enraged, the Overseer runs in vain to catch Ra before he leaves. Ra gives this final benediction: “Farewell Earthlings. You just want to talk of realities, no myths. Well I am The Myth talking to you! So it’s farewell.”

The spaceship takes off leaving an obliterated Earth in its wake. We hear June Tyson recites this poem:

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In some far off place
Many lightyears in space
We’ll wait for you.

Where human feet have never trod
Where human eyes have never seen
We’ll build a world of abstract dream myth

In tomorrow’s realm
We’ll take the helm of a new ship
And wait for you.

Like the lash of a whip
We’ll take the journey
To another world
Another world’s world!11
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The end of Space belies Sun Ra’s contempt for reality and preference for what he called “myth-science.”12 Paul Youngquist describes “myth-science” as “the form that knowledge takes as space music...the Arkestra creates knowledge running counter to normal science and its positivist presumptions. Music as science and science as myth.”13 During his lecture at UC Berkeley, Ra explained that “[e]very myth is a mathematical parable. Myth is another form of truth, a parable is a myth; it is a parallel assertion.”14 Therefore, myth-science is musical and linguistic and for Ra, there was no distinguishable difference between the two. Ra stated in his essay “My Music is Words:”

My words are music and the music is words but sometimes the music is of the unsaid words concerning the things that always are to be, thus from the unsaid words which are of not because they are of those things which always are to be.15

The “not” Ra refers to here relates to his related concept of astro-blackness. In Sun Ra’s astro-black philosophy the nothingness or “notness” of myth begets sound. Ra explains that “[s]ound, soundlessness are both music for soundlessness has its own feel and field of sound-degree…[t]he nothing is the whole note of music, within that nothing is the divisional manifestations of the elements of rhythm, and the analyzation quintessence of the melody.”16 Ra connects this nothingness to blackness and the perceived social value of blackness: “[Black people] are priceless. They have no price. They’re worthless. Which makes them priceless. They ain’t worth nothing.”17 In other words, from nothing there is the potential for all things and the same is true for black music: “Natural Black music projects the myth of Blackness / And he who is not Black in spirit will never know.”18 As Youngquist states, “Sun Ra changes the race game from skin tone to sound tone. Music projects myth, and both are black, as black as space...By assimilating blackness to

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12 The term “myth-science” first appeared as another moniker for the Arkestra on the record Secrets of the Sun (1963).
13 Youngquist, A Pure Solar World, 189.
14 John Szed, Space is the Place: Lives and Times of Sun Ra (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 304.
15 Ra, The Immeasurable Equation, 469.
17 Szed, Space is the Place, 332.
18 Ra, “The Outer Darkness (version 2),” in The Immeasurable Equation, 295.
space to music, Sun Ra potentiates “nothing,” remaking it into “living spirit.” Ra’s conception of blackness disrupts racist ideology and transforms a symbol of perceived inferiority into a marker of incomprehensible value.

Myth was appealing to Ra because it exists in a state of non-existence; myth is not tangible and yet its effect can be measured and observed. Consider the mythological trickster Anansi the spider. Anansi is obviously fictional and yet his role in slave rebellions, particularly in colonial Jamaica, can be observed. The resourceful Anansi is famous for his cunning and triumph over his oppressors, inspiring mutiny and providing a model for Jamaican plantation slaves to resist their own oppressors. These “Anansi tactics” included “lying, stealing, cheating, [and] working slowly,” among others.

Sun Ra recognized the efficacy of myth and, like Anansi, desired that his own personal mythmaking and transformative music would stir up similarly resistant behavior. In the vein of the influential slave narratives that preceeded, Ra would often repeat this creation myth to explain his origin and Earthly purpose:

I’m not a human. I never called anybody “mother.” The woman who’s supposed to be my mother I call “other momma.” I never call anybody “mother.” I never called anybody “father.” I never felt that way. I’ve separated myself from everything that in general you call life. I’ve concentrated entirely on the music, and I’m preoccupied with the planet. In my music I create experiences that are difficult to express, especially in words. I’ve abandoned the habitual, and my previous life is of no significance any more for me. I don’t remember when I was born. I’ve never memorized it. And this is exactly what I want to teach everybody: that it is important to liberate oneself from the obligation to be born, because this experience doesn’t help us at all. It is important for the planet that its inhabitants do not believe in being born, because whoever is born has to die.

Ra would also often recount this abduction narrative:

[T]hese space men contacted me. They wanted me to go to outer space with them. They were looking for somebody who had that type of mind…So that’s what I did. It looked like a giant spotlight shining down on me, and I call it transmolecularization, my whole body

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20 Szed, Space is the Place, 20.
was changed into something else. I could see through myself. And I went up. Now, I call that an energy transformation because I wasn’t in human form...Then I landed on a planet that I identified as Saturn...I knew I was alone. They were down there...[t]hen all at once they teleported me, and I was down there on that stage with them. They wanted to talk with me...They would teach me some things that when it looked like the world was going into complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak, but not until then. I would speak, and the world would listen. That’s what they told me.  

These stories reinforce the image of Ra presented in *Space* as an extra-terrestrial, time traveling philosopher who can teleport fellow Black people with a swish of his hand. Sonny Blount transmolecularized into Sun Ra, the Black Mosaic prophet leading his people on an exodus to a cosmic Canaan. Ra’s teleportation of Black people from planet Earth in *Space* parallels his own purported abduction and functions as an alternative narrative to the generational memory of the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. The poem Tyson recites in the closing minutes paired with the apocalyptic imagery supports this as it reflects Ra’s speculation of potential futures for Black people beyond the rigid reality of this world. This film demonstrates how the threads of Ra’s music, and by extension his poetry, costuming, and cosmic philosophy weave together to create a complex tapestry of metamorphic expression. Sun Ra believed that “music paints pictures that only the mind’s eye can see.” Individually, this art can edify the soul, but Ra understood that it’s collective power is potent enough to expand consciousness.

**1.2. Afrofuturist Tropes**

Like *Space is the Place*, Octavia Butler’s sci-fi novel *Kindred* (1979) provides particularly fertile ground when defining Afrofuturism and its common tropes. The plot centers around a young Black woman named Dana who suddenly finds she can time travel between 1970’s Los Angeles and pre-Civil War Maryland. Dana is a writer and is married to a white man, Kevin, who

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21 Ibid., 44.
sometimes accompanies her to the past. While in Maryland, Dana and Kevin get entangled with
the lives of her ancestors: Alice, an enslaved but proud woman and her owner, Rufus. Over the
course of the novel Dana is privy to and experiences firsthand the brutal violence and
psychological terror to which her Black counterparts are constantly subjected. Dana meets Rufus
for the first time by saving him from drowning. Although Dana initially tries to teach a young
Rufus that the color of his skin does not entitle him to treat others poorly, he eventually succumbs
to the ideology that like his father before him, his whiteness ensures his right to own other human
beings and to inflict pain on them as a matter of course. Despite this and much to the chagrin of
Kevin, Rufus and Dana develop a complicated relationship.23 Jealous of the kindness Rufus shows
Dana, Alice confides to Dana that she will escape and attempt to find her husband. Her escape
fails, however, and Rufus sells Alice’s children (whom he fathered) as punishment. Heartbroken
and hopeless, Alice commits suicide. Rufus later confesses to Dana that he lied about selling the
children and demonstrates genuine grief and disappointment in his actions, though he never fully
takes responsibility for his role in Alice’s suicide, nor does he make any attempt to change. Dana
uses this moment to coerce Rufus into legally freeing Alice’s children who now call him “daddy”
instead of “Master.” The novel’s climax see’s Rufus attempting to rape Dana after expressing his
desire for her to replace Alice in his life. Dana considers giving in momentarily, contemplating how
long it might take her to forgive him, before ultimately murdering Rufus. After this, she time travels
for the last time and finds that the arm that Rufus was just grabbing has been amputated.24 In the

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23 Dana acknowledges Rufus’s humanity and Rufus respects Dana’s intelligence but he never forgets his role as her
master. By the end of the novel, Butler leaves the reader to contemplate the implication that Dana now cares more
for Rufus than her own husband.

24 It is significant that Dana literally loses an arm at the novel’s close, the amputation serving as a visceral metaphor
for the trauma that slavery inflicts and continues to inflict on the Black body. This relates to Kodwo Eshun’s notion
that humanism is a “treacherous category” for Black people. See More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic
epilogue, Dana and Kevin search for evidence that Alice and Rufus’s children survived, finding that at least one child lived to see emancipation.

Like *Space, Kindred’s* characters and themes reveal some basic tenets of Afrofuturism. Firstly, Butler shows us the tragedy of a total loss of identity with the character of Alice. Her attempts to reinhabit her role as a wife results in the loss of role as a mother. Her status as an enslaved person has already robbed her of her past cultural identity. Because of this loss, Alice is unable to envision a reality beyond her present and unwilling to continue in her dehumanization, Alice makes a choice to end her present reality.\(^{25}\) Conversely, Dana, fueled with knowledge of her future self, is eventually able to kill Rufus, avenging Alice and ensuring that her future will come to pass. Butler also demonstrates how paradoxical identities are synonymous with the lived Black experience. Indeed, this “dynamic tension”, to borrow a term from Alex Weheliye, manifests primarily because of the multiplicity of contradicting identities she embodies.\(^{26}\) I define dynamic tension as the paradox that manifests when two disparate elements co-exist. These elements are often the inverse of or opposed to each other— analog versus digital, the organic vs. the engineered, the human vs. the post-human.\(^{27}\) In this case, Dana is all at once an independent, self-assured spouse who had the agency to choose her mate despite family disapproval and Rufus's

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\(^{25}\) See Richard Bell, “Slave Suicide, Abolition and the Problem of Resistance,” *Slavery & Abolition* 33, no. 4 (2012): 525-549. I do not want to romanticize Alice’s death or similar real world occurrences. Stories like Alice’s were used as proof in post-revolutionary America that those who do not resist tyranny to the death do not deserve liberty. In other words, enslaved people who failed to fight to the death deserved enslavement. These stories were also used by abolitionists to rouse others to their cause. However, these stories robbed enslaved people of their voices and effectively doused potential runaways of their courage and “[turned] proud souls into submissive ciphers whose plights pleaded for humanitarian intervention (536).”


\(^{27}\) Post humanism is a philosophical perspective that “assumes agency is distributed through dynamic forces of which the human participates but does not completely intend or control” as opposed to the humanist perspective that “assumes the human is autonomous, conscious, intentional, and exceptional in acts of change.” See “Posthumanism,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefo/9780190228613.013.627
slave who seriously considers acquiescing to her master’s insidious request for survival’s sake. In the same way that Sonny Blount is also Sun Ra, Dana is a modern, intelligent woman who understands the legacy of slavery and an enslaved person with complicated feelings for her master. It should be noted that the elements that give rise to the dynamic tension do not necessarily need to be resolved. The “two-ness” that Dana experiences is not a problem to be remedied, but a continuously renewable energy that powers Black expression.28 Jürgen Grandt posits that “the ‘blackness’ of Black culture...in fact thrives on hybridity, harnessing the energies inherent in the tension filled process of cultural production as well as simultaneously affirming the African American [tradition].”29 The tension inherent in Dana’s dueling identities are not resolved by Butler, instead, she leaves the reader to ponder these questions: What are we to make of Dana’s passion for Rufus which she herself acknowledges is more intense than what she feels for her husband? What are we to make of Dana eventually coming to see the past and plantation as her home versus her marital home in the 1970s? How does the trauma experienced by Dana’s ancestors affect her physical body in the present? Through the lens of Afrofuturism, Dana’s “double consciousness” and these contradictions can simply be.30

These existential anxieties are a distinctly modern phenomenon. Toni Morrison believed that the enslaved peoples of the Middle Passage like those depicted in Kindred were the first moderns due to the intense dehumanization they endured. She explained in a conversation with Paul Gilroy:

The so-called modernist writers of the nineteenth century registered the impact of industrialization in literature — the great transformation from the old world to the new. Africa was feeling the same things. Can you imagine what it would have been like if they

29 Jürgen Grandt, Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), xvii.
30 Du Bois, Souls, 9.
had left that continent untampered with? It’s not simply that human life originated in Africa in anthropological terms, but that modern life begins with slavery [...] 31

Kodwo Eshun cites this “founding trauma” as the reason why “modernity was rendered forever suspect.” 32 The repercussions of this tragedy continue to reverberate in the Black Atlantic consciousness, “thus creating an urgent need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence” and requiring us to “indict imperial modernity...into the field of the future.” 33 When Ra claimed he was never human he was doing more than enlivening an already tall tale. It was a myth-science explanation of the dehumanization that characterizes the Black lived experience. Humanist ideals are defined as “a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives.” 34 How then can Black people consider themselves “human” when they have been historically excluded from this? Eshun’s solution is to dismiss the “treacherous” category of human, and by extension any cultural production that engages with the category altogether. But not all Afrofuturist scholars agree.

Weheliye explains:

It is precisely because slavery rendered the category of the human suspect that the reputedly humanist postslavery Black cultural productions cannot and do not attribute the same meaning to humanity as white American discourses. These inscriptions of humanity in Black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities—as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject. Eshun, in his move to polemicize against Black humanism, takes the performance of the human in Black literature and music at face value, leaving behind its most radical gesture of marking the boundaries and limitations of the human itself. 35

Summarily dismissing the category of human would deny Afrofuturism’s power to collapse binaries and to free Black people from the weight of history.

32 Kodwo Eshun, More Brilliant, 405.
A frequent method Afroturists use to explore the contradictory, dual nature of Black identity is the use of avatars. On a macro level, Dana is the avatar Butler uses to explore the antebellum slavery through the lens of a modern young Black woman. Like Butler, Dana is a modern woman working through the trauma of historical memory who finds identity in being a writer. Within the novel itself, Alice and Rufus serve as foils and Afroturist avatars for Dana and Kevin respectively. Through Alice and Rufus’s master-slave dynamic, Dana and Kevin are horrified to see a reflection of their own marriage. We are told that since the beginning of their relationship Kevin has held more power due to his age and successful writing career. Although Kevin is well-meaning, he is insecure and self-involved, treating her like a secretary by insisting she type his stories and showing irrational jealousy about her relationship with Rufus. By the end of the novel Kevin has grown from someone unaware of their race and gender privilege to a man who actively fights racist oppression, though his ability to truly empathize with the plight of enslaved people remains limited. Dana comes to accept this about her marriage, however, as she finds identity in being Kevin’s wife and a writer in her own right at the story’s end.

Sonny Blount's carefully constructed avatar of Sun Ra, which was partly borne out of his experiences being a working musician in segregated Chicago in the 1950, goes hand in hand with the second trope of Afroturism—social activism. After meeting with like-minded thinkers, Blount and company developed Thmei, an activist collective with the goal of changing the material reality of Black people living in the southside of Chicago through creative expression. Unlike other Pan-African groups who looked to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam for wisdom and authenticity, Thmei looked deeper into history to the ancient Egyptians, therefore aligning themselves with the antiquity and prestige of that tradition.36 “Thmei” is a double deity, the Egyptian goddess of truth.

and justice, sometimes depicted on Egyptian breastplates alongside Ra. Through his studies Ra read that the Ancient Ethiopians birthed all peoples, nations and cultures and that the Ancient Egyptians disappeared possibly around the same time Black Africans were enslaved, appealing to the kinship he felt with these people. Thmei’s embrace of Egypt as an alternative intellectual hereditament ultimately led Blount to legally change his name to Le Sony’r Ra in 1952, telling friends the “Creator” told him to. The shortening of this name to “Sun Ra” developed as a legal practicality but when journalists pressed him for meaning his answers were often nebulous. More often than not, Ra would emphasize how this name reflected an inner spirit, referring to it as his “vibrational” name. Nonetheless, Ra pointed out that he had always been “Sun Ra.” Ra once demonstrated in a lecture that “Herman’ reversed is ‘nam(e) reh’ (“Reh” with a silent h is one of the variant spellings of the name of the god Ra).” “Herman” is also “Armand” in French; “Armand” (silent d) reversed is “nam(e) ra,” or “permutated,” “Man Ra” and in fact for a while he considered calling himself “Armand Ra.” In other words for the former Herman Blount, the name “Sun Ra” represents the “two-ness” of his Black identity.

The last trope of Afrofuturism is the rejection of linear time and, by extension, modern notions of racial progress. To understand the suspicion placed on linearity, we must briefly travel to the past. Spurred on by the Age of Enlightenment and preceded by the Scientific Revolution, the concept of race was invented somewhere between 1730 and 1790. As more people became aware of the geographical and human variety that exists in the world, the urge to quantify and qualify all things “coincided with attempts at designating and classifying human diversity.”

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37 Ibid., 34.
38 Szwed, Space is the Place, 82-83.
39 Ibid., 101. This name borrows from solfege as well as the Egyptian Sun god.
40 Ibid., 102-104.
41 Ibid., 104.
42 Ibid., 103. 
discourse at the time was preoccupied with the racialized body which gave rise to human experiments, human zoos, and race exhibits. These “freak shows” fueled an international public desire for the exotic, which in turn justified the economy that sprung up around these exhibits, which provided a convenient scientific justification for imperial expansion.44

The Enlightenment not only gave rise to racialized scientific classification but the “cultivation of time discipline” as well as the notion of “progress”.45 Enlightenment thinkers viewed progress as inevitable, rendering the past as a primitive but necessary stepping stone to a better, more technologically advanced future. Progress narratives along with the universalization of time facilitated colonial expansion by placing those categorized as “savages” outside the “cultural time-line” framework, in stark contrast to European civilization.”46 In other words, the racialized, savage other has no history. They are “condemned to the past…[operating] outside of time’s arrow altogether.”47 This explicitly teleological notion of racial progress flowered as older ideas of cyclical time gave way to notions of linearity. The Enlightenment fascination with categorization brought about the universalization of time, lay the groundwork for scientific racism, and emphasized race as a category inexplicably linked with space and time. Since this white supremacist legacy is so closely tied to teleology, Ra’s art and the ontological paradox presented in the Butler’s narrative deliberately frustrates this.48

The tendency of African American culture “[to dictate] that all cultural hallmarks and personal evolutions are recast in a historical lineage” has been observed by Afrofuturist scholars.

44 Ibid., 1-12.
46 Ibid., 318.
47 Ibid., 318.
48 I do not mean to suggest that interracial marriage by itself is a path to Black liberation, just that Butler purposefully centers interracial couplings to challenge the notion of race as a fixed, permanent state and as a means for Blacks and whites to grapple with their collective past in the hope of a more equal future. Butler also used this coupling to expose notions of supposed racial progress, as neither Dana nor Kevin’s family approves of their pairing.
Afrofuturist art serves as a conduit in which Afrofuturists grapple with the generational anxieties borne of the transatlantic slave trade. Time-travel, and by extension alternate universes, immortality, and reincarnation permeate Afrofuturism, “[erasing] the prism of race-based limitations that all too often lace the present and define the recent past.” Ytasha Womack comments that “[j]ust as the right words and actions can speak the future into existence, the same can recast the past, too. This cyclical nature of time and the contemplation of it all is a favorite theme and conversation point for Afrofuturists.”

Like the Black character Jaycen Wise from the eponymous comic series who pilfers priceless artifacts from museums only to return them to their proper indigenous roots, or the “timelessness” described in the spaced-out poetry of Sun Ra, a non-teleological concept of time is a frequently employed mechanism by which Afrofuturist artists to recast and reclaim historical narrative. Dana’s ability to time travel and interact with her ancestors presents an ontological paradox and complicates the perceived racial progress of her present. Although Dana and Kevin live in a time where their relationship is ostensibly accepted, the marriage has cost both her and her husband their families as neither approves of the union. Louise Seamster and Victor Ray explain that “[t]eleological assumptions about linear progress impose a false logic on history and visions of the future. This logic retroactively explains history as a series of necessary steps to arrive at the present.” A purely teleological view of Dana’s experiences would imply that the atrocities suffered by Dana’s ancestors were necessary for Dana’s present reality to exist. Likewise, Ra’s creative output demonstrates a suspicion and disdain for this interpretation of time. Like he stated in

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50 Ibid., 153.
51 An ontological paradox, sometimes called a bootstrap paradox, refers to a causal loop without origin. This popular sci-fi trope can be observed in movies like *Back to the Future* (1985). Like Marty McFly, Dana is instrumental in the past playing out a particular way that ensures her own existence. See also *By His Bootstraps* (1941) by Robert Heinlein.
53 As she travels, Dana finds herself saving Rufus repeatedly in one manner or another leading her to wonder if she was destined to do so.
Space, Ra works on “the otherside of time.” Working on the “other side of time” allows Ra to “alter destiny”, effectively putting an end to the painful past: “The past is an eternity / All its own / It is not a part of the endless[...] Universe-Omni.” In other words, the omniverse Sun Ra inhabits is endless or “of timeless being” because “every beginning is an end”, i.e. cyclical and highly elastic, with no distinct start or finish. Erik Steinskog calls this temporal framework “the changing same,” borrowing a term from Amiri Baraka. “The changing same, then, changes the past or the understanding of the past. It keeps the past alive in a different way than linearity does.”

Afrofuturism keeps the past alive while rendering it weightless; it provides an alternative to the tyranny of teleology that one might not otherwise escape.

1.3. Black to the Future

Officially coined in the early 1990’s, Afrofuturism describes Black cultural productions that cast reflections of the African diasporic past against the backdrop of the far future. These productions create space that allows the Afrofuturist to discorporately negotiate the limits of Black subjectivity, speculate potential futures, and create alternative historical narratives. The term first appeared in Mark Dery’s Black to the Future, a conversation between Dery, sci-fi author Samuel Delaney, and scholars Tricia Rose and Greg Tate.”

Dery concedes that the concept of Afrofuturism brings about a possible paradox: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” Dery goes on to say that if evidence of Afrofuturism exists, it “must be found in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points.”

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56 Ibid., 180.
glance at the afro-diasporic space-time continuum reveals evidence of these imaginings. Black to the Future and the later scholarship of Alondra Nelson identified some of these as the creative outputs of writers Ishmael Reed (Mumbo Jumbo, 1972) and Ralph Ellison (The Invisible Man, 1952) visual artists Fatimah Tuggar (“The Spinner and the Spindle”, 1995) and Jean-Michael Basquiat (“La Hara”, 1981) and directors Lizzie Borden (Born in the Flames, 1983) and John Sayles (The Brother from Another Planet, 1984). Nelson says this of these “self-styled mavericks:”

“[Afrofuturist] creations reflect the long and impressive history of African diasporic culture, but also push the envelope of these traditions. They garner text, sound, and image in the service of reimagining Black life. They create reflections on the African diasporic past and renderings of our possible futures. These are past-future visions, and in this sense, Afrofuturism is an antidote to unbridled, raceless future-lust.”


58 Ibid.
Alondra Nelson would go on to edit a special issue of *Social Text* in 2002, a natural evolution of a now defunct website dedicated to Afrofuturism. The issue features contributions from other Afrofuturist scholars such as Alexander Weheliye, Ron Eglash, and Kali Tal and is primarily concerned with the intersection of race and technology. Afrofuturist poetry by Tana Hargest and Tracie Morris is also featured as well as reproductions of Fatimah Tuggar’s digital art.  

Music is particularly well suited for communicating the Black experience and so Afrofuturist speculative narratives frequently take shape in music. As race theorist Paul Gilroy explains:

The musics of the Black Atlantic world were the primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness which this population seized upon and adapted to its new circumstances. It used the separate but converging musical traditions of the Black Atlantic world, if not to create itself anew as a conglomeration of Black communities, then as a means to gauge the social progress of spontaneous self-creation which was sedimented together by the endless pressures of economic exploitation, political racism, displacement, and exile.

J. Griffith Rollefson concludes that “Afrofuturism is most prominent in music...it is because a number of its artists have continually highlighted the mythic qualities of both historical tropes of magic and futuristic narratives of science through the seemingly paradoxical figure of the soulful spaceman.” Some of these spacemen, or the more inclusive Afronauts, have been identified by Kodwo Eshun and Mark Dery: Jimi Hendrix, Herbie Hancock, Alice Coltrane, Parliament Funkadelic, Lee “Scratch” Perry, and of course, Sun Ra. For decades, Ra and his Arkestra lived up to their reputation for experimentation and sci-fi theatrics as their frenetic live shows saw the elastic Arkestra utilize music to “transmolecularize” their listeners into outer space.

63 The Arkestra was not a fixed ensemble. At its core, the Arkestra is a jazz big band with a revolving door of members and instruments.
To be sure, the way Afrofuturist artists present themselves and their art is a carefully
crafted, integral part of their overall aesthetic. After all, that is the intent of Afrofuturist art. Whether
it’s a novel that seeks to accurately depict the horrors of enslaved life or an avant garde film that
depicts the literal rapture of every Black person on earth, Afrofuturism is concerned with
transforming one’s lived reality. Ytasha Womack’s seminal text *Afrofuturism: The World of Black
Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* which covers everything from magical realism to folklore highlights
this aspect, specifically details how Afrofuturists use their art to effect material change.64 More
recently, Afrofuturist scholar Elizabeth Hamilton, expanded on their previous definition of
Afrofuturism, now describing it as a “mechanism [that] relies on not just the injection of futurity,
fantasy, and technology, but also an ever-present orientation toward Black liberation that draws its
strength from liberation movements in the past.”65 I have aligned my conception of Afrofuturism
with Hamilton’s (Figure 1) as I believe it is the most useful in describing the non-passivity of
Afrofuturist art and taps into why Sun Ra started this to begin with. When commenting on the
early days of Thmei in the south side of Chicago, Ra said “I was trying to uplift Black people out
of this condition they in [sic] and I only played for them. I [did not] play for white people.”66 This
is the Afrofuturist manifesto: creativity as resistance. It goes beyond motherships, fanciful costumes
and oversized afros.67 This is art that actively seeks to liberate your mind, attitude, and existence, to
infinity and beyond.

Consider the record *Interstellar Low Ways* released in 1966 by Sun Ra and his “Myth
Science” Arkestra. This record is significant as it was released on El Saturn Records, a Black,
independent label founded by Ra and Arkestra manager Alton Abraham with the support of

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64 Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill
Books, 2013). See pgs. 177 - 185 for real world accounts of this.
Thmei. Ra considered the founding to be a humanitarian effort, reflecting his commitment to Black liberation stating that “the foundation of it was for [sic] to get this music out there to people… it’s the most unselfish organization ever been on this planet. [The financial backers] didn’t ask for no money. They said this music should be heard by people.”

*Interstellar* and all of its “interplanetary exotica” is one of El Saturn’s best known records and exemplifies Ra’s Afrofuturist creativity at its most potent. It was during the recording of this album that Ra and the Arkestra’s live shows began to take on a theatrical quality, complete with hand-me-down opera house costumes, silly hats, and mosquito nets, along with typical instruments like those of a traditional jazz big band and unusual instruments like the “fireplace (tuned logs), the sun harp (Ukrainian bandura), and the flying saucer (which turned out to be a silent-running version, with flashing red, green, and white lights).” Shows would open with chants and recitations of Ra’s poetry, most famously “Astro Black:”

Astro-Black Mythology

 Astro-Timeless Immortality

 Astro-Thought in Mystic Sound

 Astro-Black of Outer Space

 Astro Natural of Darkest Stars

 Astro Reach Beyond the Stars

Out to Endless Endlessness

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70 Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 212.

71 Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation*, 74.
The music featured on *Interstellar* also reflects this eclectic, creative freedom. There are tracks that follow standard AABA jazz forms like “Onward.” There are tracks that begin unassumingly like “Somewhere in Space,” which shuttles between V - i in A minor but gets gradually more dissonant as the track wears on. “Interplanetary Music No. 1” sees the band chanting backed by the rhythm section which includes a “space gong,” while a strangled, bowed bass solos off key and arhythmically. “Space Loneliness” is a stuttering, chromatic, minor blues. This melancholic dirge brings to mind Charles Mingus’s “Goodbye Pork-Pie Hat” which uses similar harmonic language. Perhaps the most affecting track on *Interstellar* and the best example of the Arkestra's approach to performance and composition is “Rocket Number 9.” The song opens with a twisted nod to Dizzy Gillespie’s “Salt Peanuts” and then is punctuated by spontaneous flurries of notes, random bouts of silence, and a mind melting bass solo that morphs into Sun Ra signature cacophony. “Rocket” ends with the call of a cosmic train conductor: “Second stop is Jupiter. All out for Jupiter!”

On *Interstellar* and over the course of a long career, Ra and the Arkestra take listeners on a sonic journey through the vast emptiness of the omni-verse, and through their bespoke aesthetic and performance rituals we see the same tropes realized in Butler’s *Kindred*: 1) identity play by way of an avatar; 2) a rejection of linear time; and 3) the goal of Black liberation. I argue that the sum of all these parts is what makes this record Afrofuturist. There are other artists who may mimic one or two features of Afrofuturism, but unless all of these aspects are present and working in tandem, the effort is not truly Afrofuturist as Ra originally intended.

Although Sun Ra shuffled off this mortal coil in 1993, his immortal legacy continues to be reinterpreted by new voices in new musical mediums. In this paper, I argue that a later generation of Afrofuturist artists use Black popular music to achieve their aims of Black liberation. Like Ra,

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72 The head begins at 0:10, followed by three solos starting at 0:48 performed by the trumpet, tenor sax, and piano respectively. The head repeats at 2:47 in its entirety to close out.

73 John Szwed likens this track to “Flamenco Sketches” by Miles Davis on *Kind of Blue* (1959).
these artists utilize avatars and alternative narratives to articulate warnings and calls to arms, often using the trope of immortality and reincarnation, all while appropriating images of technology and science fiction. I will demonstrate how these artists use Afrofuturist speculative thought to inform their music, videos, and overall aesthetic, especially as it relates to style, form, and temporality.

1.4. Justification and Methodology

Astro-blackness is not limited to experimental jazz. Dallas born singer Erykah Badu is often dubbed the Queen of Neo-Soul, a genre of Black popular music that combines elements of jazz, soul, and contemporary R&B.\(^{74}\) Now treated as a respected elder stateswoman, Badu, born Erica Abi Wright, first impressed audiences with 1997’s *Baduizm*. *Baduizm* has since become a staple of Afrofuturist music. The following year OutKast, composed of rappers Big Boi and André 3000, released their highly praised *Aquemini*, building on their previous album *ATLiens’* Sun Ra-like omniverse space imagery.\(^{75}\) Both artists used their music videos and album art to further their Afrofuturist messages, all the while encouraging their (Black) listeners to expand their consciousness, warning them to not be preoccupied with the things of this earthly world lest “[their] ass git left” by the mothership.\(^{76}\) More recently the artist Janelle Monáe has woven this imagery into the tapestry of her entire musical aesthetic.\(^{77}\) Monáe’s *Metropolis* series, based on the science fiction novel of the same name, follows the saga of Cindi Mayweather, an android constructed in the year 2179 who falls in love with a human and who is subsequently sentenced to disassembly as punishment. Monáe, who is sometimes credited with bringing Afrofuturist ideals to the mainstream, has continued Mayweather’s story from 2007’s *Metropolis: Suite I* with 2010’s *The


\(^{76}\) A quote from Badu’s song *On & On*. The full lyric reads “The mothership can’t save you so your ass is gon’ git left.”

ArchAndroid and 2013’s The Electric Lady.⁷⁸ Although their music is not all the same, these artists are connected by their collaborative efforts as well as their liberation-minded music, which is modeled on Sun Ra’s career.⁷⁹

Afrofuturism has exploded in popularity in recent years and its presence in the current cultural zeitgeist is growing. Curated by producer and educator King Britt in 2014, MoMA PS1 hosted an Afrofuturist event entitled “Moondance: A Night in the Afro Future” where patrons could enjoy live performances and lectures by Alondra Nelson and Ytasha Womack.⁸⁰

The popular novels by Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor have been bestowed much praise and prestige by the Hugo Awards, Nebula Awards, and World Fantasy Awards.⁸¹ From the incredible success of Afrofuturist superhero film Black Panther (2018), to Beyoncé’s cinematic veneration of the ancestors Black is King (2020), Afrofuturism is being embraced by more and more prominent Black creatives. When researching this topic, I asked myself: “Which musical artists are responsible for initially bringing Afrofuturism to popular music? Which artists continue that legacy? How do these artists interpret Afrofuturism in their music and aesthetic? Why are there so few tools at my disposal to properly showcase the rich complexity of this music?”

In recent years, Phil Ewell identified music theory as a racialized structure of what sociologist Joe Feagin calls the “white racial frame.” Feagin describes the white racial thus:

[A]n overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate. Over time these aspects become imbedded in most whites’ character structure, to varying degrees. For

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⁷⁹ There are intrapersonal connections here, too. Badu and André were once a couple and share a child together. André has also appeared in Badu’s videos and Badu has contributed to OutKast’s music. Big Boi was instrumental in Monáe’s early career, producing her first album. Monáe can be seen in OutKast videos such as “Morris Brown” and finally Badu was featured on one of Monáe’s most popular songs Q.U.E.E.N.
⁸⁰ King Britt, “Projects,” http://www.kingbritt.com/moondance-moma-ps1
⁸¹ It should noted that Okorafor considers her books to be works of “Africanfuturism”—futurism that specifically focuses on the non-Western experience. http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html
centuries, it has been a dominant and foundational frame from which an overwhelming majority of white Americans—as well as many other people seeking to conform to white norms and perspectives—view our still highly racialized society.

Ewell goes on to explain how our institutionalized structures prop up the white status quo and why it is of paramount importance to adopt an anti-racist approach if we are to materially change the overwhelmingly white makeup of music theory. Ewell makes suggestions of how to combat this but stops short of offering solutions, “because it usually frames the racism that is part of music theory’s racialized structures as a disease that can be cured, rather than as a structure that needs dismantling (racism is a structure, not a disease).”

Scholarship of Black popular music in general, specifically rap and hip-hop, is typically musicological or ethnomusicological in nature, focusing on extra-musical aspects like history, linguistics, and cultural impact (Alim, 2003; Katz, 2008). Considering that from its conception, American popular music has been shaped by the contributions of Black artists, there is logic in highlighting these features. Even though scholarship exists that investigates specific musical aspects such as pitch (Ohriner, 2018), rhythm and rhyme (Hirjee & Brown, 2010), metrical ambiguity (Ohriner, 2015) and flow (Adams, 2008; 2009; Duineker, 2019; Gomez-Peck, 2019; Komanieki, 2017; Krims, 2001; Roth, 2019), these analyses are incomplete because they neglect to properly account for what Paul Gilroy refers to as the “syncretic complexity of Black expressive cultures.” Since all Black cultural productions, Afrofuturist popular music included, is a part of an “imagined community” made up of “multiple imagined ‘sources’, based on the previous knowledge of specific songs, artists, or genres,” I believe scholars have a responsibility to always account for these cultural idiosyncrasies and shape their analyses accordingly.

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82 Ewell, “White Racial Frame,” 1.5.
Consider Kyle Adams’s article on applying “phrase” to rap and hip-hop for instance.\textsuperscript{83} Adams is correct when he acknowledges that “hip-hop songs can contain long stretches of music whose content conforms to generic norms but creates neither forward motion nor the anticipation that such motion will complete itself,” a feature I qualify as an example of dynamic tension.\textsuperscript{84} He goes on to argue that because of this, one would have to rely solely on lyrics to determine phrases. Adams does acknowledge that the word “phrase” is fraught with historical baggage and yet proceeds to argue the benefits of using the term for this music anyway. Adams argues that hip-hop phrases create anticipation, which the listener experiences as direction “leading to an ending that creates closure.”\textsuperscript{85} I do not disagree that it is possible to parse regular grouping structures in hip-hop, but I do disagree that these structures are necessarily propelled towards closure. As I argued earlier, the dynamic tension present in Black cultural productions has no need of resolution, and so it is with hip-hop. If “phrase” is to be defined as a goal-directed unit of music that is headed for a clear conclusion, then it is incompatible with much of hip-hop. At the end of the article, Adams concedes that perhaps inventing a new term would be simpler, but ultimately doubles down saying “‘phrase’ as a term is useful here precisely because of its long and significant history in both music theory and musical performance.”\textsuperscript{86} Here, Adams tacitly suggests that for analyses of Black cultural productions to be sound, they must in some capacity adhere to existing theoretical norms but fails to acknowledge the historical exclusionary nature of music theory which would probably disqualify hip-hop as music worthy of academic interest anyway. This is why it is important for our community to do the difficult and necessary work to reframe music theoretical discourse as it pertains to Black cultural production. I intend to bring these nuances and complexities more

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 6.2.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 6.4.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 6.5.
sharply into focus through the lens of Afrofuturism, thereby demonstrating the utility and necessity of culturally rooted theoretical frameworks.

In this dissertation, I will take a holistic approach to my analyses, discussing typical musical concerns such as form, structure, semantics, and temporality as well as extra-musical features such as race, gender, sexuality, identity, and aesthetic in the creative outputs of Erykah Badu, OutKast, and Janelle Monáe. I have chosen these artists for my analysis because of their recognized status as important contributors to Afrofuturist music, commercial success, and interpersonal connections. Their combined oeuvres provide opportunity to closely dissect Black music that covers multiple genres and styles. I will focus on the recorded albums, music videos, and otherwise “official” versions of songs. For example, any discussions of Badu’s early music will include albums like *Baduizm* (1997) and not live renditions that appear on *Live*, released later the same year. While I recognize that there are other artists with whom this aesthetic is associated, for the sake of this project, I have chosen to focus on select tracks from these artists because I believe they best represent Afrofuturism in Black popular music since the term was coined in the early 1990s. This list is not meant to be exhaustive.\(^{87}\)

The examples, shown in Figure 2, will not necessarily be presented in chronological order of release. I will begin each individual analysis with a general overview of the song within the context of the album, as well as the album artwork and any other supporting visuals or promotional images. Then, I will analyze the lyrical content supported by any personal statements or writings made by the artists. I will then analyze the music itself, highlighting how the construction of the music and other compositional choices support the lyrical narrative and aims of the song. Special focus will be given to issues of non-linear temporality and polystylism, both of which are

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\(^{87}\) It should not be inferred that the examples presented in this paper are the only examples of non-linear temporality one can observe in these artists’ collective output.
analogous to Sun Ra’s ideology of astro-blackness and mythscience. Drawing primarily from this foundation as well as scholarship on Afrofuturism, the following chapters will weave traditional and non-traditional analyses while highlighting these aspects of Afrofuturist speculative thought: 1) identity play; 2) immortality and reincarnation; 3) mythmaking and alternative narratives; 4) warning; 5) call to arms. My analyses will comprise primarily of transcriptions using standard Western notation along with diagrams depicting groove based on Philip Tagg’s research and a modification of Adam Krims’ flow diagrams. Rhythmic transcriptions of rap will include color-coding to highlight rhyme with arbitrarily chosen colors. No connection should be inferred from song to song unless otherwise stated. In addition, because of the intertextual fabric of this music, I will apply Gérard Genette’s literary theory of hypertextuality as Serge Lacasse does in his essay on intertextuality and hypertextuality in music. In Chapter 2, I will use the terms “intertext,” “hypertext,” “allosonic,” “travesty,” and “copy” in the context of musical quotation as described by Lacasse and so would like to give brief definitions here for reference.

Intertextuality is defined by “the actual presence of a text within another.” Lacasse discusses quotation as a common intertextual practice in recorded popular music of which there are two types: “allosonic” and “autosonic.” Lacasse cites the common practice of jazz musicians quoting snippets of other tunes when soloing to describe an allosonic quote:

Here, the melodic line he is quoting is of an abstract nature and could have been performed in any number of ways, by any musician and with any (melodic) instrument. In other

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90 Lacasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality,” 149.
91 Ibid., 150.
words, what is shared between the original text and the intertext consists of an abstract structure.\textsuperscript{92}

This differs from an autosonic quotation which is “intimately linked with recording techniques.”\textsuperscript{93} A sample lifted from one recording to be utilized in another is an example of autosonic quotation. For example, two of Beyoncé’s songs “Flawless” and “All Night” sample the famous horn lick featured prominently in OutKast’s “SpottieOttieDopaliscious.” Lacasse explains that when a sample is used, “what is shared is not so much a ‘sameness of spelling’...as a ‘sameness of sounding.’”\textsuperscript{94} Hypertextuality is defined as “the production of a new text (hypertext) from a previous one (hypotext).”\textsuperscript{95} A travesty is an example of a hypertextual practice that aims to “debase” or “ennoble” the hypotext.\textsuperscript{96} Lacasse uses A Fifth of Beethoven by Walter Murphy and the Big Apple Band as an example of a travesty of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5 in C Minor as it transforms the classical work into a disco tune. Whether Murphy’s song debases or ennobles Beethoven’s symphony depends on the perspective of the listener, although Genette emphasized the author’s intentions. Finally, a copy is another hypertext practice that “aims at being the closest possible imitation of a preexistent, usually recorded, performance.”\textsuperscript{97} Lacasse uses the example of a band faithfully reproducing a live performance of a previously recorded song.

Building on Lacasse’s terminology, I will construct intertextual genealogies as appropriate. Figure 3 shows a basic map with a corresponding legend. These maps offer a snapshot of information including key, chord loops, pertinent text excerpts and any other information that can be tracked from “generation to generation (hypotexts).” Ideally, the final “generation” will be the object (hypertext) of the map, with the understanding that the map can theoretically continue as

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 150.  
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 150.  
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 151.  
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 152.  
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 153.  
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 156.
long as material from that artifact continues to be utilized. I will use conceptual frameworks such as “intersectionality” as described by Kimberlé Crenshaw and “hip-hop feminism” as described by Joan Morgan when applicable. Finally, I will analyze any corresponding music videos, album artwork, or writings and then draw my conclusions.

But we should start back. My highschool band director was the first Black music teacher I ever had. An avid composer and arranger, we often played his arrangements at football games and the obligatory pep rally. These were the only times we were allowed to indulge in “cool” music, i.e. music not written by white people for the purpose of being adjudicated. Over the years, he handed us arrangements of everything from Erykah Badu, Mystikal, and Missy Elliot to Bill Withers, Al Green, and the Temptations. No matter the genre his reverence and respect sent a clear message: this was Black music made by Black people for Black people. Not only was it Black, but it was also excellent. Excellent in a way that was intangible for those who did not have the right antennas. Ever since then I have endeavored to keep myself attuned to these freakquencies.98

I use the phrase “theorizing while Black” to sum up my experience of alienness within this discipline.99 As I will soon demonstrate, the reclamation and reinvention of identity is key to the Afrofuturist aesthetic, so it feels natural that I should share a bit about my own. I am quite used to being the “token Black” or the “diversity hire” within white professional spaces. Because of this, I admit to sometimes turning the volume down, as it were, from those formative freakquencies for survival’s sake. Like the Afro-diasporic thinkers and creatives who came before me, I have adopted Afrofuturism as a means of reframing the many paradoxes of Black existence. It has also afforded me a specific theoretical lens with which to add to a small but growing body of

98 See Erykah Badu’s album art for Worldwide Underground (2003). This neologism is also the name of Badu’s production team that produced that record. Neologisms such as this are common in the Afrofuturist aesthetic.
99 I intentionally use the phrase “...while Black” to describe the heightened scrutiny I feel as a music theorist who happens to be Black. See also Chan Tov McNaramah, “White Caller Crime: Racialized Police Communication and Existing While Black,” Michigan Journal of Race & Law 24, no. 2 (2018): 335 - 416.
scholarship on Black cultural productions and in doing so, an effective tool with which to combat music theory’s white racial frame.
FIGURE 1. Elizabeth C. Hamilton’s conception of Afrofuturism as a mechanism.
Figure cont’d. Here I have adapted Hamilton’s model of Afrofuturism as a mechanism to convey my notion of how Afrofuturist artists use multiple aspects interdependently. I have placed the avatar in the center as a stand-in for the artist themself.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OutKast Selected Tracks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity Play</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Two Dope Boyz (In a Cadillac)</td>
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<td>E.T. (Extraterrestrial)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Erykah Badu Selected Tracks</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Identity Play</strong></td>
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<td>Next Lifetime</td>
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<th>Janelle Monáe Selected Tracks</th>
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<td><strong>Identity Play</strong></td>
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**FIGURE 2.** List of selected tracks and their corresponding Afrofuturist characteristics.\(^{100}\)

\(^{100}\) These songs could be viewed as having more than one Afrofuturist characteristic. I have chosen to select one trait they best demonstrate overall.
FIGURE 3. A mockup of an hypothetical intertextual genealogy. The arrows between shapes are placeholders for the shapes in the legend that represent the relationship between hypotexts. The hypertext will always be doubly boxed or encircled.
CHAPTER 2. OUTKAST: TWO DOPE BOYZ

2.1. Introduction

In chapter one I theorized that through his avatar, Sun Ra utilized dynamic tension and non-linear temporality in his writings and music to perpetuate his Afrofuturist space. In this chapter, I will apply the same theory to selections from two of OutKast’s unambiguously Afrofuturist efforts, *ATLiens* and *Aquemini*. I argue that OutKast develops their Afrofuturist mythos with skillfully chosen samples and the exploitation of temporal expectations in their music through the lens of their reworked avatars of “Two Dope Boyz”. Paired with their inventive visual aesthetic, the rappers carve space to safely queer gender norms and express their skepticism of the virtues of the American dream.

OutKast’s second studio album *ATLiens* (1996) is their first brush with Afrofuturism. Primarily produced by frequent collaborators Organized Noize, this album marks Antwan “Big Boi” Patten and André “3k” Benjamin’s first attempt at producing on their own with five out of the fifteen tracks attributed solely to them.\(^{101}\) Released by LaFace Records, the brainchild of musicians turned producers Antonio “L.A.” Reid and Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds, *ATLiens* is a concept album that incorporates elements of psychedelic rock, dub, and gospel, along with traditional rap and hip-hop.\(^{102}\)

For both rappers this creative time period is marked by personal upheaval and the desire to further hone their musical voice.\(^{103}\) Big Boi’s aunt Renee, an influential maternal figure in his life,

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\(^{101}\) The name “ATLiens” is a portmanteau of the abbreviation of Atlanta and “aliens.”
\(^{102}\) Roni Sarig, *Third Coast: OutKast, Timbaland, and how Hip-Hop Became a Southern Thing* (Cambridge: MA, Da Capo Press, 2007), 107-110. The now defunct LaFace Records was a rising star at the time, ignited by the success of hip-hop girl group TLC’s debut album *Ooooooohhh... On the TLC Tip* in 1992.
passed away. In the same year, Big Boi and his girlfriend Sherlita welcomed their first child. André for his part started a set of dreadlocks, stopped smoking marijuana, became a vegetarian, parted ways with girlfriend Keisha Spivey, and set out to finally graduate with his high school diploma, having dropped out to be a part of OutKast in his senior year. Both André and Big Boi have described feeling spiritually restless prior to the recording of this album, so they embarked on a soul searching trip to Jamaica to gather inspiration for this album. While there, they spent time absorbing the sounds of artists like Lee “Scratch” Perry and George Clinton and contemplating the tenets of the Five-Percent Nation. Renewed, their musical objectives began to align with leaving an impactful legacy for their children and community. OutKast had this to say in a Billboard article from August 1996:

It’s like everybody talking about sipping champagne and being big time. So we just took it upon ourselves to do something new. When we came out in ’94, we were just out of high school, but we’re older—some of us have babies. I want my children to say, “Daddy really said something; he wasn’t just trying to brag on himself.” We’re just trying to take care of our families.

To aid their goal of creating a musical legacy, both rappers invested tour money into new equipment such as “the MPC3000 sampler, SP1200 drum machine, ASR–10 synthesizer, a Tascam mixing board, and turntables with piles of old records found at local shops.” These investments reflect the group’s desire to develop a more individual, organic sound that relied less on sampling.

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104 Sarig, *Third Coast*: 139-142. Growing a set of dreadlocks is often interpreted as a sign of spiritual maturity in the Black community.
105 See the analysis of “Two Dope Boyz” for a more detailed explanation of the Five-Percent Nation.
107 Sarig, *Third Coast*: 141.
108 To be sure, 11 tracks on *ATLiens* do indeed contain samples and interpolations.
It was during this time that their personas of “Two Dope Boyz” started to more fully emerge. Primarily, Big Boi and André represent the “player and the poet” respectively. The dynamic tension created by the rapper’s seemingly incongruent personas is the core of what makes OutKast unique. They all at once complement and repel the other. It was during this time that André’s increasingly conscious lyrics and non-normative gender presentation began, anchored by “Big Boi’s recognizable keeping-it-real ethos.” André began wearing dresses, wigs, feather boas, and other costume apparel on stage and in promotional imagery that was atypical for male rappers at the time. Interestingly, the album art for ATLiens and Aquemini both feature Big Boi standing slightly in front of André, as if Big Boi’s typical representation of masculinity is a protective buffer for André’s queering.

Although Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik (1994) hinted that there was depth to be mined beyond “the player and the poet” image presented, their next two albums fully realize this. Atliens’ liner notes include twenty-four pages of a fully illustrated comic strip featuring our heroes as their updated avatars—Daddy Fat Sax (Big Boi) and Binhamin (André) respectively. The liner notes gives an alternative history lesson about a long forgotten realm named “Geo Chrome (Georgira)” where the mythical city of Atlantis (Atlanta) was the capital:

In an attempt by the Dark Horde [upholders of evil, censorship, and the enemy of all that’s righteous] to take over the Geo-Chrom, Atlantis was flung into a dimensional warp. In the ensuing battle most of Geo-Chrome was separated or destroyed. Reducing the once great cities to nothing but battlefields or lonely outposts of death and hopelessness. When Atlantis was hidden, a great wealth of power and knowledge was hidden with it. This is what [the leader of the Dark Horde] hungers for. Atlantis was one of the seven cities, each holding a chapter from the universal knowledge key, which give [sic] almost unlimited

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109 Saul Austerlitz, “Records: OutKast’s Aquemini,” Yale Herald, November, 13, 1998. See also “D.E.E.P.,” “Crumblin’ Erb,” and “Git Up, Git Out” from Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik. All three songs address social issues concerning the Black community from a place of compassionate critique. Although the tagline “the player and the poet” wasn’t officially used until their third studio album Aquemini (1998), these archetypes have been associated with both rappers since the beginning of their career.

110 Rambsy, “Beyond Keeping It Real,” 213.

111 These names are stylized as Dad-Efat-Sax and Bin-Hamin in the liner notes.
power and immortality to whoever holds all seven chapters. Nosamulli holds six chapters, he will not rest until he attains Atlantis.\footnote{OutKast, liner notes for \textit{ATLiens} (1996), LaFace Records, CD, 3-6. This text is set against the backdrop of a futurist looking planet.}

The tale continues to speak of a prophecy about two males born in the same year but “different realms,” marked by a crown shaped birthmark who are destined to reunite the realms and defeat Nosamulli.\footnote{Big Boi and Andrè were born in Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia respectively, hence the different realms. This prophecy is made by a figure that resembles Old Testament prophets like Moses and Elijah as he is depicted with long grey streaked dreadlocks, robes, and a staff.} Nonetheless, Daddy Fat Sax and Binhamin survive. To stop this happening, Nosamulli orders the death of every male child who bears a crown shaped mark. With a little help from ORGHO-KNO-I-Z-E (Organized Noize), we follow the pair as they attempt to save L.A. Reid and “positive music” from the evil Nosamuli. Our heroes succeed but Bin-Hamin is injured in the process. The story ends on a cliff hanger with a promise of more to come.\footnote{The aforementioned billboard article stated that the comic strip would continue with the subsequent releases of singles. I have tracked down as many original copies of the singles from this time as I can find, but have yet to find a continuation of this story.}

We are left with the image of a broken android with the likeness of L.A. Reid, floating aimlessly through the omni-verse, its face permanently etched with a frozen scream. The image of a damaged android aimlessly adrift in the inky void of space is a fitting visual metaphor for the themes explored on \textit{ATLiens}. The penultimate page of the liner notes neatly encapsulates the core anxiety of the Black experience: “You belong nowhere...therefore, you are OutKast!!!” This liminal space between wanting to belong and not belonging is reflected in OutKast's compositional choices, especially as it pertains to the temporal, as I will soon demonstrate. If \textit{Southern} was about distinguishing themselves in the East Coast/West Coast debate, \textit{ATLiens} and later \textit{Aquemini} was about distinguishing themselves as unique, off-kilter, southern rappers with one foot in Atlanta and the other in outer space.
2.2. Analysis of “You May Die (Intro)"

The opener to ATLiens lasts only 1:06 but effectively sets the tone for the rest of the album. No strangers to theatrical album openers, this track features a Portuguese prayer, reverberating vocals, and an interpolation of a Quincy Jones cover, all underscored by a repeating chord loop. Like on the opener to Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik, the voice of Myrna “Screechy Peach” Brown, or just “Peaches,” features prominently. Here, Peaches is supported by Joi Gilliam and Trina Powell’s backing vocals as well as piano, acoustic guitar, and a flute riff that sounds independent to the underlying pulse established by the piano and acoustic guitar. I will elucidate how the prayer, chord loop, and interpolation of this seemingly benign introduction first signals OutKast’s embrace of future vision and subtly nods to liberation movements of the past.

The track fades in delicately, as if one were getting their bearings after a long slumber. The piano and guitar perpetuate an aeolian cadence in F♯ minor (Dmaj7 - EM- F♯min; ♭ VI - ♭ VII- i ). I will refer to this particular loop as an aeolian shuttle, since loops such as this can be conceived as aeolian shuttles with two poles (♭ VI and i ) that takes on “the character of a passing chord in a shuttle between the two chords at opposite ends of the loop.”115 Tagg quotes Alf Björnberg on the lyrical connotations of popular songs that utilize aeolian shuttles saying “[a]s a whole...a relatively uniform field of associations which might be characterized by such concepts as modernity, cold, waiting, uncertainty, sadness, stasis, infinity in time and space.”116 I interpret, then, that the aeolian shuttle that underscores “You May Die” is meant to encourage contemplative introspection akin to religious meditation. This is further strengthened by the Portuguese prayer that begins at 0:08, lining up on the downbeat of the second F♯min chord after the shuttle occurs twice. Table 1 shows a translation of the prayer.

115 Tagg, Everyday Tonality II, 386.
116 Ibid., 386-387.
These lines reference a passage in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes in the Christian Bible: “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.”\textsuperscript{117} This verse is part of a larger passage that meditates on the passing of time and human impermanence, comparing it to the mysteries of the natural world, ultimately concluding that all of life is meaningless (“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind”).\textsuperscript{118} This mood of somber contemplation continues as Peaches, accompanied by the layered, choir-like vocals of Joi and Trina, stops praying and begins to sing: “You can be sure / Some go low to get high / You may hurt till you cry / You may die.” Like the narrator of Ecclesiastes, these lyrics communicate to the listener a warning about the certainty of the trials and tribulations of life. Unlike the biblical narrator, however, the lyrics of “You May Die (Intro)” do not encourage complacency. The narrator suggests that the best way to live is to accept one’s lot in life and fear God, for “God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.”\textsuperscript{119} In contrast, “You May Die (Intro)” encourages the listener to “keep on trying / ‘til it’s summer, in the city”—instead of choosing the painful certainty of nihilism, one should rather look ahead and persevere until a better reality is achieved. Although these lyrics are partially based on the Bible, this track implies a secular

\textsuperscript{117} Ecclesiastes 1:9 New International Version.
\textsuperscript{118} Eccl. 1:14 NIV.
\textsuperscript{119} Eccl. 12:14 NIV.
spirituality that places power on the individual rather than a deity.\textsuperscript{120} This empowers the listener to do more than just hope for better days but actively embrace their own creative energy to reshape reality as OutKast is demonstrating here.

As I stated earlier, the last lines are an interpolation of “Summer in the City,” originally recorded by American rock band The Lovin’ Spoonful in 1966 and later covered by Quincy Jones in 1973.\textsuperscript{121} Although one could possibly argue that the mere inclusion and transformation of an interpolation such as this one constitutes an example of non-linear temporality, I am instead prompted to inspect the different ways this interpolation has been performed and to consider the potentiality of its cultural resonance.\textsuperscript{122} Figure 5 shows an intertextual genealogy of “You May Die (Intro)” that only illustrates direct influence. The aforementioned track is treated as the ultimate hypertext with Lovin’ Spoonful’s original recording, Jones’s cover, and the passage from Ecclesiastes as hypotexts.\textsuperscript{123} In theory, this example could be configured to show in detail every spun off branch that is related to the track and every subsequent sampling of “You May Die.” For simplicity’s sake, I have only chosen to show the evolution of the Lovin’ Spoonful’s original to Jones’ cover to OutKast’s song, as well as the allusion to scripture.

The Lovin’ Spoonful’s version primarily consists of an aeolian half cadence in C minor during the verses (\textsuperscript{124}I - b\textsuperscript{VII}- b\textsuperscript{VI}-V) and a tonally ambiguous chorus that juxtaposes two plagal shuttles—one simple, one dorian. The sounds of honking horns and jackhammers can be heard at 1:12, further illustrating along with the jagged piano riff (aeolian half cadence) the harsh and noise polluted nature of the city. The verses are delivered with an anguished urgency, as if John

\textsuperscript{120} This connects to Erykah Badu’s conceptualization of “god” which Marlo David interprets as a “universal creative force.” See my analysis of “On & On” for more on this.
\textsuperscript{121} ATLiens specifically credits Quincy Jones’s version.
\textsuperscript{123} Lacasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality,” 36-37. See also “Justification and Methodology” in Chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{124} Tagg, \textit{Everyday Tonality II}, 375. See also Justification and Methodology in Chapter 1.
Sebastian were trying to hasten the arrival of those amorous, summer nights through sheer force of will. This eventually gives way to the decidedly cheerier melody of the chorus (plagal shuttles). There are two possible hearings of the chord shuttles: Dm ⇔ G is a plagal shuttle that could be heard as either i - IV or ii - V. Since the next new harmony heard after this shuttle is C minor, there is logic in hearing this particular moment as ii - V that eventually leads to i. However, because this shuttle is preceded by another plagal shuttle, F ⇔ B♭ where the first harmony of the shuttle is tonicized by the chord that preceded it, I am inclined to hear the “summer in the city” shuttle as i - IV as both i chords sound like temporary home keys. This ambiguity supports the shifting mood of joy to longing expressed in the lyrics in the original recording. The first four lines of the chorus speak of the fun, dance-filled nights and are sung over the first simple shuttle which is in the major mode (F ⇔ B♭). The last four lines lament that the days can’t be as carefree as the summer nights and are sung over the second shuttle in the minor mode (Dm ⇔ G). The juxtaposition of two plagal shuttles that are heard in such a way that does not immediately connect to the overall key implies stasis—a place to tarry harmonically. In the context of this original recording, then, it is fitting that this shuttle occurs while the singer sings about how they regret the days can’t be like the summer nights. However the lines “‘til it’s summer, in the city” are delivered without the intense sense of longing that is present in the final hypertext, implying that “summer,” while elusive for Jones and OutKast, is already here for Lovin’ Spoonful.

Jones’s version follows the basic harmonic blueprint of the original recording albeit in a different key (A minor). The mood of Jones’s cover is more laid back, transforming the metronomically stiff piano riff of the original into a wordless, soulful organ groove. The omission of the lyrics, as well as the city noise, encourages the listener to simply vibe along and focus on the

125 Tagg refers to shuttles such as these as dorian as that mode allows for a major IV in a minor key.
126 Tagg, Everyday Tonality II, 379.
subtle interplay of the ensemble until Valerie Simpson’s vocals arrive at 2:30 without warning. Simpson’s lyrical change from “go out and find a girl” to “ain’t it nice just to be a girl” slyly transforms the original implication of a young man sexually prowling the city to a young woman who simply wants to have a good time until “he’s main squeezing.” In this way, the girl Lovin’ Spoonful wants to find to sexually conquer now has agency to opt out. Interestingly, of all the covers of this song, this is the only one to be sung by a Black woman and the only one to make this particular change. Another change can be observed in the way Simpson infuses the lines “in the summer, in the city” with longing by not observing strict time in relation to the ensemble (2:53). No lyrics are sung after those in Jones’s version, instead opting to smoothly vamp until its conclusion while Simpson ad-libs vocalizations. Overall, Jones’s version fits Lacasse’s definition of a cover— “an (allosonic) hypertext consisting of a rendering of a hypotext that reveals no intention to be either a travesty or a copy.” More specifically, this performance does not aim to exactly replicate the original (allosonic copy) and though there are changes in style and lyrical content, there is no sense of an intent to debase the original (travesty). By giving primacy to the instruments rather than the voice, listeners can focus on the ensemble’s improvisation. Instead, Jones’s cover gets to the heart of the matter—the underlying sense of longing and expectation with less focus on sexual undertones.

I argue that the interpolation of “Summer in the City ” present at the end of “You May Die” is an allosonic quotation that points to Jones’s version alone. But if one considers hip-hop’s “imagined community,” it is also possible to associate the interpolation with other notable acts who had recently used Jones’s cover as compositional material. For instance, three years prior to the release of ATLiens, alternative hip-hop group The Pharcyde famously sampled Jones’ version of

127 A main squeeze is the person one has their primary romantic or sexual relationship with.
128 Lacasse, “Intertextuality and Hypertextuality,” 158.
“Summer in the City” for their chart topping hit “Passin’ Me By.” Specifically, the verses heavily sample the descending aeolian sequence (i - b VII - b VI - V) that also appears in the verses of the original song, though this particular sequence never appears on “You May Die.” This argument seems less likely, however, when considering the lines “‘til it’s summer, in the city” are not utilized in “Passing Me By.” Moreover, the subject matter and tone of “Passin’ Me By” is at best only tenuously connected to “You May Die”. “Passin’ Me By” is characterized by nostalgic glimpses of a youthful past while OutKast’s track is solemn, yet hopeful for the future. Both tracks display longing, but they are looking in different directions. Therefore, considering the biblical allusion, looping aeolian shuttle, and rhythmically dissonant vocal delivery, the interpolation recalls Jones’ version alone and signifies futurity.

“You May Die” functions as both an Afrofuturist alternative narrative and a call to arms to fight a future that is often depicted as “raceless.” It is not the soul stirring manifesto that appears at the end of Janelle Monáe’s “Q.U.E.E.N.” Instead it is a soft, unassuming, and unusual mix of biblical allusion and coded language that features Black women peripherally associated with the group, rather than members of the group themselves. More than just a tone setter, this track acts as a benediction that draws the previous era of OutKast to a close while ushering in a new one. Indeed, the immediate next track on ATLiens is “Two Dope Boyz,” a song that effectively reforms the Afrofuturist avatars first introduced on Southern. In just over a minute, the rappers communicate that the road to liberation will be difficult and you may even perish but “keep on trying.” Big Boi and André 3000 effectively transport their listeners into their newly birthed Afrofuturist space for the first time—an Atlanta-inspired omniverse populated by liberation minded, outkasted aliens.

2.3. Analysis of “Two Dope Boyz (In a Cadillac)"

According to the Rap Dictionary, a “dope boy” is someone who distributes illicit substances, namely drugs. In the context of hip-hop and gangsta culture, the “dope boy” can be seen as an avatar for the performance of Black masculinity which is marked by patriarchal attitudes. bell hooks explains:

The sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangster rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As the crudest and most brutal expression of sexism, misogynistic attitudes tend to be portrayed by the dominant culture as an expression of male deviance. In reality they are a part of a sexist continuum, necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal social order.\textsuperscript{130}

Many hip-hop artists have uncritically embraced patriarchal ideals, and by extension conspicuous materialism and consumption. In the post-Civil Rights era, in which Big Boi and André grew up, Black communities began to embrace capitalism which affected perceptions of manhood. bell hooks states that:

\begin{quote}
[о]nce money and not the realization of a work ethic based on integrity and ethical values, became the sole measure of the man, more Black men could enter the game…In Black communities hustling for money, even if that meant lying and cheating, became more acceptable if it brought home the bacon. A shift in class values occurs in Black life when integration comes and with it the idea that money is the primary marker of individual success, not how one acquires money.\textsuperscript{131}
\end{quote}

Thus, the drug economy became an acceptable work arena for Black men to work within and “[g]angsta culture [became] the essence of patriarchal masculinity.”\textsuperscript{132}

The embrace of gangsta culture works in tandem with the notion of “keeping it real,” the notion that “rappers…gain their worth in part based on their abilities to channel and exhibit

\textsuperscript{130} bell hooks, “Gangsta culture—sexism & misogyny who will take the rap?,” in Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representation, ed. bell hooks (New York: Routledge, 1994), 135.

\textsuperscript{131} bell hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 19-26.
recognizable aspects of the hood or distinct Black communities.” On the surface, OutKast’s avatars of “two dope boyz” uphold these ideals but their music and personas offer fertile ground to transcend typical characterizations assumed by Black male artists. I argue that by later adopting Afrofuturism, they were able to push against restrictive norms and explore new modalities of masculinity.

“GREETINGS EARTHLINGS” are the first words heard on “Two Dope Boyz (In a Cadillac).” Spoken by a presumably extraterrestrial voice, the phrase is taken directly from the beginning of their song “D.E.E.P.” which appears on Southern (Figure 6). The reference to “D.E.E.P.” a blistering track that demonstrates OutKast’s militant ideals early in their career is important. The reference reminds listeners that their interest in tackling heavier topics such as systemic racism is not new (André, “D.E.E.P.” Verse 1, 0:37 - 0:57):

You heard it here first with your master plan in reverse
I ain't the one with the curse, so disperse, yes, catching plagues
Niggas catching AIDS, niggas getting sprayed, niggas on they way

To a dead end, you won't catch me spreading no white thighs
I only see afro bitches up in my eyes

I don't eat no beef and surely not no pork
I used to drink that 8, but now I shove it down your throat

The “master plan” André speaks of is code for white supremacy. It also references the hook of “Crumblin ‘Erb”, another track on Southern (Niggas killin’ niggas they don’t understand / That’s the master plan). Since André has the plan in reverse, he is immune to catching “plagues” and getting “sprayed” (shot). Moreover, he is so militant in his pro-blackness that he does not

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133 Howard Rambsy II, “Beyond Keeping It Real: OutKast, the Funk Connection, and Afrofuturism,” American Studies 52, no. 4 (2013): 205.
135 This could also be understood as a play on “the massa’s plan.”
fraternize with white women, only “afro bitches.” André also tells us he has given up beef, pork, and alcohol in conjunction with his association with the Nation of Islam, something he and Big Boi dabbled with during this time (Big Boi, “D.E.E.P.” Verse 4, 4:22 - 4:39):

And I don’t give a damn, muthafucka cause you know why
The Caucus Mountains and the mutant gene
You try to wipe a nigga like me slam up off the scene

You hairy bastard, work a little bit faster
Because of the shit that I done been through, I shall never call you master
You D-E-V-I-L, the cave is where you dwell
So stay up out the rain, it’s beginning to smell like dog, yeah

This excerpt from Big Boi’s verse is more evidence of the teachings of the Five Percent Nation or the Nation of Gods and Earths.136 Five Percenters believe that Black people were the original inhabitants of Earth. These Black humans inhabited the planet for 66 trillion years while white people were created 6 thousand years ago by a scientist named Yakub (Jacob) on the island of Patmos. White people were later exiled to the caves of Europe after rising up against their creator.137 This extreme belief about race Big Boi and André demonstrate here is crucial. On top of neatly fitting in with the sci-fi theme of ATLiens, this sample would have conjured these images in the minds of their listeners which is precisely why they incorporated it. After this initial sample, the beat begins, built mainly on a dorian plagal shuttle sampled from “Danger, She’s a Stranger” by The Five Stairsteps. The song, which is about a remorseful partner who is pleading with their lover to forgive them, does not have any obvious ties to the themes of “Two Dope Boyz.” Nonetheless, the sample’s inclusion is important. Like the interpolation of Quincy Jones in “You May Die”, it demonstrates the Afrofuturist urge to make the old new again.

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136 References to the tenets of the Five Percent Nation are not uncommon among hip-hop artists.
The overall theme of “Two Dope Boyz” sees the rappers reaffirming their roots (Coming up on ya from the South / The ATLiens ain’t changed) and their commitment to rap (This side niggas dusting, that side niggas lacing / But in the middle we stay calm). There are no instances of what could be construed as overt references to Afrofuturism. Luckily, OutKast released an animated music video in late 2021 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the release of ATLiens. The video sees Big Boi and André riding around Atlanta in the aforementioned Cadillac and smoking joints that produce colorful plumes of smoke.

At the 1:05 mark, the cadillac disappears into a sort of cosmic nothingness and we get flashes of OutKast as they were 25 years ago and how they appear now. They appear to be wearing the same clothes but they have visibly aged at 1:23. Suddenly, a green tinted André who is wearing what is presumably a space helmet appears flanked by two bodacious aliens. The scene zooms out and we see all three figures standing atop an alien planet in an unfamiliar star system. More images of older OutKast appear before finally the two blow up their cadillac and walk calmly away from the explosion.

So what are listeners to make of these images? Choosing to view time as non-linear as an Afrofuturist would, I posit the 25 years between initial release of “Two Dope Boyz” and its music video only strengthens the message behind the music. Again, Afrofuturists work on the “otherside of time,” meaning that even though OutKast is technically no more, Big Boi and André will forever be two dope atliens in a cadillac.

2.4. Analysis of “E.T. (Extraterrestrial)”

“E.T. (Extraterrestrial)” is an experimental track on ATLiens demonstrating the emcee's embrace of Afrofuturist tropes. Like much of ATLiens, Big Boi and André ponder if they are indeed aliens like the titular character in the Steven Spielberg movie of the same name. The form
(Figure 7) of “E.T.” alternates between verses and hooks with both emcees sharing an equal number of bars between them, something that can be observed on many OutKast songs. The repeated lyrics “out of this world” aptly describes how this song makes the listener feel untethered and weightless despite the song’s familiar organization. However, the lack of a typical beat or bassline, along with the rappers’ irregular rhyme scheme and flow choices obfuscates the boundaries of each section and encourages an extracorporeal listening experience which resonates with the song’s themes of alienation. Nonetheless, there are connections between the lyrical delivery and the unusual beat just beneath the surface level.

As usual, Big Boi slips into his “pimp” persona when rapping the first verse. His verse is primarily concerned with condemning youth violence and seeks instead to “vocally arm” his listeners, declaring it his responsibility to help break the cycle of violence he observes in the Black community. He laments that the friends of his youth have turned to “car jack[ing]”, “unsafe sex”, and “flauging.” He implores his listeners to “guard [their] grills” — a metaphor for protecting their minds, bodies, and inner peace. Here we see the protection from harm that Afrofuturism affords. André plays the “poet” and speaks more abstractly about his personal feelings of anxiety and alienation. He encourages his listeners to not give up despite how out of place they may feel and to not be afraid to try new things. Indeed, some of the metaphors André conjur the image of the emcee physically pushing his listeners out of their comfort zones (“knocking other niggas out the box.”) He ends his verse by comparing OutKast’s music to “hailstorms and blizzards in the middle of the spring.” Overall, both emcees seek to liberate their listeners by speaking directly to and about their immediate realities while providing hope that one’s circumstances don’t necessarily have to determine the course of one's life.

138 Flauging is southern slang for pretending to have more than you do. Similar to “stunting.”
The beginning of “E.T.” is elided with the end of the previous track “Millenium”. One cycle of the chord loop takes 16 bars, setting the expectation that the verses will follow suit (Figure 8).

This brief elision coupled with the slow fade in of the chord loop, which consists primarily of an ethereal keyboard synth and repetitive guitar motive, makes it difficult to initially determine the hypermetrical downbeat. The chords in the right hand do not always move at the same rate as those in the left hand, which increases this ambiguity. However, as the first twenty seconds elapse, the guitar takes on a metronomic quality and it becomes possible to more easily hear the 4-bar hypermeter with a harmonic rhythm of one chord change per every two bars. This results in a looped progression: Am - F - Em - G7 - Am - Am/C - F9 - Em7♭9 (i - bVI - v - VII - i - i6 - bVI - v).

To better understand what makes “E.T.” experimental, I will first demonstrate some of the hip-hop norms of the time using “California Love” by Tupac ft. Dr. Dre and “Shimmy Shimmy Ya” by Ol’ Dirty Bastard. Simple divisions of the underlying beat with rhymes falling on the last beat of a bar was the norm at this time. Figure 9 shows an excerpt from “California Love” and “Shimmy Shimmy Ya.” The opening bars of both songs consist mainly of simple duple and quadruple divisions of the background beat with rhymes occurring at the end of those bars. Compare this to Figure 10 which shows Big Boi’s opening bars of “E.T.” Notice how Big Boi prefers internal rhymes (“say”, “everyday”, “stills”, “kills”, “shit”, “hit”), offbeat rhymes (“clockwork”, “Glock to work”) and complex syncopation that is unconcerned with the metrical

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139 I base this assumption in part on Kyle Adams’ article “Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap” in which he asserts that rappers such as OutKast “create unity between music and text by selecting rhythms, groupings, and motives from the music and incorporating them into the rhythm of the lyrics.” [https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.08.14.2/mto.08.14.2.adams.html](https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.08.14.2/mto.08.14.2.adams.html)

140 The Am/C chord could also be interpreted as Cadd6.

141 Tupac and Ol’ Dirty Bastard are representatives of the West and East coast respectively which were the primary areas in the country contributing to rap at the time.

implications of the chord loop.143 Big Boi largely avoids beginning a new sentence on the
downbeat of a measure.144 Counterintuitively, Big Boi begins a new sentence directly on the
downbeat in the last 4 bars of his verse beginning at 1:00 (Out of this world like E.T.). These bars
noticeably elide into the first instance of the hook sung by Witch Doctor. Similar to the way the
right hand chord of the keyboard moves sustain while the left hand moves on, Big Boi suspends
his verse over the first four bars of what should be the hook. Indeed, the phrase “Out of this world.
Are you alien?” is sung three and a half times before the second verse begins with a new chord
cycle.

If Big Boi’s verse is an expansion of the elisions and suspensions present in the chord loop,
then André 3000’s embodies the metronomical quality of guitar riff. Indeed, André doesn’t seem
concerned with stuffing as many syllables as possible within a given bar. Although some portions
of the lyrics lie unevenly across bars like Big Boi’s, André’s verse mainly relies on a steady stream
of syncopated eighth notes and a short rhythmic motive. There is also a notable elison of the first
half of André’s verse with the last half which coincides with the rhythmically suspended chords in
the chord loop. This with the lack of space between the lyrics “Ain’t that a bitch that be in heat?/
I’m on the beat like cops,” obscures a new cycle of the chord loop145 André ends his verse
similarly to Big Boi and the hook begins again and slowly fades out into the ether.

“E.T.” is a unique and affecting entry of OutKast’s oeuvre. The flow, delivery, and overall
production of this track toys with temporality in subtle but powerful ways. Musical suspensions,
textual elisions, and the lack of the typical anchoring features such as a prominent bass line obscure
the simple underlying formal scheme and encourages an “out of this world” listening experience

143 Adam Krims describes this type of flow as “speech-effusive” in *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*.
144 Big Boi does indeed begin two phrases on the downbeat before this. However, both instances occur on
hypometric upbeats and thus feel and sound weaker.
145 Something similar occurs in mm. 105 - 106 except it occurs half way through a cycle of the chord loop.
where we, the untethered listeners, are free to ponder our own feelings of alienation. In this way OutKast rejects linear temporality and strict structural demarcations associated with white hegemony, instead embracing the Afrofuturist tropes of futurity and dynamic tension, which in turn leads to liberation. These are just a few examples of OutKast’s ability to utilize text, sound, and image to sculpt their Afrofuturist space. Through the lens of the familiar trope of “dope boyz”, OutKast subvert expectations to project their own way of being MCs in the hip-hop community.
FIGURE 5. Intertextual Genealogy of “You May Die (Intro)” by OutKast.
FIGURE 6. Intertextual Genealogy of “Two Dope Boyz (In a Cadillac).” Because the robotic voiceover from “D.E.E.P.” only partially appears in “Two Dope Boyz,” it is represented by a dotted circle. Since the backup vocals from “Danger, She’s a Stranger” are sampled with no alteration, it is represented by a solid circle.
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<tr>
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<td>“Peep what I say”</td>
<td>Speech effusive</td>
<td>36 (32 +4)</td>
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<td>1:09 - 1:39</td>
<td>“Out of this world”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verse 2</td>
<td>1:40 - 2:27</td>
<td>“Right now I’m smiling”</td>
<td>Metrical</td>
<td>36 (32+4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hook</td>
<td>2:27 - 3:05</td>
<td>“Out of this world”</td>
<td></td>
<td>28</td>
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**FIGURE 7.** Form of “E.T. (Extraterrestrial).”

**FIGURE 8.** Transcription of chord loop from “E.T. (Extraterrestrial).”
FIGURE 9. Transcription of excerpt from Tupac’s “California Love” ft. Dr. Dre and Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s “Shimmy Shimmy Ya.” Dr. Dre and Ol’ Dirty Bastard primarily employ simple and quadruple beat divisions and land their rhymes at the end of each bar.
FIGURE 10. Transcription of excerpt from OutKast’s “E.T. (Extraterrestrial).” Big Boi rarely rhymes at the end of bars, preferring internal rhymes instead.
CHAPTER 3. ERYKAH BADU: ANALOG GIRL IN A DIGITAL WORLD

3.1. Introduction

Erykah Badu has presented herself under various monikers as a matter of course throughout her career. Even the name “Erykah Badu” is a stage name, reinforcing the Afrofuturist notion that the boundaries of identity are unfixed and fluid. In this chapter, I will analyze selections from Erykah Badu’s oeuvre through the lens of her most popular moniker “Analog Girl in a Digital World.” I argue that “analog girl” is more than a nickname but one of Badu’s Afrofuturist avatars. After providing context for this avatar, I will then demonstrate how each song selection reflects aspects of Afrofuturist speculative thought that informs Badu’s musical and aesthetic choices. Specifically, I will focus on how Badu uses cyclicity, self-borrowing, and visuals to aid in the construction of the “analog girl” avatar, and by extension, her personal philosophy of “Baduizm.” Using Afrofuturist speculative thought as a foundation, I will also utilize “hip-hop feminism” and the concept of intersectionality to frame my analyses.

Erykah Badu goes by many names: “Fat Belly Bella,” “Rasta-Style Flower Child,” “Badula Oblongata,” “Analog Girl,” (Figure 11) amongst others. Badu switches identities with ease, as if they were jewelry, hats, or clothes. Out of all the names and honorifics associated with her, “analog girl” is arguably the most recognizable. The phrase “analog girl in a digital world” first appeared in “...& On,” the fourth track of her second studio album Mama’s Gun (2000). In the context of her artistic output, the nickname indeed seems to encompass Badu’s feelings of alienation from, and skepticism of, modernity and technological advancement.

146 Badu was born Erica Abi Wright and later rejected her birth name calling it her “slave name”. Badu has been quoted as saying “[m]usic is a rebirth process and I am a midwife helping to bring it into the world.”
http://www.rockonthenet.com/artists-b/erykahbadu_main.htm

147 The gospel according to Badu. It is meant to inspire, elevate, and evolve listeners.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtBBK91d1wE

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A good example comes from her 2015 mixtape *But You Caint Use My Phone*. In the intro of the ninth track “Dial’Afreaq,” Badu relays a theory about how cell phones are responsible for the planets’ declining bee population. She explains that the frequencies emitted from cell phones confuse the bee’s inner compass, which makes it “impossible for them hoes to find their way back to the hive.” She laments that “it is unlikely that the world will ever, ever, ever relinquish the convenience of cell phones.” Earlier on “Phone Down,” Badu tells her companion that she can “make them put their phone down,” implying that analog (read in person) interactions trump digital connections. Badu has elsewhere acknowledged the utility of technology, specifically how technology can unlock new soundscapes, and its utility in exchanging music and ideas within the hip-hop space. On “The Healer” from *New Amerykah, Pt. 1: 4th World War* (2008), Badu sings “Told you we ain’t dead yet / We been livin’ through your internet.” In the same verse, Badu encourages her listeners to “get baptized in the ocean of the people” so that they can “reboot, refresh, restart.” This tension between the analog and digital is represented in the album art for *But You Caint Use My Phone* where Badu is depicted as some sort of Afro-vedic deity with multiple arms holding multiple phones of varying technological capabilities (Figure 12). She is presented as both organic and manufactured as her breasts, arms, and legs are populated with speaker cones, her private parts the control box. Another take on this is present on the artwork for *New Amerykah, Part 2: Return of the Ankh* where a cybernetic Badu is situated amongst colorful, alien flora, while a gnarled tree and a smaller Badu holding a tuning fork springs from the top of her head.\(^\text{148}\) Indeed, Badu has always had a tepid relationship with technology, specifically its ability to connect and distract, and that tension directly translates to her conception of herself across her artistic output.

\(^{148}\) This imagery also brings to mind the Greek myth of Athena springing from Zeus’ head. Athena, the goddess of intelligence and wisdom, was said to have appeared fully formed and armored, ready to do battle. In contrast, Badu is fully formed but only armored with a tuning fork, implying that music is Badu’s weapon of choice.
Beyond her technological distrust, “analog girl” can also be interpreted as an avatar that embodies the intersectional realities experienced by Black women. I understand intersectionality as an analytical framework that addresses the “multidimensionality of Black women's experience.”

Coined by Kimberlè Crenshaw in 1989 to mitigate the “[erasure of] Black women in the conceptualization, identification and remediation of race and sex discrimination,” Crenshaw asserts that “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism.” These “intersecting oppressions” constitute a “matrix of domination,” that is, the “distinctive set of social practices that accompany [Black women].” For example “analog girl” encompasses Badu’s non-traditional approach to motherhood in a society that is hostile to unmarried mothers. Marlo David explains:

[Erykah Badu is] a transgressive Black maternal figure and “artist-at-work” who resists the privileging of marriage by seeking alternative family structures that affirmatively centralize Black women as mothers and heads of households. Badu uses her music, visual style, and linguistic play to offer an Afrofuturistic vision of family that embraces Black women’s sexual autonomy and transgressive motherhood as an important part of a Back collective identity that resonates in the post–Civil Rights era.

Badu’s choice to have three children by three different men while remaining unmarried has garnered her criticism which Badu felt compelled to address in a blog post on a fan site from 2008:

I have defended myself here ON THIS SITE and hurled a few insults .. but only in response to your insults of
my music , my clothes , my lyrics , my hair , my being a woman , my spirit, my choices of partners….
these have all been on trial here .
i know you are having fun , but what if it were you and your children?

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150 Ibid., 140.
152 Marlo David, *Mama’s Gun: Black Maternal Figures and the Politics of Transgression* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University, 2016), 83.
my son is 10.
my daughter, 4.
peace
ANALOGUE GIRL
and if this post is not clear
kiss my placenta.153

Badu’s frustration is palpable and demonstrates the heightened scrutiny to which Black women are subjected. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, “[p]ortraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas helps justify U.S. Black women’s oppression. Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought.”154 As “analog girl,” Badu puts forth a brand of feminism that exploits the disconnect between the self-image she has created and the controlling images prescribed to her, while retaining the right to enjoy patriarchal elements of hip-hop culture. This “hip-hop feminism” is apparent in “Danger,” which I will discuss later in this chapter.

“Danger” describes a woman’s lived reality of parenting while her partner is incarcerated due to this “complex occupation.” The song is a jubilant rebuttal to the notion that the “heterosexual, two-parent [family is]...the most suitable to represent Black citizenship in the American racial landscape[...]”155 Marlo David asserts that “Black women, like Badu, who choose single motherhood over marriage and whose children have 3 different fathers fall into categories of social illegibility and disrepute within Black social spaces.”156 In other words,

153 https://soulbounce.com/2008/07/erykah_budu_say_kiss_my_placenta/
154 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 69.
155 David, Mama’s Gun, 83.
156 Ibid., 83-84.
Badu’s bespoke brand of feminism is “brave enough to fuck with the grays.”¹⁵⁷ As Joan Morgan explains:

Black women can no more be defined by the cumulative sum of our pain than blackness can be defined solely by the transgenerational atrocities delivered at the hands of American racism. Because Black folks are more than the stench of the slave ship, the bite of the dogs, or the smoldering of freshly lynched flesh. In both cases, defining ourselves solely by our oppression denies us the very magic of who we are. My feminism simply refuses to give sexism or racism that much power.¹⁵⁸

The space between Badu as innovative artist and unapologetic, single, baby mother is where “analog girl” exists. It is within this space that Badu challenges and alters negative perceptions of Black womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality.

3.2. Analysis of “Next Lifetime”

“Next Lifetime” is the sixth track on and the second single released from Baduizm, Badu’s 1997 debut album. This low-tempo R&B ballad describes Badu’s inner conflict when she finds herself desiring another man who is not her partner (Now what am I supposed to do / When I want you in my world? / But how can I want you for myself / When I’m already someone’s girl?). The time hopping images from the accompanying music video also supports this interpretation. I argue that the cyclical harmonies and visual narrative provided by the music video establish Badu as an “analog girl,” here, a metaphor for her views on love, sexuality, and relationships. Although her views mostly align with traditional hetero-normativity, Badu casts herself as an “astro-timeless” immortal existing on the “other side of time” with the power to tailor social norms to her liking.

The song opens with a brief skit of Badu talking to an unnamed man who has expressed romantic interest in her (0:00–0:44). As the music provided by producer and multi-instrumentalist

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.
Tone the Backbone swells in the background, Badu acknowledges their mutual attraction, declines her suitor’s offer (not unkindly), and the song properly begins. The lyrics continue to touch on Badu’s attraction to her potential lover (Your energy / Feels so damn good to me / It picks me up don’t wanna come down / You got me spinning all around) and demonstrates the behavior she believes she should adhere to as a committed woman (You’re beautiful / But still it ain't that type of party now). She allows herself to mentally entertain his proposition (See, it ain't nothin' wrong with dreamin’) but in the end, her refusal to go there with her suitor affirms her love for her partner (It lets me know just how strong / That my love is for my baby).

While Badu’s loyalty to her partner may be read as a conservative approach to relationships, I argue her suggestion of a “next lifetime” belying her rejection of a traditional “soulmate” love. A A♭ m9 - B♭ m9 - Am9 chord loop lasts the entirety of the song with only subtle variations. The cyclicity and root motion of this simple loop can be understood as signifiers of futurity and reincarnation. Notice how the quality and voicing of the individual chords remains the same while the root changes. The root motion (up a whole step, down a semitone, down a semitone) can be understood as analogous to Badu’s repeated phrase “I guess I’ll see you next lifetime.” I also interpret this chord loop as an example of the “extended present.” I understand the “extended present” as an “immediate, present-time [activity that] usually last[s], depending on tempo and degree of exertion, for "between around one and eight seconds.”

Utilizing the extended present here encourages listeners to focus on the message being transmitted by the lyrics and accompanying visuals. The “extended present” also supports the conception of time presented in this song—belief in reincarnation frees you from the anxieties of mortality, thereby enabling you to participate fully in the here and now. Even though we mere mortals may perceive space-time as

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159 Tagg, Everyday Tonality II, 353-356. Tagg explains that music that employs a one-chord change should not be viewed as “harmonically impoverished” but rather a phenomena of “now sound.” Even though the music remains on B minor, the music still has kinetic energy that propels it forward.
linear, for Badu this current lifetime is indeed not the end, and every step towards “the end” ultimately serves to bring her back to where she started. Through this lens, Badu’s rejection is less of a “no” and more of a “not right now.” This murky distinction allows Badu to adhere to a flexible form of monogamy without incurring the type of social condemnation that has followed Badu in her real life. More than a romantic sentiment, Badu uses the concept of reincarnation to articulate her Afrofuturist conception of an alternate diasporic past and her affirmation of that past’s enduring vitality. This future orientation is brought into sharper relief in the accompanying promotional images and music video.

Like *Space is the Place*, Badu uses visual cues to reinforce the Afrofuturist subtext of her music. At 3:15, Badu suggests to her suitor that “maybe we’ll be butterflies” and on the album art for the live version of “Next Lifetime,” Badu appears digitally altered with butterfly wings. Badu is crowned with her signature headwrap, her arms and hands adorned by chunky, ankh (☥) bearing jewelry (Figure 13). The headwrap and ankh symbols signify Badu’s authentic (analog) Blackness while the obviously digitally rendered butterfly wings suggests that same Blackness has the potential for metamorphosis and transformation. The dynamic tension represented by this image, which calls to mind the art of Fatimah Tuggar, “intervenes at the border between real and hyperreal.” It is in this liminal, Afrofuturist space, which David describes as “the [gap] between essentialized Blackness and post-soul possibility to project forward into future Blackness,” that Badu’s analog girl inhabits.

The music video for “Next Lifetime” opens in pre-colonial Africa in a modest, nondescript village. A title card flashes on screen identifying the setting as “the Motherland 1637 A.D.,” an

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162 Ibid., 701.
163 Ibid., 705.
apocryphal Africa reconstructed from bits and pieces of cultural memory. The village dwellers, who are adorned in beads and animal print go about their daily routines as Badu emerges from her dwelling. She too is dressed in brightly colored fabric with armbands, beaded necklaces, her signature headwrap, and a prominent ankh tattoo on her left shoulder. On her way to purchase food, Badu acknowledges two older women, genuflecting in their direction. This show of respect occurs twice, underscoring Badu’s reverence for her maternal elders and her desire to validate Black womanhood. A little later we see Badu’s first suitor played by rapper and producer Pete Rock gazing at Badu longingly from across a watering hole (1:10). Badu returns his gaze but they are interrupted by Badu’s partner and child, played by her partner at the time Andrè 3000. There is a reaction shot of Pete Rock’s disappointment before the camera focuses on Badu’s ankh tattoo and the scene flashes forward in time as a butterfly flutters across the screen (1:28–1:31).

The video jumps forward in time to “The Movement: 1968,” where the story continues against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement. Badu, still clad in brightly colored fabric and her headwrap, finds herself again face to face with Pete Rock who is handing out flyers for a political meeting (1:42). Their body language suggests that they are romantically involved, suggesting that Badu has kept her word to choose Rock in this “next lifetime.” In this lifetime, a new suitor appears played by rapper Method Man. Later at a “power meeting” apparently run by Rock and Badu, Method Man gives a speech to the crowd while the attendees throw up the Black power fist. Beginning at 2:37, Badu and company are attacked by the Ku Klux Klan. A cross is burned outside and when a brick is thrown through the window, it is Method Man that springs to action to protect Badu with his body (2:53). As soon as the Klan breaks down the door, the butterfly appears again and the scene shifts again, this time back to the Motherland but in 3037.

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164 The video specifically gives the date December 2, 1968. I am unsure of what specific event Badu is referencing here. The most likely scenario is she is referencing the general racial unrest of 1968 or the murders of prominent Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by the F.B.I. in December 1969.
A.D. This final scene depicts an “ancient choosing ceremony” where the attendees paint their faces, dance, laugh, and choose mates. Andrè 3000 makes another appearance but instead of Man instead. More butterflies fly across the screen and Badu stares down lens pointing her finger, perhaps implying that we the viewer will see her in the next lifetime.

The music video is Badu’s attempt to create an alternate historical myth that rejects the reality of what Joy DeGruy calls Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). PTSS is a syndrome brought on by “[m]ultigenerational trauma…continued oppression and [an] [a]bsence of opportunity to access the benefits available in the society.” Throughout history, Blacks have been hindered from achieving the patriarchal nuclear family. During slavery (1619–1865), enslaved Blacks needed permission from their masters to marry, and even then their unions exploited for breeding, thereby increasing the enslaved population. So long as they were enslaved, Black men could not execute their responsibilities as the patriarchal heads of their families. These unions were further strained due to the constant threat of being sold off or of violence against loved ones.

During legalized segregation (1865–1965), African-American marriage increased as it was now recognized by law, but the Black Codes were created to severely restrict the movements and rights of Black people. These codes also signaled the beginning of mass incarceration of Blacks as Douglas Blackmon explains that “[a]t the end of the 1880s, thousands of Black men across the South were imprisoned in work camps, only for violations of the new racial codes, completely subjective crimes, or no demonstrable crime at all.” From 1965 to present day, mass incarceration and high unemployment have been the main stressors on African-American

relationships. In the 1990s, Black incarceration was trending upward nationally and at the beginning of the decade Black people were almost seven times more likely than white people to be incarcerated. By 2001, the rate of adult Black men who had ever been to prison was 16.6%, twice as high as adult Hispanic men (7.7%), and over six times as high among adult white males (2.6%). To summarize, after the conclusion of chattel slavery, discriminatory laws led to Black males being over represented in American prison populations, curtailing their ability to find and maintain meaningful employment, which in turn erodes the foundation of the patriarchal nuclear family. It is this reality Badu seeks to correct here by depicting a “Motherland” untouched by colonialism, and positive images of an intact Black, nuclear family well into the far future. By choosing to return to this image of the diasporic past that conspicuously lacks any trace of modern technology, Badu transforms it into a sort of Black utopia. This “past-future vision” suggests that Black cultural memory has not been lost and reinforces the vitality and longevity of Blackness and Black traditions. This artistic assertion is a powerful counter to the “unbridled, raceless future-lust” that is common in modern science fiction depictions. It is also significant that Badu aligns her historical myth with liberation movements of the past, suggesting her intent to carry on that important work through her art. Referring to this alternative history, Erik Steinskog claims that the “Civil Rights Movement becomes the point from where the future can appear.” I would argue against this reading as I believe the visuals, lyrics, and time traveling conceit imply that the

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168 St. Vil, St. Vil. and Fairfax, “Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome,” 141.
172 David, Afrofuturism, 705.
persistence of blackness is not contingent on any particular historical event, real or mythological. Badu is affirming that blackness is not beholden to fixed moments in time, meaning that the future was never in doubt.

“Next Lifetime” is representative of Badu’s eclectic style and her ability to communicate her own philosophical truths through the medium of hip-hop and R&B. Like Sun Ra before her, Badu blends music, text, and style to reject reality and create her bespoke brand of myth-science. With one foot in the traditions and rituals of the past, Badu orients her gaze towards a intentionally Black future, reimagining the rules for Black women navigating love and relationships across spacetime through her avatar as the “analog girl.”

3.3. Analysis of “On & On …& On”

Erykah Badu’s debut single “On & On” is arguably her most recognizable song. The single performed well on the Billboard charts, earned Badu the Grammy for Best Female R&B Performance at the 1998 Grammys and in the two decades since its initial release, the song has become synonymous with “Baduizm.” Indeed, the content of these songs reveals Badu’s personal mix of philosophy and spirituality, casting Badu as a street prophetess whose mission is to warn Black folks of the planet’s impending doom. For all its success, listeners of “On & On” have still struggled to decipher its meaning, a fact Badu cheekily pokes fun at in the song’s sequel “…& On.” I put forth that both songs are sung from the perspective of “analog girl” and are meant to be taken in as a whole. The futurity and cyclicity insinuated by the titles correspond to Badus conception of space-time, which in turn corresponds to the “cipher form” featured in both songs, to borrow Badu’s metaphor. In the context of rap and hip-hop, a cipher (or cypher) is a freestyle session where the rapping participants stand in a circle and take turns improvising. Feminist theorist Gwendolyn Pough defines cipher as “both a space that Black women create for themselves and a
space in which they question themselves about what it means to be both Black and woman in the larger U.S. public sphere.”¹⁷⁵ The cipher, for Badu, is a metaphor for infinite knowledge. Badu claims she was born with her cipher, and that “since knowledge is infinite,” it has infinitely fallen on her. This form, which is propagated by cyclical grooves and static harmonies, is an example of “the changing same.” Referring to Amiri Baraka’s essay of the same name, Steinskog states that “[t]he changing same, then, changes the past or the understanding of the past. It keeps the past alive in a different way than linearity does.”¹⁷⁶ Here, Badu interacts with her own past through self-borrowing, adding another layer of commentary and complexity in the process. The following analysis will demonstrate how this form, aided by self-borrowing, occurs at the local and large scale level across both songs.

I understand cipher form as being composed of a primary and essential groove. These grooves are made up of repeated chord loops or shuttles that occur over an unchanging beat. The primary groove is characterized by its meditative quality, useful in getting the listener to focus on the implications of the text rather than the complexity of the music. The primary groove usually lasts the majority of the song and always precedes the essential groove. The essential groove is derived from the primary groove but is subtly different, thereby encouraging closer listening.¹⁷⁷ The essential groove is brief, occurs 1–2 times during the song, and typically aligns with the bridge. The lyrics that are sung over the essential groove offer a distillation of the song’s overall theme.

¹⁷⁷ This derivation relates to Steinskog’s conception of the “changing same.”
“On & On” begins with a now iconic syncopated, percussive beat—as if Badu herself were rapping her knuckles against our foreheads, trying to force our third eye open. After this, the primary groove begins in earnest (0:06). Badu opens the first verse with “Oh my, my, my/ I’m feelin’ high/ My money’s gone/ I’m all alone/ Too much to see/ The world keeps turnin’” Here, Badu describes her detachment from the material things of this world as well as her physical detachment from our reality. Badu is on a higher plane of existence, untethered as the world continues to spin. David interprets these lines as a description of the “psychospiritual violence” Black captives (the listener) experience at the hands of “Intellects,” an ironic catch-all term used to describe those who can not comprehend Badu’s teachings.178 In the next half of the first verse, Badu spells out the essentials of “Baduizm.” Badu sings “If we were made in his image/ Then call us by our names/ Most intellects do not believe in god/ But they fear us just the same.” “His image” could allude to a higher power and was probably influenced by Badu’s connection to the Five Percent Nation, a religious movement under the umbrella of Islam. Badu even states that these lyrics were inspired by “the gods and the earths” which is another name for the Five-Percent Nation.179 Reinforcing this, Badu sings “peace and blessings” just before this, which could be interpreted as a translation of “as-salamu alaykum.”180 Badu goes on to explain the source of her knowledge in the hook singing “Oh, on and on and on and on/ My cipher keeps moving like a rolling stone.” Just like its definition suggests, Badu’s cipher holds a wealth of knowledge—a secret message meant for Black folks, encrypted so as to throw off the “Intellects”. We learn that the cipher is also the progenitor of her Afrofuturist avatar as Badu explains “I was born

178 David, Afrofuturism, 704.
180 David comments on how the idea of “peace” is used in black spaces to preserve an authentic “African” salutation. This is important as Badu uses this song to set herself up as a sort of cosmic prophetess sent to deliver an important message to the diaspora (“Afrofuturism”, 704).
underwater/ With three dollars and six dimes.” This imagery alludes to baptism, keeping in line with vague spiritual references of the first verse. In that vein, Badu is saying her rebirth as the “analog girl” occurred thanks to the knowledge bestowed upon her by the cipher. Throughout this primary groove, the keyboardist voices the chords in such a way so that the motion from sol (B) to re (F♯) in the right hand is the most salient.181 This helps to build anticipation for the forthcoming essential groove (Figure 15).

Badu then aurally prepares us to receive the message of the forthcoming essential groove by denying us a resolution to do (E) until the strong downbeat at the start of the bridge on an Em11 chord following four beats of rest (2:33). Now that she has our attention, Badu speaks directly to those who didn’t “do [their] math”. She warns that those who didn’t understand that her earlier cryptic lyric “three dollars and six dimes” refers to the 360 degree motion of a cipher are in danger. These Black folks won’t be able to experience the same spiritual rebirth and by extension, the “mothership” won’t be able to save them from this doomed planet.182 As David points out, after Badu states that she is hungry she immediately says “Don’t feed me yours/Cause your food does not endure.” To Badu, those who do not seek liberation are spiritually and intellectually starved.183

The essential groove cycles four times before shifting back into the primary groove where it remains until the end of the song (2:57–3:46). But Badu’s message does not end here. I previously mentioned how Badu’s lyrics and reliance on metaphor proved baffling for many listeners which inspired Badu to pen a sequel entitled “…& On” where Badu self-borrows from the original song. In a tongue in cheek manner, her backup singers sing during the chorus “What good do your words do if they can’t understand you? Don’t go talkin’ that shit, Badu.” Nevertheless, Badu

181 Despite the texture of the primary groove thinning to just bass and drums (1:16) and a brief repeat of the opening percussive idea (1:24) in the second verse, the groove is essentially unchanged.
182 A probable nod to Space is the Place and Sun Ra’s cosmology in general.
continues to talk “that shit,” utilizing lyrical and musical self-borrowing to bring her message into sharper relief.

Firstly, the initial syncopated rhythm featured at the beginning of “...& On” is very similar to the now iconic intro of On & On” (Figure 16). After this, the primary groove begins (Figure 17). Although this groove is in a different key, it still features a quintal shuttle like “On & On.” Over the primary groove, Badu takes the time to describe another side of “analogue girl” singing “I be that gypsy / Flippin’ life game from the right brain / Ascension maintained / Rolling through like a burning flame / Like a supernova star / She be the light when they in the dark.” Here, Badu aligns her image with that of a creative, free-spirited, gypsy whose “life game” has the ability to dispel darkness and to stimulate and elevate consciousness (ascension maintained). A notable feature of the verses is how Badu appropriates astrological imagery to esoterically explain her conception of cosmology. Towards the end of the first verse Badu sings “the moon pass the sun / four constellations start forming / a cross up in the sky.” This seems to reference the Chinese myth of Hou Yi, a skilled archer who saved his village by shooting nine suns out of the sky, and Chang’e, his wife who drank the elixir of immortality, transforming her into the moon goddess. The four constellations could reference the Four Guardians that appear in traditional Chinese astrology: the Azure Dragon of the East, Vermillion Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West, and the Black Tortoise of the North. These creatures are the guardians of the four cardinal directions, thereby forming “a cross up in the sky.” Later in verse two, Badu mentions her own astrological sign the Pisces singing “two fish, one swimmin’ upstream / one swimmin’ down livin’

184 I hear these initial seconds as a remix of the original. Even the way Badu scats “A one-two, one-two” seems to mimic a DJ scratching at a turntable.
185 I acknowledge that the word “gypsy” is a racial slur, especially when referring to the Romani people. I use it here only to illustrate how Badu appropriates stereotypes associated with the term to describe herself. This line also alludes to the OutKast song “Rosa Parks” (1998) where André 3000, the father of her oldest child, raps “I met a gypsy and she hipped me to some life game / To stimulate then activate the left and right brain.”
186 Badu also uses sun and moon imagery in “Other Side of the Game” referring to herself as the moon and her partner as the sun.
in a dream.” The imagery of two fish swimming in opposite directions could be interpreted as the “twoness” of Badu’s avatar of “analog girl.” Indeed, after all of the constellation imagery, Badu comes back to Earth to demonstrate her authentic blackness.

After declaring herself to be an “analog girl in a digital world” (1:26–1:29), she proceeds to scat while listing various descriptive monikers: “the rasta style flower child / zip dip dow, zip dip dow / the gold tooth smile, split them vowels / bling bloom bling, melanated.” The line about gold teeth and splitting vowels brings to mind another song entitled “Southern Girl” written by Rahzel, a beatboxer and former member of the Roots, and performed by Badu.187 Like the latter part of the second verse of “...& On”, Badu celebrates her Texas roots by proudly highlighting her regional accent (gotta Southern drawl / I’m so country y’all), scatting and using nonsense syllables (twain tiki lang tanga tang tiki tiki), and painting a picture of a slower paced, slightly behind the times South to further signify her blackness (got about a hundred friends / that ain’t caught on to trends / don’t know about the internet / don’t know about the radio). “Analog girl” is still a simple, Dallas girl at heart, obscure astrological allusions notwithstanding.

At the bridge (2:08–3:00), which corresponds to the essential groove, Badu zeros in on how that simple Dallas girl came of age. She describes accompanying her mother to the washeteria, becoming aware of her socioeconomic disadvantages (water in my cereal), and links these memories to the memory of starting puberty (Remember how I felt the day I first started my period / Remember there in school one day I learned I was inferior). The experiences of growing up poor, black and female in the deep south left an indelible mark on Badu and it’s on these foundational experiences that “analog girl” is built.188

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187 The album art for the single “Southern Girl” features Badu’s bared teeth sporting a diamond grill that spells “BADU.”

188 Badu doesn’t specify what makes her “inferior” leaving room for listeners to relate their own experiences of being “othered.”
After telling listeners to “wrap their heads with this material,” a double entendre referring both to her signature headwraps and all the wisdom she’s dropped thus far, Badu quotes snippets of “On & On.” Beginning at 2:40 she sings “Cause you did not do your math / My cypher keeps moving like a rolling stone / Mad props to the god JaBorn.” Considering the textual connections, self-borrowing, and the similar iterations of form and groove, I interpret “On & On” as a macro primary groove with “...& On” functioning as the essential groove that serves to further distill the theme of identity first presented in “On & On.”

3.4. Analysis of “Other Side of the Game” and “Danger”

“Other Side of the Game” and “Danger” appear on Baduizm (1997) and Worldwide Underground (2003) respectively. Although separated by six years and two albums, these songs are connected in much the same way that “On & On” and “...& On” are. Here, Badu uses cyclicity and self-borrowing to champion non-traditional motherhood.

“Other Side” is sung from the perspective of a woman contemplating an abortion because of her partner’s need to “get [his] hustle on.” This song is unique as it focuses on the woman’s perspective and thus highlights the hardships endured by loved ones whose partners have “complex occupations.” The first sung lyrics are “Whatcha gonna do when they come for you? / Work ain’t honest but it pays the bills).” Badu quotes the 1987 Inner Circle song “Bad Boys” which gained popularity as the theme song for the television show Cops and the Bad Boys movie franchise starring Martin Lawrence and Will Smith. From the start, Badu paints a picture of a young couple surviving through illegal activity. In the accompanying music video, real life paramour André 3000 plays Badu’s love interest. The first minute of the video sees the camera panning through the couple’s large, lavish apartment. Badu’s partner’s work clearly pays the bills and then some. The camera then stops as Badu suddenly appears, a worried expression on her
face. She sings “Do I really want my baby? / Brother tell me what to do.” Even though she claims to understand “the game”, she still worries (So I pray). Nonetheless, Badu stays in the relationship, acknowledging her deep love (I love him strong) and his ability to provide (Gave me the life that I came to live…I can’t make it on my own). This inner conflict is underscored by a submediantal shuttle (Figure 18).

It should be noted that Badu’s conflict arises out of concern for her partner and the life growing inside of her. There isn’t any indication of a desire to legalize their union or that the choice she is contemplating is a moral one. We also do not get a sense of what Badu’s community thinks of her situation. Even though she asks her partner for advice, the decision is ultimately hers. This omission of moralization is key as “analog girl” at her core is a woman who lives life on her own terms. David interprets Badu’s performance as a “bold refutation of the idea that Black women must always desire marriage along with their motherhood.” These omissions tacitly imply that the situation Badu finds herself in isn’t necessarily right or wrong, it simply is, easing the weight of societal and community pressure for her listeners who may be in a similar situation.

“Other Side” leaves it ambiguous as to what Badu’s decision will be. That is until “Danger” picks up the narrative. The first seventeen seconds of “Danger” sample the opening seconds of “Other Side,” this time accompanied by synthesized, futuristic blips and bleeps, before ending abruptly with the sound of police sirens (0:18). Then at 0:20 we hear a short skit of Badu receiving a collect call from her partner who is now incarcerated. During this skit, Badu sings in the background “The brother’s got this complex occupation” using the same melody that appeared on “Other Side.”

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189 David, Mama’s Gun, 84.
190 Interestingly, right before the skit begins we hear what sounds like a reversed cymbal crash. The same effect is used at the very start of “…& On.”
191 There is another instance of a recycled melody at 3:56 in “Danger” when Badu sings in the background “I understand the game.” This matches 1:23 of “Other Side” where Badu sings the same line in the same way.
The song properly starts at 0:41 and right from the start, the listeners get a sense of how this character has changed and matured since last we heard her. Gone is the quiet, mid-tempo jazz inspired vibe of “Other Side.” In its place is a bombastic, chest thumping, ride or die anthem. It’s immediately clear that Badu decided not to terminate her pregnancy. In fact, she has fully embraced her role as a hustler’s girlfriend (Me and this baby gon’ be here all night long / Walking this wood floor until my man get home), reaffirming her love and commitment (Because I love him, love him strong). Not only has she embraced her role, there is a strong implication that she has since gotten her hands dirty as well. Badu sings about keeping the car running in case the police set up a perimeter around her block (Because they got the block on lock / the trunk stay locked / glock on cock / the block stay hot), and disposing of evidence should the need arise (Might have to flush the yayo).

This lifestyle is not without its cost, however, and it seems that at least some of Badu’s fears voiced on “Other Side” have come to fruition. Badu acknowledges this on the bridge which aligns with the essential groove shown in Figure 19 (Well there ain’t no mistaken’ / That the money you’re makin’ / Leaves you nervous and shakin’ / Cause at night you’re awake and thinkin’ ‘bout/ Lives that you’ve taken / All the love you’ve forsaken). But Badu and her partner are in survivor mode, so the guilt doesn’t stick around for long (No hard feelings / right or wrong / Weak or strong / I don’t make the laws).

Not only does “Danger” pick up a story thread from a previous album, the bridge contains a musical memory of its predecessor. I posit that since there is no satisfying way to reconcile the single instance of the harmony of E major within the context of Bb minor, it is a musical “rememory” of “Other Side of the Game.” Note that the chord in question occurs when Badu sings about her partner lying awake at night recounting his past sins. In this way, Badu acknowledges
that her identity as “analog girl” is not static but “multiple, fluid, relational and in a perpetual state of becoming.” This “rememory” honors and communes with that version of herself that was nervous and hesitant to embrace the lifestyle she is now living. Figure 20 shows how one could fit the two songs together using the E major chord as a pivot point. These complex, intertextual connections defy traditional notions of teleology in musical narrative.

Erykah Badu is an Afrofuturist chameleon who utilizes her many personas to disseminate her “life game” across space and time, using music, neologisms, and costuming as her medium. With her primary avatar of “analog girl,” Badu positions herself as a transgressive Black, maternal figure who is inclined and empowered to define those roles as she sees fit. Using cyclicity and self-borrowing in the works such as “Next Lifetime,” “On & On,” “...& On,” “Other Side of the Game,” and “Danger,” Badu crafts a unique narrative as “analog girl” that defies conventional ideas of Black womanhood while grounding herself in authentic Blackness.

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FIGURE 11. Screenshot from Erykah Badu’s official Instagram account. Badu as “Analog Girl.”

FIGURE 13. Album artwork for *Live* and Fatimah Tuggar’s *Working Woman* (1997). Badu’s analog body is adorned with ankh symbols and stitched with a digital image of butterfly wings. This image is similar to the photomontages for which visual artist Fatimah Tuggar is known. Both artists use digitally manipulated images to comment on Black female subjectivity.


FIGURE 16. Opening rhythm of “On & On” vs. “...& On.”
FIGURE 17. “...& On,” primary groove, 0:03 - 0:15

FIGURE 18. “Other Side of the Game,” primary groove, 0:49 - 1:00.
FIGURE 20. “Danger” and “Other Side of the Game” connected by a pivot chord.
CHAPTER 4. JANELLE MONÀE: THE ARCHANDROID

4.1 Introduction

The majority of Janelle Monáe’s musical output consists of five out of seven planned suites across three albums that depict their version of this story: *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008) which contains Suite I, *The ArchAndroid* (2010) which contains Suites II and III, and *The Electric Lady* (2013), which contains Suites IV and V. In this chapter I will analyze three selections from Janelle Monáe’s *Metropolis* series through the lens of her *Metropolis* alter ego Cindi Mayweather. After providing context for this avatar, I will then demonstrate how each song selection reflects aspects of Afrofuturist speculative thought that informs Monáe’s musical and aesthetic choices. Specifically, I will focus on how Monáe utilizes genre hybridity to aid the telling of her alternative narratives.

Monáe’s *Metropolis* is loosely based on the themes, ideas, and aesthetics of the original novel written in 1925 by Thea von Harbou and the subsequent film directed by Fritz Lang and released in 1927. To better understand how Monáe appropriates this story, I will give a brief synopsis of the original novel. The novel is set in a dystopian future that uses common tropes of the genre like humanoid robots as well as biblical allusion to sharply critique the machinations of a capitalist society. The story follows Freder Frederson, the son of Joh Frederson, master of Metropolis. Metropolis is a heavily industrialized city ruled by the wealthy elite who live in high rises. The upper classes live a life of luxury and leisure, made possible by working classes who literally toil day and night beneath the ground. As Freder relaxes in his garden, a young woman named Maria from the workers’ city wearing tattered clothes appears, accompanying a group of children. Maria tells the children that their brothers and sisters live in the high rises and that they are

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193 Monaë revealed that they are non-binary in April 2022, stating that they will still use she/her pronouns along with they/them. I will use both in this chapter.
all connected. Maria is quickly ushered away but Freder is already in love and her words stir him into action. Freder travels to the worker’s city and is shocked to see the inhumane living conditions the workers endure. Freder confronts his father about the hierarchical nature of their society, but he indifferently dismisses Freder’s concerns. Now that his privilege has been thrown into sharp relief and disappointed with his father’s response, Freder contrives to meet up with Maria in the worker’s city. He eventually succeeds and Maria declares that Freder is the mediator needed to bridge the gap between the head (ruling class) and the hands (working class). The previously idealistic Freder is now a radicalized revolutionary. Meanwhile, Freder’s father Joh catches wind of this meeting. He employs the help of his former friend and romantic rival, Rotwang, to undermine the coming revolution. Rotwang, who is an inventor, ostensibly agrees but devises a plan of his own to frustrate Joh’s plan and destroy the entire city. Rotwang then completes construction of a humanoid robot made in Maria’s image. Rotwang uses robot Maria to convince the working class to wage war on the ruling class and the workers agree. They start a riot, flood the city, and eventually charge the Heart machine—the machine responsible for keeping all of Metropolis running. The foreman of the Heart machine begs the workers not to destroy the machine and accuses Maria of witchcraft. The workers leave to find the real Maria but end up burning robot Maria at the stake instead. The real Maria has been apprehended by Rotwang in a church and Freder rushes to save her. Freder defeats Rotwang, embraces Maria, and then takes his father to see the foreman of the Heart machine, acting as mediator just as Maria predicted.

Similarly, Monáe’s saga takes place in a socially segregated and heavily militarized Metropolis in the 31st century. But instead of following a human, this saga follows Cindi Mayweather, an android (I’m an alien from outer space / I’m a cybergirl without a face, a heart or a
Mayweather breaks taboo by falling in love with a human and is subsequently sentenced to disassembly, replacing the inter-class love story between Maria and Freder at the heart of the original novel with a love story between a human and an android. We learn of Cindi’s crime immediately on the first track of The Chase Suite entitled “March of the Wolfmasters.” Set against a futuristic sounding military cadence intercut with strings, we hear a decidedly cheerful voice relay a message to the residents of this fictional city:

Good morning cy-boys and cyber girls! I’m happy to announce that we have a star-crossed winner in today’s heartbreak sweepstakes. Android no. 57821 otherwise known as Cindi Mayweather has fallen desperately in love with a human named Anthony Greendown! And you know the rules? She is now scheduled for immediate disassembly! Bounty hunters you can find her in the Neon Valley Street District on the 4th floor at the Leopard Plaza Apartment Complex. The Droid Control Marshals are full of fun rules today. No phasers, only chainsaws and electro-daggers! Remember, only card-carrying hunters can join our chase today. And as usual, there will be no reward until her cyber-soul is turned into the Star Commission. Happy hunting!

On the next song “Violet Stars, Happy Hunting!!!,” we listen as Cindi and Anthony profess their mutual love (I love you and I won’t take no for an answer) and narrowly escape the Droid Control Marshals (Don’t let her get out the window!). As she’s on the run, Cindi expresses confusion over her crime (It’s impossible/ They’re gunning for me / And now the army’s after you / For lovin’ too!). Like Freder witnessing the atrocities happening in the worker’s city, the threat made on Cindi’s life for falling in love radicalizes her. From this point in the saga forward, Cindi’s narrative is non-linear and often confusing. Even though we hear her evade capture on “Violet Stars,” subsequent albums make it seem that this is not the case. For example, on “57821” from The ArchAndroid, we see from Anthony’s perspective that Cindi is indeed a political prisoner. The liner notes of The ArchAndroid sheds a little light explaining that our Monáe is actually a future version of herself from the year 2719 where she was kidnapped and cloned to create the android

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194 “Violet Stars, Happy Hunting!!!,” on Metropolis: The Chase Suite, 0:00 - 0:08.
195 “March of the Wolfmasters,” on Metropolis: The Chase Suite, 0:15 - 1:06.
Cindi Mayweather. The real Monáe was then sent to Metropolis in our present day by the Star Commission. Meanwhile in 2719, word of Cindi’s rebellious actions inspires similar resistance and she eventually becomes a beloved resistance figure known as the ArchAndroid tasked with freeing the citizens of Metropolis from “the Great Divide, a secret society which has been using time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout the ages.” This elaborate time-traveling abduction narrative shares many similarities with Sun Ra’s own abduction narrative involving Jupiter, aliens, and the like. The biggest similarity is that both Ra and Monáe paint themselves as messianic figures who have been burdened with leading their communities to a cosmic promised land. Although the overall plot eludes precise details, the Cindi Mayweather saga is a layered Afrofuturist alternative narrative that spans multiple mediums and genres in order to better deliver its message of love and liberation.

Monáe’s Afrofuturist impulses reveal themselves most effectively in the character of Cindi Mayweather. Cindi’s status as an humanoid android without a “face, heart or mind” whose natural affection is demonized as taboo reflects the double jeopardy embodied by Cindi’s status as an humanoid android without a “face, heart or mind” is physically embodied by Monáe, who is Black and queer as well as non-binary. It’s notable that Monáe chose the non-human character as her avatar. In the original novel, robot Maria is seen as a foil to the real Maria. Robot Maria is a manipulative and destructive seductress who is ultimately condemned to death after being forced to carry out the plans of her male creator Rotwang. The real Maria is compassionate, kind, and wins over those around her with her grace and beauty. When comparing images of Robot Maria from the Metropolis film and the album artwork of a tattered Cindi from The Chase Suite, the inspiration is clear. One could interpret then that Monáe is likening the abuse Robot Maria suffers in the film

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196 Monáe infuses Cindi with more humanoid features than Robot Maria, complete with her signature pompadour hairstyle. See Figure 21.
to the abuse experienced by black bodies in real life. The way Monáe projects her “otherness” onto another figure in a fictional world so that she may explore her identity without repercussion is textbook Afrofuturism.

Similar to the nefarious NASA agents who kidnapped and killed Black men in *Space is the Place*, Monáe depicts Metropolis Droid Control Marshalls deploying extreme force in response to what Cindi believes to be an innocuous offense. Later Cindi realizes that the love she shares with Anthony is actually a dire threat to the status quo of Metropolis, which depends on the slave labor of droids like Cindi to maintain the wealthy lifestyles of the humans. The fact that Anthony is capable of feeling love and compassion for the non-human Cindi, erodes at the foundation of the hierarchy that keeps Metropolist afloat. A comparison can be drawn between this plot point and real world instances where law enforcement is often invoked against Black people the society at large perceives as a threat. In these ways, the avatar of Cindi, her android body, and the larger universe she inhabits, serves as an Afrofuturist safe space where Monáe’s Black, queer, and gender non-conforming listeners can find a reprieve from the “guns, anger, and frustration” of reality.¹⁹⁷

All of this set against Monáe’s syncretic blend of older Black musical traditions of the past such as jazz, blues, funk, and soul, with a modern inflection of slam poetry, rap, hip-hop. In this way Monáe acts as a “digital griot:”

[A figure that stands] between tradition and future, holding the power to shape how both are seen/heard/felt/known. exhibiting mastery of techniques, but always knowing that techniques carry stories, arguments, ways of viewing the world, that the techniques arrange the texts, that every text carries even more stories, arguments, epistemologies.¹⁹⁸

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¹⁹⁷ *Space is the Place*, directed by John Coney (1974; Plexifilm, 2003).
¹⁹⁸ Adam J. Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), 3. Monáe’s larger sphere of influence also pays respect to those who have come before her as she has collaborated with the likes of Prince, Erykah Badu, and Big Boi.
From the opening minutes of the first Suite, Monáe establishes a Metropolis that critiques the workings of race, gender, and sexuality in a fundamentally unfair society. The dynamic tension between Monáe’s real life and the story of Cindi Mayweather informs two of Monáe’s best known songs, “Many Moons,” from *The Chase Suite* and “Q.U.E.E.N.” feat. Erykah Badu from *The Electric Lady*. Both songs use a hybridized mix of stylistic features from older and newer genres of Black music with the aim of radicalization. From a birds eye view, these stylistic features serve as formal demarcations that function in a similar way to the cipher form present in the early music of Erykah Badu.

4.2. Analysis of “Many Moons”

I interpret the form of “Many Moons” as having two distinct sections A and B with a short codetta at the end (Figure 22). I determine these larger sections primarily by salient shifts in texture, style, and vocal delivery. The smaller partitions of the overall A section (0:00 - 2:46) are the introduction, verse 1, bridge, hook, verse 2, and the second iteration of the hook. Throughout the A section the verses detail the oppression and exploitation suffered by Cindi and her fellow androids (We’re dancing free, but we’re stuck here underground / All we ever wanted to say/ Was chased, erased and then thrown away) while the hook makes a case for non-violent revolution (And when you’re growing down instead of growing up / Tell me are you bold enough to reach for love?).

The A section is marked by an upbeat blend of 1960’s swing and hip-hop, buoyed by a heavily featured interpolation of the music that accompanied *Sesame Street*’s Pinball Number Count segments in the late 1970s (0:06). This music, which was recorded and performed by the iconic R&B group The Pointer Sisters, was known for its complex rhythms and shifting time signatures. Here, Monáe has only borrowed the melody but she creates her own rhythmic
complexities, mainly between her stacked vocals, the repeated rhythmic motive in the organ, and the drums (0:25 - 0:31). The overall key is C♯ minor and the two main chord loops utilized are  over a C♯ pedal (chord loop 1, 0:31 ) and  (chord loop 2, 0:43). Similar to OutKast and Erykah Badu these chord loops are cyclical and unassuming, so as to draw attention to the message being delivered rather than the intricacies of the music itself.

The B section (2:46 - 5:28) has fewer partitions being composed of what the liner notes refers to as the “cybernetic” and the “closing lullaby.” I interpret 2:46 as the start of a new distinct section because the texture noticeably thins, Monáe stops singing and begins to rap, and a third chord loop begins and plays till the end of the song . Like the essential groove on Badu’s “On & On,” this section distills the information presented in the previous section. Monáe delivers this chantdown in short, punctuated bursts using two or three syllable words with vague associations (Civil rights / civil war / Hood rat / Crack whore / Outcast / Weirdo / Stepchild / freakshow). At one point Monáe directly references “March of the Wolfmasters” with the lines “Cybergirl / droid control / Get away now they tryna steal your soul.” In this section, Monáe is preaching to anyone who has ever felt othered and encouraging them to change their life and worldview by reaching for love. The B section ends with a subdued lullaby, the frenetic energy of the beginning now dissipated. Cindi sweetly croons “And when the world treats you wrong / Just come with me and I’ll take you home / No need to pack a bag / Change your life.” Monáe is enticing her weary listeners to follow her “home,” like Sun Ra, rapturing the Black inhabitants of planet earth onto his spaceship. While this song is a part of a larger alternative narrative, this song falls under the category of a call to arms. This is made more apparent in the accompanying visuals.

199 The third chord loop actually briefly plays at the very beginning during the introduction just before Monáe begins to sing.
The music video for “Many Moons” takes place a futuristic slave auction where the wealthy elite of Metropolis bid at the Annual Android Auction on “the finest fashions and android money can buy.” Title cards tell us a few of the participants in the auction like the masked “Punk Prophets” Deep Cotton, frequent collaborators and producers of this song and Big Boi credited here as “Sir Lucious Leftfoot, Auctioneer Extraordinaire.” The hostess Lady Maxxa introduces Cindi Mayweather, played by Monáe, and right before she begins to perform, her appearance changes from android to human with the push of a button on her temple.200 We also see “Lady Maestra, Master of the Show Droids” also played by Monáe. While Mayweather wears her customary black and white tuxedo, Lady Maestra is seated on a horse dressed like a jockey and accompanied by other Black women wearing white veils. Cindi runs out on stage to cheering fans and the auction properly begins (1:13). Cindi jukes and jives as if she were possessed by the spirit of James Brown. The androids up for sale, who are all played by Monáe, are bid upon for billions of pounds. At one point an android named Suzie Scorcher seductively walks the catwalk. We see a white female in the audience tell their partner “I want one” and Suzie is subsequently sold for over 5.7 billion pounds (3:28 - 3:43). By blending imagery of slave auctions with a modern fashion show, Monáe leaves the viewer to contemplate the uncomfortable implications of our present and possible future.201

At the start of the B section (3:43), a series of rapidly flashing images of a closeup of Cindi’s face is overlaid over black and white footage of everything from World War II propaganda, the Civil Rights Movement, John F. Kennedy’s inauguration, campaign footage from Barack Obama’s first presidential run, and footage of the bombing of Hiroshima. Like the lyrics of this

200 Similar to the way androids are depicted in movies like Blade Runner (1982) and Ex-Machina (2014), Cindi can pass as human.
201 The slave auction calls to mind a similar scene in Jordan Peele’s horror thriller Get Out (2017), although “Many Moons” predates Get Out by nine years.
section, the images are vague and pass by too quickly to absorb. Nonetheless, they convey a
general distrust of the media and government propaganda, a common sentiment in sci-fi stories
involving revolution. Beginning at 4:44, Cindi begins to malfunction as she works herself into a fit
with her dancing. Eventually, her body begins to levitate and at 5:21 her body is struck by some
kind of electricity. As her body slowly floats back down to the stage, the androids clad in white
that accompanied Lady Maestra begin to make their way to her body. We see it is in fact Lady
Maestra who sings the line “just come with us and we’ll take you home” just before the light
flickers out of Cindi’s eyes. The screen fades to black and a title card displays a quote from Cindi:
“I imagined many moons in the sky lighting the way to freedom.” The nature of Cindi’s death is
uncertain and open to interpretation. Cassandra Jones reads this moment as a “‘homegoing’ in the
African American sense of returning to a spiritual home or heavenly afterlife in death, but also as a
return to an earthly space of family.” Through this lens we can interpret Cindi’s “death” as a
release from that which seeks to control her. This is the ultimate message of “Many Moons,” a call
to arms to free oneself. Indeed, Monáe sings during the bridge “You’re free, but in your mind/
You’re freedom’s in a bind.” Monáe wants her listeners to be like Cindi and free themselves
through the transformative power of music.

4.3 Analysis of “Q.U.E.E.N.”

According to Monáe, Q.U.E.E.N. stands for the following marginalized groups: queer,
untouchables, emigrants, excommunicated, and negroid. She explained in an interview that she
composed this empowering anthem “for everyone who’s felt ostracized. I wanted to create
something for people who feel like they want to give up because they’re not accepted by
society.” Similar to “Many Moons,” I interpret the form of “Q.U.E.E.N.” as having two distinct

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sections A and B with a short codetta on the end (Figure 22). Unlike “Many Moons,” the portion of the song that would correspond to one of Badu’s essential grooves is not the B section but the codetta. While the entire track has Monáe’s signature retro-futuristic sound, I argue that the A section, B section, and codetta are all demarcated by subtle changes to style and texture.

The A section (0:00 - 2:54) consist of Verses 1-3 and three iterations of the hook. There is an 8 bar interlude that links Monáe’s interlude to Badu’s interlude (2:54 - 3:12). “Q.U.E.E.N.” maintains the same funky groove throughout over the ever present guitar riff in B minor first heard at 0:02. While the other instruments elaborate on the riff and Monáe’s vocals, there is no other harmony besides B minor until the codetta at 4:25. I interpret this “one-chord change” as an example of the “extended present.” Similar to Badu’s “Next Lifetime,” Monáe uses the extended present to support the musical narrative.

The choice to employ a one-chord change for the majority of this song works well when considering the conceit of the music video that accompanies “Q.U.E.E.N.” The video opens in a futuristic “living museum” where notorious, time-traveling rebels from the past are frozen in suspended animation. We are shown Monáe, who is playing herself but within the context of the larger Mayweather saga, and Badu, who is acting as one of her avatars Badula Oblongata. We watch as two Black women dressed in black and white enter the museum. One of the women distracts a guard while the other sneaks over to a record player to play an LP. Once she does this, the music begins and we see Monáe and her “Wondaland” accomplices break out of their suspended animation. Nathalie Aghoro notes how the two members of Monáe’s band who are covered in white chalk, “refer to anthropological discourses of the discovery of supposedly premodern, undiscovered, and ahistorical peoples intended to legitimize Western conquests and

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204 Tagg, Everyday Tonality II, 353-356.
205 Wondaland refers to Monáe’s record label.
settler colonialism…”

I also interpret these two figures as representing those first moderns who were abducted from their homeland, frozen, and then eventually set free through the power of Monáe’s music. The music allows them to “reconquer [a] previously conquered space of subjection.”

Besides the visuals, this A section is also significant as the lyrics contain hints of Monáe’s queerness. As I stated previously, Cindi Mayweather’s love interest in this story is Anthony Greendown, a character who is explicitly gendered as male. Yet in verse three, she sings “Am I a freak because I love watching Mary?” This seems to refer to the same Mary Monáe mentions on “Mushrooms and Roses,” which appears on The ArchAndroid. “Mushrooms and Roses” is a psychedelic love song about the joys of hetero and homosexual lovemaking. While the title seems to refer to mind altering substances, it could also be interpreted as a veiled reference to male and female genitalia. Indeed, Monaë sings “Mushrooms and roses is the place to be / Smells like love to me.” Blueberry Mary, as she’s referred to here, is a promiscuous android (She’s wild man, she’s wild! / She gives the boys all of her kisses and electricity) who is “crazy” about Cindi. During the chorus, Monaë as Cindi sings “Come sweet love / Take my hand / Follow me / Just let us be.” In “Q.U.E.E.N.,” right after she mentions Mary, Monaë asks a nun, “am I good enough for your heaven? / Say will your god accept me in my black and white? / Will he approve of the way I’m made?” More than a reference to her tuxedo uniform, Monáe is taking organized religion to task for their historic persecution of the LGBQT community. Just before the start of the B section, Monáe sings “even if it makes others uncomfortable, I will love who I am.” This is not an empty sentiment. In 2010, Monáe famously told Rolling Stone that she “only dates androids.”

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207 Ibid., 333.
being put into a box, Monáe dodged direct questions concerning her sexuality and leaned hard into her Mayweather avatar. But as she and her music matured, she began to feel more comfortable in her skin. In 2018, Monáe came out as pansexual and has been in high-profile romantic relationships with men and women.\(^{209}\) So as in her personal life as well as her art, Monáe champions queerness by loving out loud.

The B section begins with a marked shift in style and texture and this marks when Badula finally begins to move about the space. The soulful funk that dominated the majority of the A section gives way to buttery smooth jazz. Badu’s interlude is the beginning of the B section (3:12 - 4:24). The guitar riff and B minor harmony remain constant making the transition feel seamless. Badu being featured on this track is also significant considering her status as an Afrofuturist OG.\(^{210}\) Badu features on other artists’ songs are relatively rare and Monáe’s listeners would understand Badu’s presence here as a positive endorsement of her work. For Badu’s part, she sings about liberation and reaffirms that music is the key to unlocking it (Baby, here comes your freedom song / Too strong we moving on / Baby, this melody will show you another way). Badu tells us we’ve been droids for too long and that it’s time to come “home” and sing our song. If the listener still isn’t convinced to jump on the freedom train, Monáe has one more trick in her tuxedo pocket.

After Badu’s interlude morphs into the codetta, which begins at 4:25, we hear Monáe tell her band to “flip it” because she doesn’t think we understand her meaning. From there she launches into a fiery rap that makes her liberation goals plain. In the video, delivers the rap clad in her signature black and white tuxedo which she hasn’t worn thus far in the video. The entire verse is delivered with the focus solely on Monáe speaking directly into the camera. In the years since its

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210 OG is slang for “original gangster.” It’s used to describe someone whose style and manner is perceived as classic.
release, this rap has been received as a neat encapsulation of Monáe’s Afrofuturist goals, and so is worth viewing in its entirety:

Are we a lost generation of our people?
Add us to equations but they’ll never make us equal
She who writes the movie owns the script and the sequel
So why ain't the stealing of my rights made illegal?
They keep us underground working hard for the greedy
But when it's time pay they turn around and call us needy (needy)
My crown too heavy like the Queen Nefertiti
Gimme back my pyramid, I'm trying to free Kansas City (yup)
Mixing masterminds like your name Bernie Grundman
Well I'ma keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman
You can take my wings but I'm still goin' fly
And even when you edit me the booty don't lie (what?)
Yeah, I'ma keep singing, I'ma keep writing songs
I'm tired of Marvin asking me, "What's Going On?
March to the streets 'cause I'm willing and I'm able (what?)
Categorize me, I defy every label
And while you're selling dope, we're gonna keep selling hope (uh)
We rising up now, you gotta deal, you gotta cope
Will you be electric sheep?
Electric ladies, will you sleep?
Or will you preach?211

Here, Monáe effectively disrupts the time space continuum to bring us this funky message of love and radical self-acceptance. Again, this is the Afrofuturist manifesto: creativity as resistance and music is the medium. With her references to other iconic Black musicians like Marvin Gaye and Bernie Grundman, her style of dress, and classic dance moves, Monáe aligns her creative output with those that have come before. With her modern, throwback style, complex futurist musical narrative, and utilization of the “extended present,” Monáe also looks ahead. These “past-future” visions are funneled through the avatar of Cindi Mayweather, Monáe demonstrates

211 Outro of “Q.U.E.E.N.” from The Electric Lady, 4:25-5:10. This outro is full of references to other science fiction works such as Philip K. Dick’s novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep (1968), allusions to ancient Egypt, Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman, and highly regarded black musicians of the past like Marvin Gaye.
the perks of being a “freak” and shows her listeners how to embrace, write, and rewrite the messy reality of identity. Ultimately, Monaë’s Afrofuturist music offers hope and light for society’s most put upon.
Figure 21. Image of Robot Maria from *Metropolis* and the album artwork from *The Chase Suite*.

![Image of Robot Maria from Metropolis and the album artwork from The Chase Suite.](image)

Figure 22. Form chart for “Many Moons.”

<table>
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<th>Intro</th>
<th>Verse 1</th>
<th>Bridge</th>
<th>Hook</th>
<th>Verse 2</th>
<th>Hook</th>
<th>Cybernetic Chantdown</th>
<th>Lullaby</th>
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</thead>
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<td>0:31</td>
<td>0:55</td>
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<td>1:39</td>
<td>2:21</td>
<td>2:46</td>
<td>4:25</td>
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Figure 23. Form chart for “Q.U.E.E.N.”

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<th>Hook</th>
<th>Verse 2</th>
<th>Hook</th>
<th>Verse 3</th>
<th>Hook</th>
<th>Interlude 1</th>
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<td>1:05</td>
<td>1:42</td>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>2:36</td>
<td>2:54</td>
<td>3:12</td>
<td>4:24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The goal of this dissertation has been to highlight the depth and complexities of Afrofuturist popular music through bespoke analyses that remain sensitive to cultural context. In this paper, I have described how OutKast, Erykah Badu, and Janelle Monáe approach Afrofuturism in their creative outputs based on the model of Sun Ra, the progenitor of Afrofuturism. In my introductory chapter, I detailed Sun Ra’s astro-black philosophy and overall contributions to the art form through the lens of his poetry, writings, lectures, music, and most importantly his blaxploitation film, *Space is the Place*. I then engaged with Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and foundational speculative texts to identify the most common tropes of Afrofuturist art, which are the use of avatars, the rejection of linear time, and the goal of Black liberation. From there, I formed my theory of “Afrofuturist space” and the ways in which artists perpetuate it through identity play, immortality and reincarnation, mythmaking and alternative narratives, warnings, and calls to arms. I then identified OutKast, Erykah Badu, and Janelle Monáe as a subsequent generation of Afrofuturist artists operating in the realm of Black popular music.

In Chapter 2, I analyzed selected songs by OutKast through the lens of their avatars of “Two Dope Boyz.” I theorized that these avatars ultimately allow Big Boi and Andrè 3000 to perform a type of Black masculinity that is atypical for hip-hop. Both rappers draw on popular characterizations of male MCs, like the gangsta persona, to initially draw their listeners in. OutKast then manifest the Afrofuturist trope of rejection of linear time by exploiting rhythmic expectations that arise between their music and flow delivery. This intentional rhythmic dissonance is a signifier to listeners to pay special heed to the message being transmitted by the lyrics. To support their message, OutKast also engages with mythmaking and alternative narratives, as can be witnessed in the comic book inspired album art of *ATLiens* and in their music videos.
In Chapter 3, I analyzed select songs of Erykah Badu through her most popular avatar of “Analog Girl.” I determined that through her avatar, Badu practices her philosophy of Baduizm, which at its core, seeks to uplift her listeners while championing Black female independence and autonomy. “Analog Girl” also serves as a metaphor for Badu’s complicated relationship to technology, as well as her desire to practice “hip-hop feminism” that address her lived reality of being Black, female, unmarried mother by choice. From my analyses, I concluded that Badu often employs what I call “cipher form,” a form characterized by static harmonic progressions and cyclical grooves. Cipher form has a primary groove, that typically spans the majority of the song, and an essential groove, which is harmonically based on the primary groove and serves to synthesize the overall message of the song. The essential groove usually occurs once and the subtle differences from the primary groove aurally signify its importance. This form is accompanied by Badu’s narrative music videos, album art, and overall public aesthetic. Like Sun Ra, Badu appropriates myths from various cultures, as well as ancient Egyptian iconography to further her message.

In Chapter 4, I analyze select songs of Janelle Monáe through the lens of her Afrofuturist avatar of Cindi Mayweather and the accompanying Metropolis Suite, based on the novel and movie of the same name. I determined that Monáe recasts Metropolis as an Afrofuturist narrative, borrowing the theme of a group of marginalized people rising up to change the status quo all while being led by a revolutionary. Monáe primarily uses a stylistic blend of the past and future as well as the “extended present” to convey her message. Supported by their theatrical music videos and penchant for presenting themselves androgynously in a black and white tuxedo uniform, Monáe’s Afrofuturist music champions marginalized groups that are sometimes ignored by other Afrofuturists, like the gender non-conforming and LGBTQ+ community.
Overall, I have concluded that Black popular musicians who embrace Sun Ra’s model of Afrofuturism do so explicitly across multiple mediums in order to negotiate and challenge the boundaries of Black identity. These artists use different techniques to birth and perpetuate their Afrofuturist space and this is reflected in their compositional and aesthetic choices. Like Sun Ra, these artists utilize avatars, engage in mythmaking, and exploit the complex hybridity of Black cultural production to enhance their message. These artists often align their creative output with liberation movements of the past, adding additional layers of commentary and critique. All of these strategies work in tandem to demonstrate to their listeners new ways of thinking and being, free from the burden of cultural trauma and the societal forces that seek to restrain and control.

Afrofuturism is an important part of Black cultural production that deserves more scholarly attention and there are many musicians who engage with Afrofuturism who do not appear here. This dissertation only scratches the surface of the varying ways these artists harness Afrofuturism to achieve Black liberation. Future research on this topic should investigate how Afrofuturism manifests in contemporary artists who engage with this aesthetic but whose music is untexted, adheres to but not all of the tenants I have identified here, or lies outside the sphere of popular music altogether. Some bodies of work not mentioned here that are ripe for future scrutiny include Ghetto Sci-Fi (2008), Brotha from Anotha Planet (2009), Spacebase Is the Place (2011), and Back on the Planet (2013) by hip-hop artist Ras G. King Britt, who curated the previously mentioned “Moondance: A Night in the Afro Future” at MoMa PS1, saw Sun Ra and his Arkestra rehearse as a child. This early influence is reflected on his album Adventures in Lo-Fi (2003) and his music produced under the name Fhloston Paradigm like After… (2017) and “Live on Star’s End.” Other notable artists whose music could be interpreted through the lens of Afrofuturism include experimental hip-hop group Shabazz Palaces, especially albums such as Shabazz Palaces...
(2009), Of Light (2009), and Lese Majesty (2014), and Since C.A.Y.A. (2017); Drexciya’s The Quest (1997) and Neptune’s Lair (1999); Flying Lotus 1983 (2006), Cosmogramma (2010), You’re Dead! (2014), and Flamagra (2019); Throwing Shade’s House of Silk (2016); Beyoncé’s The Lion King: The Gift (2019); Doja Cat’s Planet Her (2021); and the Black Panther (2018) soundtrack curated by Kendrick Lamar. All of these bodies of work engage with Afrofuturism to greater and lesser degrees and it is my sincere desire that future scholars will pick up where I’ve left off and deepen our collective knowledge of Afrofuturism.
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Space is the Place. Directed by John Coney. 1974. Plexifilm.


VITA

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