An Angel, a Thief, and a Mothership: Imaginative Considerations of Black Being

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Music is the weapon of the future. —Fela Kuti

We believe songs are spaceships. We believe music is the weapon of the future. We believe books are stars. —Wondaland Arts Society (Janelle Monae)

The 1995 film, *The Last Angel of History*, written by Edward George and directed by John Akomfrah, retells the legend that Robert Johnson sells his soul to the devil at a crossroad in exchange for extraordinary mastery of the guitar and the blues. The Data Thief, a fictional character in the film, searches 200 years after Robert Johnson's discovery to find the mythical crossroad to obtain access to his future. His journey commences with one spoken clue: "Mothership Connection." The film later maintains, "The Mothership Connection is the link between Africa as a lost continent in the past and Africa as an Alien Future."[1] Indeed, time is entwined with studies of blackness. Literary scholar Michelle M. Wright asserts in her study of "Middle Passage Epistemology" that blackness as a construct fits into linear temporality. Whereas, in the case of the Black lived experiences, Wright uses the term "Epiphenomenal time" to describe blackness that operates against a linear temporal framework. This concept instead identifies the phenomenological aspects of Black life which comprise the past, present, and future.[2] Drawing from the travels of the Data Thief and the allusion to Parliament's 1975 album that situates blackness in outer space through funk music, this essay examines the ways racialized subjects utilize performance in search of an expressive order that challenges the linear narrative of time and the nebulous history imposed upon them by the Middle Passage and dominant white cultural representations.

Furthermore, the underlying assumption of a culture's history is that it needs to start from a beginning or have a root. This issue is particularly raised within the histories of Black culture. Historian Paul Gilroy offers a different ontology for the construction of Black identity through his study of Martin Robinson Delany. Gilroy asserts that instead of seeing identity in relationship to "roots and rootedness" which stems from a Eurocentric worldview, identity should be seen as "a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym

[1] *The Last Angel of History*, directed by John Akomfrah (1995; London, England: Black Audio Film Collective, 1996), DVD.
[2] Michelle K. Wright, *Physics of Blackness : Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

routes."[3] Inspired by this interpretation, I investigate *The Last Angel of History* from a somewhat rhizomatic approach to underscore the meditations of the Black speculative imagination as a performance of world-making. I am interested in Black artists' relationship with time and space, beginning in their envisioned future rather than the past. In other words, although I acknowledge that oftentimes Black lives are swept up and animated by the afterlives of slavery, I shift my gaze to the Mothership Connection first before drawing on the Middle Passage epistemology of the slave ship, to see what can be unearthed.

The film *The Last Angel of History* opens with a montage of shots that together comprise a scene of the crossroads saturated with meaning. The crossroads is as much a critical point where a decision must be made as it is an unseen physical location. Those that inhabit the crossroads are time travelers. They are confronted with the decision to either dwell on the catastrophe of their past that trickles into their present or move forward into an unknown future. The first scene is through a golden tinted lens in a long shot of a rural area populated by a few shacks that have unfortunately encountered a flood. The murky water that surrounds these dilapidated dwellings is a result of a storm that ruined what was already shabby and insecure. With a quick cut to the next shot, a close-up of two trailers that are a short distance from one another behind a fence more than two-thirds under water is shown. The short time lapse between the two shots illustrates an impending disaster that will speedily cause total destruction similar to Walter Benjamin's prophecy that I will discuss shortly. It is in this moment of somber revelation that the audience hears the jovial sound of birds chirping followed by the eerie sound of Robert Johnson's 1937 single "Me and the Devil Blues." The song begins at the lyrics "Me and the devil were walking side by side." The dissonant soundscape conceptualizes the crossroads and raises the question: which path must one take after witnessing her already unstable home, place of origin, be ruined at its foundation?

Those that inhabit the crossroads are time travelers. Walter Benjamin's angel in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" precedes the angel of history referenced in the title of the film. Inspired by Paul Klee's 1920 painting *Angelus Novus*, the German Jewish philosopher discerns that the image of this angel represents the angel of history, where his face is turned towards a catastrophic past. What humans perceive as "a chain of events," the angel sees from a much higher vantage point as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."[4] In this moment the angel of history desires to stay, awaken the dead, and repair what has been smashed into pieces, but his wings are caught in a storm that propels him toward the future. The vicious storm symbolizes "progress" in Benjamin's illustration. The angel can no longer close its wings because of the storm. Its desire to mend the past is hindered by its immobility; all it can do is stare into destruction as it moves

[3] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,1993), 19.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257.

forward. As the storm impedes his flight, the angel is forced to surrender to progress against his will. The wreckage of the past continues to grow skyward in the process, its fragments and shards accrue new meaning and interpretation as they "flash up" at moments of danger to only be seized for the bolstering of the present and future material progress.[5] Benjamin's illustration positions the angel of history as a time traveler who intends to save humans, by traveling through time, from the impending destruction that they've caused. The past, as a category of time, is a geographical formation here. The opening scene of *The Last Angel of History* shows the storm's aftermath. Data Thief finds himself standing above the crossroads that have been submerged under water. As the last angel of history, he is caught between two realms and takes on the responsibility to ensure that Black people have a future amid the present and past catastrophes.

The deep, muddy water symbolizes disparate associations: destruction and renewal, hopelessness and anticipation. It illustrates the uncertainty of a journey due to its lack of clear pathways. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of moving images that depict a wasteland appearing flooded and uninhabitable followed by the sound of birds chirping then that of "me and the devil were walking side by side" evokes an uncanny, mythical feeling. Through both the sound of the birds and the blues, Akomfrah sets the pensive tone of *The Last Angel of History* as a film that juxtaposes the redemptive quality that science fiction offers alongside the social reality of Black people, particularly those of working-class status. He underscores the fact that Black people find themselves in an existential predicament. They are expected to envision a possible future despite being robbed of an abundant past, a history that unceasingly haunts the present. Their future must be found, as the film demonstrates, archeologically. They must sift through the past with the Data Thief as a guide.

Returning to the opening soundscape, "Me and the Devil Blues" tells the story of the singer's morning event, waking up to the devil knocking at the door, who he greets singing: "Hello Satan, I believe it's time to go." Consumed by his inner turmoil, Robert Johnson takes out his fight with the world on his female companion by becoming the oppressor in his own home. He sings, "Me and the Devil/Was walkin' side-by-side... I'm going to beat my woman/Until I'm Satisfied. She said 'you don't see why/That I will dog her 'round'…It must-a been that old evil spirit/So deep down in the ground/You may bury my body/Down by the highway side." The "old evil spirit" that was once tormenting him, he has now been fully possessed by towards the end of the song as he refers to the evil spirit as "my old evil spirit."[6]

Johnson's fight with the world is incited by a racializing process that has psychological consequences. Frantz Fanon, a Martinican psychoanalyst and philosopher, offers a deconstructive theory of this racializing process on the Black male subject in his book

[5] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257.

[6] Robert Johnson, "Me and the Devil," recorded June 1937, Sony Music Entertainment Inc., track 15 on *King of the Delta Blues Singers,* 1961, open.spotify.com/album/2IWaNq5o4tG1w6yxve5BMU.

Black Skin, White Masks, translated from French and published in English in 1967. His book underscores his feelings as a Black male subject in the oppressive environment of the white world. He writes, "A man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a Black man—or at least like a nigger. I shouted a greeting to the world, and the world slashed away my joy. I was told to stay in bounds, to go back where I belonged."[7] He conjectures that his Black skin on his male body is perceived as unsightly and inadequate by his white male counterpart, which consequently produces an inferiority complex in his mind and by extension the psyche of the Black subject. Here I appropriate Fanon's theory of epidermalization to the Black female subject in the blues song. She incurs a divided self-perception in a white, male-dominated society. As the Black subject receives the residual of colonization according to Fanon, the Black female subject is doubly colonized because of her appearance as both Black and female. In the eyes of Robert Johnson, the Black male subject, who has internalized the disapproval of his Black skin, he sees the Black female subject as a possible target to act out the violence he encountered in the world. Fanon's theorization extends Johnson's song beyond one man and woman's personal struggles and sheds light on the collective psychological distress embedded in Robert Johnson's blues song

Furthermore, participating in the blues allows for communal mourning and the processing of trauma. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his book *Memory, History and Forgetting* synthesizes Sigmund Freud's essays on "Remembering, Repeating and Working Through" and "Mourning and Melancholia" in order to demonstrate how choosing to remember the history of violence as a collective body or collective memory reaffirms the collective identity and thus prevents the compulsion to repeat the traumatic memories by 'acting out'. Freud notes that the presence of melancholia assumes the presence of disregard for self. In other words, mourning retains the recognition of oneself whereas melancholia does not and can potentially lead to the disregard of others. In this sense, mourning can motivate someone to take action while melancholia just leads to desolation in perpetuity.[8] Moreover, he pairs the work of mourning to the work of remembering as they are both painful, but beneficial in the end as freedom will come from the eventual relinquishing of the lost object. Although the blues is revered as a genre that provided a sense of salvation to many Black Americans that sang and listened to it, the potential for the production of melancholia was evidently high in such a genre of sorrows that could possibly do more damage to the Black psyche than good over time. Perhaps, this discovery prompted its evolution and eventual birth of other musical genres, such as jazz and soul.

Over Robert Johnson's blues voice in the film appears a long shot of the gold tinted Deep South and the narrator who stands with his profile to the camera wearing a straw hat, Black

[7] Franz Fanon, "Fact of Blackness," *Black Skin, White Masks*, Trans. Charles Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 114-115.

[8] Paul Ricoeur, "The Abuses of Natural Memory, Blocked Memory, Manipulated Memory, Abusively Controlled Memory," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 72-73.

sunglasses and a light-colored cotton shirt. In a cool and calm manner full of downward hand gestures by his side on every downbeat, he shares the legend of Robert Johnson as if he was delivering a rap or spoken word piece at a poetry jam. His spoken word undercuts the focus of the wasteland in the background. The narrator recites with understated enthusiasm, "Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil at the crossroads in the Deep South. He sold his soul and in return he was given the secret of a Black technology, a Black secret technology that we know to be now as the blues." The film cuts again to a close-up of the narrator's face still in profile as he says, "The blues begat jazz, the blues begat soul, the blues begat hip hop, the blues begat R&B." Inspired by the story of Robert Johnson, Akomfrah creates the Data Thief in the image of Johnson. The narrator describes the Data Thief as "another hoodlum, another bad boy, scavenger, poet figure." He is told a story two hundred years into the future: "If you can find the crossroads…you'll find fragments, techno-fossils, and if you can put those elements, those fragments together, you'll find the code. Crack that code, and you'll have the keys to your future." Before venturing on his journey to find the crossroads, he is given a clue: The Mothership Connection. Following this clue, the Data Thief, "[Surfs] across the internet of Black culture, breaking into the vaults, breaking into the rooms, and stealing fragments, fragments from cyber-culture, techno-culture, narrative-culture." At various points in the films, the screens of computers flashing images of ancient symbols Egyptology, mythology, old photographs of Black families and plantations released from a sequential or linear arrangement appear.

The Data thief is a bad boy that must retrieve what has been stolen or concealed from his ancestry for generations by hegemonic power, the dominant white class. He seeks to excavate the hidden transcripts of his history that have been mired in cyclical violence and discourses of truth that supplant one another.[9] Like the narrator's poetic delivery, the Data Thief is a poet figure that destabilizes paradigms as much as it incites passion through its eloquent delivery of artifacts. The Thief gives up his right to belong in his time to come to the present time of the 1990s and find the mothership connection. He becomes the angel of history. He can visit the old world and the new but cannot be a part of either. He does not know that his time travel is a problem until he makes his last trip to twentieth century Africa and remains there. He cannot leave because he has travelled through the crossroads where time and space bends and the past, present and future takes on new meaning. Put differently, the crossroads maintain a black hole.

A black hole is a bending of the space-time continuum, where it sucks everything into its region with no means of escape. Houston Baker Jr. uses the black hole as a metaphor for blues artists and African American writers who perform an action similar to the black hole within their work. Baker writes, "The symbolic content of Afro-American expressive culture can thus be formulated in terms of the black hole conceived as a subcultural region in which a dominant white culture's representations are squeezed to zero volume producing a new expressive

[9] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice : Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed D.F. Bouchard, (Ithaca : Cornell University Press, 1977), 151.

order."[10] Though he initially may seem trapped, the Data Thief is indeed free from chronological time to dwell in an Africa that is comprised of both an ancient past and alien future integrated into the world by a digitized and sonic diaspora. *The Last Angel of History* overall documents the way in which Black artists have circumvented the angel of history predicament. They have dared to strengthen their wings in order to maneuver through the storm and jump into black holes that alter their time-space reality and frees them from a linear history that disenfranchises their hopeful future. Recognizing the catastrophe generated by social division on the earth, their practice of world-making through music, performance, and literature in a sci-fi or speculative fashion allows them to disengage from automated thinking of linear time and revisit and redeem the debris in an alternate space.

This Planet is Doomed, So Give Up the Funk

As idealist History is dismantled and vandalized by the hoodlum and bad boy called Data Thief (an ironic angel indeed), there is seemingly no need for another Angel of History. However, time travelers and space cadets who fly with the angelic pave the way in the 1970s for a new expressive order to be perpetuated against dominant white cultural representations through sound. Following the second World War, computer technology that was originally created to aid the military industrial complex "mutated, devolved and diversified" to an extent that it was now accessible for Black American and Black British musicians to use in order to construct a soundtrack for their freedom.[11] Music critic Greg Tate reflects how sampling creates digitized race memory. The technological process prolific in hip hop "collaps[es] all eras of Black music onto a chip, being able to freely reference and cross reference all those areas of sound of previous generations of creators' kind of simultaneously."[12] Essentially, computers became time machines. As the previous section focused on the Data Thief as the last Angel of History, the next section of this essay will more acutely focus on the significance of the Mothership Connection to epitomize the Black imaginary. Mothership Connection references both the first clue the Data Thief received as well as the album promoted by funk master George Clinton and his collective Parliament-Funkadelic.[13]

I begin this section with an excerpt of a poem entitled "The Planet is Doomed" written by the famous jazz musician/philosopher Sun Ra in order to situate a discussion of the mothership connection in the social climate of 1970s America. Unfortunately, the racial climate does not look so different than today. I contextualize this social climate with a poem rather than historical

[10] Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 228.
[11] *The Last Angel of History*
[12] *The Last Angel of History*
[13] Though the cover of the 1975 album *The Mothership Connection* is attributed solely to the band Parliament, Funkadelic was another band also headed by George Clinton. Several musicians working on various projects with Clinton became known collectively as Parliament-Funkadelic.

facts to privilege subjugated knowledge over historicism determined by hegemonic power. The poem reads:

> it just breaks me all up, man
> it just breaks me all up—
> can't understand a damn bit of it
> like man, I gotta get away before they mess up
> my mind
> before they take my soul, man
> I just gotta get away
> and blast off in my rocket ship
>
> I come from a better place than this
> what in the hell am I here for—
> here to keep up with the pricks,
> all the narrow-minded hoodlums,
> all the big talkers and
> big money makers and rackets,
> all these prickin' squares around?
>
> hell, no—
> I gotta blast away
> I gotta get away, man
> I gotta blast off like a super megatron
> rocket on
> electro dynamic radiation
> I can't stand it, man
> I gotta get away!
> all these pricks messsin' up my mind
> all the long cars and all the big green
> money
> they can take it and shove it
> people been givin' me the shaft for ages
> people, people ain't nothin'
> but a bunch of hoodlums
> ain't nothin' but a bunch of pricklin'
> gangsters,
> that's all they are
> only thing they understand is a

shotgun shell[14]

Within the first few pages of his book of poetry of the same name, this *planet is doomed*, he articulates his discontent and restlessness as a result of "prickin' squares" on planet earth. He is upset and disillusioned at his concluded diagnosis of planet earth: doomed, condemned to certain destruction. His frustration and his belief to be of an alien origin that is "better" than earth, as he believes that he is from Saturn, fuels his desire to potentially abort his mission on this planet and travel to another locale. (Outer)Space is *that* place, a place of liberatory possibility from oppression and confinement. Sun Ra ultimately identified the issue of racial feeling and devised a plan of escape for Black people to achieve autonomy outside of the American socio-political structure. He divulges his plan in his 1974 Sci-fi film *Space is the Place* where he encourages space travel to a utopic place that those of African descent could call their own. Upon arrival to this new planet, Sun Ra—dressed in Egyptian-inspired garb and a shiny headpiece—Sun Ra reflects on his new surroundings and soundscape. He informs the viewer that "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 to on planet Earth who would understand.[15] He sets this new planet apart as a uniquely different visual and sonic experience to cure the feelings of dispossession Black Americans experience on the earth.

Sun Ra's somber tone resonates with that of Walter Benjamin who prophesies catastrophe as the ultimate prognosis of a world bent on materialism. He continues later in his poem to call out the culprit of earth's destruction: earth creatures who "can't get their wings up…they can't do nothin' but crawl…like a bunch of animals gossipin' and fightin' wars."[16] Moreover, the "squares" as he calls them are invested in the economic system and hustling people for their money, causing people to "sweat blood on the job".[17] He thus highlights an intersectionality between the class and racial struggle. Among the economic system, he asserts that the earthlings' practices of "super-imposed adulthood" and "immaturity" contribute to their lack of flight and transcendence.[18] The terms super-imposed adulthood and immaturity are within one line of each other in the poem and are not necessarily meant to be contradictory. Instead, their mutual presence emphasizes the problem of people who are on one hand too adultish to imagine greater possibility, and on the other too childish to recognize the persistent need for it. Sun Ra's 1974 film ultimately exhibited his solution to the impending doom of planet earth, his sonic war on terror that included a mass exodus of African Americans to a new land resonant of Marcus Garvey's nationalism. His prolific catalogue of chant-filled music and poems

[14] Sun Ra, "this planet is doomed" in *this planet is doomed*: the science fiction poetry of Sun Ra, (New York: Kicks Books, 2011), 1-2.
[15] *Space is the Place*
[16] Sun Ra, "this planet is doomed," 2.
[17] Sun Ra, "this planet is doomed," 2.
[18] Sun Ra, "this planet is doomed," 2.

inspires Black people to elevate and understand their true origin outside of the oppressive regimes they found themselves in.

An angel is a supernatural being that aids the people of the earth but does not originate from the planet. In other words, it is an alien to earth, coming graciously to aid people in their affairs to ultimately bring glory to the Creator. It has wings that help it fly above the ground and through dimensions. It is not in service to itself, but instead subordinate to a higher entity. The angel of history serves History, the study of past human affairs. In this sense, one could say that in his poem "this planet is doomed" Sun Ra depicts himself as a divine being that must leave the wicked and perverse earth for a new place. "This planet is doomed" through the purview of Sun Ra's philosophy sheds light on the production of blackness in space, free from the surveillance of white people. Furthermore, funk master George Clinton articulates that the inspiration behind his 1975 album *Mothership Connection* with his band Parliament-Funkadelic was to imagine Black people in new places. He states: "On [this] record, I had to find another place that we hadn't perceived Black people to be, and that was on a spaceship. So, I pictured him in there leaning like it was a Cadillac. You know, slidin' through space, chillin', coming from the planet Sirius."[19] Sirius, also known as the Dog Star, is the brightest star in the sky and has special status across multiple civilizations and their mythologies. Interestingly, Sirius is a homonym of the adjective serious. I easily heard the second spelling when I listened to Clinton speak about his album because of Parliament-Funkadelic's outrageous attire and theatricality. Could it be planet serious that this Black individual comes from or leaves, to slide through space, chillin' on the sounds of funk music? There may be a double meaning in the making. Of course, Sun Ra is no angel of history as he does not desire to stay and help mend the catastrophe. However, Parliament-Funkadelic just might be.

The album *Mothership Connection* is not only known for its blend of psychedelic rock, African rhythms and funk blended into a large ensemble sound, but it is also known for its sci-fi packaging and Black narratives that were absent in American sci-fi cinema.[20] The album cover pictures Clinton arrayed in a spacesuit of metallic shorts and silver platform boots as he sits legs spread at the entrance of a saucer-shaped vessel flying in space. Overall, Clinton's music, comic book liner notes and graphics became the major representations of the Black imaginary that were more assessable to the urban, working class than the esoteric undertakings of Sun Ra. Regardless of intention, Parliament-Funkadelic's appropriation of sci-fi imagery to Black narratives helped to destabilize the mid-1900's obsession with Black authenticity and realism in American film and television, which was directed towards the urban, working class.[21] As Blaxploitation films declined in production, Clinton seized this moment as an opportunity to offer a different kind of redemption not tied to any explicit notion of blackness: pure, unadulterated funk.

[19] *The Last Angel of History*.
[20] Adilifu Nama, "Subverting the Genre: The Mothership Connection," in *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 161.
[21] Nama, "Subverting the Genre: The Mothership Connection," 162.

The Mothership Connection tells the story of another poet figure Starchild who has arrived from another planet on the mothership to bring the people of Earth the funk. Several characters narrate the storyline throughout the album. For example, the first track of the album entitled "P-Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)" features the Lollipop Man who acts as an intergalactic DJ as he informs the people of Earth of what they have the pleasure of hearing. The broadcast comes from a frequency on the mothership, a frequency he calls W-E-F-U-N-K. He says, "Welcome to station WEFUNK, better known as We-Funk. Or deeper still, the Mothership Connection. Home of the extraterrestrial brothers, Dealers of funky music. P.Funk, uncut funk, The Bomb."[22] In essence, the Mothership Connection promotes solidarity across its listeners, a universal encouragement to the hearts and minds of the listeners to connect by jiving with the groove of the beat. Their presumable collective bodies in motion alter the segregated spaces they inhabit as they emulate their "extraterrestrial brothers" who are not afraid to cut loose and get down. In describing the formation of modern nationality, Homi Bhabha describes a distinction between "pedagogical" time and "performative" time. Whereas the former exhibits how historical events build upon another towards a certain destiny, the latter describes a people that recreates themselves collectively by taking up a given activity simultaneously.[23] In the case of the Mothership Connection, grooving to the funk and even desiring it (as the lyrics to Parliament Funkadelic's song "Give Up the Funk" says "We want the funk, give up the funk. We need the funk, We gotta have that funk)[24] acts within performative time to re-create the people of the Earth with new desires. Perhaps, George Clinton's funk does what Sun Ra's cryptic mantras could not, cause the "crawlers" and the "squares" to fly or at least build momentum.

Funk is a healing substance according to music and Afrofuturism critic Kodwo Eshun. In his book, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Eshun notes that "Funkadelia… invades through the nostrils and seeps through the nerves, setting inhalation at war with the body. You breathe in the purification of the universe."[25] Lollipop Man states in "P-Funk" that "If you got faults, defects or shortcomings, You know, like arthritis, rheumatism or migraines, Whatever part of your body it is, I want you to lay it on your radio, let the vibes flow through. Funk not only moves, it can re-move, dig?[26] In addition to its healing properties, Starchild describes the Funk as a substance that is so ancient, it is likely that the citizens of Earth

[22] Parliament, "P-Funk," by George Clinton, Bootsy Collins, and Bernie Worrell, recorded October 1975, Casablanca Records, track 1 on *Mothership Connection*, https://open.spotify.com/album/4q1HNSka8CzuLvC8ydcsD2.

[23] Homi K. Bhabha, "DissmiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), 291.

[24] Parliament, "Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off the Sucker)," by Jerome Bailey, George Clinton, and Bootsy Collins, recorded October 1975, Casablanca Records, track 6 *on Mothership Connectio*n, https://open.spotify.com/album/4q1HNSka8CzuLvC8ydcsD2. The song was released as a single in 1976 by Casablanca records.

[25] Kodwo Eshun, "Sampladelia of the Breakbeat" in *More Brilliant than the Sun : Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 54.

[26] Parliament, "P-Funk."

have forgotten the potential of its power. As referenced in the song "Mothership Connection (Star Child)," Funk is as ancient as the Egyptian pyramids that the Parliament crew has returned to claim. In fact, the secret to funk, Earth's regenerating life force, is in the pyramids. The Mothership Connection represents a return to origins: "The Mothership Connection is the link between Africa as a lost continent in the past and Africa as an Alien Future."[27] This theorem is evinced by the name of the album and the connection that is forged between the people of Earth and the spaceship.

Executing the possibilities of imagination is one of the most powerful tools to combat the internalization of dominant transcripts dictated by white cultural representations. Albert Einstein asserts, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is, strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research."[28] Einstein had a prediction related to his theory of special relativity called the "twin paradox." Physicist Ronald Mallett provides a simplified version of Einstein's prediction that I find useful in explaining how traveling to space metaphorically affects social change. Mallett describes the "twin paradox" with a story about two twins, Jim and Fred, who are both twenty-five years old at the beginning of the story. The daring twin, Jim, decides to take a journey to a star on a rocket ship that is going close to the speed of light while Fred uncourageously stays on the earth. Jim ends up journeying to a star twenty-five light years away. As he approaches the star, everything that measures time on Jim's rocket slows down though he does not perceive the change. His metabolism and heart rate even slow down. Due to a time dilation effect that Fred witnesses, what only takes his brother in the rocket ship ten years to travel back in forth from the star takes fifty years from Fred's point of view. When Jim returns to the earth to meet his brother, Fred is now fifty years older than he. Thus, the twin who took the adventure into space traveled on a vessel that served as a time machine that not only preserved his health but expanded his mind.[29] Now, returning to the topic of the Mothership connection, consider for a moment that: the rocket ship is the Mothership, Fred is collectively the Black working class, and Jim is Starchild (the extraterrestrial brother). Here is the manifestation of the Mothership Connection in Einstein's "twin paradox." As Starchild the adventurous twin travels to the Dog Star in the Mothership, he breaks from chronological time to conduct liberation experiments outside the confinements of Earth's oppressive forces like gravity and time. One of his experiments is the production of funk music that he uses to entreat his unadventurous twin brother onto the rocket ship so that he too can rid himself of the shackles of white representation to create a new expressive order. Within this framework, the liberation that

[27] *The Last Angel of History*.

[28] Albert Einstein, "On Science" in *Einstein on Cosmic Religion and Other Opinions and Aphorisms*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 2009), 97. This edition, which includes an "Appreciation" by George Bernard Shaw is an unabridged republication of *Cosmic Religion and Other Opinions and Aphorisms* originally published in 1931 by Covici-Friede, Inc. in New York.

[29] Ronald L. Mallett, *Time Traveler : A Scientist's Personal Mission to Make Time Travel a Reality*, (New York : Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006), 66.

could take fifty years on the ground could require much less time in daring to signify on the marginalization of society through space and time travel. Essentially, the "twin paradox" fortifies the foundation of the speculative and the imaginative serving significant roles in catalyzing social change.

Towards a Mothership Epistemology

The signifier of the sea ship haunts contemporary Black life as an engine of racism.[30] Representations of Black life found in literature, visual art, cinema and the quotidian, are inextricably linked to routes and traveling vessels. They are what literary scholar Christina Sharpe calls the "orthography of the wake."[31] The ship of enslaved Africans, Édouard Glissant writes, has the capacity to produce a new shared knowledge among those who inhabited it and their descendants. The Martinican philosopher determines that both the ship and the Atlantic Ocean are wombs in which new forms of relation take shape that are not reducible to products of a white imaginary.[32]As a feminine vessel, the "Mother" ship and outer space possess a similar capacity to bring forth something new.

The "Mother" ship Connection is a metaphorical allusion to the Middle Passage and a return to Africa. However, the Mothership Connection subverts the lexicon of the Middle Passage and consequently undermines the power of imperial and national projects. It does so by extending an invitation to Black populations across the Atlantic to join a grand party experience on a spacecraft that is freed from the weight of oppression in negotiating citizenship, freed from the gravity on planet Earth. The sea ship also signifies racial division, the residue of chattel slavery that perpetually plagues the contemporary era across continents. W.E.B. Du Bois reminds us in *The Souls of Black Folk* of the problematic "color line," a metaphorical demarcation of space that interrupts the white sociological imagination of the United States due to the presence of Black people. [33] Given the materiality of socio-economic division, Black artists and cultural theorists invoke their imaginations to transcend it. And even so, as Michelle M. Wright argues, Middle Passage epistemologies cited in the seminal texts of discourses on blackness such as W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* "interpellate" entire Black collective identities into a linear historical narrative, defined by heteronormative masculine Black progress. [34] Evidently, the historicism of hegemonic power greatly influences those who try to resist it

[30] See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4 ; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.

[31] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 20-21.

[32] Eduard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6. See also Michaeline A. Crichlow with Patricia Northover, *Globalization and the Post-Creole Imagination: Notes on Fleeing the Plantation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

[33] W.E.B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 13.

[34] Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015),27. Although W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Paul Gilroy interpret from a

like the way physics impacts Fred. Furthermore, those who engage in contentious politics via artistic expression are cast to the side, which includes people who consider themselves to be from another planet or who produce speculative narratives encoded in music. Their messages of social change call for re-examination in today's climate of continued antiblack violence and the emerging interest of social and educational institutions in antiracist pedagogy, a methodology that uses praxis to promote social justice.

By shifting the gaze to the Mothership before looking at the slave ship, I see a prospect of a new global project using the Black imaginary to break free from temporal constraints in order to charter new territory for Black people.[35] I build upon Michelle K. Wright's incorporation of lay discourses of spacetime in particle or quantum physics to add to the conversations around blackness and offer ways to trace Black agency in alternate spacetimes. Through theoretical, fictional, poetical, and musical material, this essay considers alternative trajectories for historicizing blackness. Data Thief, for example, receives a clue at the crossroads to help him reconfigure and reframe the historical narrative of Black cultural production by archeologically digging in the past. I combine Black aesthetics and the sci-fi subjects of time travel, space travel and the black hole to shed light on the world-making practices of Black performers. The Black speculative imagination is a cultural and political force expressed through aesthetics. It unfetters blackness from temporal constraints, offering Black people a future beyond the suffering derived from coloniality and subjection. Drawn from the plurality of Black experiences infused with speculative fiction, science, technology, mythology and spirituality, this integrative pulse reassures that a promising Black futurity is within reach.

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heteronormative masculine worldview, they are not diametrically opposed to Wright's proposition of expanding discussions of blackness outside of a linear historical narrative. In fact, the premise of W.E.B. Du Bois' short story titled "The Comet" is based on a catastrophe as an equalizer that wipes everyone out save one Black man and one white woman in order to re-imagine historical narrative and envision a better future for Black Americans. Similarly, my conception of Black identity being conceived through multiple pathways is inspired by Paul Gilroy's offering of a transatlantic Black culture that transgresses the spatial boundaries delineated by nations.

[35] See Thomas F. De Frantz and Anita Gonzalez, "Introduction: From 'Negro Expression' to 'Black Performance" in *Black Performance Theory*, eds. Thomas F. De Frantz and Anita Gonzalez, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 1-15 for a discussion on the "Black Imaginary;" see also Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017). Colbert explores how Black movements create circuits connecting people across space and time, and in particular writes a chapter on spaceships.

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