

African Afro-futurism: Allegories and Speculations

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Introduction

In his seminal text, *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, Kodwo Eshun remarks upon a general tension within contemporary African-American music: a tension between the “Soulful” and the “Postsoul.”¹ While acknowledging that the two terms are always simultaneously at play, Eshun ultimately comes down strongly in favor of the latter. I quote him at length:

Like Brussels sprouts, humanism is good for you, nourishing, nurturing, soulwarming—and from Phyllis Wheatley to R. Kelly, present-day R&B is a perpetual fight for human status, a yearning for human rights, a struggle for inclusion within the human species. Allergic to cybersonic if not to sonic technology, mainstream American media—in its drive to banish alienation, and to recover a sense of the whole human being through belief systems that talk to the “real you”—compulsively deletes any intimation of an AfroDiasporic futurism, of a “webbed network” of computerhythms, machine mythology and concepttechnics which routes, reroutes and criss-crosses the Atlantic. This digital diaspora connecting the UK to the US, the Caribbean to Europe to Africa, is in Paul Gilroy’s definition a “rhizomorphic, fractal structure,” a “transcultural, international formation.” [...]

[By contrast] [t]he music of Alice Coltrane and Sun Ra, of Underground Resistance and George Russell, of Tricky and Martina, comes from the Outer Side. It alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future. Alien Music is a synthetic recombinator, an applied art technology for amplifying the rates of becoming alien. Optimize the ratios of excentricity. Synthesize yourself. [...] From the outset, this Postsoul Era has been characterized by an extreme indifference towards the human. The human is a pointless and treacherous category. (Eshun 1998, 00[-006]-00[-005])

The debate that Eshun outlines—along with its rich lexicon of terms—has a formidable history, both preceding *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, and following that book’s publication.² Taking a cue from Eshun, in this paper I examine a related—although not identical—tension within Afro-futurism, namely the tension between *allegory* and *speculation*. While these terms correspond roughly to the Soulful (humanism) and the Postsoul (posthumanism) respectively, shifting the discussion to allegory and speculation enables me to detect a *crypto-humanism* within posthumanist discourse.

And it allows me, furthermore, to offer a somewhat different take on the Postsoul—a speculative version that pushes the Postsoul to its limits.

In order to situate the discussion and render it less abstract, I examine the allegory/speculation tension through selected examples from Africa. I will argue that African-based Afro-futurist production heightens the tension while veering towards the speculative pole. But in order to understand how and why that is the case, it will be necessary, first, to more carefully theorize how allegory and speculation function within Afro-futurism and then, second, to more fully contextualize Afro-futurism in Africa.

Allegories → Speculations

Afro-futurism developed largely as a response to the condition of forced diaspora—of transatlantic slavery. Such is already evident in Mark Dery’s “Black to the Future,” a text widely recognized as the movement’s seminal theoretical statement. Dery begins his text by observing that only a handful of African-American novelists “have chosen to write within the genre conventions of science fictions,” something he finds

especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but not less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). (Dery 1994, 180)

The focus on forced diaspora as a kind of “alien abduction” laid the terrain for much of the theoretical and creative work to follow. Of course, Dery was only reflecting on decades of music, literature, and art that had explored this theme: Sun Run’s “intergalactic research,” Jimi Hendrix’s “Astro Man,” Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, and Anthony Braxton’s “Trillium R,” to name just a few. But what, precisely, does “alien” designate in Afro-futurist production? Although Eshun is partly correct that Afro-futurism “adopts a cruel, despotic, amoral attitude towards the human species” (1998, 00[-005]), it is important to also note the opposing tendency to domesticate and re-humanize aliens.

Many argue, in fact, that Afro-futurism derives its affective and political force by allegorizing conditions of slavery through the *metaphor* of the alien. The allegorical nature of Afro-futurism is articulated in the pithy title of Alondra Nelson’s 2001 article, “Aliens Who Are Of Course Ourselves.” In Nelson’s reading of artist Laylay Ali’s representations of an alien community called the Greenheads, the key point of the images is

that they “reflect contradictions of the *human* condition” (2001, 99; my emphasis). “Alienness” is on this view a metaphor for “human connection and detachment” (100–101), or as Nelson notes, the alienness we project onto each other—and particularly the alien foreignness of black subjects in an inhospitable world.

Ken McLeod makes a similar argument in an extended discussion of “alien and futuristic imagery in popular culture” (2003, 337). He argues that the important Afro-futurist musician George Clinton “assumed the alter ego of an alien named Starchild who was sent down from the mother-ship to bring Funk to earthlings. Starchild was an *allegorical representation of freedom and positive energy*—an attempt to represent an empowering and socially activist image of African-American society during the 1970s” (2003, 343; my emphasis).

And indeed, a similar line of argumentation guides the interpretation of other non-human forms within Afro-futurist discourse. Discussing the issue of technology and the cyborg, Tricia Rose interprets Afrika Bambaataa’s use of android metaphors as “an understanding of themselves as *already having been robots*. Adopting ‘the robot’ reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labour for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society” (in Dery 1993, 213–4; original emphasis). For Rose, the cyborgic confusion of human with technology only throws humanity into sharper relief. The human “robot” can never be an affirmative figure for Rose—it can only ever represent the de-humanization and reification of certain humans through racial capitalism.

As suggested by the above examples, Afro-futurist theorization often trades on constitutive paradoxes to the effect of: “ruminating on alien life is really about human life”; “explorations of technology are really about human capabilities”; “visions of the future are really about the present.” These paradoxes can be formalized as “X is actually about non-X.” Or perhaps a more pertinent formalization would be: “non-X is really about X”—since in each case “X” is really what matters.

Even Kodwo Eshun, who has long taken a strong anti-humanist position, advocates the allegorical position in a text published five years after his magnum opus. “The conventions of science fiction,” he writes, “marginalized within literature yet central to modern thought, *can function as allegories* for the systemic experience of post-slavery black subjects in the twentieth century” (Eshun 2003, 299; my emphasis). Here again, science fiction scenarios (“non-X”) are really about the here and now (“X”). For Samuel R. Delany, similarly—at least in as Eshun’s reading of him—Afro-futurism is less concerned with the future than with providing “a significant distortion of the present” (Delany 1995, quoted in Eshun 2003, 290).

Writing about the future, in this rendering, is really a matter of distorting the here and now.

What one witnesses in much Afro-futurist interpretation, then, is a kind of crypto-humanism. This is a humanism rerouted through metaphors of the alien and the cyborg. Rather than becoming something other than human, “aliens” and “cyborgs” are understood as metaphors for those humans who are denied humanity, for those humans who are not valued as such. In almost every case, what first appears to be the creation of something completely other (extraterrestrials, androids) turns out to be what is most familiar. There is seemingly no thought beyond what is already known—every thought of the outside is “in fact” about us. As Nelson tells us, the aliens are of course ourselves.

Without diminishing the potency of this mode of interpretation,³ I want to ask if it may be possible to think about Afro-futurism outside the rubric of allegory. I will be asking, that is, what Afro-futurism might look and sound like if we think about it in terms of a speculative exploration of the unknown—an exploration of the unknown *qua* unknown, rather than as a metaphor of the Same. A step in this direction is already suggested in a famous scene from the film *Space is the Place*. When Sun Ra teleports into a youth center in Oakland, California, and announces his imminent departure into space, a young African-American man asks him: “Are there any whiteys up there?” To this, Sun Ra responds: “They’re walking there today. They take frequent trips to the moon. I notice none of you have been invited.” In his response, Sun Ra makes a clear political point about the exclusion of African Americans from U.S. society and technological development. But it is also relevant to view the exchange in terms of what George Clinton (2016) has recently characterized as a “futurist standpoint” that came “from an era when we were contemplating space travel.” In the second half of the twentieth century, metaphors of space became indissociable from actual space navigation and exploration. In a similar vein, speculation about life on other planets, conspiracy theories about alien contact, and advances in space exploration technology form an uneasy relationship. Discourses about extraterrestrial space—alien life included—are not necessarily or exclusively metaphorical. Outer space is not *merely* a metaphor for Earth.

If certain African-American products push interpretation in this direction, it seems to me that African-based Afro-futurism moves even further away from allegory. This move is due, in part, to the fact that African musicians and artists are not compelled to deal directly with the condition of diaspora. And because of this, references to “outer space” and “aliens” have less obvious metaphorical resonance.

In general, African-based practitioners of Afro-futurism opt for a more speculative vision of “the outside.”⁴ Whereas allegory reveals a hidden meaning about how things are, speculation is a form of thought or action about how things are not. Allegory implies a vector of return—a reflection of or a detour through the other back to a (reconstituted) self. As such, allegory is ultimately about the here and now. Speculation, by contrast, is directed outwards towards the unknown and the unanticipated.

This paper focuses on those practitioners of Afro-futurism who speculate on others who are not ourselves, on others who do not always reflect or echo the human back to the human. This form of speculation is at once political, epistemological, and ontological. In the face of humanist allegory or the vicious but irrefutable logic that one cannot think anything outside of one’s own thought, these practitioners respond with appeals to an absolute beyond.

African Afro-futurism

In his important book, *Dub*, Michael Veal (2007, 209) asks “whether Afro-futurism is fundamentally an *African American* trope, reflecting a particular proximity to the apparatus of the cold war?” (original emphasis). As an example from outside the United States, Veal notes that a number of aspects associated with Jamaican sound production might easily be considered Afro-futurist, for example: the reliance “on modern sound technology to craft sonic evocations of archaic Africana” (208), the occult connections between sound and deep space (211), the conceptualization of the recording studio as a “hybrid of laboratory, spaceship, temple, jungle, or shaman’s hut” (211), and an understanding of “science” as a spiritual practice rooted in “neo-African black magic” (212). And yet, Veal continues, “the sci-fi component” of Jamaican music has generally been “more implicit than explicit” (210). He attributes the core of Afro-futurism to the United States’ participation in the space race and the battle for global dominance during the Cold War; and because Jamaica was peripheral to these processes, its music “tends to be less concerned with images of flying saucers and interplanetary travel, and is more reflective of prominently interwoven dichotomies of nature/technology and past/future” (210).

Despite his hesitancy to place dub squarely (and neatly) within the lineage of Afro-futurism, Veal was one of the first scholars to theorize Afro-futurist production outside of North America. Nonetheless, what ties Jamaican and African-American “sci-fi” together is the shared condition of diaspora. Whether creative responses to the sci-fi nightmare of slavery take the shape of “images of flying saucers and interplanetary travel” or “interwoven dichotomies of nature/technology and past/future,” the question of

diaspora and of its relationship to Africa remains a fixed reference point.

This returns us to the question of how an African-based Afro-futurism might operate. Indeed, in the past few years there has been a proliferation of creative work by African musicians, artists, and writers exploring quintessentially Afro-futurist themes. While some practitioners have registered a certain discomfort with the label “Afro-futurism” (e.g., Bristow 2015), the sheer prevalence of the term—applied both “externally” by critics and “internally” by musicians and artists—suggests the very real development of something like an *African Afro-futurist movement*.

I use the term “African Afro-futurism” as shorthand to refer to creative practices and theoretical activity on the African continent, but with a full acknowledgement of the term’s ambiguities and limitations. For one thing, many important practitioners within this movement circulate between Africa and other parts of the world, thus undermining my definition of African Afro-futurism as a movement taking place “in” Africa. I also readily acknowledge that speaking of an *African Afro-futurism* may seem somewhat redundant or even disingenuous, since surely Afro-futurism is already African at a fundamental level (that is, at an “existential” rather than geographic level). Acknowledging these ambiguities, I nonetheless think it important to recognize the recent explosion of Afro-futurist creativity in various African countries—even if this development has unclear borders and a much longer history.

Although not literally the same thing as transatlantic slavery, one could also easily point to similar forms of racial violence and “alienation” on the African continent. These include, amongst many other things: dispossession and expropriation under colonialism, the long history of capitalist predation and resource extraction, and the construction of “official” discourse by white historians and academics.⁵ Furthermore, one aspect that is not sufficiently emphasized even in critical literature is the devastating affects of transatlantic slavery on communities in Africa. So high was the number of enslaved Africans between 1650 and 1890, in fact, that large swaths of Central and West Africa experienced an unprecedented decline in population. The disproportionate enslavement of African men also caused a massive demographic and social rupture in many African communities (Manning 1990).

Rather than thinking about Afro-futurism in the Americas and in Africa as distinct movements, then, it may be useful to establish a more inclusive Black Atlantic narrative, as for example recently outlined by South African journalist Ntombenhle Shezi (2015) in her concentrated Afro-futurist timeline. Shezi presents an annotated chronology of what she views as the major events of Afro-futurism:

- W.E.B. Du Bois' story "The Comet" first appears in 1920
- Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa publishes *Indaba, My Children* (1964), "a work of speculative fiction told through African mythology" (Shezi 2015)
- The film *Space is the Place* is released in 1973
- In the 1980s: Afrika Bambaata releases *Planet Rock* and "Jean-Michel Basquiat becomes celebrated for his graffiti-like works, featuring griots and robots" (Shezi 2015)
- From the 1990s: Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, Mark Dery's article "Black to the Future," and Hype William's music videos for Missy Elliot, Busta Rhymes, and TLC
- In the twenty-first century, Shezi provides three examples, all of them from Africa: the music video for Simphiwe Dana's song "Ndiredi" (2004), the Kenyan film, *Pumzi* (2009, directed by Wanuri Kahui), and the video for South African band Fantasma's song "Eye of the Sun" (2014), which prominently features musicians Spook Mathambo and Moonchild Sanelly.

These creative products engage tropes central to Afro-futurism, including outer space, technology, mythology, and the question of the future. This paper will examine the first two South African examples included by Shezi: Mutwa's book *Indaba, My Children* (1964) and Simphiwe Dana's song "Ndiredi" (2004). (I will examine Fantasma's song, "Eye of the Sun" [2014] elsewhere.⁶) These productions are very different from each other; one important task of this paper, then, will be to ascertain what the three examples share vis-à-vis Afro-futurism.

As I have already suggested, one notable aspect of African Afro-futurism is the tendency towards speculation. But the examples of African Afro-futurism provided by Shezi are by no means straightforward—they may mix allegory and speculation, or may come down on one side more than the other. They require rigorous analysis before any general conclusions can be drawn.

Credo Mutwa

"1964: The first edition of Indaba My Children by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa is published. This is a work of speculative fiction told through African mythology." (Shezi 2015)

Born in 1921, Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (more commonly known simply as "Credo Mutwa") is a Zulu *sangoma* (diviner) who since the 1990s has

garnered international attention in communities of alternative medicine and New Age spirituality (Steyn 2003). In recent years, he has worked with a number of institutions, including the Ringing Rocks Foundation (founded in Philadelphia “to explore, document, and preserve indigenous cultures and their healing practices”) and the Heart Healing Center in Colorado, where he is lauded as a treasured representative of esoteric Zulu knowledge (as cited in Chidester 2005a).

Mutwa’s position within South Africa is however far less secure. Born in the province of Natal to a mother deeply committed to traditional African religion and a father who converted to Christian Science in 1931, Credo Mutwa turned to his mother’s family when he fell ill and his father carefully avoided biomedical intervention (in line with the tenets of Christian Science). After being fully healed, Mutwa recognized that his illness was in fact a call to initiation and to the process of *ukuthwasa* (becoming a *sangoma*) that he would undergo later in life.⁷

Like many young Zulu men living under apartheid, Mutwa moved to Johannesburg in search of employment and soon found a job in a curio shop geared towards tourists. The shop owner, a white man named A.S. Watkinson, relied on Mutwa to authenticate and interpret the African artifacts in the store, and in the process Mutwa “emerged as a gifted and imaginative storyteller, recounting elaborate tales that he insisted were drawn from the authentic repository of Zulu tribal history, legends, customs, and religious beliefs” (Chidester 2006, 185). Mutwa’s early experiences working for Watkinson set him on a decades-long trajectory working in various ways for the tourist industry.

His tourism work in the 1970s and 1980s took a dubious turn when he was hired by the South African government to design African cultural villages. His first effort was a culture village *cum* theme park located smack dab in the middle of Soweto, on a plot owned by mining magnate Ernest Oppenheimer. The ill-conceived park, which still exists, sits adjacent to the Oppenheimer Tower, a turret-like structure built from the bricks of houses demolished during the forced removals of the 1950s. Sponsored by the South African National Parks Board and intended to affirm the apartheid ideologies of “tribalism” and separate development, Mutwa’s cultural village was denounced by most black South African residents in Soweto at the time. In the wake of the 1976 Soweto Uprising,⁸ the village was raided and set on fire. Mutwa’s “village,” whose many sculptures lack any obvious connection with Zulu folklore and appear instead to be idiosyncratic Mutwa creations, has remained a tourist site long since its 1976 ransacking. The blackened surfaces of many of the sculptures remained well into the 1990s, which, according to one tourist company, lent “the village an eerie

atmosphere” (Excite Travel 2004, quoted in Chidester 2006, 187).⁹ Known as Kwa-Khaya Lendaba, Mutwa’s creation remains an unpopular tourist destination in Soweto (I have visited roughly a dozen times and have never seen another tourist there), bearing only the trace of a failed collaboration between the apartheid government and a Zulu diviner and artist.

Driven out of Soweto in the mid-1970s, Mutwa attempted to develop another, more ambitious yet equally doomed, tourist village in the “homeland” of Bophuthatswana. Music scholars may recall Bophuthatswana as the site of Sun City, the casino and resort complex where musicians were invited to perform during the cultural boycott against South Africa (which ended in the early 1990s). Although a UN-mandated boycott forbade musicians to tour South African, the apartheid-era government lured performers to Sun City by insisting that the boycott did not apply there because the resort was located in the independent state of Bophuthatswana (Nixon 1994; Drewett 2006). But Bophuthatswana was never an independent state, it was a Bantustan (or homeland) of South Africa that was created artificially as part of the larger apartheid apparatus.¹⁰ Each of the ten black national “units” was designated a specific homeland—with the consequence that even black people born and raised in cities such as Johannesburg or Cape Town were “assigned citizenship on the basis of their ethnicity in one of the Bantu states, thus becoming foreigners in their own land” (Ferguson 2006: 56). This system of so-called “grand” apartheid became the bedrock of the policy of “separate development,” which sought to replace the discourse of racial segregation with one of national difference. Hence, Bophuthatswana was presented by the South African government as the national state of the Tswana people.

It was in this context that Mutwa established the Lotlamoreng Dam Cultural Park in 1983, a tourist space consisting of adobe villages representing each of South Africa’s national units. “Around these displays,” writes David Chidester, “Mutwa erected clay statues of African deities, most prominently an African goddess twenty feet tall” (2006, 187). When Bophuthatswana was dissolved into South Africa in 1994 (despite serious resistance by puppet-leader Lucas Magope), Mutwa was expelled. But like the strange remains of his burnt village in Soweto, Lotlamoreng developed a ghostly afterlife. As John and Jean Comaroff wrote in the second volume of their classic *Revelation and Revolution*: “When we visited the apparently abandoned site in August 1995, we found its ‘ruins’ inhabited. The ‘traditional Tswana village’ had metamorphosed into a thoroughly modern private space: a neatly swept courtyard, plastic buckets, clotheslines, and a large transistor radio announced the presence of residents more real than authentic” (1997, 3–4). “In a truly surreal moment,” they continue,

“a woman recognized our confusion and, taking on the role of tour guide, began to offer utterly fanciful exegeses of the riot of ethnic images before us” (4).

Mutwa’s involvement in the Soweto cultural village and later the Lotlamoeng park has two important implications. First, it is impossible to deny Mutwa’s complicity with the apartheid government—indeed, he openly declared his support for apartheid policies. (For example: “White men of South Africa are only too right when they wish to preserve their purebred racial identity”; and “Separate Development . . . is the clearest hope that the Bantu have thus far” [Mutwa 1966b, 319]). While it seems that his position was based on a discomfort with the fact that in the 1970s and 1980s any affirmation of African culture or tradition was liable to the accusation of “tribalism” by the black Left, there is obviously no way to justify his actions. The second important point to realize about Mutwa’s work with the cultural villages is the manner by which he freely mixed African folklore with his personal contributions. Amongst the sculptures at Kwa-Khaya Lendaba, one finds a “Zulu house and a Venda shepherd’s shelter,” but also several UFOs and a “large metal sculpture that represents the female rain god, Nomkhubulwane” (Simbao 2007, 45). As such, art historian Ruth Kerkham Simbao (2007) takes issue with interpretations of Mutwa’s work that too simply associate it with apartheid ideology. Clearly, there is more going on at Kwa-Khaya Lendaba than a promulgation of separate development.

This mixing of “culture” with personal imaginings runs throughout Mutwa’s work, and indeed much of his artistic and authorial output bears little resemblance to anything otherwise known about Zulu customs and beliefs. Hence, although the popular media in South Africa has generally regarded Mutwa as a charlatan or fraud (see Chidester 2006), by Mutwa’s own admission his work is a “strange mixture of truth and nonsense” (1966a, 353). Another ambiguity that runs throughout his work is the tension between publically shared cultural knowledge and secret wisdom. At times, he claims to be simply relating African folklore, while at other times he claims to have access to secret knowledge gained only through painful ordeals. (I return to this issue later.)

This brings us, finally, to the Mutwa’s *Indaba, My Children*, a book included by Shezi in her Afro-futurist timeline. *Indaba, My Children* was commissioned by Mutwa’s boss at the curio store, Watkinson, and Adrian S. Brink, a white academic at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. “Indaba” is a Zulu word that refers to a conference or gathering where important matters are discussed and evaluated. If Brink was correct that Mutwa named the book in order that the ideas expressed

therein might be evaluated for their “authenticity and acceptability,” this was a very strange choice for the title indeed, since “the wild, extravagant, and imaginative poetry and prose of these texts bore little if any relation to anything previously recorded in print about Zulu religion” (Chidester 2006, 185).

Although initially ignored or derided, Mutwa’s book has unexpectedly reentered circulation in the past decade. In addition to New Age practitioners and conspiracy theory buffs who laud Mutwa’s work, *Indaba, My Children* is presented as a seminal text of Afro-futurism on several websites, with one writer calling the book “a classic and indispensable resource for anyone interested in the cultural life of Africa and the human experience as it is filtered into myth” (Webb n.d.), and another placing Mutwa in a list of Afro-futurist authors alongside highly respected contemporary writers Nnedi Akorafor and Ben Okri (Brown 2015). On the one hand, it seems that readers in the diaspora simply don’t know about Mutwa’s troubling past. (The current Wikipedia entry on Mutwa downplays his earlier actions and frames his political position during apartheid in generous terms.¹¹)

On the other hand, however, it is of course necessary to allow for creative readings of Mutwa’s work despite its earlier political associations. Reflecting on Joseph Lelyveld’s (1985, 251) indictment of Mutwa as portraying Africa just as the apartheid government wanted to see it, Terence Ranger nonetheless notes that,

even though it is tempting to dismiss Mutwa, or the Bantustan organic intellectuals who are manipulating religious traditions to invent convincing local identities, as mere puppets, the range of interests involved in creating this localized model of traditional religion and the increased reality of that model make it impossible to regard it as just a distorting fraud. (Ranger 1993, 71–2)

Alluding to his earlier theorization of invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), Ranger asks us to view Mutwa’s work as more than a mere distortion of something authentic. Mutwa himself seems to have something similar in mind. In the postscript, he characterizes *Indaba, My Children* as “a strange mixture of historical fact and legendary fantasy, a strange mixture of truth and nonsense” (1966a, 353). This strange mixture, he contends, has less to do with content than with African storytelling as a mode of performative address. Stating that “the African people do not tell stories the way they are normally told among other races,” he justifies the twists and turns of his book on the grounds that it must “maintain interest and avoid boredom” (354). As such, “flights of fantasy are permissible from time to time” (354).¹²

The book begins “when Time itself was still in its infancy, so many hundreds of generations ago” (Mutwa 1966a, 6), with a character named “Simba the lion” devouring the husband of Princess Marimba, Chieftainess of the Wakambi Tribe, daughter of Odu and Amarava (Mother of the Nations), and “youngest of the few immortals left upon this earth” (5). Shortly following this episode, Marimba, her son Kahawa, and Kahawa’s friend Mpushu the Cunning, realize that the Wakambi are not the only nation on earth when they come across a man who introduces himself as a Masai. Carrying with him a “bow with a well greased string and a heavy quiver full of stone-tipped arrows” (14), the Masai man boasts to Marimba that for his people “war and killing are the very breath of life” (14–15). Having unarmed the Masai man and bound him “securely hand and foot” (13), the Wakambi villagers prepare for an uneasy night, bracing themselves for a potential invasion. But instead of the sound of an invading army, the villagers hear something far stranger:

... a sound that was not of this world, that flowed through the silent dusk like a silver river through dark forests. It was a sound such as no human ears have ever heard before. It penetrated the very depths of the soul like cool water down a thirsty throat—like oil, soothing oil killing a cruel pain. Men stared at each other with incredulous wonder. Others groaned, and wept, blatantly and without shame. It was a sound of unearthly beauty, and to the surprise of everything it came from the throat of Marimba! She had taken the deadly bow of the captive Masai and had fitted a gourd to the middle of the bow itself, transforming the deadly weapon of war thus into the first *makweyana* bow-harp the world had ever seen. (15)

Along with the music of the bow-harp, Marimba also invented the world’s first song, as well as the act of singing itself. The transformation of a weapon of death into an instrument of music is a theme to which Mutwa constantly returns. Later in the story, a boy named Malinge is apprehended for inventing a “particularly vicious and cowardly” animal trap (Mutwa 1966a, 30) used to “wantonly and willfully destroy . . . a living thing for no other reason than to see the effect of the new kind of snare that he had invented” (33). Following Malinge’s trial (which results in his “legs being broken with clubs so that [he] may never walk again, and [his] hands destroyed by paralyzing [his] fingers” [34]), Marimba transforms the cruel animal snare into a musical instrument: “Thus the xylophone—the *marimba*—was born” (35). To this origin myth, Mutwa appends a drawing of a marimba as well as a short set of instructions for the instrument’s construction.

On another occasion in the book, music is used to protect the Wakambi against a band of Night Howlers, creatures described as having

“eyes that blazed like glowing embers, veined with veins that glowed like red-hot copper” (Mutwa 1966a, 20). Just as a Night Howler begins to rip apart Marimba’s son, she performs a song on the kalimba that paralyzes and destroys the vicious beast (22–23).

Later sections in the book describe the arrival of the “Strange Ones” (a category that includes many outside nations), as well as the histories of various southern African nations, including the Zulu people. Although the importance of music recedes somewhat in the later sections of the book, the perennial tension between war and peace remains center stage. Mutwa’s lifelong insistence that the Zulus are not a violent and warring nation stems in part from the fact that King Shaka tends to dominate histories of the Zulu people at risk of overshadowing all else. As Mutwa remarks in the Prologue to *Indaba, My Children*: “Ask any anthropologist in South Africa who was the greatest Zulu King and he will reply instantly: ‘Tshaka, of course.’ That is not so; Tshaka (or Shaka) was not the great Chief White historians make him out to be” (1966a, x). Mutwa also takes issue with cliché ideas to the effect that Zulus work themselves into “frenzy and rage” by performing war dances (x). Such distortions of Zulu history, Mutwa insists, breed “suspicion, hate and bloodshed” (xi).

Mutwa attempts to set the historical record straight by appealing to folklore, on the one hand, and creative storytelling, on the other. At times, this blurring creates uncomfortable pairings, for example when Mutwa places the mythological figure of Marimba into conversation with the warring community of the Masai—the Maasai, of course, being the more typical spelling of an actual ethnic group in East Africa. If Mutwa hopes to present a picture of the Zulu people as peaceful rather than warlike, it is disappointing that he cannot extend the same courtesy to his neighbors in present day Kenya and Tanzania.

Mutwa’s relationship to non-Africans is marked by an even more unsettling ambiguity—a blurring of boundaries between human outsiders and extra-terrestrials. In the 1960s, these “Strange Ones” seem primarily to be those from outside nations, including the Ancient Phoenicians and, more recently, Europeans. But in the 1980s Mutwa seems to have shifted from talking about aliens in the metaphorical sense of outsiders, to aliens as “beings from outer space” (Chidester 2006, 191). Mutwa has insisted for at least three decades that Africans have long known about many species of extraterrestrials. When asked about the significance of his bronze necklace pendant at an event in Japan in 1985, Mutwa responded: “[I]n Africa we have a tradition that there are extraterrestrial intelligences watching the earth. Do you not have reports in Japan of what are called ‘Flying Saucers?’” (Chidester 2005b, 1140).



Figure 1: Credo Mutwa speaking about aliens

In several elaborate accounts, Mutwa has spoken of not only witnessing aliens but also eating them. Of all the species, he speaks most frequently about the Chitauri (a name that has since been appropriated Marvel Comics),¹³ and the “small servants of the Chitauri” known as the Greys (Chidester 2006, 181). In addition to his scattered written accounts, Mutwa’s view on aliens was the subject of a three-hour documentary by British conspiracy theorist and former sports commentator, David Icke. In that documentary, *The Reptilian Agenda* (1999), Mutwa argues for the need to publicize secret African knowledge in the face of colonial distortions. (“Africa is being murdered,” he says at one point.) Part of that secret knowledge concerns a species of shape-shifting aliens who have infiltrated human society on earth.

The contemporary assessment of Mutwa’s checkered past is uneven to say the least. It is probably fair to say that most black South Africans view Mutwa ambivalently, with perhaps a sense of vague suspicion. David Chidester—a white South African academic who teaches at the University of Cape Town, and who has studied Mutwa’s work extensively—views Mutwa in balanced terms but ultimately takes a cynical position. Communities associated with New Age spirituality, alternative medicine, and—more recently—Afro-futurist tendencies, often celebrate Mutwa as a spiritual genius, a keeper of secret knowledge, or even a “shaman.” Mutwa also has

some traction in so-called “traditional medicine” circles within South Africa. For example, in the National Heritage Council’s “Transformation Charter” (2007) Credo Mutwa is listed in the acknowledgements as one of five “Sage Philosophers and Organic Intellectuals” whose comments contributed to the document. And although the popular media has often “sneered” at Mutwa, the University of South Africa has developed a new brand inspired by Mutwa’s philosophy, arguing that he is “arguably one of the world’s finest contemporary philosophers” (quoted in Steyn 2007, 272–3).

In the midst of these competing disavowals or investments, Mutwa continues to promulgate the dissemination of repressed African knowledge. As is the case with much Afro-futurism, this project has a hazy relationship to “origins” and is at least partially speculative and fictive. Most recently, Mutwa has spoken about telepathic communication with dolphins and has elaborated his position on extraterrestrials. At the age of ninety-four, he continues to reveal new pieces of ancient African knowledge.

Simphiwe Dana

“2000s: Simphiwe Dana releases the music video for her song Ndiredi off her debut album Zandisile. The video sees her waking up in the future, with flying cars and cosmological motifs carried throughout the video.”
(Shezi 2015)

In the midst of a history of deep colonial violence, says South African author Pumla Gqola, “Simphiwe Dana offers herself as wounded heroic figure who will change the future” (2013, 22–3). Born in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa in 1980, Simphiwe Dana is of a different generation than Mutwa. Dana, furthermore, is no healer or mystic; she is a musician widely known for combining “a completely unique jazz contralto intonation with Xhosa jazz balladry, and weav[ing] the whole over an infectious, often danceable fusion rhythm from her superb backing ensemble” (Coplan 2008, 349). Drawing on the stylistic practices of the long history of South African jazz, but committed to Xhosa (rather than English) lyrics, Dana has crafted a deliberately Afrocentric approach to musicking, stating in a recent interview: “Well, I would say I’m an old-school Afro-futurist as a musician” (Barlow 2014).

Several recent articles and blogs have lauded the music video for Dana’s “Ndiredi” (2004) as an important African intervention in Afro-futurism. Gqola calls Dana a “prophetess,” noting that in her music videos “characters are constantly moving, searching, travelling through different dimensions of existence—through walls, streets, forests, water, planets” (2013, 71). Such is certainly the case in “Ndiredi,” a video produced as a

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collaboration between Dana and director Andrew Wessels, and whose “basic concept was of African futurism and of creating a futurism based on African principles.”¹⁴

The video begins with the image of a tube TV displaying pure static. Dana’s face appears on the TV screen, then on screens mounted on a large wall panel. While the images fade in and out, her voice enters:

Ndiredi ukundiza ndiph’ umoya (I am ready to fly, give me wind)

This first line is already saturated with meaning. In Xhosa and other Nguni languages, *umoya* means “wind,” but also “breath” or “spirit.” Anthropologist Robert Thornton (2008, 213) observes that in Nguni cosmology spirit (*umoya*) is a “nonmaterial substance or essence.” Spirit is like blood because it can flow, but whereas the transmission of blood is understood to be restricted to “direct lines of (biological procreation),” spirits may be deliberately called upon from afar (213–4). This is why Dana may call upon spirit when she is ready—when she is ready to fly.

The camera shifts to a wider angle; there are multiple television screens, at different angles, in different shades. Then the camera switches to the other side of the room: Dana is lying on a bed. She has dreadlocks, she wears white clothes and is wrapped in a black shawl. To the right of the screen is a tube TV with no case, its circuitry exposed; to the left, a bowl of *impepho* (incense with healing properties). A round window behind her bed, almost like the window in a ship cabin, allows a view outside: through the window, the viewer catches glimpses of a futuristic world with small flying vehicles.

A second voice (also Dana’s) enters the musical texture, singing the same words, and forming a melodic line in counterpoint with the first. We are then visually transported outside the room for the first time. It looks like a city with walkover bridges and bus-like vehicles, but there are also strange flying cars and spheres with Saturn-like rings. Referring to the futuristic cityscape, Gqola comments: “The metallic early Afro-futurist aesthetic is sustained throughout the video when Simphiwe leaves her cabin and interacts with the physical and metaphysical world outside her bedroom and other women. All of these shifts make sense alongside Afro-futurist musicians’ previous fascination with both the racism-free utopic future and examining the past” (2013, 70).

As Dana’s voice heightens to sing the second line of the song (*Ndinaw’ amandla okundiza ndiph’ umoya* [I have strength to fly, give me wind]), we are back inside the room where she sleeps, and the camera zooms in on one of the screens. A dull green glow with retro writing appears:

“NEWS 23/01/2017 tonight a group of stars will form a variant of the six pointed star.”

On a nearby television screen a visualization connects stars into a slightly lopsided figure with six sides—a star with multiple layers of meaning in several religions. Something mysterious is about to happen on this, the twenty-third of January, 2017.¹⁵

Percussion begins to enter, and the visuals change dramatically: three women are seated on the desert landscape of a distant planet, their auras glowing brightly.



Figure 2: Screen capture from the music video for “Ndiredi” (2004). Three women on the desert landscape of a distant planet.

An elderly woman, represented as a kind of *sangoma* (diviner) figure, draws the same six-sided star in the sand. The *sangoma* then performs a ritual with two stones (one black and one white), finally smashing them together to form a single stone, which she drops into a hole. The hole acts like a membrane to another dimension, and the stone passes through to the cabin-like room in which the video began, finally landing on Dana’s head and abruptly waking her from sleep.



Figure 3: Screen capture from the music video for “Ndiredi” (2004). The stone passes through from another dimension, landing on Dana’s head.

We are made to understand, I think, that the desert landscape is a dream. During these scenes—and at the intersection of these two dimensions—Dana sings:

Themba limbi andinalo (I have no other hope)
Nguw’ ithemba lam (It is you who are my hope)
Nguwe nguwe nguw’ ithemba lam (It is you, it is you, it is you who are my hope)

Dana then gets out of bed, packs some documents into a cylindrical shoulder bag and exits the room, landing herself magically in a forest at night. Lost, she wanders in the moonlight, eventually breaking into a run. By this point of the song, her (non-diegetic) voice is supported by a full band, including drums, bass, and a horn section. The lyrics adumbrate a series of near failures, for example: “I nearly fell of a cliff / I nearly ran into a wall / I nearly stepped on a tail.” Towards the end of the song, Dana will shout defiance in the face of those who tell her that she does not have what it takes.

Dana comes across a misty river in the forest and bends down to drink—only to find herself transported into a yellow desert, wearing a long black cape and standing under a blistering sun. She then follows a bubble through the desert until she meets the three women from the desert landscape who woke her with the stone. The women clap gently, acknowledging Dana’s arrival, and suggesting that they had been expecting her. Removing the contents from her cylindrical shoulder bag—photos, pamphlets, and a

water bottle—she throws or pours these into the hole through which the stone first fell. This hole seems once again to dip into another dimension, and we see Dana one last time—she lies in her bed in the strange cabin-like room filled with televisions. But this time it is Dana herself who, having woken and then wandered through forest and desert, sends a wake up call to her still-sleeping self—who once again wakes with a start.

There are several things to notice about the music video. First, the narrative is one of “a dream within a dream within a dream”: a recursive pattern of cascading dream states common to sci-fi and Afro-futurist imaginings that disrupts any clear division between waking and sleeping.

Second, notice that the addressee of the lines “I have no other hope / It is you who are my hope” remains unstated for the entire duration of the song. However, the line “themba limbi andinalo” (“I have no other hope”) seems to have religious or spiritual connotations, and can be found in Hymn 302 of the Xhosa-language Anglican hymnal (*Iculo* 1949), where the true “hope” (*themba*) is of course Jesus Christ. Like many black South Africans, Dana seems to embrace a notion of the divine that is at once Christian but that effortlessly incorporates African religious cosmology, including the importance of ancestors. Relevant to this discussion is a recent interview in which Dana reflects on her reluctance to sing in the Church choir as a child because she felt that her “raspy” voice did not fit the texture of the music. She then recalls: “Early on, my singing was very much tied to my understanding and my seeking of the God Entity. I was a very serious child. I would take my time, and go off alone to the mountain like Moses. Go and sing, you know, just go and sing—it’s just me and the birds. And I would put my arms out and sing at the top of my voice, and I would feel so blessed.”¹⁶ Here, Dana invokes the Old Testament but also employs the unusual term “God Entity,” which has vaguely New Age connotations.

Third, consider the strange temporality implied by the director (Wessels) when he comments that the video is “based on the idea of a future Africa in which the West never had a hand . . . looking at utopian ideas based on African philosophy. Maybe one day!”¹⁷ This comment is striking in light of Wessels’ subject position as a white South African working to realize Dana’s creative ideas. But it is also interesting because it speculates on a future (“Maybe one day!”) in which the West *had never* intervened. The video, in other words, portrays a future with an altered past.

Allow me to now widen the scope of analysis a little. It is worthwhile pointing out that despite Dana’s statement that she is “old-school Afro-futurist,” the music video for “Ndiredi” is actually quite unusual within her oeuvre for its explicit futurism. Indeed, Dana’s work taken as a whole is seldom (if ever) referred to as “Afro-futurist.” Nonetheless, I think that it

may in fact be possible to detect a different sort of Afro-futurism in Dana's larger body of work, particularly in the manner by which she develops alternatives to the status quo. These alternatives are established dialectically through an affirmation of African *languages*, on the one hand, and a sharp indictment of contemporary urban *spaces* and *consciousness*, on the other.

Dana is one of South Africa's most assertive advocates for using African languages for education and in the public sphere. She reflects:

The year is over and I am reminded of the pain I felt at the beginning of this year when I was looking for schools for my children. I am based in Cape Town, but I found it impossible to get them into a good school not far from home that offered an African language as part of the curriculum. Now, I am not talking about a third language as is the norm . . . I was looking for a school that offered Xhosa as a first language. [...] I believe that language serves many purposes, but most importantly it serves to inform you of the essence of your being. I believe that the different African languages and tribes have a common goal: that of informing us of our Africanness, our identity. Despite the existing tribal divisions, there is a unifying African culture that transcends these divisions. Which is why I have no truck with these tribal divisions as they are ephemeral. (Dana 2010)

For Dana, language is critical for consciousness: "We are pathetic versions of our colonial masters," she writes. "No wonder we are so apologetic about the continued suppression of our identity, our culture, our languages.... Language is the bringer of culture. What we have forgotten of ourselves is hidden in our African languages. Language might be the revolution that Africa needs" (Dana 2010).

Through a series of high-profile newspaper op-eds, incessant social media statements, and presentations at international venues, Dana has argued that Zulu should be accepted as the "first language" in South Africa. South Africa has eleven official languages: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu. Although Dana's first language is Xhosa rather than Zulu, she nonetheless advocates for Zulu as a national lingua franca because "at least it's African" (Dana 2010).¹⁸

The question of language loomed large at a panel on South African music that I moderated in 2014 at the Apollo Theater in New York with Simphiwe Dana, rapper Tumi Molekane, and the vocal group The Soil. Earlier that year, there had been serious calls for a change of national anthem. The current anthem is an awkward hodgepodge of languages, styles, and keys: the first part is derived from Enoch Sontonga's classic Xhosa hymn, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" (1897).¹⁹ The second half of the anthem,

which begins with an abrupt modulation to the dominant key, is a version of the old, apartheid-era Afrikaans national anthem, “Die Stem van Suid-Afrika” (The Call of South Africa).²⁰ In the post-apartheid version, a verse in Afrikaans is followed by a verse translated into English.

Combining “Die Stem” with “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” was meant as a gesture of reconciliation in the post-apartheid era—a way of reforming the country (by including “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika”) while at the same time maintaining a place for the white minority in the “New” South Africa. Musically, the post-apartheid anthem is irredeemably awkward, with an abrupt and completely unprepared modulation jolting the piece from “Nkosi . . .” to “Die Stem.” Furthermore, efforts to maintain the old anthem as a way to reconcile with South Africa’s colonial past could not go unmediated: after all, certain lines from “Die Stem” explicitly refer to the Afrikaner’s conquest of “deserted” land and were thus “insufferable . . . and had to be deleted” (Coplan and Jules-Rosette 2005, 302).²¹ But what irks people like Simphiwe Dana most is the sheer insult of making black South Africans sing any version of “Die Stem” at national events.

At the panel discussion at the Apollo Theater, Dana and I agreed on what we saw as the most elegant solution: to simply get rid of the second half of the anthem and keep “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” as the entire national anthem without any additions. This move would be a clear affirmation of Afro-centrism over and against the faltering project of a “rainbow nation,” at least insofar as the notion of a rainbow nation effectively freezes revolution in the name of a liberal politics of human rights. The question of the national anthem is a question, as filmmaker Lebogang Rasethaba has recently put it, of “the people versus the rainbow nation.”²²

Alongside her commitment to African languages, Dana has simultaneously ushered an urgent call to leave the “townships,” which in South Africa means those ghetto-like areas created during apartheid at the outskirts of cities as a way to house laborers. As Gqola notes, townships for Dana “are both the geographical ghettos that have come to define ‘authentic’ Blackness and the mentality that polices legitimate forms of Blackness. Townships are a white supremacist construction, and although they have been shaped by vibrancy, defiance and counter-cultures, the time to claim the world beyond township borders has long been with us” (2013, 85). Dana’s indictment of townships is very unusual in larger post-apartheid discourse; it is even “courageous” in light of “notions of locating Black life in township as ‘authentic,’ or as ghetto-fabulous” (124). Her position is redolent, it seems to me, of Kodwo Eshun’s bold critique of a similar set of valorizations in African diasporic musics. “Everywhere, the ‘street’ is considered the ground and guarantee of all reality, a compulsory logic ex-

plaining all Black Music,” writes Eshun (1998: 00[-004]). “Rejecting today’s ubiquitous emphasis on black sound’s necessary ethical allegiance to the street,” he continues, “this project [*More Brilliant Than The Sun*] opens up the new plane of Sonic Fiction” (00[-003]). Of what then, for Dana, does a “Sonic Fiction” consist? Where is the alternative to the township or the street?

Dana presents several answers. “Ndiredi” is a speculative intervention into imagining a future that might have happened; it additionally employs the notion of exodus through flight (“I have strength to fly, give me wind”) as well as the expansion of consciousness through layers of dreams. Two of Dana’s songs from 2006 provide a very different but complementary response. “Bantu Biko Street” is an homage to Steve Bantu Biko (1946–1977), pioneer of the South African Black Consciousness Movement who was murdered by the apartheid police. The song is about a fictitious street, “an imaginary and metaphoric space of thought and memory, where collective struggle and healing take place” (d’Abdon 2014, 87). Another song from 2006, “Sizophum’ Elokishini,” is a direct call for people to leave the townships en masse. “Lokishini” (or in more contemporary parlance, “loxion” or “kasi”) is a slang term for “township” and is in fact derived from the Afrikaans word *lokasie* (location). When Dana calls for an exodus from the townships, she calls as well for an exodus from location, that is to say, a *dislocation*. In a manner both poignant and ironic, the song “Sizophum’ Elokishini” is performatively very much within the style of older township musics—of *marabi* and various kinds of “African jazz” (see Ballantine 1993; Coplan 2008). In a popular music scene dominated by electronic musics such as house and *kwaito* (Steingo 2016), Dana remains committed to full bands and to what Coplan calls “Xhosa jazz balladry.”

Her commitment to full bands is due, in part, to a desire to distance herself from “mainstream” contemporary popular music—especially *kwaito*. Typically, Dana states merely that she does not “feel any great affinity with the current South African pop music style, *Kwaito*” (quoted in Franzen 2010). Instead, she says, “I see myself more in the tradition of my people, the Xhosa, and I work with elements of gospel and jazz, but at the end of the day it is my very own language” (ibid.). At other times, however, Dana goes beyond the seemingly neutral language of non-affinity and makes fairly disparaging remarks about *kwaito*. For example, at her concert at the Apollo Theater in 2014, she joked about *kwaito* musicians who repeat a single word for the entire song. In every way, Dana takes a critical distance to what she views as the status quo.

In summary, Dana employs a multi-pronged response to neo-colonialism in Africa. The valorization of African languages and the use of Afro-futurist imagery are part of the same decolonizing impulse. But the music

video for “Ndiredi” seems to suggest that it is not enough to simply call for an exit, an exodus. Rather, futures-to-come or presents that might-have-been need to be actively imagined, visualized, and sounded. “Ndiredi” is a call to be ready for the impossible present in which the West had never intervened.

Speculations

In this paper, I have closely examined two very different cases of African Afro-futurism. The question then becomes, how does one interpret the work of Mutwa and Dana? To what extent are the theorizations of Dery (1993), Eshun (1998, 2003), and Nelson (2001, 2002) applicable to these quite different examples? The temptation for allegorical interpretation is strong. As mentioned earlier in this paper, alterity is typically understood within Afro-futurist production as a kind of distorted mirror of the Self. And the point, we are often told, is to gain a clearer image of the self through that oblique reflection. From Mutwa’s UFO sculptures and his elaborate tales of extraterrestrial communication, to Dana’s Afro-centric dream worlds and her invocation of a time-space beyond the townships, it may once again be tempting to interpret all of these as allegories for a contemporary society that is both violent and false.

Or consider, at greater length, a paper by academics Tyson Lewis and Richard Kahn about David Icke’s reptilian hypothesis—recall that Icke is a “conspiracy theorist” who bases his work partly on flexible interpretations of Credo Mutwa. The reptilian hypothesis essentially holds that a species of shape-shifting reptoid aliens has taken control of the planet earth by assuming human form and manipulating all layers of society. Icke’s elaboration of the hypothesis is extremely dense and forms the basis of several lengthy books (e.g., Icke 1999, 2001). As Lewis and Kahn observe, “Icke asserts a standard conspiracy-culture line that the pure Aryan bloodline has ruled the planet throughout history, though he is unique in developing it in an exocultural [i.e., extra-terrestrial] direction. In Icke’s mind, Aryan lizards have been Sumerian kings, Egyptian pharaohs, and, in more recent history, American presidents and British prime ministers” (2005, 10). In brief, Icke argues for the existence of a kind of age-old Illuminati forged from the inter-breeding between humans and reptoid aliens.

According to Lewis and Kahn, Icke’s theory is allegorical through and through. It is a “historical critique,” they tell us, a “trenchant political analysis mixed with what reads like an over-the-top satire in the tradition of Jonathan Swift” (2005, 10). Lewis and Kahn interpret Icke’s reptoid aliens as non-human *animals* (i.e., *reptiles* such as snakes and alligators). They propose that Icke’s “theory simultaneously represents a progressive desire

for the construction of a holistic animal/human future and a reactionary attitude that is unable (or unwilling) to overcome the fetters of capitalist spectacle and conservative conceptualizations of liberal-humanist subjectivity” (2–3). As they make clear, such an interpretation is par for the academic course. The allegorical interpretation of Icke resembles political philosopher Jodi Dean’s position that “the distortions and imaginative leaps of conspiracy theory may be helpful tools for coding politics in virtual realities of the techno-global information age” (1998, 144). The allegorical interpretation also resembles Mark Dery’s argument that alien conspiracy theories are “at once a symptom of millennial angst and a home remedy for it” (1999, 12).²³

Once again, allegories of home replace spectacular tales of outer space. All talk of aliens and the unknown are merely “tools,” “remedies” or “symptoms” of the here and now. Lewis and Kahn are probably correct that Icke himself encourages such an interpretation, as he proposes in the conclusion to *Children of the Matrix* (2001, 406) that reality is constituted by a “multi-dimensional infinity” united only by that trans-dimensional force called “love.” “We are the reptilians and the ‘demons,’” he muses, “and, at the same time, we are those they manipulate because we are all the same ‘I’” (424, my emphasis). Lewis and Kahn comment that in the final analysis “it is not clear whether Icke is in fact suggesting that reptoids are simply psychic projections and that his numerous treatises are little more than an elaborate allegory” (2005, 12). But Icke’s conclusion seems to suggest precisely an allegorical interpretation: “If the reptilians and other astral manipulators did not exist, we would have to invent them. In fact we probably have. They are other levels of ourselves putting ourselves in our face” (2001, 423).

Fine, let Icke have his allegory. But what if we think about Mutwa’s and Dana’s work, not as allegory, but as *speculation*?

What would it mean to speculate on the possibility of aliens—*not* of aliens as versions of ourselves, *not* as those from different cultures, *not* as non-human animals—but as extraterrestrial beings? What if, when Mutwa asks us—in the spirit of *ubuntu*, of humanity—to be hospitable to any and all visitors, before determination, what if he really does mean *any and all*?²⁴

There is, after all, a long history of such speculative thought in Africa (as attested to by Mutwa, and also perhaps by the Dogon of West Africa²⁵), as well as in Continental philosophy. A young Immanuel Kant stated baldly: “I am of the opinion that it is just not necessary to assert that all planets must be inhabited, even though it would be nonsense to deny this in regard to all or even only most of them” (2012, 295). As Peter Szendy remarks, the question “*Why not?*” forms the basis of Kant’s early thinking,

for example, “*Why* would there *not* be forms of intelligent or reasonable life (life endowed with reason) elsewhere than on Earth?” (Szendy 2013, 45).²⁶

On the one hand, such speculation was for Kant merely part of the “freedom to invent” (2012, 295). On the other hand, however, it opened a terrain of new and difficult questions, not least of which was the impossibility of comparing two beings (human and extraterrestrial) when “*experience* does not offer us this possibility” because we have never met such an extraterrestrial being (2006, 225; my emphasis). But despite Kant’s urging in his early text, the *Theory of the Heavens*, that “It is permissible, it is proper to amuse oneself with such ideas” (2012, 307), the “critical” Kant of the three Critiques would bar all such speculation.²⁷ Hence, Kant defined the critical project as follows: “Such a thing would not be a doctrine, but must be called only a critique of pure reason, and its utility in regard to speculation [*in Ansehung der Spekulation*] would really be only negative, serving not for the amplification but only for the purification of our reason, and for keeping it free of errors, by which a great deal is already won” (1998, 149). What the “mature” Kant hoped precisely to guard against is the temptation for thinking to stretch “its wings in vain when seeking to rise above the world of sense through the mere might of speculation” (563). Hannah Arendt comments on the consequences of philosophy’s “critical” turn: “Modern man, when he lost the certainty of a world to come, was thrown back upon himself and not upon this world; far from believing that the world might be potentially immortal, he was not even sure that it was real” (1998, 320).

If critical philosophy is precisely the prohibition of thought to engage any topic beyond our sense-perception, then the reemergence of speculative philosophy in the past ten years marks a radical departure.²⁸ But if I am correct that African Afro-futurism is a resolutely speculative project, then perhaps the speculative move against critical philosophy (against Arendt’s “modern man”) needs to be aggressively provincialized.

Rather than allegories of the *here and now*, I propose interpreting African Afro-futurism as a series of speculations about the *absolutely other*, about those forms of existence lying beyond the threshold of consciousness.

This includes Mutwa’s aliens but also Dana’s dream encounters in “Ndiredi.” The figures that Dana encounters are not mere projections of her psyche, they are not simply “communications from different localities within the architecture of the dreamer’s personality”—as they are, for example, in psychoanalysis (Jedrej 1992, 111; quoted in Muller 1999, 85). Following Carol Muller’s work with Zulu Nazarite communities in South Africa, I would speculate that persons encountered in dreams are instead “communications from components of a cosmology in which the dreamer

is situated” (1999, 85). Here, persons encountered in dreams are ontologically real and distinct beings that become known to the dreamer during sleep. Persons encountered during a dream are fully fledged subjects rather than mere manifestations of psychic disturbances.

Likewise, the alternative future that Dana portrays in “Ndiredi” might be interpreted beyond the rubric of allegory. Rather than a distorted image of the present, might it not be a speculative vision of a future-to-come?

African Afro-futurism reactivates the speculative question—“*Why not?*”—that was lost to the West during the course of so-called critical philosophy. Recognizing that the “whole is false” (Marcuse 1982, 451), African Afro-futurism proceeds not (or at least not only) through negative or immanent critique; rather, it ignores the Kantian prohibition against the speculative amplification of thought, ignores the mandate to purify reason in order to keep it free from error.

Noticing that those images on the walls of the cave are mere shadows, African Afro-futurism speculates on the great outdoors—thus anticipating the immanent and revolutionary step to come.

Notes:

1. I would like to thank Bill Dietz for comments on an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to express my appreciation to Shirley Taylor and Jamilla Deria at the Apollo Theater for inviting me to moderate a panel on South African music—the panel was an excellent opportunity to think through some of the issues I write about in the current article. Finally, I would like to thank to Didier Sylvain for editing this wonderful special issue, and for being a fellow traveler on these strange paths.
2. Perhaps the most prominent and direct critic of Eshun was Weheliye, who advocated for a more balanced perspective, and who sought to recover a different sort of humanity (outside of white liberalism) in African American music (Weheliye 2002). Goodman’s later defense of Eshun is not incommensurable with the arguments of the current article (Goodman 2009).
3. Indeed, there are good arguments for a non-naïve, “reparative humanism” (see Gilroy 2011).
4. I use this term roughly in Ochoa Gautier’s sense (2014, 61). Ochoa Gautier borrows the term from Seeger (1987). I do however acknowledge that allegory forms the interpretive matrix for much science fiction (if not exactly Afro-futurist) production in Africa as well. For example, white South African author Lauren Beukes frequently refers to her South Africa-based sci-fi novels *Moxyland* (2008) and *Zoo City* (2010) as “allegories” or “allegorical apartheid” (Beukes 2013). And to provide one additional, completely banal example, consider Roger Ebert’s (2009) review of South African sci-fi film *District 9*, which he calls “a harsh parable... about the alienation and treatment of refugees.”
5. The term “alienation” of course also has a distinct Marxist heritage, a heritage not at all unrelated to the violence of slavery and colonialism.
6. For a brief discussion of Spoek Mathambo’s Afro-futurism, see Steingo (2016, 149–150). See also Young (2016).

7. Mutwa recounts that it was only in 1958 that he “visited my mother and grandfather in Zululand after more than 30 years and, at their command, I renounced Christianity and underwent the ‘Ceremony of Purification’ in order to begin training as a witchdoctor...” (1966a, xii–xiii).
8. On June 16, 1976, school students in Soweto protested instruction in Afrikaans. Although the protest was peaceful, the students were met with extreme violence by the police, who shot several students, some in the back. This event marked a turning point in South African history and in the post-apartheid period June 16 is commemorated annually as a public holiday known as Youth Day.
9. Simbao (2007, 44) notes that Mutwa’s Soweto cultural park has been “rebuilt and preserved with the assistance of Musa Ntanzi, a fellow artist and long-term friend of Mutwa.”
10. For more on this, see Steingo (2016, especially Chapter 2).
11. The Wikipedia entry reads: “Credo believed that the great unrest in Johannesburg and the popularisation of communism in the black struggle drew Africans away from their traditional roots. Unlike most political activists, he actually supported a separation between white and black in order to preserve black traditional tribal customs and way of life.” Without any further information, the entry then attributes the attack on his cultural village in 1976 to his being “misquoted on Afrikaans radio,” although certainly those who set the village on fire knew about Mutwa’s relationship with the government at the time.
12. “These are the stories,” he says on the first page of the Prologue, “that old men and old women tell to boys and girls seated with open mouths around the spark-wreathed fire in the centre of the villages in the dark forests and on the aloe-scented plains of Africa” (vii).
13. The Chitauri appear in Marvel’s 2002 series called *The Ultimates*. Chitauri also appear briefly in the film, *The Avengers* (2012).
14. See Wessels’ short post at: <http://playithub.com/watch/gRm74OwziZ4>, accessed on September 26, 2016.
15. I am not aware of any particular significance of this date.
16. See the Shaya FM interview at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrN4E_Lh3Ek, accessed on September 26, 2016.
17. See Wessels’ comments at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gRm74OwziZ4>, accessed on September 26, 2016.
18. More recently, Dana has advocated using Swahili as a unifying language “because we are too divided to choose Zulu or whatever other language is most commonly spoken.” See de Lange (2012).
19. In the contemporary South African national anthem, Sontonga’s original Xhosa lyrics are translated into a first verse that is half in Xhosa and half in Zulu and a second verse translated into Sotho. For an excellent history and analysis of the anthem, see Coplan and Jules-Rosette (2005).
20. Interestingly, the contemporary anthem remains in the dominant key until the end of the piece.
21. An example of such an insufferable line is: “through our deserted plains / with the groan of the ox-wagon” (or, in C.J. Langenhoven’s original Afrikaans: “Deur ons vër verlate vlaktes / Met die kreun van ossewa”).
22. See Rasethaba’s film, *The People Versus the Rainbow Nation* (2016).
23. Dean and Dery, quoted in Lewis and Kahn (2005, 15, 6).

24. “Carrying an aura of indigenous authenticity, like the Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa, the term *ubuntu*, whatever it might have meant in the past, is being authenticated through its appropriations by a variety of cultural brokers advancing new initiatives—social and economic, theological and political—that require indigenous authentication. Arguably, like Credo Mutwa, this indigenous memory of what it means to be human—mobilized, creolized, and increasingly globalized for the market—is being authenticated in South Africa in and through the process of being abducted by aliens” (Chidester 2005a, 195).

25. Griaule’s work on this topic remains controversial (see Griaule and Dieterlen 1965; van Beek 1991).

26. Szendy is here paraphrasing and distilling Kant’s argument.

27. Szendy notes that the “philosophical fiction of the *Theory of the Heavens*... survives in attenuated form in Kant’s later writings” (2013, 53–4). Indeed, it is perhaps too simple to divide Kant’s work into his “pre-critical” and “post-critical” phases. But this is not the appropriate venue for such a discussion. I therefore leave such nuances to experts more knowledgeable than myself.

28. For an important statement on the so-called “speculative turn,” see Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman (2011). Examples of speculative philosophy (as well as various forms of realist philosophy) did of course exist before the oft-mentioned watershed events of 2006 and 2007 (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman [2011, 2] mention the publication of Meillassoux’s *Après la finitude* in 2006 and the Speculative Realism conference in London in April 2007). For example, in 2007, at around the time of the London conference, I was attending Manuel DeLanda’s lectures at the University of Pennsylvania. (DeLanda has since been recognized as a pioneer of Speculative Realism.) For an interesting although overstated critique of the alleged newness of Speculative Realism, see also Golumbia (2016). There are also political and economic dimensions of speculation; many have pointed to the “speculative futures” of finance capital, for example. Without becoming overly embroiled in a discussion of this topic, I point the reader to the careful consideration of progressive (or “affirmative”) and conservative forms of speculation in *Speculate This!* (Uncertain Commons 2013).

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