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Imagineering Black (Im)Possibility: Unearthing Afrofuturist Materialist Interventions

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**Imagineering Black (Im)Possibility:
Unearthing Afrofuturist Materialist Interventions**

by

De'Anna Monique Daniels

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

American Studies

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Imagineering Black (Im)Possibility: Unearthing Afrofuturist Materialist Interventions
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vi
Abstract	1
Chapter 1	2
Chapter 2	12
Chapter 3	23
Bibliography	57
Vita	60

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	33
Figure 2	38
Figure 3	43
Figure 4	44
Figure 5	46
Figure 6	47
Figure 7	49
Figure 8	52
Figure 9	53
Figure 10	54

ABSTRACT

To borrow from the Hip Hop pioneer KRS-One, Afrofuturism has the capacity to “make worlds with words,” creating contemporary sacred texts reliant on the past and the future concurrently for the navigation of social realities. Over the last twenty years Afrofuturist thinkers such as Alondra Nelson, Ytasha Womack, among others, have expanded early thinking to encapsulate ideas of race, gender, technology and how they operate in literature, in particular science fiction. With this emergent force, time has been taken to evaluate and analyze the literary sites of knowledge production; however, little critical engagement has been concerned with other forms of cultural expression and the ways they engineer possibilities through reimagining the past and rearticulating the future. In this work, I contend that in order to embrace the full potential of these worlds, equal attention must be attributed to varied visual and embodied artistic expressions. The words remain significant, and might tell us something about how to handle the subsequent material, but the visual, material, and embodied dimensions of African American survival through imagination tell a great deal about the historic effort of African Americans to celebrate and demonstrate a humanity denied by the forces of enslavement, segregation, and racism.

Chapter 1

Throughout the duration of my graduate studies thus far, Afrofuturism (an area of study that has largely developed outside of the formal walls of higher education) has overwhelmingly consumed, and some might even say perhaps, pervaded my intellectual formation as it concerns scholarly domains of religion, black popular culture, the contours of freedom and social justice across lines of social difference. This intellectual occupation with black flight, means of survival, and legibility were prioritized in my studies while undertaking a Masters degree in American Studies with a concentration in African American religion and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, found me in the upswing of the cultural and literary aesthetic and it resonated not just with my academic interest but my personal histories. My intense desire to locate a certain kind of freedom as an uncharted mode of escape *from* oppression, a flight away from the impossibilities constraining black life, and limiting its full humanity. As a young, woman of color who has found myself over time and throughout years often filled with what felt to be an unending circuitry of familial loss, alongside of what I considered to be a perpetual static immobility directly related to the complex intersections of the confounding impact of race, gender, religious inheritance, socioeconomic realities, among other pressing social realities. It felt like I would get a couple steps of mobility and life would take me 20 steps back. I started to understand, literally, the story of “what it means to be a problem” in a Duboisian sense. However, there were limitations that created not just a “double conscious” but also, a multilayered, three dimensional, structure within my mind. So, with nothing left to lose, I made an intentional decision to free my imagination as a last ditch effort towards the “otherwise possible” where I began to query in more pressing

ways, asking questions such as: what is freedom, and what does it mean to seek it, and how do we know when it has been achieved? When one claims freedom, how do they know? If certain subjectivities have been labeled the ‘historic’ problem, how is the problem then escapable? How can *I* escape the problem of objectivity, being made to feel like an object, when my imagination certainly felt otherwise? Are both positionalities possible? How might structural inequity be acknowledged and foregrounded, while also staying attuned to the importance of sighting mobility, or at least the promise of it, in futurity? What *is* agency, after all, and who gets to control the epistemological borders of its definition, and location? How can social stasis be staved, and how might we understand freedom as a means, rather than an “arrival” (as a thing) while knowing that such arrival status does not promise an end to problems? If looking to my theological inheritance for answers, one would look *for* freedom not in *this* world, but rather, in the ‘ultimate’ freedom ascertained in the forever of the promise of Heaven where the problems of the body, of finitude are no more.

Afrofuturism and its attendant moments of possibility responded to my queries with grand schemes of freedom posited in speculative and science fiction. It provided a neat and tidy categorization, a box wherein I could put my oddities, eccentricities, intersecting interests, racial identities, oppressions and obsession with magical realism. I began to see it in everything. However, there were some underdeveloped qualities that prevented it from truly being “in everything”. So I calibrated my excitement and begin to interrogate Afrofuturism. For instance, what exactly is it? Is it a methodology, discourse, theory, or simply an aesthetic? Is it limited due to its concerns with “Afro”? How much does it borrow from futurist and Afrocentric discourse? How does African-American

religion aid in the discourse? Can this unique data be forged with African-American theory to create something new? My answer was simply, “Its all those things” mostly because I was consumed with its possibility; a possibility for freedom.

After conversations with mentors, professors, and creators within the field that answer seemed incomplete. Or as Dr. Anthony B. Pinn, theologian and scholar of African-American religion at Rice University, put it, “greedy”. Yet, something valuable resonated with me from the literature to the art, the confluence of my intersecting identities prohibited me from ditching the framework completely. My research took me on a journey to study the literature, excavate the artistic expressions and I began to tie it with my Womanist leanings. I realized that if I understood the data, cultural productions, and literary interventions as an architectonic text, a sacred source material similar to the academic study of Hip Hop, what could develop is a unique form of knowledge production that could provide an answer to my previous problems. However, Afrofuturism still maintained its hardened categorical mysticism and its seemingly lack of concern for the structural limitations that surrounded me so, I began to undertake further study for my thesis.

My continued study of the recent and burgeoning forms of Afrofuturist scholarship has lead me to develop a conceptual analytic; *Imagineering (Im)possibility*. This thesis operationalizes Imagineering as a “thought-experiment” that attempts to unearth and explore the full range of possibilities that arise within underdeveloped aspects of Afrofuturism. Some of these underdeveloped aspects are its preoccupation with literature that is solely based within science fiction or speculative fiction. I assert in chapter 2 of this thesis the importance of seeing Afrofuturism as not just a literary

aesthetic but using visual and embodied expressions to conceptualize it as sacred source material that furthers not just its own genre but that of African-American religion.

Another underdeveloped aspect of Afrofuturism is its inability to take structures seriously when creating imaginative “plans of escape”. This paper through the lens of *Imagineering (Im)possibility* hopes to interrogate the peril and promise of black complex identity within notions of time/ space while bridging the mind and the body. Therefore, Afrofuturism, in its contemporary understanding, seems limited in its declaration to reclaiming the past as a means to change the future.

Cultural critic Kodwo Eshun, contends that to be black in this world means constantly grappling with dystopic realities and a dystopic future. However, how can one find hope, agency, escape, and liberation while constantly being surrounded in a dystopic reality? Eshun posits Afrofuturism provides a unique way to not only understand the dystopic realities of mass incarceration, legalized black death, dehumanized, pathologized, and criminalized black girls and boys, and economic/biologic/spiritual warfare targeted at blackness, means finding and facilitating equal access to progressive technologies, “knowing that a widespread embrace would diminish the race-based power imbalance, and hopefully color-based limitations for good”¹. Eshun goes on to further explicate the ways Afrofuturists disrupt the dystopic futures in the following statement:

“Afrofuturist fight these dystopic futures in two related ways. First, they use the vocabulary of science fiction to demonstrate how black alienation — what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” — is exacerbated rather than alleviated by those visions of tomorrow that are

¹ Womack, Ytasha L. *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Chicago

disseminated by the futures industry. Second, they disrupt, challenge, and otherwise transform those futures with fantastic stories that, as Ruth Mayer puts it, “move seamlessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones” — and thus between blackness as a dystopic relic of the past and as a harbinger of a new and more promising alien future. These acts of “chronopolitical intervention,” as Eshun calls them, double, triple, quadruple, and even quintuple our consciousness about what it might mean to live in a black future”².

Imagineering Impossibility furthers Afrofuturism by finding ways and moments of agency or “interventions” that capitalizes on the science fiction vocabulary and the use of artist expressions but is grounded and informed by the limitations of structures. It is motivated by a crawling back through history or through an ethnographic close reading of texts that contend with the full range of blackness and its complex identity. It seeks to analyze, reinterpret, deconstruct, and recode the past and present as it is without the creation of otherworldly instruments of help. It imagines through the engineering of possible black futures while leaning on conceptual and theoretical frameworks that have been recoded and deconstructed. Imagineering then is not yet a proxy for, or alternative to Afrofuturism; instead, it attempts to tease out the dimensions that are encapsulated within Afrofuturism’s unique capacity to provide moments and possibilities.

² Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism". *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): Pg. 290.

Afrofuturism contemporarily, has been concerned with issues of representation in the present and in future possibility. It has not been concerned with embodiment, or explicating exact ways of how black bodies' transition from objects to subjects. Imagineering (Im)possibility attempts to explain or unearth the moments of movement of bodies from objects to subjects, agency, travel, and capacity to survive through embodied and artistic modes of expressions. The Afrofuturist dilemma then is centered around, the reality of limitation and the query of how to escape. It asks continually how do we get to a moment or a world in time, space, or reality where there are no more structures? Where's the post-racial world? Where is the world where categories of identity no longer define? Afrofuturism has labored to answer these questions through the constructions of alternate realities, universes, and technology. All of which are needed to posit future possibility. However, I am concerned with the creations, the ingenuity for escape that utilizes the tools we currently have around us; a unique ability that has been passed down to black bodies from the middle passage experience. In a world that is comprised of structures that limit movement of black bodies through isms such as White supremacy, capitalism, homophobia, and heteropatriarchy Imagineering (Im)possibility seeks to intervene with radical movement and possibility.

Afrofuturism utilizes science fiction, speculative fantastic art, and magical realism as a means to posit tactics and strategies. However, today the structures and limitations still exist and we have to contend with bodies. Imagineering (Im)possibility as a conceptual analytic finds moments of possibility and ingenuity in the mundane. It fits bodily limitation through iconic black music; it creates culture and wearable art out of things deemed as trash; it makes beautifully grotesque the intricacies of oppression as so

many black bodies have done for centuries. It creates code, a new language and a new legitimacy through age-old expressions. It continually finds ways to become a god in a society that doesn't categorize you as human.

Imagineering (Im)possibility orchestrates mundane moments of imagining freedom into the creative ingenuity of making do. Picking up on Religion and Hip Hop scholar Dr. Monica Miller's reiteration of Michel de Certeau's "poetic ways of 'making do' (bricolage)³". Bricolage in practical or fine arts is the process or construction of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available. Furthering this idea French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss used "bricolage" to describe the characteristic patterns of mythological thought. Levi-Strauss described "bricolage as direct opposition to engineers' creative thinking process, which proceeds from goals to means"⁴. According to Levi-Strauss, in his book *The Savage Mind*, mythical thought attempts to re-use available materials in order to solve new problems. This concept and the constructions that it creates is a direct intervention within Afrofuturist discourse. Instead of constructing worlds with materials not readily available (i.e. cyborgs, advanced AI technology, post-racial identities, alien encounters, pandemics, and radical dystopian realities) Imagineering (Im)possibility ushers in the use of materials, texts, embodied expressions, and art that has been constructed, imagineered from contexts that are available for mining.

³ Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop (Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture)* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 155.

⁴ Claude Levi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage (1962). Paris*. English translation as *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966).

Furthering the use of bricolage, French philosopher Jacques Derrida extends this notion to any discourse. Stating, "If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one's concept from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur."⁵ The *bricoleur*, says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses "the means at hand,' that is, the instruments he/she finds at their disposition around them, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous—and so forth". It is this moment that Imagineering (Im)possibility becomes a reality of bricoleur. In order to unearth the inadequacy of Afrofuturism and show that there are moments of possibility, agency, freedom there needs to be an exhumation of texts and artistic expression which are not typically labeled as science-fiction or speculative art. This thesis attends to the work of the bricoleur by exhuming four interventions that construct moments and worlds of (im)possibility out of instruments at their disposition. In the case of "How It Feels To Be Colored Me", Hurston uses jazz music and her imagination to articulate the full range of her emotions while escaping the limitations of white supremacy. For *Cocktails*, Archibald Motley offers a radical reformulation of black female enjoyment by recasting black femininity in a space devoid of the limitations of exploitation, hypersexuality, and free space. In artwork and wearable sculptures of Chakaia Booker and Wangetchi Mutu a decoupage and artistic construction of materials not deemed as "art" create imaginative artistic experiences which highlight the hypocrisy

⁵ Jaques Derrida, "*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*".
Hydra.humanities.uci.edu.

and the limitations that plague black women's bodies while subversively refusing to accept it.

Imagineering (Im)possibility then becomes another way of appropriating and producing everyday mundane activities and raw material into a strategy of survival. One of the underdeveloped aspects of Afrofuturism comes from the fantasimal. The speculative fiction though incredibly interesting seems out of the realm of the achievable. For me, I can imagine a world where I'm a cyborg in 2901 where racism and classism has been eradicated due to a pandemic of some sort. However, I am still trapped in the peril that is living in the United States, as a young woman of color, from an "at risk neighborhood". How can I achieve freedom then? This thesis attempts to use Imagineering as a way of unearthing the kind of making do that both "reflects and critiques structures of constraint while showing the tenacity, resilience, and agency of subjects to survive, by making meaning out of what seems like nothing (or in my case everything)."⁶

This thought experiment or thesis unfolds in two parts. The first chapter is a brief history and nod to the fluidity that is possible when structures and bodies are taken seriously within Afrofuturism. By highlighting the knowledge production that can be mined from Afrofuturist discourse it details the possibility that stems from seeing art that has Afrofuturist sensibilities as theological embodied expressions. Using theologian and Hip Hop scholar Dr. Anthony Pinn's term "complex subjectivity"⁷, I assert that Afrofuturism extends and capitalizes on the work of black religion as a quest or struggle

⁶ Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop (Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture)* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 155.

⁷ Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Pg. 5

for complex subjectivity. I highlight the fluidity and the diversity that Afrofuturist inclined artistic expression wrestles and bucks against the “efforts to dehumanize those of African descent historically documented through the process of slavery, disenfranchisement, etc.”⁸

In the third chapter, I posit four interventions of Afrofuturism through literary, artistic, sculptural, and artistic decoupage/ bricolage that offer constructed imagineered (im)possibility through materials that are readily available. Using the work of political theorist Cathy Cohen, I assert that the ways in which Hurston, Booker, Motley, and Mutu imagineer spaces of difference can be regarded as a “politics of deviance”⁹. Cohen posits theorized nonconformity—or what she terms “oppositional practices,”—as an everyday act of resistance in marginalized Black communities. Cohen states that attention must be paid to how oppressed individuals “act with the limited agency afforded to them to secure small levels of autonomy”¹⁰. This action must be imagineered, constructed, and recreated in order for the autonomy to become reality. Imagineering (Im)possibility elucidates the ways that artistic embodied expressions engineers moments of escape, freedom, and radical change from within their mundane activities or unrelated constructions. This is to suggest the possibilities of what Imagineering (Im)possibility could look like when the structures of constraint and possibility are taken seriously.

⁸ Ibid., 15

⁹ Cathy J Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics.” *Du Bois Review*. 1, no. 1 (2004): 27.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30

Chapter 2

Fluidity In The Futurity of Afrofuturist Thought

To borrow from the pioneer KRS-One, Hip hop culture and Afrofuturism both “make worlds with words,” creating contemporary sacred texts reliant on the past and the future concurrently for the navigation of social realities. In this presentation, I contend that in order to embrace the full potential of these worlds, equal attention must be attributed to Afrofuturism’s visual and embodied artistic expressions. The words remain significant, and might tell us something about how to handle the subsequent material, but the visual, material, and embodied artifacts of Afrofuturism and hip hop are here investigated for some of the ways they articulate a kind of embodied theological response to contemporary African American experience; ultimately, this work expands the source material associated with African American religion, as articulated by theologian Anthony B. Pinn as a “quest for complex subjectivity.”

Afrofuturism, can be described as an emergent literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, mysticism, magical realism and Afrocentricity in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise the future and re-examine the historical events of the past. It is quickly becoming a global phenomenon¹¹. Over the last twenty years Afrofuturist thinkers such as Alondra Nelson, Ytasha Womack, among others, have expanded early thinking to encapsulate ideas of race, gender, technology and how they operate in literature, in particular science fiction. With this emergent force, time has been taken by scholars, to evaluate and analyze the literary sites of knowledge production, the “words”; however, little of the critical

¹¹ Alondra Nelson, Guest ed. "Afrofuturism." *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002). Pg. 10

engagement has been concerned with other forms of cultural expression and the possibilities they offer for reimagining the past and rearticulating the future, the “worlds.”

By giving attention to Afrofuturist Hip Hop aesthetics (beyond but still including the literary) and creating a space for epistemological inquiry through architectonic texts (or sacred artistic expressions), my hope is to use this research to fortify the intertextual bridge between literary and embodied artistic expressions. This bridge would empower people to see themselves and their ideas in the future, it gives rise to innovators and free thinkers, all of whom can navigate the sea of possibilities and create new communities, culture, expressions, and eventually a new balanced world. Afrofuturist architectonic texts uses the imagination to combine the textual and the visual sparking innovative progress that sometimes is smothered in the name of conformity and theoretical explication. In doing so this mode of embodied theological response also enables us to say yes to the possibility of new and better futures and thus to take back the global cultural dystopic reality, today by radically reimagining the past, present, and future.

Afrofuturist Architectonic texts (a term coined by Womanist Ethicist Katie G. Cannon,) can best be described as an artifact, artistic expression, or piece of artwork, which links the visual and the textual, creating an animated, embodied reflection. For example, the concept of Santeria offers a visible proxy of what an Architectonic text is and why such texts might matter in the construction of African-American religion. Santeria is widely known throughout most Caribbean and African countries. It’s hybrid worship style and syncretistic religiosity has its own customs, languages, and liturgy. However, the system of beliefs is made visible through *Orichá* worship, which has highly recognizable artwork, dance styles, and dress. The artifacts attributed to the religion help

to explain the language and customs while grounding the visuals that accompany the embodied experience that is indicative of this particular worship style. It is through the visible, highly recognizable artifacts that the explication of central religious tenets can be transmuted globally. Architectonic texts are comprised of the visuals and artifacts and provide a particular visible, embodied, and visceral construction of a literary or conceptual formation.

The knowledge formation attached to Afrofuturist Architectonic texts are not just related to the futurist conversation. I would contend, and many artists also suggest, that these robust and expansive formulations aid in the combatting of real life problems such as mass incarceration, mass deportation, police brutality, state sanctioned violence, global climate change, lack of access to technological advancements, and medical apartheid consistently plagued on black bodies. In light of the constant threat of erasure of black/brown bodies, Afrofuturist Architectonic Texts provide a critical understudied source for the study of African American religion--- that puts the liberation of the marginalized — especially African-Americans — front and center. When placed in cultural venues outside of books, the quest for complex subjectivity occurs through animating practical lived experiences. These embodied artistic expressions amount to a specialized knowledge production, specifically knowledge about black bodies and how they move through the world.

Afrofuturist Architectonic texts, specifically Hip Hop, underscores the centrality of blacks' specialized knowledge and utilizes cultural knowledge production providing visible examples of continued resistance to tyranny, survivalist modes, varied embodied experiences, technological manipulation, and affirms, rearticulates and provides a vehicle

of explicating the black experience in public. For example, in the visuals of and lyrics of Kendrick Lamar's "Alright", where in resistance to consistent tragedy and dehumanization, Lamar floats above the dystopic scenery and chants the hopeful triumph, "We gon' be alright". As Ytasha Womack affirms, Afrofuturism is a liberative tool, "great for wielding the imagination for personal change and societal growth"¹². "We Gon Be Alright's" visuals and lyrics become a useful tool that alerts and resounds to marginalized and dehumanized black bodies, to reject the dominant narrative and believe the imaginative. Thus, Afrofuturist architectonic texts allow us to "be in front of the developing of the material realities that shape the future in order to shape the world and alleviate the disparity"¹³.

Afrofuturist Architectonic Texts, specifically Afrofuturist Hip Hop, when treated as source material, are articulated as specialized knowledge production, where bodies in practice and experience are revealed as part of a specialized cannon, or regarded as authoritative within African-American religion. This particular source material can be used to carve out space for black people to write ourselves into speculative pasts and futures in order to reimagine possible strategies needed for true societal reform and the dismantling of centuries old forms of oppression.

Afrofuturist Architectonic texts build on Anthony Pinn's formulation of African American religion as a quest for complex subjectivity,¹⁴ by adding the benefit of rewriting history and imagining the future. This quest means "a desired movement from

¹² Womack, Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013. Pg.191

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192

¹⁴ Anthony Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. Pg. 159

being corporeal object controlled by oppressive and essentializing forces to becoming a complex conveyor of cultural meaning, with a complex and creative identity”¹⁵. Thus Afrofuturism fits within the culturally-focused rubric offered by Pinn. But these Architectonic texts also provide a way of reimagining the theoretical commitments (by offering a particularized data set) and the methodological tools in trans-historical ways (through the nature of futurist dialogue that’s grounded in the past).

Building on the culturally-focused rubric, Womanist ethicist, Dr. Katie G. Cannon, illuminates the architectonic text creation as the forging of the visual, embodied, and the textual into alignment, helping one to gain insights into the continuous call of the African American soul-force to create. It provides a visual aid to deepen the understanding of the forces that influence artistic representation and theoretical conceptualization in the work of justice; creating meaning for those in the service of the gospel. Therefore, Afrofuturist Architectonic texts becomes new source material from which one could analyze, study, learn, and map the world around them. This new source material is distinctive because its concern with African-American experience and history through the centrality of embodied “presentation in time and space” is a marker of the religious.

Musical Interpolation of THEESatisfaction

Hip Hop artists who proclaim Afrofuturist sensibilities do so with their particular aesthetic, performances, and bodily expressions that are deeply rooted in ethnicity and gender. Their identity based cultural productions suggest a complicated relationship to the intersections of technology, normative notions of progress, and human relationships that embodies a vivid complex subjectivity. Exploration into the Afrofuturist Hip Hop

¹⁵ Ibid., 158

and works of THEESatisfaction, Janelle Monae, Erykah Badu, OutKast, and Kendrick Lamar, illuminates how they navigate complex relationships to futurism and remix tropes from science fiction, fantasy, and horror in popular culture, art, and music in ways that both push back against dominant futurist discourse and expands the possibilities for Black bodies understandings of themselves and their places in the world. The following analysis of the aforementioned artists pays particular attention to Afrofuturist engagement in mapping out spaces for vivid and robust expressions of complex subjectivity. The robust expressions, or architectonic texts, highlight the constructed nature of societal aspects such as art, literature, architecture, film, television etc. Furthermore, artistic expressions can be seen as creative production as it pertains to futurism and science fiction visionary work. The following artist's creations are informed and transformed by intersectional experience. Racism, classism, sexism, and homo/transphobia affect the creation of art, the configuring of economy, and the transformation of spaces where their exhibitions take place. For instance, the artwork of Chakaia Booker, which is an aesthetic response to the "urban landscape of Northern Jersey". The re-appropriation of materials deemed as "trash" adds layers of meaning and social concerns throughout. The tires, Bookers medium, address African-American identity. By symbolically showing how the salvaging of defiant beauty from scraps of resilient material is a compelling metaphor of African-American survival in modern society.

Artists such as, Janelle Monae, Missy Elliott, Erykah Badu, AND THEESatisfaction are intentionally overt about the influence that Afrofuturism has on their work. The musical lineage of Afrofuturism can be charted back to the 1930's with jazz clubs. The 90's saw a renaissance and reimagining of Afrofuturism in hip-hop

(Atlanta based rap group, OutKast,), neo-soul (Erykah Badu) and techno (specifically Detroit producers such as Drexciya), all of who embraced the quest for complex subjectivity giving it their own distinctive edge. To look at a current snapshot of Hip Hop Afrofuturists one would look for Janelle Monae, and her Cindi Mayweather alter ego, follow Kendrick Lamar through his dystopic explication “We Gon Be Alright”, Even Snoop Dogg’s, “California Roll” reimagines the past and future with hover Cadillac’s and gold pyramid’s. All of these artists expressions are culturally rich and attempts to take on the future through fiction that explores complex subjectivities. Womack further hones in on this exploration by stating:

Hip Hop artists, musicians and filmmakers are creating new works largely to challenge color-based social structures, caste systems and the realities of second-class citizenship, which plague the experience of black people, particularly in America and across the world. In many cases, particularly in music, they reimagined these technologies to create new artistic works or reinvented processes that created new sounds that highlight these particular experiences. Each explores the impact of modernization and environment on the creation of artistic movements, identity and perspectives by people of color.

I’m giving asymmetrical attention to THEESatisfaction for the sake of time and because this group speaks more to my sensibilities as an Afrofuturist womanist. THEESatisfaction is the musical project of Stasia Irons (Stas) and Catherine Harris-White (Cat). Together the couple forms a two-woman, self-produced R&B/hip hop/psychedelic soul operation with strong cosmic overtones. Stas does a bit more rhyming/mcing while Cat is known for the jazzy vocals, and background percussive. Yet, the beauty is in the way one sound morphs into another as stylistic boundaries dissolve before your ears. The duo is inspired by everything from the Neptunes to feminist science fiction and utilizes it to create the otherworldly sounds on their sub-pop released debut album *awE Naturale*. THEESatisfaction experiments with, and often subverts and

recreates the sounds, tropes, and images of Afrofuturism that are emblematic within the genre. They provide the percussive interpolation of the themes ingrained within Afrofuturist discourse. THEESatisfaction projects the tintinnabulation (or lingering sound) of the imagined Afrofuturist strategies and ideologies. THEESatisfaction explores Afrofuturism through the song “Earthseed,” based on the sci-fi series of the same name by Octavia E. Butler, in which she details a fictional religion based on the concept “God is Change”. The Lyrics ask the same question:

Change, there are few words that you can say
We all watch things morphing everyday
what are the ideals that hold you back
What kind of support do you lack
Why are we always on the prowl and ready to attack
Surprisingly, we’re promptly on track¹⁶

On the same album, the duo produced the song “QueenS,” which is all about getting down, being carefree in blackness, and loving the black female form in the here and now. The chant proudly warns, “Don’t Funk with my groove, whatever you do”. In the QueenS video you’ll see the most fashionable house party you can imagine—all bright colors and prints, dangly earrings, ’fros and braids—and a celebration of Afrocentric, black, queer female friendship and freedom. Both pieces may be necessary to understand the power of black women’s cultural productions as Afrofuturist Architectonic Texts. The songs not only provide a source material for understanding a complicated mystical text but opens up the boundaries of the literary providing tangible projections of conceptual ideas. Sometimes politics, aesthetic, and environmental statements need to be made. Afrofuturism can be a powerful political statement. However, sometimes self-love, reclamation, and affirmations are needed and vital within Afrofuturism. Robust sexuality

¹⁶ Lyrics taken from Rap Genius.

and free expression are just as political and critical to the aesthetic. This multi-layered, free expression, is indicative of a historically grounded and “dependent articulation of humanity’s big concerns”. IT opens up our understanding of black religion as quest for complex subjectivity by recasting difference through embodied life. Afrofuturist architectonic texts picks up the mantle where the literary genre leaves off providing a soundscape, artistic space, and source material that can be analyzed and fashioned to work toward the future through a theological discourse that doesn’t lose sight of humans at work in this world and worlds to come.

The Future of Afrofuture: Interrogation/Integration of Afrofuturist Architectonic Texts

Afrofuturist architectonic texts provides tangible possibilities and visual concepts that recreate and imagine a world where black folk push back against the dominant society, enjoy a carefree space, and can have robust fully lived appropriation free cultural experiences and expressions. Afrofuturist Architectonic texts dispenses dimension to futurist narratives, which interrogates the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism forcing them to collide and probing what it means to be fundamentally, a human. It yields heightened sensations, evocative responses, visual representation of what coalitions, dialogues, social movements, and future problem solving strategies would look like if people (the diverse array in which they come) are placed at the center. In the worlds of Susana Morris, Afrofuturist Scholar, states that the cultural productions and source material created by Afrofuturist artists, performers, and literary scholars are creating “transgressive possibilities¹⁷” that destroy and disrupt normative boundaries and binaries

¹⁷ Susana Morris, “*Androids, Shape Shifters, and Vampires: Black Women’s Afrofuturist Feminist Cultural Productions.*” Lecture, Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA, February 20th, 2014.

of systems of oppression. This is vitally important for an oppressed community because the hope of dismantling the system goes away when one realizes the system can reconfigure to continue the oppression. Afrofuturist Architectonic Texts provides unique source material and produces culture that reimagines the future and gives an alternative to the dystopic view. Afrofuturist Architectonic texts create “cultural worlds of human existence” that provides another viable mode of “human thinking on the most significant existential and ontological issues facing humans¹⁸”.

Perhaps, the epistemology attached to Afrofuturist Architectonic texts are not just related to the futurist conversation. The robust and expansive formulations are needed today to combat the real life problems of mass incarceration, mass deportation, police brutality, state sanctioned violence, global climate change, lack of access to technological advancements, and medical apartheid consistently plagued on black bodies. Afrofuturism underscores the centrality of blacks specialized knowledge and utilizes cultural knowledge production providing visible examples of continued resistance to tyranny, survivalist modes, varied embodied experiences, technological manipulation, and affirms, rearticulates and provides a vehicle of explicating the black experience in public. For example, in the visuals of and lyrics of Kendrick Lamar’s “Alright”, where in resistance to consistent tragedy and dehumanization, Lamar floats above the dystopic scenery and chants the hopeful triumph, “We gon’ be alright”. As Ytasha Womack affirmed, Afrofuturism is a liberative tool, “great for wielding the imagination for personal change

¹⁸ Anthony Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pg. 11

and societal growth¹⁹” Womack goes on to say, “We must be in front of the developing of the material realities that shape the future in order to shape the world and alleviate the disparity²⁰”. Afrofuturist architectonic texts empowers people to see themselves and their ideas in the future, it gives rise to innovators and free thinkers, all of whom can navigate the sea of possibilities and create new communities, culture, expressions, and eventually a new balanced world. Imagination is the key and architectonic text combines the textual and the visual sparking innovative progress that sometimes is smothered in the name of conformity and theoretical explication. In doing so this mode of embodied theological response also enables us to say yes to the possibility of new and better futures and thus to take back the global cultural dystopic reality, today by radically Imagineering the past, present, and future.

¹⁹ Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013. Pg.19

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 21

Chapter 3

Imagineering (Im)Possibility: Materialist Interventions As Case Studies

There are many maps of one place, and many histories of one time.

-Julie Fredriekse

It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference, rather than the security of any one particular difference.

-Audre Lorde

The resilience of the human spirit lies in our ability to imagine.

-Ytasha Womack

The above epigraphs of Julie Fredriekse, Audre Lorde, and Ytasha Womack address the most exciting and yet underdeveloped aspects of Afrofuturism and the hopes that Imagineering (Im)possibility employs. An under-theorized aspect of Afrofuturism that opens itself to criticism is the notion that it tends to be concerned with only the technology of race, ascent to dystopic futures (as a means of freedom) and it's modes of speculative or science fiction to shape its claim to transcendence. Failing to take structures and bodies seriously it tends to tell the same story and depict the same map. However, just as the epigraphs above suggest when concerns of bodies are central to an analytic there becomes a severe concern with the multiplicity of material reality. Yes, aliens fringe the periphery of our future hope. Yes, time travel can be a solution to our linear understandings of time and its ability to impede notions of progress. Yes, escape from catastrophe may be possible through not yet completed means of technological advancement? However, I query what about now? How do we deal with the fact that the black women are consistently treated as other or alien? What does time travel look like now?

A constant formulaic tenant of Afrofuturism deals with black people being told they must adhere to divisions, which don't exist, and only accept a limited number of stories/histories about ourselves, "such that we have an extremely limited concept of what material reality can be". Racism can give black Americans the impression that "in the past we were only slaves, who did not rebel; that in the present, we are a passive people beaten by police who cannot fight back; and that in the future, we simply do not exist"²¹. A large majority of the work proposed by Afrofuturist and those with Afrofuturist sensibilities has been corrective; to create and utilize speculative fiction and sci-fi to interject and recuperate one-sided histories and truncated identities.

Ytasha Womack, the author of *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi Fantasy and Fantasy Culture*, explains that to her, Afrofuturism offers a "highly intersectional" way of looking at possible futures or alternate realities through a black cultural lens. "It is non-linear, fluid and feminist; it uses the black imagination to consider mysticism, metaphysics, identity and liberation; and, despite offering black folks a way to see ourselves in a better future, Afrofuturism blends the future, the past and the present". It is this move within Afrofuturism that I use to re-appropriate the term *Imagineering (Im)possibility*.

Building upon theologian and Religion and Hip Hop Scholar at Lehigh University, Dr. Christopher Driscoll's definition of *Engineering the Impossible (in Modernity and Postmodernity)*, I have added the dimension of imagination to the following definition. "Imagineering (Im)possibility is a process of meaning-making through the imagination in the face of human (specifically black bodies) limitations

²¹ Quote excerpt gleamed from <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/dec/07/afrofuturism-black-identity-future-science-technology>. Pg. 1

rooted in, but extending far beyond, physical and social death”²². Imagineering (Im)possibility is the activity/ active engagement wherein black folks of color utilize ones imagination to create/find temporary means of escape or freedom outside of our present hell of racism, sexism, and classism while taking the structures seriously. The impossibility and possibility surrounds the experience; situation; and time; while the Imagineering is the medium through which liberative spaces can be created. It offers what theorist Anne McClintock calls panoptical time and anachronistic space to occupy different positions, contradictions, realities, relationships or to simply BE when the world continues to say that feat is within the bounds of the (Im)possible. This creates a “co-constitutive process in which we imagine a limited sense of possibility and create limited lives in this image, in other words “erased from the past, erased from the future, and you’re hovering in the here and now, waiting for someone to write a story with our complexion in it”²³. The work of Imagineering (Im)possibility provides outlets for black people to see/create/project our lives more fully than the present limitations allows – emotionally, technologically, temporally and politically.

This chapter seeks to contend and elucidate how four case studies, not classified as inherently Afrofuturist, exemplify the tasks of Imagineering (Im)possibility through the use of what I see as Afrofuturist sensibilities. By closely reading two iconic Harlem Renaissance cultural productions, Zora Neale Hurston’s “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” and Archibald Motley’s *Cocktails*, and two current Afrofuturist Artists, Chakaia Booker and Wangetchi Mutu to explore the ways in which the transformation of current

²² Definition crafted from Dr. Christopher Driscoll’s syllabus for his class, Engineering The Impossible in Modernity and Postmodernity. Lehigh University, Spring 2016.

²³ Quote excerpt gleamed from <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/dec/07/afrofuturism-black-identity-future-science-technology>. Pg. 2

worlds into an imagineered liberative space, through artistic creations, practices, and social visions, allows black people the experience of Imagineering a different future for themselves.

This different future promises the weight of oppression, racism, respectability politics, and gender oppression could be temporarily lifted allowing them to express and experience the full range of emotions that were typically denied to them, an anticipation of central Afrofuturist tenets. My intuition is that through the cultural and literary expressions dated back to the Harlem Renaissance we can begin to see futuristically treated experiences within the black diaspora that were not and need not be classified speculative or sci-fi.

How It Feels To Be Colored Me: Literary Materialist Intervention

“How It Feels to Be Colored Me” is a descriptive, autobiographical essay wherein Zora Neale Hurston explores the discovery of her identity and self-pride, while offering a radical explanation of how it feels to be (fully) black in the spaces she inhabits. Originally published in the May 1928 edition of *The World Tomorrow*, “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” is a brilliantly inimical essay that did not fit with the popular or widely shared ideologies of racial segregation, nor did it completely mesh with “the flowering of black pride associated with the Harlem Renaissance”. Throughout the essay, Hurston continually considers how the relationship between desire, power, and subjectivity attempts to incapacitate her articulation and expression of her materiality and identity.

In order to work through that tense relationship Hurston employs Deviance as a mode of resistance. In political theorist Cathy Cohen’s work, “Deviance As

Resistance²⁴” one is able to understand the ways in which employing and developing a new field of investigation (Deviance) as a means to analyze and center the experiences of those deemed other or aberrant of “state-sanctioned, normalized, White middle, and upper class, male heterosexuality²⁵” particularly the black middle class nuclear family structure. Deviance then becomes vitally necessary in order to shift how scholars discuss and articulate the politics of those most vulnerable in Black communities (“those thought to be morally wanting by both dominant society and other indigenous group members”). Cohen states that attention must be paid to how oppressed individuals “act with the limited agency afforded to them to secure small levels of autonomy²⁶” Shea asks us to closely examine how marginalized individuals create counter spaces by willingly choosing an outsider status, even if only momentarily. Hurston deploys this methodology later in the essay through her choice to mentally travel away from the spaces that tragically colored her. An intentional deviance given limited agency and constrained choices sits at the center for this field of research. These individuals are not fully or completely defining themselves as outsiders nor are they satisfied with their outsider status, but they are also not willing to adapt completely, or to conform. The cumulative impact of such choices might be the creation of spaces or counter publics, where not only oppositional ideas and discourse happen, but lived opposition, or at least autonomy, is chosen daily. Through the repetition of deviant practices by multiple individuals, new identities, communities, and politics might emerge where seemingly deviant, unconnected behavior can be transformed into conscious acts of resistance that serve as

²⁴ Cathy J Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics.” *Du Bois Review*. 1, no. 1 (2004): 27-45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29

the basis for a mobilized politics of deviance.

This new field of investigation will be deployed through the use of a theoretical framework that highlights the creation and denigration of categories/ the work of processes of normalization with its base in queer theory/black feminism that will illuminate the understanding of power as it is arranged around race, gender, class and sexuality. All of this is an effort to gain new insights and knowledge production of the everyday politics of those considered the least in Black communities. A renewed or revitalized focus on acts deemed as deviant can “investigate their potential for the production of counter normative behaviors and oppositional politics”. In other words deviance can provide a theoretical lens to understanding how the marginalized and dehumanized find not only their humanity but access to autonomy, pleasure, escape and in those moments political resistance. The implications of deviance offer examples and explications of behaviors, mores, and non-normative communities where previous explanations no longer apply. Therefore, Deviance in the case of resistance becomes another way to formalize and crystallize understandings of voices least heard.

In the essay, Hurston divorces herself from “the sobbing school of Negrohood” that requires her to continually lay claim to past and present injustices, or be the victim of her race/gender/class. Hurston exclaims in the opening paragraph,

“I AM COLORED but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was not an Indian chief.”

By opening with this polemical statement, she provides an explanation of not only her pride but her breaking from conventional modes of essentialism and colorist notions that

comes out of the Harlem Renaissance when explicating thoughts on the black experience.²⁷ Collapsed into the first sentence are layered myths about black identity. According to theorist Barbara Johnson in “Thresholds of Difference”²⁸ Hurston offers a parallel to the fact that being colored is a “misdemeanor for which some extenuation must be sought”²⁹. At the same time she rejects the extenuation, which offers a dilution of blackness with mixed blood. By asserting that the answer to How does it feel to be colored? Her response is I am 100 percent colored, though I am different from other members of my race, I am not different from my race³⁰. Instead Zora finds comfort in the fact that she can sleep at night knowing that she has lived a righteous life, never fearing that some “dark ghost” might end up next to her in bed. Using wit and intentionality Hurston delivers a powerful message to challenge the mind-sets of her, and our, time.

In the essay, Hurston, imaginatively describes her childhood in Eatonville, Florida and her experiences and process of being culturally “colored”. Through anecdotes describing moments of joy, pleasure, and possibility she fondly remembers when she was “everybody’s Zora,” free from the alienating feeling of difference. However, during her teenage years, after the passing of her mother, she experiences becoming “colored” after leaving the comfort of Eatonville and attending a boarding school. This experience is not isolated, yet, Hurston explicates that she does not consider herself “tragically colored”

²⁷ (See Jean Toomer’s *Cane* or Nella Larsens’ *Passing*)

²⁸ Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston”. *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1). University of Chicago Press: 278–89. 1985. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343471>.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 280

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 280

and begins weaving together extended metaphors that suggest her self-pride. Her unique self-pride stems directly from her experience of existing in a world free from difference. A world that I would suggest helped her to imagine what that would look like on a larger scale.

However, even with high levels of self-pride there is still experiences with discrimination though Hurston explains she is too busy “sharpening her oyster knife” to stop to think about the pain that discrimination may cause, and as a “dark rock surged upon” she emerges all the stronger for any hardships that she has had to endure. Hurston does, however, acknowledge moments when she feels her (or others’) racial difference, and her experience with a friend at a jazz club marks the distance between their lives. It is this experience that I see Imagineering of (Im)possibility being employed. Normally, she doesn’t notice the difference between herself and the other “colors” in the world. However, once she enters the Jazz club with a white companion, she becomes acutely sensitive to the “feel of her race”. In this particular passage, she describes a moment of change and transformation that positions her as what I would call ultra-black. Through a break in the space-time continuum, which was imagineered through the particularized “black” jazz music. Hurston is able to ascend to a primitive, jungle state where she, along with the orchestra, captures the freedom to BE.

“This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it, until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow, and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum, I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends... I creep back slowly to the veneer we

call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.--- Excerpt from *How It Feels To Be Colored Me*³¹

The excerpt begins with the orchestra setting the stage and embarking on the trip to freedom. “It grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury.” The orchestra turns into an uncontrollable, animalistic, raging energy. It claws and attacks her sensibilities and senses until she breaks through the barrier and into a jungle. It is here that Hurston follows the direction of the orchestra “exultingly,” or with triumphant joy. This joyous following results in a transformation of Hurston’s mentality and body placement. Within herself (in her jungle habitat), she is able to dance wildly, yell, whoop, and shake a ceremonial spear reminiscent of the Bantu-speaking people of Southern Africa. All of a sudden on this orchestra-led journey, Hurston has found a way to inhabit and express her primal, Africanity—her rage. Hurston’s body reads as a flag and her inhibitions are dissolved. What is left are base emotions of rage, pleasure, and signals of her Africanism (pulse like a war drum, the paint colors are symbolic of African flags). However, before much damage can occur, if she found something to kill, the joy and freedom ends and she has to fold her identity back up. She begins the process of returning through the tonal veil to the “vener we call civilization” because the ultimate freedom which she experienced and expressed through her body cannot occur within the society she currently inhabits. The tonal veil becomes the entry into other worlds. The orchestra, the beat of the music, is the vehicle that contains enough force to attack through the veneer, and Hurston’s body fully inhabits the space. Hurston’s “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” is the moment in time when she is free, primal, and African. It is the

³¹ "How It Feels To Be Colored Me." In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, by Zora Neale Hurston, 1040-1043. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. New York, New York: Norton, 2014. Pg. 1042

intersections where all of her identity can be expressed simultaneously, in a space, which she has engineered, that transcends time, space, and geography.

Hurston's embodied experience literally transforms her mind state and allows her to rip through to a primitive jungle terrain, where the full range of her emotions can be contained and expressed. This experience that is dependent upon a Jazz orchestra (iconic black music), transports her from one place to another (even though her physicality has not changed), and freedom to inhabit her rage are all indicators of Afrofuturist modalities. Through this unique experience Hurston has wonderfully articulated the (im)possibility and capacity for blackness to be wielded as a tool of resistance, provided a liberative release, even if temporary.

Hurston's moment of transcendence shows us what space and time travel looks like now (and then in the 1920's). Zora who was already prone to crafting an alternate narrative (due to her Eatonville experience) understood and seriously considered the limitations of escape and freedom that the intersection of her race, gender, and class posited. Instead of languishing in the experience and anger of being subjected to her cultures commodification, she was able to transport herself to a world that destroyed the structure of limitation. For her survival meant agency to fully express her emotions, anger, rage, and pleasure. Agency meant using black Jazz music in a way that could never be colonized by her "white companion". In this instance she imagineered travel that featured full embodiment while never leaving her seat.



Figure 1: Archibald J. Motley Jr., *Cocktails*, c. 1926. Oil on canvas, 32 × 40 in. (81.3 × 101.6 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; The John Axelrod Collection-Frank B. Bemis Fund, Charles H. Bayley Fund, and The Heritage Fund for a Diverse Collection. Digital image © 2014 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts.

Cocktails: Artistic Materialist Intervention

Cocktails is an oil-on-canvas painting created about 1926 by Harlem Renaissance artist Archibald Motley. Motley, the first African-American Artist to present a major solo exhibition in New York City, was an incredibly influential artist to emerge from the black arts movement, which stemmed from the Harlem Renaissance. Motley’s painting offers a twist on what the “New Negro,” could be. For the New Negro as portrayed in the painting has been re-placed by black women with “renewed self-respect and self-dependence,”

and the ability to fully experience aristocracy, exhibitionism, and freedom (sensual, pleasurable, and sexual) without violent interruption, exploitation, or present danger. This ability to recast subjects type-casted and stereotyped as angry, mammies, poor, and exploited is indicative of Afrofuturist tenets and its iconic modes of Imagineering. The composite shows a gathering of African American women laughing pleasurably over a round of drinks. Yet, at a time when the “manufacture and sale of alcohol was illegal and speakeasies were the counterculture recreation of choice in northern cities, the scene can and usually is read as political commentary.³²” I urge that the painting offers an explicit Imagineering of what black female enjoyment/freedom/radicalized pleasure might look like. Motley’s painting then becomes a radical reconfiguration of black expression of the day.

In the painting Motley emphasizes controversial themes by using a “predominantly warm color palette, with an abundance of expressive reds and pinks that convey sensuality and passion. These visual suggestions of self-indulgence and physicality are further highlighted by the stark contrast of the painting hanging on the wall behind the carefree black women in the scene. The composition of monks facing each other echoes the scene of social interaction between Motley’s women, but it plays this image of “lively female, American socializing against a representation of monastic (and masculine, European) restraint and morality (and likely also transgression, as scenes of drinking monks misbehaving were embedded in European popular culture).” The work of Motley inverts the social interaction and re-characterizes possibility. In the painting we have a black male servant, serving a table of smiling, jubilant black women, as they

³² Motley, Archibald John, and Richard J. Powell. *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014.

enjoyed illegal contraband. Not to mention, the addition of a timeless, otherworldly space by casting no shadows or earthly bound figments outside of the window. This scene would not be typical even within the context of the Harlem Renaissance. Therefore, *Cocktails* becomes a work of speculative fiction, an architectural artistic intervention that imagineers a future where black women can simultaneously enjoy life, pleasure, and joy without injustice, violence, exploitation, and threat from both patriarchy and classism. Casting the painting as Afrofuturist becomes clear when paired with the condition of the seemingly unconscious woman in the bottom left corner of Motley's scene. Here, we have a seemingly random interjection of a naked, faceless, woman. Though apparently "hedonistic", I read the interjection as possibility. For a black woman to be free enough to remain naked and at rest is unheard of, especially in the cultural moment wherein which Motley creates this masterpiece. Motley has interjected a uniquely bodily and sexual freedom akin to the primitive nakedness that Zora Neale Hurston experiences in "How It Feels To Be Colored Me".

If *Cocktails* is read as a work of proto-Afrofuturist speculative art or simply an imagineered (im)possibility the scene suggests adding to the cannon works of black womanhood where bodily and sexual freedom are not only experienced but also enjoyed (the black women laughing freely, the interjection). It situates whiteness as objects, exploited characters, props (the painting on the wall). It also, offers a sense of middle-class indulgence (the women are eating and drinking abundantly) that is not surrounded by class, gender, racial conflict (the presence of a darker, skinned black male waiter as servant) a (im)possibility that is needed in order to imagine a future that encourages a socioeconomically diverse community. For example, how can black folks who have

never experienced indulgence imagine a future where the possibility is included? One would need to imagine that specific (im)possibility. Works such as *Cocktails* does the heavy lifting for the imagination.

While Afrofuturism tends to concern itself with dating back to the pyramids of Egypt, the transatlantic slave trade, I assert that the Harlem Renaissance was the place where black folks did the labor of Imagineering (Im)possibility. It was a time period that critically engaged limitation and concern for bodies. Renaissance artists continually carved out spaces of possibility that explored a multi-genre rebirth of blackness and possibility. For instance, the concept of “passing” suggest one could imagineer an alternative reality that transmuted the limitations of being black in America. Therefore Imagineering (Im)possibility means engineering, speculating, situating, and articulating the New Negro, past, present, and future. Seeing the Harlem Renaissance as the foundation of this radical movement causes us to rethink blackness as a problem and instead explore the full range of possibility and prospects that can be unearthed; a process that was taught to us by the Harlem Renaissance artists, political commentators, and musicians.

The following two case studies are being used to present not specific works but rather the methodology and mediums of artistic cultural productions which continually utilizes Imagineering (Im)possibility as a “highly intersectional” way of looking at possible futures or alternate realities through a black cultural lens. The following artists use their art and bodily aesthetic to remain non-linear, fluid, and feminist. Their particularized imaginative expressions conflates, considers, and project mysticism,

metaphysics, identity and liberation; and, despite offering black folks a way to see ourselves in a better future, while blending the future, the past and the present”.

Aesthetic of Chakaia Booker: Sculptural Materialist Intervention

Chakaia Booker is a New York artist born in Newark, New Jersey. Booker received a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Rutgers University in 1976. Booker went on to receive her Master of Fine Arts from the City College of New York (CUNY) in 1993. Booker is attributed with having studied a variety of disciplines including African dance, ceramics, weaving, basketry as well as tai’chi all, which inform her interesting artistic practices³³. Booker is iconic and well renowned because of her elaborate and ornamental sculptures created from used and discarded construction materials such as rubber, wood, and plastic. However, equally important and most visible component is Booker’s personal aesthetic, which turns her body into moving pieces of art. As shown in Figure 4.1, Booker is a carefully assembled and richly layered individual who sees herself as “a sculpture through her tasks of dressing, sewing, cooking, and other daily activities which she considers to be art forms in their own rights³⁴”.

In the 1980’s Booker created wearable sculptures, which she could place herself inside, and utilize as clothing. Turning not only her work but her personal aesthetic into an imaginative space, the wearable sculpture is all about getting energy and feeling from a desired design which parallels to Afrofuturism’s core tenets. The wearable sculpture which collides into an otherworldly headdress is made up of a compilation of African textiles, wrapped one on top of the other with panels hanging to shoulder and sometimes

³³ Biographical information paraphrased from Lilly Wei, "Queen of Rubber Soul", *Art News*, V.101 No.1 (January 2002):88-90

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 89

waist-length, she is statuesque and highly visible resembling a moon walker or space cadet.



Figure 2: Chakaia Booker discusses her work (Photo by Doug MacCash / NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune)

Booker’s wearable sculpture exemplifies the theory in Judith’s Butler *Bodies That Matter*. Butler unearths the ways that performativity causes us to “think further about the

workings of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters sexual and political”³⁵. Particularly, Butler interrogates through philosophical theory if there is a “way to link the question of the materiality of the body to the performativity of gender”³⁶. This interrogation is problematized by the fact that even the materiality of the body is difficult to differentiate from its surroundings— “Not only did bodies tend to indicate a world beyond themselves, but this movement beyond their own boundaries, a movement of boundary itself, appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are’”³⁷—Butler still insists that there is such a thing as materiality of the body. This materiality in turn has a demonstrable effect on the performativity of gender which creates a complex paradoxical relationship. This forms the crux and agenda of her argumentation to seek out ways in which power imprints/writes itself into/onto people’s bodies with a focus on performativity of gender and construction of sex. Butler seeks out the ways in which sexual norms are made to materialize the body’s sex in order to ensure and employ the hegemony of heterosexuality. Most important the work of Imagineering (im)possibility was her treatment/challenge on the construction of gender. Butler goes along with the general understanding that gender is culturally constructed and sex is physiologically based, yet, she makes the important point that sexual difference itself is also culturally constructed: “Sexual difference, however, is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices”³⁸. Invoking Foucault, she observes that sex not only functions as a norm in

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge, 1993, pg. xii

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 3

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1

society, but “is part of a regulatory process that produces the bodies it governs”. Butler stresses the importance of reiteration in the process of sexual differentiation, and points out “that this reiteration is necessary is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled”. Which creates cognitive dissonance in the political bodies that try to enforce the norms on certain folks. Butler continues to challenges the notion of ‘construction’ by seeing it as implicitly/inherently masculine and biased – suggested to speak of ‘materialization’, because the nature is never passive. She Argues that a usual argument of construction presupposes an “I” or a “we” who enact the construction – which is not true, since “I” appears only in the process of construction: “Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves.³⁹” This forced a new operation of exclusion, that are critical to/in the construction of gender, leading Butler to an argument that the idea of ‘construction’ doesn’t work here: it is not really a ‘construction’ (neither it is essential). For Butler ‘sex’, a seemingly biological category, is artificial: its differences become the ‘law’ only inasmuch as the norms of this ‘law’ are reiterated again and again. If we are in the search for a world that is gender fluid how can we use this concept to create race fluidity? Is it even possible? With Butler’s understanding of bodies in mind can technology effectively render us post-human through the blurring of the boundaries of human and machine? How does capitalism and its intense exploitation of black women’s bodies aid in forcing the search for an efficient solution to particularized systemic oppression? What is so difficult about dealing with

³⁹ Ibid., 7

materiality, which leads to pleasure? Why does it make folks viscerally uncomfortable and how does that play out in our politics? How does materiality, those deemed uninhabitable within this framework further deconstruct the inside/outside binary through their particular subjecthood and subjectivity? Booker's work of Imagineering (im)possibility through the usage and reappropriation of trash and visible textiles takes seriously the issue of exploitation and discard when it comes to black women's bodies.

Booker's monumental works are comprised of discarded tire rubber a choice that uplift reclamation and reuse; she pushes the material into forms that are alive, organic⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ As an architectonic text, Booker's work informs and animates the living ship that is depicted in the *Xenogenesis/Lilith's Brood* saga by Octavia Butler.



Figure 3: Chakaia Booker 2007, Dilated Perception, 58" x 78", collagraph, relief, digital images.

Booker began creating her works of art from discarded materials found at construction sites. The found materials have their own purpose, history, and use but can be transformed and given a future of fluidity, new life, and energy. The tire sculptures are considered an “aesthetic response to the urban landscape of Northern New Jersey⁴¹”. The

⁴¹ Lilly Wei, "Queen of Rubber Soul", *Art News*, V.101 No.1 (January 2002):80-90.

tires represent metaphors, which investigate the aesthetic, Afrocentric, political, and economic concerns and interests of Afrofuturist culture.



Figure 4: Chakaia Booker stands with rubber sculpture “Tornado”

Booker began working with rubber tires in the early 1990s and presently continues to primarily work in this medium. The various tread patterns, colors, and

widths that the tires possess create a palette for Booker similar to the palette of painter. Booker's work has layers and layers of meaning loaded with social concerns throughout which is indicative of her futurist inclination. The sculptures, which were created with the tires, are said to address African-American identity. The black tires symbolize the strength of African American identity while the color nuances are meant to evoke the complexities of the black humans application.⁴² "The pigments of the medium range from blue-black, deep grey to brown, and are sometimes stamped with blue or red. The textures are just as varied as the pigmentation ranging from matte, smooth, glossy, cracked, and game encrusted indicative of the full range of African American skin tones.⁴³"

Booker states there is a cathartic release that comes from creating her works of art: "Salvaging such defiant beauty from scraps of resilient black, rubber [provides] a compelling metaphor of African American survival in the modern world."⁴⁴ Booker's current work presents a homage and reclamation of her African heritage and its influential artwork. The tread pattern of the tires in her work represent the scarification and body painting which was once and still is present in particular African cultures. As in a piece from 1994 a mask which was "untitled" "similar to Picasso, Booker appears to draw from distorted facial features of West African Tribal marks is a less quotation of formal images and a greater assertion of African American identity and aesthetic

⁴² Ibid., 85

⁴³ Ibid., 88

⁴⁴ Ibid., 88

lineage.⁴⁵ Tread patterns and repetitive geometric shapes throughout Booker's work are reminiscent of traditional African textiles.



Figure 5: Acid Rain (Lluvia Ácida), Chakaia Booker, 2001

Afrofuturist critics suggest that overall the tires characterize, symbolize, and or signify toughness, linked to the will of the African diaspora for continued survival. "Booker's work calls attention to slavery, industrial revolution, working class, factory labor and even addresses the qualities of rubber."⁴⁶ Booker's "Echoes in Black" from the 2000 Whitney Biennial deals with scarification both emotional and physical that people go through in life through class, race, and labor. As for her piece "No More Milk and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 89

⁴⁶ Ibid., 89

Cookies" from 2003, this work "questions our commercially driven society and what happens when consumption is prohibited."⁴⁷ Her 2001 piece "Wench (Wrench) III" is a surrealistic sculpture, which subverts a very masculine mechanic's wrench into a feminine feather boa. The piece "Spirit Hunter" is reminiscent of images of life and death as well as a feminist approach to birth and sexuality.



Figure 6: *Spirit Hunter*, 2001 120.5"x132"x144". Rubber tire, steel, wood

⁴⁷ Ibid., 89

Booker's work is concerned with engineering culturally diverse alternatives in regards to humankind. Unwilling and unbossed by the tendency to throw out trash, Booker considers the limitation of climate change and remakes identity on top of an identity. Booker's artistic works emblematic of Imagineering (Im)possibility because of the way they create a new emotional and visceral response to age old frameworks. The cultural production asserts that a reimagining and re-envisioning of materials can be fashioned into life giving sculptures. Bookers personal aesthetic utilizes art in a physical form and forces visibility to bodies that are typically rendered invisible---black women's bodies. Booker discursively layers African textiles and creates brightly colored sculptures that get individuals to see her limitations and physicality in a new and invigorating way. The wearable art forces the world to see her blackness and her womaness simultaneously and to regard it as beautiful, artistic, and exciting. They see her complexity because she wears her identity in a way that is dramatic. This is Imagineering Bricolage; It forces legibility and forces you to see something that you may not ordinarily see, the black body. Getting people to see the worth – taking what people deem as garbage and placing it on top of the body that they deem as garbage and force the other to see it in a different way.

Artistic Expression of Wangechi Mutu: Bricolage Materialist Intervention

Wangechi Mutu is a Kenyan artist that creates layered images of fantastical figures, transforming the female form into primal and powerful expressions of otherworldly dominance. Mutu currently resides in the US and was trained as an anthropologist and sculptor. Originally from Kenya, Mutu was educated in Nairobi at Loreto Convent Msongari (1978–1989) and later studied at the United World College of

the Atlantic, Wales (I.B., 1991). Mutu moved to New York in the 1990s, focusing on Fine Arts and Anthropology at The New School for Social Research and Parsons School of Art and Design. She then earned a BFA from Cooper Union for the Advancement of the Arts and Science in 1996, and then received an MFA from Yale University in 2000. This interdisciplinary/transnational training manifests in her insightful attention to the body as a site of cultural, tactile, and aesthetic complexity.

Through the collage medium, Mutu uses typical depictions of the female form to transform them into a new kind of women, which can be described as grotesque and surreal due to the crude decoupage of her work. Mutu describes her lab as the female body because it's the place where she can express the issues she has with the way women's bodies have been written upon, talked about, and depicted in the past and present, she hopes to disturb the dominant discourse and project the true female form into other planes so that the issues of black women's bodies dehumanization can cease in the future.



Figure 7: Wangechi Mutu with her piece *Sirens and Serpent*

Though her work is described as grotesque, Mutu exclaims that the visuals need to dissolve themselves into the psyche. “If people get grossed out by something that is not overly gross--- i.e. static images--- there is a process happening in the brain”⁴⁸. The use of collage is particularly important to Mutu’s artistic expression because of the fusion of languages, free association, and attempts at commonality amongst objects that don’t come from the same place, similar to what Africa is to her. Mutu’s work gives her strong particular resonance with her creations and she firmly believes there is a power within that can be spread to those who view the work. Described primarily as a collage artist, Mutu’s work collapses a myriad of textual and tactile objects and references including glitter fur, found illustrations from medical books and magazines, ink, acrylic, medical instruments, and Mylar.

Mutu describes her work as “...using the body as a platform to reveal the resilience and physical/mythical power of the female body...”⁴⁹ She goes further saying, “I think there is a shift not in using the black body ‘as a political gesture per se, but a movement towards using the black body for a variety of gestures not just pertaining to race or gender in the most obvious manner.”⁵⁰ It is through this movement that the process of Imagineering takes a stronger hold. Mutu further explains the intent of her work, saying: “I’m really trying to pay homage to the notion of the sublime and the abject together and using the aesthetic of rejection, or poverty, or wretchedness as a tool to talk

⁴⁸This biographical information is courtesy of http://www.saatchiallery.co.uk/artists/wangechi_mutu_articles.htm/. Web. 12 Mar 2012.

⁴⁹ Reed, Aimée. “*Interview with Wangechi Mutu*,” Daily Serving, Apr. 12, 2010 on Thea Liberty Nichols guest blog at [www. http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/25/wangechi-mutu/](http://blog.art21.org/2011/02/25/wangechi-mutu/). Web. 10 Feb 2012

⁵⁰ Ibid., 6

about things that are transcendent and hopeful.⁵¹” Consider Mutu’s image entitled *Cancer of the Uterus*, which powerfully connects to the images of the HeLa cells, as they provide an artistic equivalent to the cervical cancer that ravaged the body of Henrietta Lacks, which were futuristic in their own context stimulating the growth of treatments for cancer and countless medical advancements. Mutu’s work foregrounds the interior structures of the human body with its depiction of cells, organs, tissues, and body parts which are not imposed onto a facial image, but out of which a face is constructed then imposed onto a medical textbook page. Full red lips poke through a throbbing black mass of cancerous tissue, while the diseased substance that spreads across the central region of the female face similarly overcomes the eyes.

⁵¹ Ibid., 7

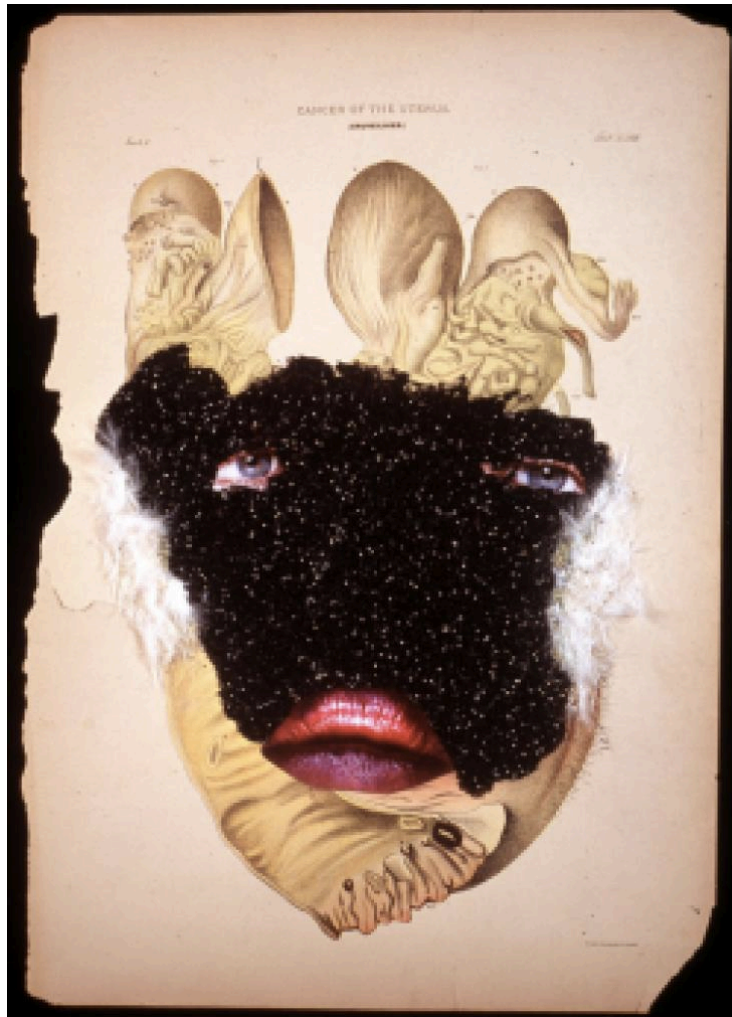


Figure 8: *Cancer of The Uterus*

Mutu’s work is part of an exhibit entitled, *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors* where beauty and disease are mapped onto bodies, faces, organs, and tissues. The works in this series do not “represent” blackness or femaleness in a traditional way, instead they collapse “normal” body parts with diseased body parts, where the disease becomes flesh gone bad, contaminated by the superimposition of deformed cultural and gender ideologies as disease—growths, attachments, disorders. Mutu superimposes social dis-eases that women experience with physiological disorders, largely disorders of the female reproductive system. Disease and disorder are mapped as

palpable, throbbing manifestations of historical and social experience. Mutu explains, “Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body, the black female body more so.”⁵²”



Figure 9: *A Shady Promise*

Merrily Kerr also explains how the interior and exterior dichotomy emerges in the work saying, “Mutu portrays the inner and outer ideals of self with physical attributes clipped from lifestyle magazines: the woman’s face being a racial distortion, her mind occupied by a prototypical white model.” Mutu’s work is part collage, part embodied

⁵² Ibid., 8

archival project that conjoins body parts, objects, and the grotesque with fragments of color, beauty, life and death, the clinical and pat the mystical or otherworldly depictions. It points to an astute reading of the black body as an entity that gestures to other ways of experiencing and seeing images and flesh. I read Mutu's work and the HeLa images as shifts beyond historical and scientific record to a space where the body reveals, tells, heals and knows. Mutu's work employs an aesthetic that I might call "identity assemblage"⁵³ as it collages fragments of, body parts, symbols, objects, and textures to displace antiquated notions of racial identity with a vivid and complex subjectivity.

⁵³ Term gleamed from Jasbir Puar at lecture hosted by Lehigh University. See *Terrorist Assemblages* Duke Univ. Press, 2007 or 8, I think.

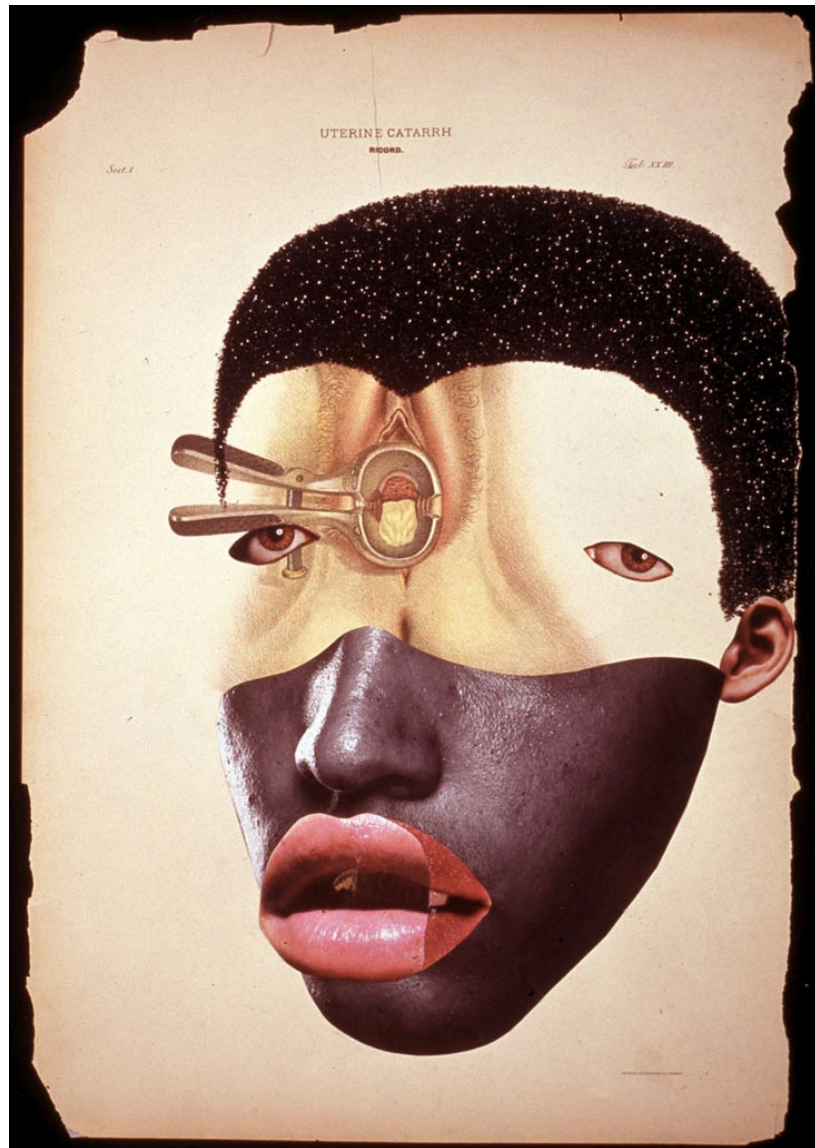


Figure 10: Wangechi Mutu Uterine Catarrh 2004 Glitter, ink, collage on found medical illustration paper
46 x 31cm

Mutu's work and by extension the other artists mention are creating a future that one has never experienced. How can you do that? How can one create from a place of the unknown? Then that is much more than a simple creation. It is a process of Imagineering (Im)possibility, akin to the cosmology of God. This is how those who have been dehumanized become Gods. You place your imagineered art, body, plan of escape, and freedom on the metaphorical wall as sort of a promissory note. You look at your moment

of purpose, need, want, desire, and survival as your goal. You may not have legal rights, but you create a world where you can experience the excess of life and pleasure. The movement from object to subject becomes realized in the art. At the start of this paper I queried How do we/I get free? How do I escape the structures? This thought experiment has taught me that a black and white plan of Escape doesn't need to be there because the hope is already in the mind, which causes me imagineer it. I take possibility and impossibility hand in hand. That is the tension that causes freedom and escape to appear. I can see it, can you?

In summation, Imagineering (Im)possibility is about making do (or making worlds) when institutions, structures, and limited possibility threaten autonomy, agency, pleasure, freedom, and liberation. It doesn't necessarily offer an end to the problems or extended escape. However, it contends with the notion that one can create these spaces with materials, metanarratives, and insider knowledge of the structures that inform how one lives; a material reality that is birthed in Afro-diasporic reality from the middle passage and beyond. Imagineering (Im)possibility is a thought experiment that unearths materialist interventions within Afrofuturism. It is an attempt to theorize, conceptualize construct worlds that offer full range of black humanity in the midst of limitation. It is concerned with fantastic stories but makes use of the world we currently inhabit. It is a project of thorough imagination even down to its conception.

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