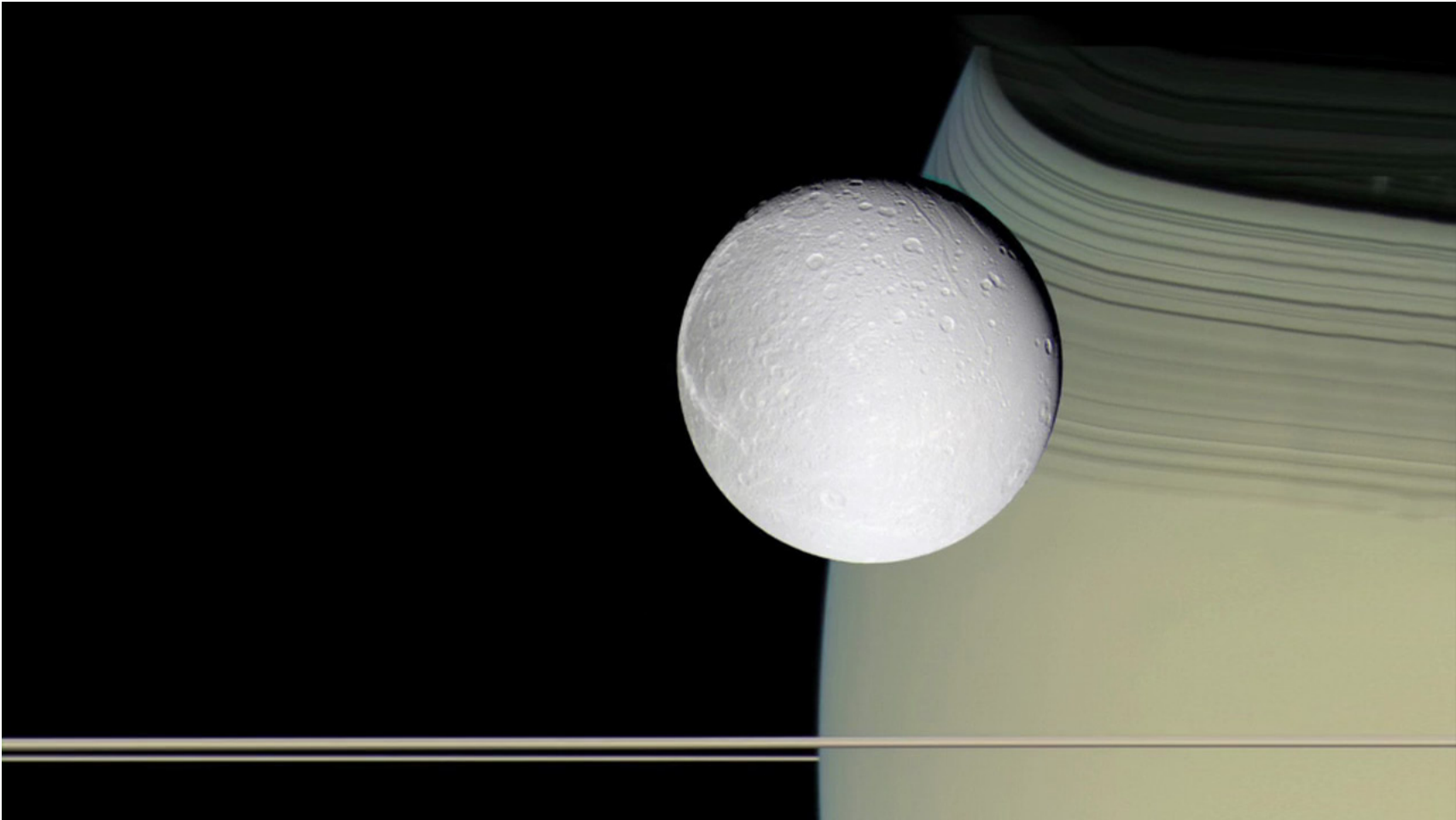




CENTAURUS GALAXY, *DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



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# Robot Love is Queer: Afrofuturism and Alien Love

**TOBIAS C. VAN VEEN**

“ROBOT LOVE IS QUEER”

— caller to DJ Crash Crash on WDRD<sup>1</sup>

Janelle Monáe’s debut EP of cybersoul and spacefunk, *Metropolis (The Chase Suite)* (2008), commences with an open-call for would-be death squads.<sup>2</sup> Bidding good morning with cheerful exuberance, the feminine voice of the surveillance state calls for the targeted murder, by bounty hunters, of android Cindi Mayweather:

Good morning cy-boys and cy-girls! I’m happy to announce that we have a star-crossed winner in today’s heartbreak sweepstakes. Android number 57821, otherwise known as Cindi Mayweather, has fallen desperately in love with a human named Anthony Greendown. And you know the rules! She is now scheduled for immediate disassembly! Bounty hunters, you can find her in the Neon Valley Street District, on the 4th floor in

the Leopard Plaza apartment complex. The droid control marshals are full of fun rules today. No phasers, only chainsaws and electro-daggers! Remember only card-carrying hunters can join our chase today. And as usual there will be no reward until her cyber-soul is turned into the Star Commission. Happy hunting!<sup>3</sup>

This essay, itself an assemblage of concepts drawn from a constellation of Afrofuturist sources, is about love—about loving the other, and about loving an-other whose otherness transgresses all that is presupposed in the possessive of the “whose”: an-other who is not a *who*, but a *what*. These terms, and this fundamental distinction of Western metaphysics—of subject/object, of who/what—are troubled here as a philosophical distinction of the Thing to the thinking Man. A philosophical distinction that masks the racialization of the Thing. Which is to say this distinction is troubled by way of an allegory of race that suspends

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and surpasses allegory. And the source of all this trouble, I assert, is alien, android, and Afrofuturist love.

Such troubling has occurred elsewhere in recent discourses, including object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, and alien phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> But these discourses are not the first to rethink the Thing. Moreover, object-oriented philosophy tends to neglect how raciology—the “ethnocentrism” of

Western metaphysics—problematizes the object, its perception, and its discourse. Indeed, like Alexander Weheliye, I contend these discourses owe a debt to black feminist, Afrofuturist, and postcolonial thought, as well as (French) feminist psychoanalysis, in thinking the object.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I turn to the work of Sylvia Wynter, Kodwo Eshun, Sara Ahmed, and Frantz Fanon, who respectively pose the agency

of the nonhuman, if not the object, from the position of the othered.

Fanon hints at an-other form of nonsubjectivity in which, under racialized duress, he “gave himself up as an object.”<sup>6</sup> Wynter traces the ways in which the “ethnoclass” of white humanism “overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”<sup>7</sup> Ahmed’s queer phenomenology unpacks straight assumptions concerning the orientation of

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objects—critiquing “the orientation of phenomenology” by asking “what it means for ‘things’ to be orientated”—while at the same time demonstrating their implicit racialization in a “world of whiteness.”<sup>8</sup> And Eshun anticipates developments in alien and object philosophy with his inventory of Afrofuturist becomings that reject (black) humanism—to the point where “African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human.”<sup>9</sup>

What connects their work is a critique of white humanism/metaphysics as a historical construct that, despite its paradigmatic shifts, has become the unthought and default registry of authentic being. In this missive my aim is to briefly connect their innovative work with the theoretical and artistic assemblages of Afrofuturism—by way of the black science fiction music and music

videos of Janelle Monáe—that explore what it means to love the alien.

### **Loving the Alien**

Janelle Monáe deploys the science fiction trope of the enslaved android to address race, gender, and white supremacy, connecting her work to Afrofuturist thematics criss-crossing the Afrodiaspora. Afrodiasporic posthumanist approaches range from Jamaica’s Lee “Scratch” Perry

**“EX-APPROPRIATION, AS AFROFUTURIST PERFORMATIVE STRATEGY INITIATES A BECOMING EXHUMAN.”**

**“AFROFUTURIST LOVE...REMAKES ALIENATION AS  
ALIEN NATION [WHICH] ARISES NOT BY REJECTING  
THE ALIEN BUT BY EX-APPROPRIATING IT FOR  
THE PROJECT OF DECOLONIZATION.”**

and The Upsetters's reclamation of the racist stereotype of black über-animalia on their seminal 1976 LP *Super Ape* to Grace Jones's alien, animalia and androidal performances—particularly as she flaunted the womanist black power of her fierce, embodied athleticism, in her hula-hooping live performance of “Slave to the Rhythm” at the Queen's Jubilee in 2012.<sup>10</sup>

These are but two examples of Afrofuturist cultural performance that stress the use of science

fictional, fantastical, and mythical tropes in the praxis of radical black ontogenesis, whereby the white stereotype of nonhuman black identity is ex-appropriated by animalia, android, and alien black becomings. Such ex-appropriation signals a deconstructive becoming that short circuits the dialectics of re-appropriation by improperly mis-purposing the deprivileging terms of dehumanization. To this end, Derrida writes that “ex-appropriation is not what is proper to man.”<sup>11</sup> Ex-appropriation, as

Afrofuturist performative strategy, marks an improper re-appropriation, conducted without propriety, of the nonhuman. At the limit of the performative, it initiates a becoming exhuman, whereby the nonhuman is weaponized as a speculative exit from the white supremacist imaginary through practices of signifyin' love for an exhuman alien blackness.

Mark Dery's coining of the term “Afrofuturism” in 1993 to describe black futurist music, comix, and arts connected to like concepts in

## **“ALIEN LOVE ITSELF [IS] A POTENT FORCE OF BLACK FUTURE VISIONING.”**

the work of Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, Samuel R. Delany, Amiri Baraka, Octavia Butler, and Mark Sinker, among others.<sup>12</sup> In particular, Mark Sinker’s work offers a tantalizing lead for discussing Afrofuturist love, seeing as his short 1992 essay in *The Wire* magazine was provocatively titled “Loving the Alien.” By correlating the alien abduction stories of Sun Ra to Public Enemy’s post-slavery observation that “Armageddon been-in-effect,” Sinker set out to chart the historically

alienating conditions whereby “Black Science Fiction” becomes a radical exercise in *loving* the alien. Thus an Afrofuturist strategy arises, whereby “black American culture, forcibly stripped by the Middle Passage and Slavery Days of any direct connection with African mother culture . . . has nonetheless survived; by syncretism, by bricolage, by a day-to-day programme of appropriation and adaptation.”<sup>13</sup> Such adaptive appropriation names the bricolage of ex-appropriation, which in Afrofuturism undertakes a

speculative pedagogy of learning to love the affects and tropes of “alienation”: “The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America—and so by extension Europe and Asia—are already in their various ways Alien Nation.”<sup>14</sup>

Afrofuturist love, then, is a love that paradoxically yet strategically remakes alienation as Alien Nation. Such love is improper, insofar as

it loves the alien by way of the ex-appropriation of alienation. It is a love that mis-purposes the white supremacist category of subhumanity and shapeshifts it into radical exhumanity, signalling a chance for a novel collective love in the post-apocalyptic timeline. Alien Nation arises not by rejecting the alien but by ex-appropriating it for the project of decolonization.

If Dery's early concept of Afrofuturism named a movement that did not yet exist, today Afrofuturism is a planetary movement everywhere redefining and remaking itself. In her exemplary book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack describes how Afrofuturism has since been taken-up by artists, activists, writers, and scholars across the Afrodiaspora, indicating what Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones have since named "Afrofuturism 2.0."<sup>15</sup> In an era

of hashtags, memes, and rapid digital modes of cultural communication, AF 2.0 signals the perpetual reinterpretation and reinvention of Afrofuturism by Afrodiasporic peoples. Afrofuturism, as love for the alien, also signals a planetary love for speculative approaches to blackness and for alien love itself as a potent force of black future visioning.

### Robot Love is Queer

But what does it mean to love the alien? What does it mean, in Janelle Monáe's vision of Metropolis, for an android to love a human? And for a human to love an android? To love an-other, then, who is alien to the *who*, who is ordered as *what*, who is categorically refused the rank of the subject and its ontological certitude as an agentic individual. An-other who is always the *whose* of another who, which is to say, the *what* as the property of the *who*. Such is Cindi's tale of

the alien android, who is evidently thinking twice about being forced into servitude to those who would unthinkingly declare themselves *who*.

Cindi Mayweather's flight from the authorities begins with a transgression of love: for in Metropolis, androids are forbidden from falling in love with humans. That, in sum, the supposedly heartless, "alien from outer space," that *what* which has been built to serve—with all of its science fictional, metaphoric, and intertextual resonances with *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), and, particularly in visual and thematic tropes of the revolution of the collective working class of the *what*, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)—is not permitted to fall in love with the enshrined entity of the *who*: the enfleshed, hearted, and class-of-all-classes, privileged human. Not because the human cannot be



touched—as Monáe’s “Prime Time (feat. Miguel)” (Alan Ferguson, 2013) video makes clear: androids are often pleasurebots for their human clients—but because of the insinuation of agency to the what, in what android love implies: that their impulses transgress categorical whatness, usurping and undermining the affective-poetico agency of the who as the only subject who can love.<sup>16</sup>

There is a twist to Monáe I wish to explore here, which is to say a “queer” twist, insofar as the caller to WDRD asserts that “robot love is queer.”<sup>17</sup> It is here that Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology helps us think “the task of making ‘race’ a rather queer matter.”<sup>18</sup> For alien love queers the straightness of who—who love. Queerness does not just operate on the side of the who: it traverses the who/what. The transgression of who-what love is nonstraight: it looks off to the side,

towards Things. Loving the alien is not just transgressive; it is disorientating, undoing the orientation of whose who. It is disorientating in Ahmed’s sense that “disorientation involves becoming an object.”<sup>19</sup> Thus loving the alien, in its disorientation from the proper alignment of who/what, involves becoming exhuman. There are no “straight humans” left in such love. And relevant to our discussion here, Ahmed draws this queer praxis of disorientation from Frantz Fanon, whereby “the point at which the body becomes an object” is where “the black body begins.”<sup>20</sup> Ahmed articulates the disorientation of queer love to racialization *qua* objectification at the point of the black body. Fanon, of course, is referring to the dissecting violence of the white gaze in objectifying the colonized. Observing the objectifying glances of whites as he rides a train, and the three seats of space they grant him, Fanon writes of his body

“giving way to an epidermal racial schema”—a black/skin—whereby “disoriented, incapable of confronting the Other, the white man, who had no scruples about imprisoning me, I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from myself, and gave myself up as an object.”<sup>21</sup>

Fanon makes a crucial observation: it is the racializing gaze of the colonizer that skins the other as object. It is this skinning of the other as object that will lead us to read the shifting skin of android Cindi Mayweather as a queering disorientation of the epidermal racial schema.

The WDRD caller’s statement that “robot love is queer” does not mask but rather amplifies the disorienting love between the who-what. And fundamentally, such queer robot love, *qua* alien Afrofuturist love, does not collapse into being loved as a who. Rather, it retains the disorientating queerness of being

loved as *the alien*—which is to say, of a love that gives itself up to a love for, and of, the object. A love that does not reject the alien, but rather affirms it by becoming (the) object; a love that would not strive to reshape the alien into the schema of the subject; a love that disorients the schema of the who/what.

Thus the Afrofuturist twist. For it is not the case that—in a liberal mode—the what struggle to

become who. It is not the case that those objectified demand to be acknowledged as “equally” whose who in the privileging caste system of who over what. For it is the “epidermal racial schema” of the who/what itself that queer robot love disorients. It does so by disorienting the skinning of the object, insofar as the shifting of the skin disorients the white/skin’s ontological privileging of the who over the what.

Thus a broader point: it is Afrofuturism, as the decolonizing praxis of Afrodiasporic speculative thought, amplified to the level of the radical black imaginary and enacted across multiple modes of expression and media that elaborates—in its alternative mythsciences, musics, and speculative fictions, its histories, perspectives, rhythms, and tempos—a collective reimagining of futures assembled from a revisioning of

**“ALIEN LOVE QUEERS THE STRAIGHTNESS OF WHO-WHO LOVE...THERE ARE NO ‘STRAIGHT HUMANS’ LEFT IN SUCH LOVE.”**

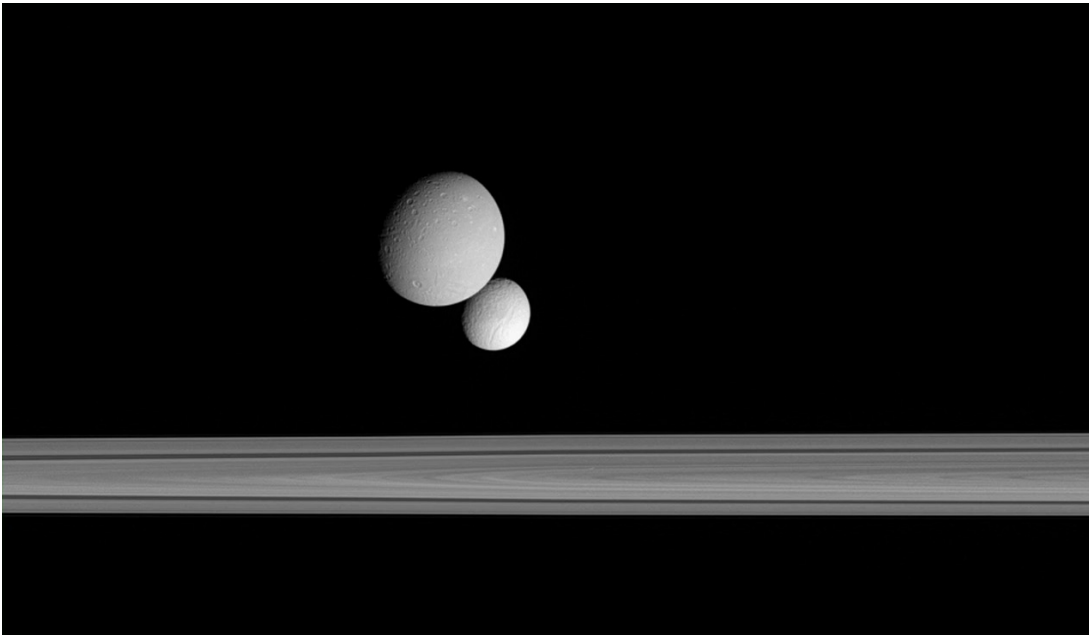
the past that infiltrate the present.<sup>22</sup> The alien, as the anticipatory figure of the exhuman, arrives by way of the reinvented past from such futures to-come. By loving the alien, Afrofuturism interrogates the unthought reality privileging the who over the what—that hegemonic reality that says the object, the alien, the thing is not to be loved, but only ab/used, put to work, enslaved, its past stolen, its futurity erased—

casting into the temporal flux a future hitherto denied for the alien.

This reality of the who that orders, colonizes, and enslaves the what is upheld by white supremacy, the socioeconomic raciology that equates the privileged figure of the human with the skin of whiteness. Rather than struggle to become who (and thus to become, under raciological neocolonialism, a white/skin subject), at stake in the Afrofuturist thematics

of Monáe's black sonic, speculative, and science fiction imaginary, is an-other struggle: *that of the what to become something other than that of the who*.<sup>23</sup> What is at stake is to reject the paradigm of the who as the only such authenticating paradigm; to become an-other by weaving "living myths" of becoming through storytelling so as to assert the affective and poetic sociogeny of the what, without being *whose*.

**“THE ALIEN, AS THE ANTICIPATORY FIGURE OF THE EXHUMAN, ARRIVES BY WAY OF THE REINVENTED PAST FROM SUCH FUTURES TO-COME.”**



DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

And with this sociogeny, or socio-collective development of the what (for as Fanon wrote, “there is nothing ontological about segregation”) an emergent ontogenesis takes shape in the shifting (perception of the) skin.<sup>24</sup> With re-crafting, myth becomes a new reality of the thing, to become not but a thing but a thing unto itself. The *modus operandi* of becoming strikes through (and requires) both sociogeny and ontogenesis, which is to say, it is socio-cultural as a collective becoming even as its singularity enunciates the many in but one shifting skin. I call this the dispossessed whatness of becoming-alien—an Afrofuturist love of queer disorientation—whereby dispossession signals a what unowned, precisely because becoming alien demands an exiting praxis from the schema of the human.<sup>25</sup>

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FIGURE 1. JANELLE MONÁE AS WHITE/SKIN ANDROID CINDI MAYWEATHER, "MANY MOONS" (DIRECTED BY ALAN FERGUSON, 2008), FRAME GRAB.



FIGURE 2. JANELLE MONÁE AS BLACK/SKIN ANDROID CINDI MAYWEATHER, "MANY MOONS" (DIRECTED BY ALAN FERGUSON, 2008), FRAME GRAB.

Monáe's exemplary album *The ArchAndroid* (2010)<sup>26</sup>—black science fiction sound for the "cybersoul," as Monáe has called her work—follows the rise of Cindi as the revolutionary ArchAndroid, inspiring fugitive *robotas*—those forced to work in serfdom—to rise up against a surveillance state that uses (and abuses) sentient androids for forced labour and pleasure. Cindi/the ArchAndroid is imprisoned in (and escapes from) mental and physical incarceration, waging time-travelling warfare with the sonic, symbolic, and embodied weapons of myth, dance, and song.<sup>27</sup> Which is to say Cindi's primary means of struggle are the very affective-poetico domains of the *who* that supposedly make the *who* a *who*—which is also why, in the imaginary realm of Metropolis, her expressions, music, and rhythms are banned from the airwaves of WDRD. Besides its affective force, insofar as her music

combines funk, pop, hip-hop and soul in an energetic take on Duke Ellington, George Clinton, OutKast, Prince, and Sun Ra's big band sound, Monáe's thematic narrative of the alien android offers a powerful allegory of alienating and enslaved objectification under capitalist white supremacy. Insofar as Cindi is an *android*, a whatness enslaved to the who as the latter's likeness, Monáe's science fiction performance of android slavery reinforces the thesis that the first subject of modernity—in what is not an allegory but a much-needed critical re-reading of modernity *tout court*, not just of the "peculiar institution"—is the "subject \$" of the slave, and not the celebrated (French) revolutionary.<sup>28</sup>

As C.L.R. James and Eric Williams have argued, modern capitalism, particularly the Industrial Revolution, begins with the transformation of Africans into commodities.<sup>29</sup> Indeed,

in the first volume of *Capital*, Marx calls the embodied economic unit of slavery "blackskins," and as I have noted elsewhere, the blackskin denotes living monetary value by way of an ontological conversion to whatness: the blackskin is not a human subject, but a living product to be hunted.<sup>30</sup> Further, the reference to skin, as if a pelt made to serve rather than be skinned, calls to mind Fanon's distinction between skins and masks, whereby the black/skin that bears the objectifying gaze of the colonizer is forced to don the mask of whiteness, even as s/he is denied the privilege thereof. Thus the colonizer fabricates the colonized as an inferior image of himself. It is this unbearable splitting of self, caught between skin and mask—or what W. E. B. Du Bois would likewise call "double consciousness"—that leads Fanon to give himself up to the object. What Afrofuturism elaborates is how this giving-up

also constitutes a refusal of the transcendental pre-eminence of the (white) subject. Such a refusal may take the form of disorienting the distinction between mask and skin, by a strategy rendering the skin as much an artifice as the mask.

Monáe plays with such a troubling of the skin. In the uncut video for "Many Moons" (Alan Ferguson, 2008), Cindi Mayweather first appears backstage as a white android, before pressing a button on the side of her temple that renders her skin black (see Figures 1 and 2). Here, the androidal white/skin is a signifier as slippery as any other, its apparent solidity a construct of technological rendering that disturbs not just the apparent distinction between mask and skin, but whiteness as the supposed fleshy guarantee of authentic humanism. The multiplicity of possible readings of Mayweather's white metallic sheen reveals whiteness as a construct as

artificial as the android—or indeed, the human. And the same goes for blackness: though it is applied after the fact, thereby revealing its like artifice, it is applied to make the thing a thing to begin with. It thus follows that deconstructive schema of the dangerous supplement—which is to say, it effaces in the same gesture whiteness as originary mark of human subjectivity.<sup>31</sup> Mayweather’s androidal blackness can also be read as a beauty effect applied to cover the (undesirable) underskin of whiteness, a gesture that counteracts prevailing trends in whitening cosmetics. As Gilroy has pointed out, countervailing gestures of black-is-beautiful are often implicated in complex systems of commodification.<sup>32</sup> It is because the supplement remains dangerous that its excess is capitalized. Thus the Afrofuturist black/skinning of the android intersects Monáe’s pop culture commodification as a commercial representative of

beauty manufacturer Covergirl, who describes Monáe as “staying true to her own brand of beautiful.”<sup>33</sup> What is meant here by “true,” and “staying” true to such a “brand”—with all the ambiguity of branding in signifying the marked skin of ownership—becomes open to multiple disorientations through Monáe’s becoming android, in the shifting of Mayweather’s supplemental skins.

In cut-up footage interspersing the video’s android auction of Alpha Platinum 9000 models, all played by Monáe—where the allegory is clearly that of the slave auction block—the white-skinned Alpha Platinum 9000 model is again shown, this time against the backdrop of a thermonuclear explosion.<sup>34</sup> The signature mushroom cloud mirrors the whiteness of the android (see Figure 3). The eerie significance of disorienting the solidity of white/skin is echoed in the video’s

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**“WHAT IS AT  
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THE WHO AS THE  
ONLY SUCH  
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apocalyptic imagery. Again, multiple readings abound. In the symbolic archetypes of Western metaphysics, whiteness is the noncolor of purity and matrimony, of life itself. Here, in its radioactive cloud, whiteness is connected to species-death, to the self-destructive terminus of life itself. In the same frame, the metallic sheen of Mayweather's white/skin reveals an uncanny hope for its artifice: once revealed as the construct it is, forged from earth metals that make machines of intelligence or destruction, revealed too are its starkly diverging futures—accept artifice or beget apocalypse. As the mushroom cloud erupts to the side of Mayweather, we bear witness to two diverging futures of whiteness, the urgency of which is confronted by an absolute danger: if such polarities become political, in Schmitt's sense, that violence towards the supplement becomes total war.<sup>35</sup>



FIGURE 3  
JANELLE MONÁE AS WHITE/SKIN ANDROID CINDI MAYWEATHER, "MANY MOONS" (DIRECTED BY ALAN FERGUSON, 2008), FRAME GRAB.



**“I CALL THIS THE  
DISPOSSESSED  
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AFROFUTURIST  
LOVE OF QUEER  
DISORIENTATION.”**

This is not the only time Monáe plays white/skin. In *Metropolis* (The Chase Suite), Monáe’s opening Afrofuturist allegory of the slave patrol (an allegory that is the living horror/truth of systemic state violence against African Americans today), the chase to the death is conducted using the weaponry of “chainsaws and electro-daggers.” The evidence of this chase appears on the cover of Monáe’s *Metropolis*. The Platinum 9000 model android Cindi Mayweather appears damaged, missing one arm, and stripped of some circuitry. But most importantly, insofar as Monáe’s blackness is elsewhere a commodity, Mayweather—which is to say, Monáe in performance as Mayweather—is startling white, stripped of her black/skin. All the constitutive paradoxes of whiteness as artifice, as machinic sheen, and yet as supposed index of its own human authenticity, are brought to bear in this image. At work is a

complex exposure of whiteness as artifice. Mayweather’s black/skin is likewise marked in its absence as an artifice fabricated by the needs of whiteness to assert its supremacy.

Why must Mayweather be disassembled? What does transgressing the who/what distinction amount to, for white supremacy? In the violence of the Chase, whiteness seeks to eradicate the supplement of the other’s skin so as to see itself reflected. When objects resist, white supremacy demands originary whiteness everywhere, without supplement. Yet the erasure of that dangerous supplement destroys the very thing whiteness needs to fabricate its supremacy. Thus such erasure risks total catastrophe. And so Mayweather remains, a fragment or excess that cannot be completely destroyed. As Mayweather gazes from the cover, we bear witness to

the violence of whiteness in failing to accept its artifice—unworking, nonfunctional, and broken.<sup>36</sup>

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Drawing from Fanon's troubling of mask to skin in *Black Skins, White Masks*, Sylvia Wynter suggestively calls for a raciological genealogy of the "human" as a constructed and historically-situated figure. Today's dominant model of the "human," writes Wynter, as "the *natural scientific model* of a *natural organism*" is now planetary insofar as "the West, over the last five hundred years, has brought the *whole* human species into its *hegemonic*" model of "Man2," which is a "transumptively liberal *monohumanist* . . . model of being *human*" that effaces the potential of what Wynter calls "*the autopoiesis of being hybridly human*."<sup>37</sup> For Wynter, the hybridly human acknowledges the "regulatory laws" of its environment

(that claims humans as part of an autopoietic system) while coming to terms with its posthumanism (that humans are no longer subordinated to genetic code).<sup>38</sup>

Tendencies in Afrofuturism further but also differ from Wynter's argument. Or rather, they further the potential of the hybrid-human only insofar as Afrofuturist becomings push toward the *exhuman*. Such becomings appear so alien and unnatural to the natural scientific model of Man that their reality is only comprehended as unreality, as if "but" art, and not the transformational art—*qua* technics—of what Richard Iton calls the "black fantastic," which I resample from his prose as those "notions of being . . . marked as deviant."<sup>39</sup> The role of myth in such potential is not secondary but constitutive, which is to say, in a deconstructive schema of retroactive supplementarity, the

necessary inclusion to begin with of that which is excluded for there to be a beginning (or, that which is added on after the fact to make the thing whole to begin with). For Wynter, the hybrid-human arises in the "*conscious awareness*" of the tension and slippery ambiguity between the *bios* (skin/body/phylogeny/ontogeny) to the *logos* or *mythoi* (word/mask/myth/culture/sociogeny).<sup>40</sup> But it is the exhuman that amplifies the *mythoi*, which in all of its web of signifiers—the myths we tell about ourselves, *particularly about us as "we"*—shapes our perception of the former, that fleshy stuff of the skin.<sup>41</sup> And particularly of what is under the skin, as the genetic code now found to be malleable. Hence the tension and slippery ambiguity of the "human" as-such. In conversation with Katherine McKittrick, Wynter is quick to point out the "major implication here," one not lost on the futurist avenues of alien

alterity that propel Afrofuturism: that of process, of becoming, of shapeshifting, and thus of radical agency and change: “humanness is no longer a noun. Being human is praxis.”<sup>42</sup> To which Afrofuturism adds an alien deviation: the improper praxis of becoming exhuman.

Louis Chude-Sokei develops Wynter’s thought in relation to the hybrid humanity of the black Atlantic, emphasising that “the plantation Negro was neither human nor animal but something or somewhere else.”<sup>43</sup> The underlying logic of a praxis of being (non)human in the neither/ nor is a thesis first described by Wynter in 1979 as the “possibility of lack.”<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, the *social* position of “being the non-human” under white supremacy must “conceptualize . . . the lack of intellectual faculties”; thus being the non-human “engenders the anxiety of falling into the socially

stigmatized.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Wynter follows Deleuze and Guattari in positing lack as “created, planned and organized in and through social production.”<sup>46</sup> Thus lack is contingent to social production, and the possibility of lack is how it reconfigures the contingency of being (non)human. By the same token, becoming non-human engenders alternative modes of social production—thereby signalling the political economy of Afrofuturism.

The Afrofuturist thesis is to amplify the possibility of lack to that of the impossibility of potential—and I again use “amplify” not just as metaphor, but like Chude-Sokei to signal the significance of music, and sonic remix culture, to the call-and-response of what Paul Gilroy has influentially named the black Atlantic.<sup>47</sup> For, it is the self-described “Living Myth” of Sun Ra, jazz composer and Arkestra bandleader, the Afrofuturist case of

cases, that amplifies the impossibility of Wynter’s call to transform the scientifico-biological constraints upon the human, by enacting, by *becoming*, an impossible figure of the *bios-mythoi*. And here a translation but also transformation arises, from *bios-mythoi* to Living Myth, as Sun Ra declares himself the return of an ancient alien Kemetic Pharaoh from Saturn. Sun Ra, the Living Myth who “walked the Earth,” alien in both space and time, poses to “us” all the question: “What myth am I?”<sup>48</sup> And what I(s) are myths?

Kodwo Eshun asserts the force of Afrofuturist mythos is such that it is capable of rejecting the “pointless and treacherous category” of the human.<sup>49</sup> Eshun’s late twentieth century Afrofuturist inventory of Black Atlantic Sonic Fiction, PhonoFiction, and Futurism, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, remains one of few texts to develop an Afrofuturist

inquiry as speculative, challenging, and urgent as Wynter's. For critics such as Weheliye, Eshun's description of Sonic Futurism as adopting a "cruel, despotic amoral attitude towards the human species" has been understood as rejecting the black body.<sup>50</sup> But this is to neglect what Eshun signals by his understanding of the "human," which I suggest echoes Wynter's category of the Western/white supremacist model of Man, and not the (black) body as-such. For Eshun's encyclopedic compendium of Afrofuturism is concerned with all manner of bodies—from the animalia-Ark body of Lee "Scratch" Perry, in which a body ecology emerges of mixing console and organic mystique, to white German android-band *Kraftwerk*, whose bodies became performances of machinic whiteness *par excellence*; from Mothership funkmeister and outerspace alien George Clinton, whose gender-queering body flaunted stage nudity,



DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.

**“ESHUN’S EMPHASIS ON ‘FLUIDARITY’ ANTICIPATES THE CONCEPT OF “LIQUID BLACKNESS”—OF BLACKNESS UNHINGED FROM TRADITION, DISLOCATED FROM THE DEMANDS OF AUTHENTICITY, AND UPROOTED FROM THE REAL”**

to the android, alien, and black comix bodies of Detroit techno-collective Underground Resistance. While it remains attentive to bodies, Eshun’s project is admittedly ex-anthropological: it articulates the praxis of becoming-exhuman. It is ex-anthropological insofar as it decenters the anthropocentric tendencies of cultural studies and music criticism, which according to Eshun, seek “the Real Song, the Real Voice,” by positing in their audibility the authentic soul of an

*anthropos*, caught in a “perpetual fight for human status, a yearning for human rights, a struggle for inclusion within the human species.”<sup>51</sup> Instead, Eshun surveys the assemblage of production, distribution, communication, and recording technologies in which the (human) body becomes but a component. Anticipating developments in media archeology and media ecology, Eshun writes, “Machine music . . . is the artform most thoroughly

undermined and recombined and reconfigured by technics.”<sup>52</sup>

By rejecting the human, Eshun also rejects “any and all notions of a compulsory black condition,” particularly the “solid state known as ‘blackness.’”<sup>53</sup> This is to say that for Eshun, interrogating the human means a like critique of black realness, representation, and authenticity. Eshun critiques the bounding of blackness to the real, which neglects the antisociality of black surrealism: “the ‘street’

is considered the ground and guarantee of all reality, a compulsory logic explaining all Black Music, conveniently mishearing antisocial surrealism as social realism.”<sup>54</sup> This is a point also taken up by Chude-Sokei as he questions the “Afro” in Afrofuturism and other neologisms suggesting a default condition to blackness, insofar as they “too often deploy blackness as a knowable force or object or assume it as innately radical,” bound by an “insistence on reducing black technological usage—or sound—to political solidarity.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, for Chude-Sokei the black Atlantic can be overdetermined as a like myth, in which it is assumed that “common historical experiences and shared cultural or musical influences translate as shared ideological concerns, similar aesthetic motivations, or even shared visions of the past and future.”<sup>56</sup> Both Chude-Sokei and Eshun see the black Atlantic

as an imagined space of unending contestation over the meanings of blackness, conducted through the fragmented, rhizomorphic and fractal networks of global communications, whereby multiple, contingent, open-ended blacknesses transact without resolution.

To this end, black Atlantic Futurism, writes Eshun, dissolves “into a *fluidarity*” that “dislocates you from origins.”<sup>57</sup> Insofar as the black Atlantic is not but one thing, neither is its futurism. Both are set adrift in the oceanic temporality that connects metaphors of the past to the fluid matters of the future. Eshun’s emphasis on “fluidarity” anticipates the concept of “liquid blackness”—of blackness unhinged from tradition, dislocated from the demands of authenticity, and uprooted from the real (of the street and its philosophical fundament). Eshun signals such fluidarity by

its “unrecognizability, as either Black or Music.”<sup>58</sup> It appears as the unrecognizable, the alien, the unidentifiable object, that which dazes and distorts schemas of perception. We must be attentive to the audible homophony in Eshun when he writes that Black Atlantic Futurism “uproutes you,” suggesting both the *uprooting* of the hierarchical arborescence of black tradition (howsoever located), and the *uprouting* of the mythical routes of the black Atlantic. Thus, Black Atlantic Futurism also suspends the black Atlantic from assuming that its concept harbours the same shared beliefs. The black Atlantic thus connects at the same time it dislocates the distribution of differentiations of blackness by way of an oceanic space of geography, *mythos*, and technics. And as Eshun emphasises, the dislocation of blackness in tradition, recognizability, and realness, is

not replaced with a single, new model of being human; rather, the affective-poetico assemblage of “Alien Music . . . replaces them with nothing whatsoever.”<sup>59</sup>

This nothingness has, again, been read as cruelly destructive nihilism—but like the ambiguous explosion of planet Earth at the close of Sun Ra’s 1974 film *Space is the Place* (John Cone, 1974), it is with the destabilization of the ground, of *terra firma*, that what Sun Ra calls the Outer Darkness reveals itself, as the potential of other planets to come. By nothing, I read Eshun as not positing *nihilio*, but rather all that Wynter anticipates in the *possibility* of lack—Sun Ra’s Outer Darkness of the Void, in which potential is feared as nihilism precisely because of the profoundly radical effects of its disorientation.

Though Sylvia Wynter appears absent from Eshun’s text, it is here that I wish to connect the two as the

site of an encounter yet-to-come. For what Eshun sets forth is a catalogue of Afrofuturist becomings—an inventory of radical departures from humanism—that invent the exhuman otherwise. Just as Wynter writes of how enslaved Africans were excluded from the ontology of Man, becoming something other to white humanity, as the “scapegoat-carrier of all alternative potentialities that are repressed in the system,”<sup>60</sup> Kodwo Eshun writes that the music of “Afrodiasporic futurism”—which is to say the music of Afrodiasporic peoples that have endured the position of the colonized/scapegoat under white supremacist humanism—“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.”<sup>61</sup> This appears a succinct summation of Janelle Monáe’s project

of android love music—insofar as embracing nothingness implies, and intensifies, a love for some Thing. ■



<sup>1</sup> Janelle Monáe, "Our Favorite Fugitive (Interlude)," *The Electric Lady*, Bad Boy Entertainment / Wondaland, 536210-2, 2013, compact disc/album.

<sup>2</sup> Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis (The Chase Suite)*, Bad Boy Entertainment / Wondaland, 511234-2, 2007, compact disc/album.

<sup>3</sup> Janelle Monáe, "The March of the Wolfmasters." *Metropolis (The Chase Suite)*, Bad Boy Entertainment / Wondaland, 511234-2, 2007, compact disc/album.

<sup>4</sup> A critique of how raciology structures Western philosophical discourse needs to be brought to bear upon these discourses, especially when the latter claims it has escaped anthropocentrism to deal exclusively with Things. For example, insofar as SR/OOO display a love for horrific things, particularly in readings of H. P. Lovecraft, what oft goes uncommented is how such horrific fiction deploys its monstrosities as allegories for the racialized other (see my "Victims Themselves of a Close Encounter: On the Sensory Language and Bass Fiction of Space Ape (In Memoriam)," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 7, no. 2 (2015): 86–115, doi:10.12801/1947-5403.2015.07.02.05). By the same token, one could critique Meillassoux's argument that the supremely ancient object indicating an *arche-fossil* temporality inaccessible to the Kantian critical faculties neglects to account for how raciology structures the discourse of the inaccessible, primitive, ancient, alien (see Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier, London: Continuum, 2008). This is not to discount Meillassoux's anti-Kantian argument, but it is to suggest that the object, *qua* object, is not a neutral category suspended from raciology (which thus may have effects for the anti-Kantian argument). Likewise, Harman posits speculative realism as an ontological inquiry into the "drama at work in the heart of tools themselves," the "tool-being" that is "subterranean" in Heidegger's distinction of *Zuhandenheit* (object-tools unnoticeable because functional: ready-to-hand) to *Vorhandenheit* (broken, and thus present-at-hand, though only as broken) (Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 24, 31, 35, 125). Yet this argument side-steps who or what is considered a tool-being, and who or what has the ability to make such a distinction. Reading Heidegger through Fanon, Wynter, and Hegel, one could point out that masters only "see" their slaves when unworking or resisting (and thus, we may add, as nonfunctional or broken tools). What happens in SR/OOO when tool-beings resist? Or, even speak? Indeed, for Harman, the object, *qua* tool-being, is devoid of language, insofar as language is "something human" (133). Is there no idiom of the alien, no murmur of the tool-being? And what if language itself is an alien virus, as Burroughs suspected?

<sup>5</sup> Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). See also the object relations theory of Melanie Klein and French feminist psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's work on the abject, as that which is neither subject nor object (see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)).

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.

<sup>8</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3, 14, 111.

<sup>9</sup> Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1999), A[192].

<sup>10</sup> Lee "Scratch" Perry and The Upsetters, *Super Ape* (Island, UK, 1976: ILPS 9417).

<sup>11</sup> The term arises from Derrida, in conversation: "The 'logic' of the trace or of différance determines this re-appropriation as ex-appropriation. Re-appropriation necessarily produces the opposite of what it apparently aims for. Ex-appropriation is not what is proper to man. One can recognize its differential figures as soon as there is a relation to self in its most elementary form (but for this very reason there is no such thing as elementary)" ("'Eating Well', Or the Calculation of the Subject," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Points...*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 269).



## Robot Love

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- <sup>12</sup> Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 179–222.
- <sup>13</sup> Mark Sinker, "Loving the Alien in Advance of the Landing—Black Science Fiction," *The Wire* 96, February (1992).
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013). Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, eds., *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (New York: Lexington, 2015).
- <sup>16</sup> Janelle Monáe, "Prime Time (feat. Miguel)" (directed by Alan Ferguson, Wondaland Arts Society, 2013), posted by janellemoneae, October 10, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxIs2xXOClg>.
- <sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Alessandra Raengo for pointing out the "Queer Inhumanisms" special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, where the question "has the queer ever been human?" is brought to bear upon "the active force of the nonhuman," with the observation that "the queer, we could say, runs across or athwart the human" (Dana Luciano, and Mel Y. Chen, "Has the Queer Ever Been Human?", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 186, 189). My use of "queer" is developed through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, which explores how queer dis-orientation relates to object becoming.
- <sup>18</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 113.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 159.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.
- <sup>22</sup> A strategy that Kodwo Eshun names "chronopolitics." See Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287–302.
- <sup>23</sup> I thus echo in approach but differ in conclusion from Alexander Weheliye's question, insofar as I stake the Afrofuturist position (as does Weheliye, in his critical reading of Eshun; see "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* 71, no. Summer (2002): 21–48) as advocating for an exhumanist becoming, and not a revival, as Weheliye seemingly calls for, of humanism: "what different modalities of the human come to light if we do not take the liberal humanist figure of Man as the master-subject but focus on how humanity has been imagined and lived by those subjects excluded from this domain?" (*Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 8).
- <sup>24</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 163.
- <sup>25</sup> Fred Moten, reflecting on Fanon, writes that "loss and fabrication are cognate if we are only made in dispossession. The remainder is ownership, but can it remain? Can the fabricated bear a trace of what lies before their fabrication?" ("The Subprime and the Beautiful," *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (2013): 242). It should be emphasized that Moten is not seeking an originary blackness in the posing of this question. Rather, "what lies before being fabricated needs neither to be remembered nor romanticized when it is being lived" (ibid.). Afrofuturist becoming is perhaps such a life praxis, insofar as it rejects any romantic notion of originary recovery in the invention of a lived alien alterity by way of a revisioning of the past. My thanks to Alessandra Raengo for directing me to this article.
- <sup>26</sup> Janelle Monáe, *The ArchAndroid* (Bad Boy Entertainment/Wondaland, US, 2010: 512256-2).

<sup>27</sup> See Thomas, Valorie, "'Neon Slaves, Electric Savages': Badoula Oblongata, the Archandroid, and Sarah Baartman's Ghost," in *Afrofuturism and (Un)popular Music*, ed. tobias c. van Veen (forthcoming).

<sup>28</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>29</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Random House, 1989); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> tobias c. van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation," in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, eds. Reynaldo Anderson, and Charles E. Jones (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 63–90; Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 915.

<sup>31</sup> Derrida writes that "whether it adds or substitutes itself, the supplement is exterior, outside of the positivity to which it is super-added, *alien* [my italics] to that which, in order to be replaced by it, must be other than it." (*Of Grammatology (Corrected Edition)*), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145).

<sup>32</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> "Janelle," Covergirl, accessed September 16, 2016: <https://www.covergirl.com/latest-news/covergirl-models/janelle-monaee>.

<sup>34</sup> In the march of replicas (though their replicant repetition does not erase their *différance*), Mayweather is the singularity; she is the event or exception that refuses, that excess which the system desires (and thus auctions as the most pricey black/skin) and yet cannot contain.

<sup>35</sup> See Schmitt, Carl, *The Concept of the Political (Expanded Edition)*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Which is to say, the thing appears as *Vorhandenheit* in this moment: the broken object in its ontological specificity. Yet is its specificity a broken white object or black? What such a (speculative realist) reading demonstrates, as Fanon notes, is how Western metaphysics, including ontology, is bound to racism.

<sup>37</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 21, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics & Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16.

<sup>40</sup> Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 23, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Thus a distinction needs to be made from transhumanism, which pursues the "evolutionary" overcoming of the "limits" of the *bios* by advancing a *mythos* of the technologically-enhanced *übermensch*. This is not to say that Afrofuturism does not (or cannot) pursue an art of the *bios*, but that what distinguishes it from the problematic racism of transhumanism (the future/past eugenics of a *Gattaca*) is its *mythos*, or what stories it tells of the *bios* to begin with.

<sup>42</sup> Wynter, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 23.

<sup>43</sup> Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2016), 41.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text* 1, no. Winter (1979): 149–56.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 152.

## Robot Love

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<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Sun Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose of Sun Ra* (Norderstedt: Waitawhile, 2005), 340.

<sup>49</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-005].

<sup>50</sup> Weheliye, Alexander G. "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music." *Social Text* 71, no. Summer (2002): 21-48. Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-005].

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 00[-006].

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 00[-002]. See also Eshun, Kodwo, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," CR: *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287-302.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 00[-003].

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 00[-004].

<sup>55</sup> Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*, 10-11.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>57</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-001].

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 00[-001].

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 00[-003].

<sup>60</sup> Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," 154-55.

<sup>61</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 00[-005].

