

AFRICA ON THE MOON: THE COMPLEXITIES OF AN AFROFUTURIST READING OF DUB

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts a detailed and specific analysis of the music and the mythology of Lee “Scratch” Perry and other key figures and works in dub, in relation to Afrofuturist thought and the music, theory and philosophy of Sun Ra in particular. It discovers at every turn multiple layers of complication, points of disjuncture as well as confluence, but argues that we can identify complicity and hybridity between these forms and their key protagonists without reducing their distinctiveness or specificity. By viewing dub through an Afrofuturist lens, the article aims to illuminate aspects of dub that would otherwise remain hidden, allowing that here, as in the development and diversification of the musics themselves, the revelatory relationship may be reciprocal.

KEYWORDS: Afrofuturism, dub, Sun Ra, Lee “Scratch” Perry, diaspora

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THE BLACK ARK BURNS

If reggae is Africa in the New World, then dub must be Africa on the moon; it's the psychedelic music I expected to hear in the '60s and didn't. The bass and drums conjure up a dark, vast space, a musical portrait of outer space, with sounds suspended like glowing planets or with fragments of instruments careening by, leaving trails like comets and meteors (Ehrlich 1982: 106).

I am an extraterrestrial, not from another planet but from heaven (Lee "Scratch" Perry quoted in Mottram 2007).

And a sound that lived in the solder joints of labyrinthine patch bays, in the grain of the dirt on grubby tape heads, in the walls themselves, etched with esoteric graffiti from which particular letters have been meticulously scored out, is lost and can never be remade. A ghost is born. The smoke trails blow into the past and into the future.

After the fire, in the narrative of the mainstream British music press at least, Lee "Scratch" Perry is no longer eccentric, erratic, unpredictable. Now he's plainly mad (Kelly 1984: 7). But beneath that narrative, probably a little closer to the truth and infinitely sadder, is a story of consuming racialised alienation. Reflecting on the decision to torch his own studio, Scratch said "it was then that he realized he was 'a white man', because 'The way black people was treating me, how could I be one of them?'" (Bradley 2000: 499).

In this desolate acknowledgement of the potential for external social conditions to devalue and strip away a positive sense of racialised identity, we might find a parallel with Sun Ra's determination not to identify as human, to "escape the parameters . . . of humanity" (Womack 2013: 60). Kodwo Eshun observes that in Afrofuturist thought, "The human is a pointless and treacherous category" (1998: 3), and it is that sense of treachery, of historically established or otherwise inevitable betrayal that seems to connect Perry's statement with Ra's assertion of Saturnian origin. There are distinctions as well as commonalities to be observed here, though. Noting Ingrid LaFleur's definition of Afrofuturism as "a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens" (2011), the bleakness of Perry's position might suggest a disconnect, since it seems to identify no possible future in the black culture around him. Ra's luminous response to the "treacherous category" (Eshun 1998: 3) of humanity is foundational to Afrofuturism as it is now understood. But where Ra refused the delimited humanity that the white power structures of the Southern United States belatedly offered—indelibly marked as it was by the alien abduction horror story of slavery (Sinker 1992: 33)—and adopted instead a sci-fi post-reality of his own making, Perry, in this moment, found no escape from the treachery. As his music drifted, bounced, skipped off into space, he cast around for a different shade of human to identify with, and ended up burning the primary site of his creative expression out of his own world.

It is as good an illustration as any of the complexities of an Afrofuturist reading of dub, a form as irreducible as any in the history of popular music. Indeed, through a longer historical lens the picture complicates still further, as we might observe that Perry did eventually find

an escape, and a way to re-shape his creative identity as an international producer in self-imposed exile from Jamaica. Perhaps this identity, shaped in exile, suggests a further point of affinity with Ra the Saturnian?

My research for this article started from the perspective that dub seemed to be dealt with in a relatively cursory fashion in a lot of writing on Afrofuturism. I had the impression that commentators would take time to work towards an evolved understanding of key African-American figures—Ra, Rammellzee, George Clinton—and then skate elegantly over Afro-Caribbean artists like Lee “Scratch” Perry, Scientist, or worse still, dub as a homogenized concept-lump, in a few brief pages. Working back through the defining music-focused texts of contemporary Afrofuturist thinking, I’ve found that this perception wasn’t wholly accurate. Whilst some core publications, such as Eshun (1998) and Womack (2013), certainly do devote fewer pages specifically to Lee “Scratch” Perry than to comparable American figures, there are significant documents from as early as the mid-90’s (e.g. Penman 1995; Corbett 1994; John Akomfrah’s 1996 documentary *The Last Angel of History*) and plenty of more recent discourse that stress the significance of dub to any understanding of Afrofuturism (such as Fisher 2013).

At this point some definitions are needed. In respect of Afrofuturism, to expand upon LaFleur’s definition cited above, Ytasha L. Womack offers the following:

Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it’s a total revisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques (2013: 9).

The sense that Womack conveys here of Afrofuturism as essentially multiple rather than singular, as a meta-concept encompassing or engaging in dialogue with a sprawling range of ideas, might run counter to an initial understanding of dub as a highly specific musical form. Dub can be understood as a particular language of sound (and later in this article I will mount something of a defense of that position, or at least give some thought to its value), closely tied to a specific time and place. However, recent discourse around dub (Partridge 2010; Sullivan 2014) has offered a broader reading of the form as concept as much as content or context, more expansive and rhizomatic in character than a singular sonic or socio-cultural reading could permit. Sullivan couches this in poetic terms:

Ethereal, mystical, conceptual, fluid, avant-garde, raw, unstable, provocative, transparent, postmodern, disruptive, heavyweight, political, enigmatic . . . dub is way more than ‘a riddim and a bassline’, even if it is that too. Dub is a genre and a process, a ‘virus’ and a ‘vortex’ (2014: 7).

Indeed, as compared to earlier Jamaican musics, dub can be thought of as primarily defined by “linguistic, formal, and symbolic indeterminacy” (Veal 2007: 35). The significance of this perspective is that it allows the possibility of dub as Afrodiasporic, rather than reinforcing a limiting sense of rootedness in time and place. In this conception, dub and Afrofuturism are

brought inexorably together, and not only as parallel diasporic forms with distinct lineages. Taking on board Paul Gilroy's stress in *The Black Atlantic* on "roots and routes . . . flows, exchanges and in-between elements that call the very desire to be centred into question" (1993: 190), it is possible to identify key figures of dub and of Afrofuturism as nodes in the same network, without reducing the specificity and distinctiveness of the former. That, ultimately, is my argument here: that dub can be understood as distinct and specific, whilst existing within an Afrofuturist network—a complex, simultaneously dialogical web of connections, spanning music, history and religion. In discussing dub and Afrofuturism together, we might hope to "project the plural richness of black cultures in different parts of the world in counterpoint to their common sensibilities" (Gilroy 1993: 81). Some strands of that discussion, often concerning points of difference rather than confluence between relevant musical lineages but not precluding hybridity and complicity between them, will be discussed here in a series of dialogical case studies, with special attention to the work of Jamaican dub producer Lee "Scratch" Perry.

THE MIGHTY UPSETTER

The example of Perry makes the inappropriateness of a binary or antithetical approach, which might look to oppose dub and Afrofuturism, particularly apparent. Granted, the framework of futurist concepts and imagery that US-based jazz auteur Sun Ra erected around his music and life seem clearly defined and intellectually purposeful in retrospect, whereas a figure like Perry remains a knotty thread, too complex and contradictory to be easily unraveled. But, if we're tempted to identify a simple point of difference even in the irreducible complexity of Perry's oeuvre and any message we might attempt to tease out of it, we might usefully refer to Ian Penman (1995: 38):

This Other tradition has always (sometimes bitterly) been suffused with an inherent (sometimes crippling) sense of doubt: doubt that any 'public' pronouncement of oppositionality . . . had any real point; and that you rather had to reclaim a language of your own – encoded, murky, stellar – from out of the shy or earth where you found yourself, from out of the myriad "discredited" pasts or futures. In the '60s and '70s, Sci-fi shamen like Miles, Sly Stone and George Clinton (taking some of their cues from writers like Samuel Delaney and Ishmael Reed) chose this option. If you were anyway going to be consigned to society's margins, then why not speak (in) a marginal tongue?

Penman's alignment of dub in general with the troubled, muddled worlds of George Clinton's Funkadelic project, as well as Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* (1970) and Sly Stone's *There's A Riot Goin' On* (1971) serves as a reminder that the focused and clearly articulated futurist programme of Ra is necessarily no more central to a nuanced modeling of Afrofuturism than any other node in the network. All of these musics, and Perry's too, must speak to our understanding of Afrofuturism, exist within it as well as in dialogue with it.

THE MACHINEBRAIN AND THE LIVING MAN

Amongst the many contradictions in Perry's self-made mythology, we might note that as well as a white man, he self-identified as "a machine being" (quoted in Martin 1995: 32), not so much wired into the desk as indistinguishable from it, controlling the mix at a molecular level. Scratch as cyborg, then. But, starting at a generalised conception of the sound of his classic 1970s dubs, it is hard not to feel that the blood vessels and nerve endings of the man are invading the circuitry of the Black Ark's systems—warping and mutating it from the pure order envisaged by its fastidious designer, King Tubby—and not the other way around. In an interview with David Toop for *Ocean Of Sound*, Scratch himself seemed in part to frame it that way:

Then I put my mind into the machine by sending it through the controls and the knobs or into the jack panel. The jack panel is the brain itself, so you've got to patch up the brain and make the brain a living man (Perry, quoted in Toop 1995: 113).

Certainly, there are crucial distinctions between this image and motifs presented by some American Afrofuturist musicians which we can identify as related. Something in the messy, endlessly detailed environment of the Black Ark control room suggests a parallel with the similarly densely layered world of Rammellzee—but for all their machinic appearance, Rammellzee's iconic armoured suits do not represent cyborgs. Rather, they are "gods called the Ramm Ell Zee" (Rammellzee quoted in Tate 2004: 35), metaphoric representations of the philosophy of Gothic Futurism. A closer parallel is probably the sleek, *Metropolis* and *Blade Runner*-inspired glamour of Janelle Monáe's android other (van Veen 2013: 13; McConville 2014). But the image here, in Monáe's own description and as derived from Fritz Lang, is specifically of a wholly artificial android as distinct from a partly organic cyborg. By literal definition, then, Lee "Scratch" Perry's machine being is innately more organic and less metallic than these counterpoints in African American musical futurism.

This sense of the organic undiminished, despite a deeply felt connection to machinery, can be partly understood in relation to core precepts of dub. In *Bass Culture*, Lloyd Bradley relates the rebalancing of a mix to "ancient African medicine that splits the body up into seven centres or 'selves' – sexual, digestive, heart, brain, etc. . . . [And] would, as practitioners always describe it, 'bring forward or push back' different centres" (2000: 309). This seems to suggest a shamanistic element in the cyborgian construct that Lee Perry built around himself. Beyond this, dub must also be understood as fundamentally bodily in relation to its initial inception as a source of new recorded material for sound systems, and the centrality of the physical, visceral, immersively sonic experience of those systems.

However, noting this facet of dub's origins, it is instructive to consider Julian Henriques' description of the form as born to "the most powerful music machines in the world vibrating every organ of the body" (2011: 53). The observation that a sound system employs technology to act physically upon a "corporeal medium of sounding" (2011: 23) indicates a reciprocal relationship between technology and the human body. In this we might identify

a starting point for Scratch's line of thinking, and the compelling suggestion that human and machine were intertwined in dub right from its beginnings. So, if we overstate the organic in Perry's cyborgian conception of himself we are in danger of overlooking the reciprocity between man and machine which is central to the image in the first place. As much as Perry the man is infiltrating the machine, he also tells us that the "jack panel is the brain itself" which needs to be made into "a living man" (Perry, quoted in Toop 1995: 113). The sense is that both man and machine are incomplete until they are jacked together. The combination of the two in this light becomes an expression of Perry's creative potential as well as a political statement, just as the identity of the Archandroid is for Monáe.

DIFFERENT ARKS

As the cyborg is a trope common to Lee "Scratch" Perry and to US-based Afrofuturist musicians, so too is the Ark. Specifically as a common point of departure for Perry and for Sun Ra, the concept of the Ark warrants consideration as a second brief case in point here. Considering the Black Ark and the Arkestra as the chosen musical vehicles for Perry and Ra's imaginative flights, we might initially identify the Ark in both instances as a spacecraft leaving earth for other worlds.

However, we should also observe that the Black Ark, for all its sci-fi knobs, switches and cabling, is often a more explicitly Biblical signifier. Sometimes, for Perry, it was unequivocally the Ark of the Covenant:

When you see a rainbow in the sky I tell you that is truly the sign of the ark of the Covenant. I bring the Ark out of Egypt, down to 5 Cardiff Crescent, Washington Gardens. No-one in Kingston, Jamaica, noticed it was out of Egypt, so I give them reggae music, the treasure of King Tut (Perry quoted in Mottram 2007).

And then elsewhere, the Black Ark also represents that other Biblical Ark, and its sound needs to be understood in relation to water and to animal life. Paul Sullivan identifies an "aquatic" (2014: 43) dimension to Perry's sound, and also reproduces this analogy drawn from a David Toop interview with the man himself:

Something there was like a holy vibration and a godly sensation. Modern studios, they have a different set-up. They set up a business and a money-making concern. I set up like an ark . . . You have to be the Ark to save the animals and nature and music (1995: 129).

The degree of Biblical specificity here might be expected to show up distinctions between Perry and Ra, particularly considering the depth and detail of the latter's own interrogative engagement with Christian scripture (Corbett 2006: 6). But Ra's own poetry asserts "I have known a heaven all my own" (Geerken and Wolf 2005: 64), and reminds us frequently that his sci-fi mythology can't be reduced to a simple *critique* of Christianity. Unequivocally, the Arkestra must also be understood in relation to the Arks of the Bible. Stefany Anne

Golberg's 2014 essay on Ra, since reproduced on the Arkestra's own website, confirms this with reference to Ra's own words:

The name Arkestra itself was an allusion to the Ark of the Covenant. 'A covenant of Arkestra,' said Sun Ra, 'it's like a selective service of God. Picking out some people. Arkestra has a 'ra' at the beginning and the end. Ra can be written as 'Ar' or 'Ra,' and on both ends of the word it is an equation: the first and the last are equal.... In the middle there is 'kest,' which equals 'kist,' as in 'Sunkist'...I read that in Sanskrit 'kist' means 'sun's gleam.' This is why I called my orchestra 'Arkestra' (2014).

Aside from the extraordinary similarity with Perry's assertion above, what Ra's discussion here illustrates most clearly of all is that no particular privilege was accorded to any strand of his philosophy. That which stood up to Ra's penetrating interrogation was subsumed into his system completely, aligned with elements drawn from all of human history and all across the globe. Though his approach to his materials is superficially more disordered, the same is true of Perry. That the Black Ark might be the Ark of the Covenant *and* full of animals *and* also a spaceship is the point. Perhaps the Noah analogy connects to a whole animalistic and ecological strand of Scratch's iconography (Corbett 1994: 19), and explains for us the presence of the "Super Ape" (1976) and the "Croaking Lizard" (1976), but simultaneously we see that the Black Ark may be carrying its animal passengers to an ultimate destination on another world.

This over-arching sense of pluralism or hybridity also allows Christian iconography to interact in Perry's work with the more complex and difficult to classify (Middleton 2015: 3) structures of Rastafari, and even with "the aura (if not the actual practice) of Jamaica's Obeah tradition of neo-African black magic" (Veal 2007: 142). These apparently diverse elements are manipulated in a number of ways in Perry's practice, but most conspicuously linguistically. It's worth considering in parallel an observation from John Corbett that "Perry's is a discursive kingdom, a creative world of hidden connections and secret pacts exposed in language" (1994: 128), and Darren Middleton's suggestion that "the first Rastafari scrutinized sacred writings from their social location [and] practiced an ingenious form of mother-tongue exegesis or vernacular interpretation" (2015: 9). In Perry's free-ranging monologues and in his musical works, Rastafari, Obeah, science fiction, ecology and the Bible are not merely presented alongside one another, but are integrated in a comprehensive re-versioning.

Writing about the post-punk tendency to identify dub as musically iconoclastic, Christopher Partridge notes "in much Jamaican dub, the deconstruction of the canonical and, arguably, the reified in reggae, was less a subversion of musical hegemony and more a celebration of it" (2010: 223). We might note a related tendency on a philosophical or ethical plane here. It is not celebration of extant philosophies that Ra and Perry are engaged in, of course, but iconoclastic deconstruction is not an accurate portrayal either. These artists share a joyful perception of the recombinant potential of ideas.

OF LIGHTNESS

If an interrogative engagement with Christian symbolism connects Perry and Ra so too, to my mind, does the significance of what Glenn Ligon identifies simply as “lightness” (2001: 87):

Ra’s interest in flight is a kind of politics. Being light is a refusal of the limitations of what is considered human. . . . To be light, to be able to fly away, is to be able to imagine something beyond what we see. What we see now is pretty grim, so Ra’s ability to see beyond a particular historical moment as a way to change it remains compelling (Ligon 2001: 87).

Noting the previously discussed complications with an aesthetic characterisation of Lee Perry dubs as organic, we might also turn to the notion of lightness for a way to describe the uniqueness of the sound of The Black Ark:

The sound achieved in the Ark was unique. The music was springy and light, as though it had been dabbled gently onto the vinyl, like kisses. At a time when other studios were making passable dub impressions of steamhammers getting to work on massive chunks of concrete, the Ark dubs were often spidery constructions of lacy delicacy (Kelly 1984: 7).

In understanding the importance of lightness in Perry’s 1970s work, it is perhaps instructive to compare it with the contemporary output of fellow dub pioneer King Tubby. We can draw an aesthetic distinction between the airy, upward motion of Perry’s mixes and the archeological downward delving of King Tubby dubs with reference to certain specifics of production technique.

Perry eschews Tubby’s more dramatic mix gestures, rarely truly isolating instrumental elements or inverting the mix hierarchy, maintaining instead constant but translucent filtered layers of sound. Counter-intuitively, this greater vertical layering makes for lighter sounding mixes—as it is not heard in isolation, but pushed through the tubes of compressors and against the saturation limits of the tape in combination with other elements, Perry’s bass never achieves the thudding weight and all-encompassing warmth of Tubby’s. In the drums, the prevalence of a classic, bounding one drop (from Carlton Barrett’s tenure in the early years of The Upsetters through into the playing of Black Ark fixtures like “Benbow” Creary), lighter on the kick drum than the Rockers’ patterns heard elsewhere, ensures that the high frequencies of the hi-hat predominate. The high-end emphasis is often also intensified by a gauzy web of additional percussion credited to Scratch himself.

Where vocals, horns and melodica are employed only briefly, gesturally in Tubby’s dubs, they are a constant presence, smeared thinly over the top of Perry’s soundworld. As an exemplar of all of this, we might take Max Romeo’s “Chase The Devil” (1976)—perhaps the Perry production that looms largest in British pop cultural consciousness thanks to an iconic rework at the hands of The Prodigy in the track “Out of Space” (1992), and, incidentally, one of the productions to emerge from the Black Ark which we might most immediately identify as Afrofuturist. The stepwise motion of Earl “Chinna” Smith’s guitar,

snaking up beneath Romeo's yearning vocal; the irresistible bounce of "Benbow" Creary's hi-hat, buoyed up still further by the croaking guiro and Keith Stirling's immaculate choppy offbeat keys—everything in the record seems directed towards generating lift, defying gravity. And even when re-versioned for *Super Ape* (1976) as "Croaking Lizard", the riddim is overwritten with an extensive new vocal in the form of Prince Jazzbo's toasting. Contrary to what we might assume prior to a focused, analytical listen, this production is most decidedly *not* about the low frequencies. Even Boris Gardiner's propulsive bass is restlessly, upwardly, mobile.

Granted, in "Chase The Devil" it is Satan, not Romeo or Scratch, who is taking flight. But the *lightness* of Perry productions does seem audibly, aesthetically to touch a transcendent impulse closely related to Ra's urge to flight. And in an almost unutterable sense of dismay at immediate social realities, it surely derives from the same source.

Lest we're in danger of reducing the spectrum of Afrofuturist musical creation to Ra alone, it is perhaps worth observing as a final note here that an emphasis on lightness might distance Lee "Scratch" Perry musically and conceptually from some other important Afrofuturists. Musically, the "syrupy, bass-heavy" (Womack 2013:63) sound of Parliament/Funkadelic and the punishing techno of Underground Resistance don't immediately speak of lightness. Metaphorically or conceptually, the image of an armour-clad Rammellzee or Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" (1982) can be read as speaking of substance, of momentum generated by mass or the weight to stand against the violence of the gothic future. This potential distinction emerges no less strongly when we consider Perry's work in relation to other dub producers, though. Perry's sonic lightness has already been considered here as contrasting with key aspects of King Tubby productions, and is no less distinct from the surgically precise Scientist dubs that followed in the 1980s and will be discussed later on. The larger picture always shows dub and Afrofuturism as simultaneously distinct and interwoven, as complex webs within a web of concept and creation where no singular mode of understanding goes very far. As a case in point, we might return to Paul Sullivan's related identification of Perry's sound as "aquatic" (2014: 43), and observe that in certain respects, the closest purely sonic parallel to Perry's dubs of the 1970s is found across decades and continents in the similarly submerged techno of Detroit's Drexciya (see Williams 2001: 167–72).

TO FIND ANOTHER RACE

The semi-comical spectre of Old Nick in "Chase The Devil" and the prevalence of Old Testament Judeo-Christian references throughout reggae and dub raises a fundamental question in respect of the relationship between dub and Afrofuturism. An informed understanding of the latter requires that we reach back to the beginnings of African American music, to slavery, to transportation:

The twist is that if you are black and believe in the supernatural, and are issued from an ecological determinant that does not permit of such a psychological extreme as

American Puritanism... the circumstance of finding yourself in a culture of white humanist pseudo-Puritanical store-keepers must be revolting. And if you are the slave of such a culture, your sorrow must be indeterminable (Baraka 1963: 10).

It is a familiar observation, but nonetheless a centrally important one: we must surely look to Amiri Baraka's assessment of the yawning gulf between African supernatural belief systems and Christian Puritanism if we're to attain even the most elementary understanding of Sun Ra's motivation in developing his own alien mythology/reality. In brief and basic form we might note that as an Afrocentric consciousness grew amongst African Americans in the '60s, the need for transcendence from grim social realities was not diminished. But for some, the viability of existing gospel modalities as the expression of that need clearly *was* diminished. Ra found what we might think of as an extraordinarily compelling alternative in the assertion of the possibility of a spiritual and physical transcendence beyond the limits of Earthly existence that didn't require the permission of the slavers' God, yet his own writings continued to draw from the Christian tradition, and to interrogate and engage with established spiritual structures.

Similarly, in many reggae-derived musics, Judeo-Christian imagery persists through the '70s and into the present, but crucially as filtered through the lens of Rastafari. We can identify here a further central parallel between Ra's self-made mythology and dub in all its specificity. Where dub maintained (and maintains) a forward rush aesthetically, in its relationship to Rastafari and the Christianity of the Old Testament, dub specifically looks backwards thematically, to the historical golden ages of Ethiopia and Egypt:

When confronted by stalwarts of religion, philosophy and science who sought to falsify history in the service of Western slavery, black preachers—though for the most part unlearned—discovered in the only book to which they had access (the Bible) that Egypt and Ethiopia were in Africa, and that these countries figured very importantly in the history of civilization. To blacks, Africa (interchangeable with Ethiopia) became a glorious, Biblical homeland equated with Zion (Sanders 1982: 60).

This looking backwards and forwards simultaneously is a defining Afrofuturist position, and dichotomous “links with ancient Egypt and outer space” (Lock 2011: 29) are present in Ra's Astro-Black mythology from its earliest incarnations. And as Ra invoked the dichotomy audibly in the temporally dislocated alien-primitivism of “Ancient Aiethiopia” (1959), “Jamaica's dub pioneers used echo . . . to provoke a sense of Jamaica's ancestral African roots, while at the same time invoking the infinity of the cosmos – and the future – by creating cavernous spaces within the music” (Sullivan 2014: 10).

But, to Ra, and in the lineage of Afrofuturism that runs through electro to present day hip-hop, is the possibility of rejecting modes of being, modes of blackness imposed by history, also central? The history that was a key determinant of Ra's mode of expression, jazz, was that of slavery, a cultural cataclysm characterized by Kodwo Eshun as “a total break in modernity” (Eshun 2006: 292). We might assume then that creative progress required the rejection of that history. Introducing the Ra thesis in *Travelling The Spaceways: Sun*

Ra, The Astro-Black and Other Solar Myths, Cheryl Lynne Bruce (2010: 11) invokes Frantz Fanon's statement that: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny" (Fanon 1967: 229). However, Ra's adoption of Egyptian and other pre-Christian signifiers shows us that he did not reject history but rather worked to revision it in the interests of a living present and a possible future. Eshun's concept of "chronopolitical" (2003: 291) artistic intervention may provide a more accurate model, in which "science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present" (2003: 289).

And for all that Ra seemed at times to consciously set himself up in opposition to Christian religious teaching that he regarded as reactionary, he did not reject Christianity. Certainly, as Graham Lock notes, "making the vision real was a central impulse in Sun Ra's performances. . . . His outer space utopia was offered as an alternative to the mythic space usually invoked by those means, i.e. the Christian Heaven" (Lock 2010: 31), but Lock also identifies facets of Ra's mythology/reality as directly analogous to Afro-Baptist practices and conversion experiences:

For example, many of the converts describe being taken to heaven, often by flying through the air or by travelling along a very narrow path: Sun Ra's story of his initial visit to what he identified as another planet incorporates both the elements of flying *and* of travelling along a narrow route (2010: 32).

The parallels can be traced further, and are often compelling. For Lock, they serve the dual purpose of establishing a possible concrete reality at the root of Ra's tales of alien abduction, but also and more importantly identifying the significance of Ra's science fiction iconography as a *representation* of established spiritual/religious models. The implication is that Ra's "antipathy to the Black Church" (Lock 2010:31), often expressed in terms of frustration at a refusal in those quarters to acknowledge the concrete reality of rapid change in the space age, was founded primarily on formal rather than spiritually fundamental points of difference.

In dub and other Jamaican musical forms, the language and imagery of the Old Testament seems to remain closer to the surface, to never be as completely reimaged as in its integration into Ra's mythology. Nonetheless, we can identify similar re-purposing of Christian sources, and a similar intent to revise the power structures that were often attendant upon them. Where Ra told audiences "You've outlived the Bible. Which was your scenario. You're in a science-fiction film now" (quoted in Lock 2010: 32), Lee "Scratch" Perry asserts "I am an extraterrestrial, not from another planet but from heaven" (quoted in Mottram 2007). Christian iconography as it manifests in reggae-derived musics including dub is of a vein which would doubtless appear strange, verging on the heathen at times to Amiri Baraka's American Puritans, but it is never expunged, never explicitly rejected, from "Chase The Devil" to The Congoes "Feast of the Passover" to Scientist's "Jerusalem Dub".

As has already been touched upon, the will to reimagine Christianity was already substantially present in Jamaican culture in the form of Rastafari. Michael Manley has

suggested that Rastafari provided a solution to the central problem of Christianity as a white person's religion, and therefore a tool of subjugation inseparable from the inhumanities of the slave trade:

Man has a deep need for religious conviction, and Rasta resolves the contradiction of a white man's God in a colonial society ... I think that the only Jamaican who truly knows who he is has to be the Rasta man (quoted in Sanders 1982: 59).

If we accept this assertion, the immediate implication is that the need to create an entirely new mythology to encompass the complexities of Afrodiasporic cultures' relationship to Christianity and to pre-Christian histories that drove Ra in the US was absent in Jamaica. Moreover, in Jamaica, in dub in general and Perry's work in particular, the ancient Africa of the Old Testament co-existed not only with adapted religious structures derived from the same source, such as Rasta and those of the Afro-Protestant Pocomania sect, but also, more visibly and immediately than in the US, with culturally distinct practices like Obeah (Veal 2007:142). The socially determined religious framework that dub existed within was arguably already considerably more muddled, plural and malleable than the one that Ra worked with, within and without.

However, alongside this differentiating factor, fundamental parallels between Ra's mythscience and Rasta are also evident. Particularly, we must observe a parallel with Ra, the exiled Saturnian, in Rasta's identification of its people as exiled from a homeland, both spiritually and physically (geographically), to which they must one day return. Furthermore, Ethiopianist and other Afrocentric movements existed in the U.S. and were hugely significant in shaping African American cultural and social identity through the '70s and beyond. Ra's work didn't emerge in a vacuum. More accurately, I feel the geographical distinction we must draw between our respective understandings of dub and the work of US-based Afrofuturist musicians as distinctive musics of exile is one of scale rather than distance.

If Rasta's Ethiopianist stance had its clear equivalents in the U.S., the thing that very clearly did not and could not happen was that those equivalents became intertwined with a musical form which came to dominate the entire cultural identity of the nation, as reggae did in Jamaica. The sheer scale of the North American popular cultural context that these elements existed within made such an exaggerated impact impossible, and inevitably, the more explicitly Afrocentric jazz became through the '60s and '70s, the further from the white American cultural mainstream it drifted. The near mono-cultural ubiquity of ska, rocksteady and later reggae-derived musics in Jamaican pop, in strange contradiction to the marginalized social status of Rastas there (Sanders 1982: 59), meant that the music, in rude health, inevitably transitioned to Britain with the migrants of the mid-twentieth century. That transition was central to the music latterly punching above its weight in terms of global cultural significance.

CORNER CREW DUB

So, through Rastafari we can understand dub as a music of exile, but an exile in some important respects distinct from the experience of African American Afrofuturist creators. Babylon, in common with slavery in the Caribbean *and* the US, is dystopia now, but it is a dystopia, which permits of only one resolution. Whereas some African Americans looked to the assertion of their Civil Rights in the US, or to the possibility of a separatist state within that nation as espoused by the Nation of Islam (Gardell 1996: 60), or in the case of Ra looked very much elsewhere, contemporaneous Jamaican Afro-consciousness looked only to a return to the source, to Africa, for deliverance. In this regard the closest parallel in the US to the position of Rastafari as expressed in dub is that of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). In the philosophy and active policy of the UNIA-ACL, the long term goal of "Africa for the Africans" (Garvey 1986: 68) was paired with an immediate, practical engagement with issues of social welfare. It is this same pairing, broadly speaking, that we might note in dub as a manifestation of Jamaican culture and Rastafari. It is perhaps the sense of Babylon as a universal condition escapable by a single route only, but ameliorable by positive action in the meantime, from which the strain of street-level social consciousness and comment in dub derives.

The importance of social commentary in the work pouring out of the Black Ark during the few extraordinarily productive years of its existence is apparent at a glance. So many of the Perry productions which endure in a global pop consciousness come from this place—"War In A Babylon" (1976), "Police and Thieves" (1977), "Life Is Not Easy" (1978). The impulse to tie this expansive music to gritty reality is omnipresent in dub, as expressed succinctly in the introduction to "Gimmie Mi Gun" by Dr. Alimantado:

The man can't say dat Iah!
 How the man mean I can't say dat?
 Then the police n'soldier deh deh far
 Then what! When a gunman backround di corner
 And a police n'soldier no deh deh
 We a go use fe defend I-self! Seen

According to what is going on in the world and society today
 That motivate me to do this song, I say. . . .
 (from *Best Dressed Chicken In Town*, 1978)

An increasingly unsettled and violent youth culture in Jamaica is frequently linked to the musical evolution of rocksteady and then reggae from ska, and then in those musics towards increased bass weight, more pensive moods, and harder rhythms. Dub is one of the end points of this aesthetic trajectory. Sullivan perceives the Jamaican pop soundworld as growing "more ominous as it soundtracked the emergence of the rude boys, Jamaica's first youth subculture" (Sullivan 2014: 22). But if the sense of threat evoked by the rise of street violence worked its

way into the sonic makeup of the music, the music-makers also responded with a tellingly specific brand of righteous morality in narrative content and themes.

For Michael Manley, the urgency of social messaging in Jamaican popular musics again derives, at least in part, from the backward gaze of Ethiopianist or Rastafarian beliefs. In this light, the preponderance of revolutionary motifs in the music of Bob Marley is understood thus: “Faith begins with an acceptance of the possibility of continuity. If you cannot survey a continuity into your own past, you cannot believe in a continuity into your own future. Marley had that faith” (Manley 1982:12).

On one level, the urge to street level social comment in these musics sits uneasily with certain canonical Afrofuturist modes. Kodwo Eshun notes the importance in Afrofuturist thought of attaining or retaining “a possibility space which leaves behind or moves away from traditional notions of black culture as based on the street, for instance, based on traditional notions of masculinity, based on traditional notions of ethnicity. It’s a boredom with those ideas” (2006: 10). *Literal* comment on the violence, inequity, even just the mundane specifics of life as a black American is certainly relatively scarce in the music which defines Afrofuturism as canon or concept. Even as the lineage extends to contemporary alternative hip-hop this conceptual marker remains significant. Reviewing Shabazz Palaces’ *Lese Majesty* for *The Wire* magazine, Hua Hsu notes that the presence of some (mild) old-school rap braggadocio is in “jarring” (2014: 51) contrast to a lyrical style otherwise characterized by “Afrofuturist dreaming and a swaggering commitment to its own alien language” (2014: 51). If the lyrical/narrative position of *Lese Majesty* needs to be understood in relation to both science fiction and the immediacy of hip-hop social comment, we can perhaps understand the reluctance of Shabazz Palaces and other contemporary artists to accept the Afrofuturist tag (Stannard 2015: 19). The iconoclastic model of Black Atlantic Futurism evinced by Eshun above permits no such compromise.

However, a second contemporary hip-hop example shows us that that model is not by any means the whole of the picture of Afrofuturism, and that the pairing of explicit Afrofuturist imagery and literal social comment can be successful. On *The Psychic World of Walter Reed*, Killah Priest combines these elements not just thematically across the course of the album, but often within a single rhyme:

Investigation found the macs and volts in his apartment
 The informant, mob cops, crime bosses
 And cover ups, FBI’s and flying saucers
 Watching night watch, online love affairs and true crimes
 Congregation of Masons showing new signs
 Government conspiracies
 The X9 hollow in the hands of this Killa Bee
 Jericho flesh build walls around my mind from a speck of dust
 To my exodus to the black holes to the nebulas
 (“New Reality”, 2013).

And still other examples can be found. A similar balance occurs throughout the recorded oeuvre of DOOM (formerly MF Doom), albeit with the direct science fiction references translocated to a superhero/supervillain mythology.¹ Even in the case of Tricky, whose lyrics often play with obfuscation and ambiguity, Alexander G. Weheliye observes that the absence of signifiers of “nonindividuated sociality . . . hardly provides a safety net from the real” (2005: 188).

Positioning Afrofuturist thought as oppositional to more grounded strains of social commentary is ultimately too simple anyway. For a central example to the contrary we might look to Sun Ra’s “Outerspace Employment Agency” from *Space is the Place* (1974), an unequivocal takedown of social stereotypes and systemic barriers to social justice. When Ra says in *Space is the Place*, “I hate your absolute reality” (see Coney 1974), he is neither dismissing nor rejecting the reality of black life, but rather those who would absolutize it to the mundane. The “Outerspace Employment Agency” seen in this light becomes more than satire, even a formative example of the principle identified by NK Jemisin (quoted in Womack’s *Afrofuturism*) as “art as real world planning” (Womack 2013: 177). Beyond this, the urge to kick against the dissatisfactory in the world was in the DNA of the music itself, a driving force of Ra’s direction of his musicians: “Play some fire on it,’ Sun Ra would tell his musicians. ‘If you’re not mad at the world, you don’t have what it takes” (Golberg 2014).

Returning to dub, perhaps the aforementioned spectre of an increasingly troubled youth culture hanging over dub music from its inception should form part of our understanding of key musical statements from another prominent dub futurist: Scientist. Scientist’s dubs on *Scientist Meets the Space Invaders* are markedly hard-edged by comparison to Lee Perry’s organic mulch or even Tubby’s more technically rigorous mixes. This can be explained in part by advances in technology in the years immediately following the late ‘70s heyday of those latter giants, but that’s only part of the picture. Creative production choices like Scientist’s use of densely mixed, hard-toned and markedly short reverbs in the place of Tubby’s de-tensioned springs or Perry’s swirling echoes point to a conceptual intent behind the toughness of these dubs too. Bass is thickened with chorus and flanging effects, the comforting familiarity of guitar and organ harmony is absent for long periods, and where more expansive delays are employed, as at the opening of “Time Warp”, high feedback values produce an immediate and aggressive distorted crunch. Noting these choices alongside song titles like “Laser Attack”, “De Materialize” and “Super Nova Explosion” and that iconic cover art featuring Scientist locked in explosive battle with pixelated alien foes, extraterrestrials in Scientist’s world seem to be aggressors to be repulsed.

This is of course in contrast to some canonical Afrofuturist music, perhaps primarily to the “invitational” mode (Whitehead 2010: 25) of Sun Ra’s position as an alien himself, wherein the alien is necessarily a positive signifier. Or, see also Model 500’s trailblazing techno masterwork “No UFO’s” (1985): “They say there is no hope / They say, ‘No UFOs’ / Why is no head held high? / Maybe you’ll see them fly”. Scientist’s aliens are a *them* beaming down to *us*, but with violent intent, and they certainly haven’t been invited. A similar positioning of extraterrestrials negatively, as aggressors, does appear elsewhere in Afrofuturist music.

We can connect Scientist's hard, combative dub to the excoriating techno-blitzkrieg of Mad Mike/Underground Resistance's "Death Star" (1992), or to the generally ambivalent, fear-inflected representation of extraterrestrials in Rammellzee's elaborate mythscience or Kool Keith's work as Dr. Octagon (see *Dr. Octagonecologist*, 1997).

It may be a stretch of the imagination to suggest that in the preservative echoes of dub, we observe what Walter Benjamin describes as a need to "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (cited in Weheliye, 2005: 79). However, it may be possible to assert that like Rammellzee's unique modes of creation, a production like *Meets the Space Invaders* (1981) arrives simultaneously from a place of immediacy, a specific social present, as well as from a science-fictional, quantum infinity stretching between past and future.

DUB COME SAVE ME

All of the above can carry us so far. We can learn a lot about the foundations of dub by understanding its relationship to religion, to Jamaican youth and street culture, to sound systems and dancehall. We can get a sense of the complicated contexts that spawned *Super Ape* and *King Tubby's Meets Rockers Uptown*. And by extension we can map the many connections and disconnections between dub and what we might identify as an African American Afrofuturist musical lineage. Within the discussion so far, I have made the attempt to tie these contextual considerations to the content of the music itself, and to understand the distinct styles of iconic producers in relation to environmental or social conditions. However, this approach has the potential to be reductive when misapplied or misunderstood, as it may fail to recognize dub's development towards abstraction rather than emotive representation or lyrical narrative. This is a significant shortcoming when, ultimately, so much of dub's magic resides in its refusal of narrative and its assertion of sound as pure sound, not sound as signifier.

If we talk about dub, then, we need to find our way back to the sound itself. Sullivan notes, that "although dub was, and is, more or less a fluid process with no rigid rules, certain sonic tropes are recognizably consistent when tracing its development. Chief among them are reverb and delay (echo)" (Sullivan 2014: 9). Whilst we can understand echo as a type of memory, what Mark Fisher calls "technologised time" (2013: 47), perhaps even as a retaking of a cultural space which was colonized, we should also allow ourselves to understand these "sonic tropes" as sound—and sound that speaks without needing explanation. When Ian Penman observes that "Dub's sub-sonic echo is no mere FX—it is the effect proper of a certain subjective view of the world: the dark sonic mirror reflection of a Rasta's phantasmal worldview" (1995: 39), it is perhaps regrettable that he does not quite pursue this line far enough. The *sub*-sonic echo at hand (see also Weheliye 2005: 92) is the historical echo and the social echo. But the audible echo, the sonic echo is "no mere FX" either—it is the substance of this music, at its very core, and an objective reality as well as a subjective one. Julian Henriques notes the significance of this material aspect, stating that "Dub's musical aesthetic can be described as an excavation of the material and energetic qualities of sound, removing all but the essential drum and base [sic], to create an echoic space in the music for the listener to enter" (2014: 197).

Penman's concern seems to be that this reading of dub makes it vulnerable to appropriation, to being "written of/off as if it were purely and simply a formal musical device which can be lifted and appliquéd willy-nilly" (1995: 38). But to emphasize the purely sonic in dub is to emphasize its abstractness, ultimately its confounding, complex otherness. When Tubby and others built a new form on the spectral foundations of Byron Smith's inadvertent *removal of the song from a song* (Sullivan 2014: 7), the effect was not to simplify the music any more than Malevich's "Black Square" (1915) simplified painting. I would argue that dub's untethering of sound ultimately makes it more complicated and irreducible, as well as adaptable, fundamentally plastic, perpetually in transformation—but harder to "lift" because it is harder to grasp.

If we accept dub as focusing to a considerable degree on sound as sound, this facet in conjunction with its technological origin makes diversification inevitable:

Technology was responsible for the birth of dub and has stayed crucial to its development. By the time producers and engineers had started engaging with dub outside of Jamaica, they were already using new, or different, equipment and methods compared to their Kingston counterparts (Sullivan 2014: 215).

Questions of where the diversification of dub as a cohesive form ends and the appropriation and assimilation of its tropes into other forms begins, are complex and ultimately subjective. Sullivan goes on to say that the technology-derived plasticity of dub "created a tension between those who viewed dub as a genre specific to 1970s Kingston, and those who believed it should use the new technologies to innovate" (2014: 215), but this is probably a moot point. Artists that we might identify as carrying dub forward necessarily do so in circumstances radically different from those of its inception, technologically and socially—but the dub echo as fundamental sound object (not effect or ornament) means that dub is most assuredly Roots Manuva, Portishead, Tricky, The Bug, The Pop Group, Burial just as it is Tubby, Jammy, Scientist or Scratch. In short, dub is its own sonic diaspora, a shifting world of sound that transcends geographical, social and ethical borders—in Paul Sullivan's phrase, a "meta-virus" (2014: 11).

My initial unease around the treatment of dub in Afrofuturist analysis, noted in the introduction to this essay, stemmed in part from the fact that the term "Afrofuturism" only emerged in the early 1990's (Dery 1994: 180), as a retroactive descriptor for a body of work dating back several decades prior. The danger that I perceived in this was that its discourse would be curatorial, and the half century-spanning diasporic forms in question would be simplified so that they could be ringfenced. However, just as dub has evolved, engaging with different musics and taking on different meanings, so has Afrofuturism endlessly diversified, not just as a concept, but as a living creative movement. Womack's 2013 survey considered divergences such as D. Scot Miller's Afro-surrealism (2013: 165), which have emerged since Dery's "Black to the Future" (1994). Moreover, as with the echo in dub, a key function of Afrofuturism is the disordering of linear time. An attempt to isolate the rhizomic structure that is Afrofuturism in a moment in time, or to a specific historical period overlooks this key function. I'm reminded of Paul Gilroy's assessment of Africentric assertions of cultural

anteriority: “The anteriority of African civilisation is asserted not in order to escape this linear time but in order to claim it and thus subordinate its narrative of civilisation to a different set of political interests without even attempting to change the terms themselves” (1993: 191). Very clearly, Afrofuturism attempts to change the terms.

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Afrofuturism and dub. An echo back and forth that changes with each iteration. The feedback turned up high, distortion of the image on the tape. Sun Ra and Lee “Scratch” Perry, “alien doppelgangers”.² Not the same, but connected, complicit. If singular conclusions evade us here, it is because we’re speaking of musical worlds built to resist absolutes, where commonalities do not preclude distinctiveness and distinctiveness does not imply fragmentation:

The very least which this music and its history can offer us today is an analogy for comprehending the lines of affiliation and association which take the idea of the diaspora beyond its symbolic status as the fragmentary opposite of some imputed racial essence (Gilroy 1993: 95).

But between the lines, or traversed by them, something else too. Not an absence, but an expression of potential: echoic space.

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NOTES

- 1 The supervillain mythology referred to here is central to DOOM albums including *Born Like This* (2009) and *Madvillainy* (2004), the latter a collaborative project with Madlib released under the name Madvillain.
- 2 tobias c. van Veen, personal communication with the author (by email), 22 April 2015.

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