Hermeticism Contra Hermeneutics: Kodwo Eshun's Afrofuturism and the Challenges of Black Abstraction

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1.   Contemporary black radical thought raises stimulating challenges for many of the dominant conceptions of referentiality interrogated by this special issue of *L'Atelier*. From the lived experience of black social life emerge *uses* of "blackness" as a strategic abstraction,[1] a politicized weapon, and an aesthetic intensifier; uses that are not always reducible to a symmetrical relationship between word and world. Strategic uses of "blackness" share similar critical terrain with postcolonial theory's antipathy towards facile or pseudo-universalistic forms of communication. Postcolonial re-readings of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for example, insist that the subversive value of the character of Caliban lies in his refusal to speak the language of the master, to reject the forms of communication enforced by European colonizers (Prospero) and embrace speaking in indecipherable tongues.[2] Similarly, writers such as Édouard Glissant framed the antagonism between colonizer and colonized in terms of enlightenment and obscurity.[3] The idea of subversively embracing obscure, secretive modes of communication extends from major theorists of the postcolonial and the Black Atlantic to modern American hip hop artists like the Wu Tang Clan and MF Doom who use forms of public secrecy to challenge and disrupt easy consumption. In this article, I wish to examine the uses of secrecy and opaque mythologies within the Afrofuturist writing of Kodwo Eshun. Eshun is an academic whose research deals with critical theory and cultural studies, frequently linking contemporary cultural production to the legacy of the Black Atlantic.[4] He has also published an eclectic variety of writing which uses academic concepts in more journalistic and other non-academic settings. Eshun's critical writing is particularly pertinent for our concerns because it offers productive and provocative ways of thinking about referentiality, as raised by this special issue. Eshun's writing engages with art and music which often carries a fetish for secrecy (exemplified by hidden identities of performers), opacity and obscurity (where a literally "dark" aesthetic is combined with intellectually challenging material and abundance of obscure references that make understanding or

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1   My use of the term "strategic abstraction" is partially indebted to M. N. Crawford, "The Diasporic Power of Black Abstraction". *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 42-43 (2018): 44-56.
2   See for example, A. Césaire's *A Tempest*.
3   See for example É. Glissant, *Carribean Discourse: Selected Essays*.
4   Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic is a major influence on Afrofuturism and will be referenced in the latter part of this essay.

clear illumination particularly difficult). Extensive sub-cultural referencing means that the listener/ reader is confronted with the challenge and invitation to decode. Eshun's writing rises to this challenge but in a highly conflicted way. Decoding is a hermeneutical activity. And while this is often necessary, Eshun's writing often resists what he sees as the hermeneutical tendency to uncover hidden truth contents or reveal substantial meanings beneath signification. Eshun's writing pushes back against the moment of hermeneutical revelation.

2.   Interviewed by *The Wire* magazine in 2010 for his work with the art collective the Otolith Group, he framed his interpretive vision in terms of this tension:

> The hermeneutics is the drive to interpret, to analyse and decode; hermeticism is the drive towards a secret you initiate people into. If it's a hermetic project, then you don't invite people to decode […] you invite people to join with you in the secret. If it's hermeneutics, you invite people to decode.[5]

These tensions are evident throughout his work. However, his rejection of hermeneutics in his earlier Afrofuturist writing sometimes leads to problematically de-historicizing conclusions, a problem I will critically interrogate in the latter part of this article. The most extensive example of his Afrofuturist writing is his 1998 book *More Brilliant than the Sun*. I will begin by giving an outline of the core ideas of Afrofuturism followed by a close-reading of Eshun's book, focusing on the weaponization of opacity and the antipathy to interpretation and conventional models of referentiality. The final part of the article will further elaborate upon the limitations of the Afrofuturist perspective, with the critical assistance of contemporary Black Studies and the work of Fred Moten in particular.

3.   It should be clarified that much of the work of Eshun, Moten and others I will be exploring is writing focused *on music*. This is pertinent for the provocative stance towards referentiality proposed by this special issue, because I will be arguing that what is unique about this music writing is not restricted to insights about music, per se, or popular culture, musicology or cultural history, but, rather, that writers like Eshun also use music as a mediator to achieve the kind of affective intensity *for writing* normally associated with musical experiences. As I will show, his writing does not simply describe or explain music to the reader. Instead, he seeks to enter into the mythology built around music groups and participate in that mythology via an adventurous writing style that seeks to have similar affective effects on the reader as the music would on the listener. It seeks to provoke disorientation and travel far from referents, origins or any possibility of stable contextualization.

5   K. Eshun in D. Walmsley, "The Otolith Group", 29.

4.   Before close-reading Eshun's work, I will start by tracing some of the background of "Afrofuturism". Afrofuturism rose to critical prominence in the nineteen nineties when a number of cultural critics started identifying trends in black science fiction which had been present, but without as much theoretical articulation, for decades. Key texts include Greg Tate's cultural criticism for American magazines such as *Village Voice*, collected in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk* (1992), the cultural critic Mark Dery's essay "Black to the Future" printed as part of *Flame Wars* (1993), and Mark Sinker's essay "Loving the Alien" (1992) for the music magazine *The Wire*, a magazine in which Eshun would also publish regularly. These critics drew attention to the ways in which black writers and musicians were interested in science fiction as a form that grapples with the legacy of slavery and the ongoing racism of American society, as well as offering visions of radically different worlds. In music, Sun Ra is seen as one of the central figures. The jazzman created a mythology of himself as a cosmic messenger from outer space, a self-proclaimed alien who came to Earth from Saturn. His cosmic aesthetics and mythology would be compared to Lee Scratch Perry's dub music and George Clinton's funk. The aesthetics of estrangement would also be compared to free jazz records by Ornette Coleman, Alice Coltrane and others.

5.   In Sinker's reading of this line of black science fiction, one of the core ideas is the tendency to depict the present as post-apocalyptic: "It's After the End of the World", according to one of Sun Ra's song titles. This idea resonates more broadly with other black, diasporic and postcolonial contexts, where colonial histories have been described in directly apocalyptic terms. For example, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Denowski write that "for the native people of the Americas, *the end of the world already happened* – five centuries ago. To be exact, it began on October 12, 1492".[6] For African-Americans, the transatlantic slave trade is apocalyptic, and in a sense, it could be said that Afrofuturism is guided by a core question within that post-apocalyptic eschatology: what aesthetic form is adequate to grapple with that traumatic and horrific event? Where different forms of social realism are conventionally seen as the aesthetic forms closest to documenting historical truth, Afrofuturists respond that such apparently "realist" aesthetics simply do not suffice to deal with apocalyptic events and historical trauma on such a scale. Science fiction, often viewed as far-fetched escapism, is re-interpreted in this context as far closer to historical truth. In particular, black science fiction is reconsidered as a kind of realism. In one of the most significant documents of Afrofuturism, John Akomfrah's docu-fiction *The Last Angel of History*, Kodwo Eshun (as an interviewee in the film) takes up Greg Tate's idea that black people *live* the estrangement science fic-

6   E. Viveiros de Castro and D. Denowski, *The Ends of the World*, 104.

tion writers describe. African-American history is reread in light of science fiction:

> All the stories of alien abduction, all the stories about alien spaceships taking subjects from one planet and taking them to another, and genetically transforming them, Greg is really saying…well, look, all those things that you read about alien abduction and genetic transformation: they already happened! How much more alien do you think it gets than slavery, than entire mass populations moved…and forcibly dematerialized? It doesn't really get much more alien than that.[7]

Mark Sinker frames it similarly in his landmark article on the subject. "The ships landed long ago", he writes, "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*."[8]

6.   This link between slave ships and spaceships is crystallized by the musican 7even Thirty in his song "The Problem" when he sings "If I could jump from a slave-ship to a spaceship I sure would." This exemplifies the core Afrofuturist tension: to replace a dystopian alienation (the effects of slavery and institutional racism) with another kind of alienation that would be utopian. But where Afrofuturism contains elements of utopianism, it is not a straightforward or comforting one. When utopianism arises it is borne out of the idea that there is no point of "return" and no wish for any integration. For black people in America, the idea of returning to some idealized pre-modern vision of Africa is patently absurd. For black radicals, integration within the liberal-capitalist American state is no solution to institutional racism either. A science fiction imaginary is thus often used as an implicit critique of conventional forms of anti-racism, a rejection of humanism (and facile forms of universalism), and the embrace of anti-humanism. To extrapolate some political-historical comparisons, if the Civil Rights movement was in large part guided by demands for human rights, the political logic of Afrofuturist aesthetics would be to refuse to enter into a dialectical relationship where the "slave" would ask for something from the "master". In this sense, it would have closer resonances with the radicalism and autonomy of sections of the Black Power movement. Afrofuturists do not want "recognition" from and integration with the world *as it is*; they invent entirely new worlds.

7.   One can find a unity of politics and aesthetics in the mode of expression: transparent or easily contextual referentiality is negated in favour of indecipherability and opacity. In this regard, Sinker identifies a schism in the history of black music in America. On the one hand, what he calls the "af-

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7   Eshun in J. Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History.*
8   M. Sinker, "Loving the Alien". *The Wire* 96, 33.

firmative soul-gospel aspect" has always recognized that the post-apocalyptic reality of black people in America was and is a survivable disaster, as long as, even after losing everything, basic decency and dignity remain intact. However, Sinker identifies another strain of music with a less humanist message:

> The other part – as told so obliquely by Ra, Coltrane, Braxton, Delany, Ishmael Reed and doubtless many others less easily seen than this – is that staying true to the best in yourself may mean when everything can so cunningly imitate everything else, talking in dark, crazed, visionary tongues for a season. (33)

The culture Sinker references includes Sun Ra and John Coltrane's free jazz as well as the black postmodernism of Ishmael Reed and Samuel R. Delany. I want to draw attention in particular to the description of the mode of communication – "dark, crazed, visionary" – as essential. Afrofuturist aesthetics are conceived as obscure, not completely perceptible, lying outside established norms and bordering on the psychedelic and often religious in the appeal to ancient truths and visions of far-flung worlds. Furthermore, the kind of world-building going on in these challenging aesthetic forms demands the reader/listener meet on new and unfamiliar terms, implying that familiar frames of reference be left behind. In *The Wire* magazine in 1995, Ian Penman's article "Black Secret Tricknology" develops this idea, echoing Sinker's framework in its description of an "Other" tradition of black music which embraces the building of often indecipherable and impenetrable aesthetic worlds. The turn towards the indecipherable comes from a suspicion towards the claim that "public" pronouncements of oppositionality serve any purpose. Penman says that such "Sci-fi shamen" felt that:

> you rather had to find or reclaim a language of your own – encoded, murky, stellar – from out of the sky or earth where you found yourself, from out of myriad 'discredited' pasts of futures…If you were going to be consigned to society's margins anyway, then why not speak (in) a marginal tongue? Speak a language which people would have to come to on *your* terms, not theirs?[9]

Kodwo Eshun was already developing a similar conception of Afrofuturism as an aesthetics of opacity, defined by what Penman refers to as "encoded, murky, stellar" marginal languages. In his 1998 book *More Brilliant than the Sun* Eshun takes these ideas to their extreme and uses the energy of the music in question to develop a writing style based on similarly murky and quasi-psychedelic forms of expression. Eshun sets up his own conception of Afrofuturism in a way that is firstly defined by an antipathy towards authenticity. He addresses the ways in which writing on black music usually

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9   I. Penman, "Black Secret Tricknology". *The Wire* 133, 37.

contextualizes it through emphasizing its basis in the lived experience of communities. The presence of mantras such as "keepin' it real" reinforces the idea of staying true to one's roots, repeatedly referencing the streets and neighborhoods from which the performer has come. Eshun refers to this tendency as a "hermeneutics of the street".[10] In contrast, Eshun is interested in aesthetics which break with any devotion to roots and authenticity. His writing valorizes technology, abstraction and shape-shifting, unstable identities. These themes recur throughout his book's use of various music styles but it is most evident in his discussion of techno, characterized as it is by the synthetic and artificial. According to Eshun, techno disappears from the street, the place "widely assumed to be the engine of black popculture", and rejects the "compulsory logic of representation and will to realness."[11] The rejection of logics of representation is also evident when Eshun complains of how hip hop is naively considered in terms of content, in terms of the political "message" of the lyrics, for example. Against the prioritization of content, Eshun begins from the formal dimension, focusing on scratch, rhythm and beats. His language evokes these formal aspects through military metaphors and appeals to the seduction of mythology. When describing early hip hop artist Rammellzee, he writes:

> Abstracting HipHop into a series of formal operations is the first stage in Rammellzee's militarization of beat culture. His aim is to turn the abstract machine into a conceptual WarMachine. This is why he describes himself not as a producer or an MC but as 'a mathematician and an engineer' who 'builds weapons for a living'. (03 [032])

In a sense, what Eshun characterizes as Rammellzee's aims with music parallels Eshun's aims with his own writing in this book, turning abstract ideas into "conceptual WarMachines". Similarly, in an interview for the book, Eshun says that he wants to stop calling himself a "writer":

> For the book I'm just going to call myself a concept engineer…Because that's what I'm really doing. I'm engineering, grasping fictions, grasping concepts, grasping hallucination from my own area and translating them into another one, mixing them and seeing where we go with them. I use these different concepts to probe new areas of experience, to anticipate and fastforward different explorations into new fields of perceptions which are always there, but whose strength lies in that they don't exist in traditional mainstream terms. Traditional mainstream terms are still completely bound up with the literary… (A [186])

There are strong anti-referential implications again. Rather than "communicate with" the reader, it

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10 K. Eshun, "An Interview with Kodwo Eshun by Geert Lovink": <https://v2.nl/archive/articles/an-interview-with-kodwo-eshun>
11 K. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 07[117] (Eshun's book uses an unconventional pagination system).

is as if he wants to challenge them with an indecipherable noise which cannot be immediately "interpreted". For Eshun, "the literary" carries connotations of interpretation. It is seen as conservative because it implies a safe distance between the critic, the creator and the artwork/literary object. The insistence on the critic's creative role and the translation of concepts into unfamiliar terrain is instead intended to unsettle. The emphasis on "engineering" "fictions" and "translating" concepts across domains, from the oral/aural to the written is bound up with scrambling codes, producing affective intensity, and casting doubt upon the existence of a stable literary or epistemological truth-referent. His account of "the literary" also includes the postmodern, but in quite generalizing and strawman terms. In a related passage he describes quotation, citation and the idea of ironic distance as also being "far too literary. That assumes a distance which by definition volume overcomes" (A [188]). For Eshun, the implications of postmodern literary theory go out the window if you are being "swallowed up by sound." Eshun uses these ideas to suggest a different conception of writing. He conceives of it as a technology which can be repurposed against either traditional or more postmodern conceptions and against transparency or directly communicative purposes. The language is combative partially because what is at stake is a "battle of perception". He proposes a view of writing as a technology "adapted and encrypted by successive religious regimes for warfare: the Roman, the Christian, the medieval, the Gothic, Words, letters, signs, symbols are all weapons, stolen, ornamented and wrongly titled to hide and manipulate their meaning" (03 [032]).

8.   Eshun's Afrofuturist writing is thus characterized by militarized use of opaque, encoded languages as a means of intensifying and linguistically reproducing the effects and affects of the music he is writing about. He describes this conception of Afrofuturism with reference to the Hollywood action films *Predator* and *Predator 2*. In these films the protagonists have to discover how to use camouflage to combat the lethal alien Predator at its own game. *Predator 2* (1990) was of particular interest because the jungle setting of the original film is replaced by an urban setting: the near-future quasi-dystopian Los Angeles which, in its social breakdown, is depicted as a kind of jungle. The Predator, an alien life form from another planet, wreaks havoc across the city, partially enabled by its powers of invisibility and camouflage. The hero of the film, an LAPD detective played by Danny Glover, is trying to find and kill the Predator – the only way of the saving the city – but he comes into conflict with a team of scientific engineers from the FBI who are also tracking the alien. The problem is that they want to catch the Predator and learn from its alien powers. Scientific discovery, even if it means a dance with death, takes precedence over protecting the population. With reference to hip hop producers the Bomb Squad, Eshun compares the role of the cultural engineer to

that of the engineers in the film hoping "to turn the alien into killer app. The engineer is the lethal conceptechnician, not forming a group but a 'technical assault squadron' all the more lethal for its anonymity. Deadliness lies in invisibility, in this retreat from the light into a public secrecy and private publicity" (07 [111]). Similarly, Eshun compares his role as a writer/theorist to that of the musicians he writes about. He sees the combination of dj and writer as different kinds of "remixology at work" and "all we're really doing is bringing writing and putting it onto the second deck and just accelerating it as much as a record" (A [189]). His writing thus feeds off and situates itself alongside musical experiences while also trying to stimulate readers with a rich set of ideas in terms that are both military and opaque, emphasizing the importance of myth and contradictory forms of "public secrecy" to obscure neat categorisation or interpretation.

9.   This desire to "turn the alien into killer app" recurs in different forms across Afrofuturism. Where the engineers in Predator 2 seek to repurpose the alien villain towards their own ends, Afro-futurists seek to repurpose experiences of *alien*ation away from their dystopian origins and into something transformative. The repurposing of alienation and the uses of opaque mythologies are perhaps best exemplified with the Detroit Techno group Drexicya who form a core part of Eshun's Afrofuturism. Their work sets up a thought experiment entailing science fiction ruminations upon the slaves traversing the Middle Passage. This is elaborated in the liner notes for their 1995 LP *The Quest*:

> Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A fetus in its mother's womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment.
>
> During the greatest holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant American slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air?
>
> Recent experiments have shown mice able to breathe liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and conclusive was a recent instance of a premature human infant saved from death by breathing liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs.
>
> These facts combined with reported sightings of gill men and swamp monsters in the coastal swamps of the Southeastern United States make the slave trade theory feasible[12]

Their music does not contain any lyrics, so these notes serve as the basis for a speculative narrative informing the music where, as Eshun writes they "use electronics to replay the alien abduction of

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12 Drexciya, *The Quest*, 1997.

slavery with a fictional outcome" (06 [084]). Track titles such as "Danger Bay" and "Bubble Metropolis" contribute to the narrative. But it is as if the listener is left frustrated, eager to know more about the story since there are no lyrics to develop it. Eshun writes "Their underwater paradise is hydroterritorialized into a geopolitical subcontinent mapped through cartographic track titles…". We can see an interesting tension emerge in Eshun's perspective here. Despite his antipathy to conventional forms of literary interpretation, passages like this betray the thrill of over-interpretation, extrapolating and speculating as much as possible based on minimal clues such as song titles. References to cartography and mapping recur in his writing, taunting the reader's doomed quest to situate what consistently recedes from visibility. The move towards invisibility invites the interpretive act which is taunted and mocked at the same time. Eshun focuses on other groups who, like Drexicya similarly shroud themselves in opaque mythologies: the camouflage Ninjas and Hong Kong martial arts inspirations of the Wu Tang Clan, or the uses of camouflage in performances by the Underground Resistance. In an historical era characterized by the rise of surveillance, secrecy is not only a weapon but a right to be insisted upon against totalitarian demands that everything be made visible. "Every visible power is threatened", Eshun writes with reference to Paul Virilio, so the Underground Resistance's Black Power is therefore "undetectable, not identifiable, invisible, not recognizable, stealthy, not public. Like the camouflage ninjas of Wu Tang Clan proteges Killarmy, stealth and undetectibility are quiet weapons for use in silent wars" (07 [122]).

10.   This weaponization of opacity throughout black cultural expression is again infused with the historical consciousness of slavery. Enslaved populations famously communicated to each other via songs and coded references and languages that the masters could not understand. As Henry-Louis Gates has written, "Black People have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western culture". Groups like Drexciya carry this historical consciousness in their use of myths to communicate in way that cannot be fully decoded or assimilated by mainstream culture. It is as if the truths of the ancient past are mined for the basis of alternative futuristic mythology. In his 2003 article "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism", Eshun develops this idea with reference to the central Afrofuturist document in which he played a major role, the John Akomfrah film *The Last Angel of History*. In this docu-fiction, "African sonic processes are here reconceived as telecommunication, as the distributed components of a code to a black secret technology that is the key to a diasporic future. The notion of a black secret technology that allows Afrofuturism to reach a point of speculative accelera-

tion".[13]

11.   The implications of this for writing and reading seem to simultaneously point towards opposing directions, because the reference to "telecommunication" is about clues, codes and keys to unlocking a technological secret accelerating us towards futuristic aesthetic intensity, but at the same time there is a suggestion that such unlocking will never take place because its secrets endure and remain hermetically sealed. This tension between hermeneutics and hermeticism, of hermeticism acting against hermeneutics, crystallizes Eshun's complex conception of Afrofuturism, as mentioned in the introduction. To elaborate on this contradiction, on the one hand there is a compulsion to discover, interpret, and hermeneutically reveal the truth of this "black secret technology", to decipher the code. But on the other hand, the secret technology facilitates a "speculative acceleration" into futuristic imaginaries that embrace abstraction and retain little desire to be grounded in ontological truths. The persistence of the unknowable (a "secret technology", for example) as unknowable intensifies the aesthetic thrill. Theorists of secrecy including Fredric Jameson and Jacques Derrida agree on this basic point: the value of the persistence of the secret *as such*, resisting any final moment of unveiling or revealing.[14] Eshun is thus celebrating the thrill of decoding simultaneously shrouded in occult praxes in which it sometimes seems there is no essential truth-content to be decoded. In the case of Afrofuturism, its aesthetics of opacity and abstraction are rarely smooth and completely deterritorialized[15] because the markers of historical trauma are almost always present in some form. This entanglement of uprooting semiotic acceleration with historical trauma is further explained by Eshun with reference to Greg Tate who suggested that the bar between the signifier and the signified could be understood as standing for the Middle passage that had separated *signification* (meaning) from *sign* (letter): "This analogy of racial terror with semiotic process spliced the world of historical trauma with the apparatus of structuralism. The two genealogies crossbred with a disquieting force that contaminated the latter and abstracted the former".[16]

12.   However, what is interesting and sometimes problematic about Eshun's writing is that while it obviously has an acute awareness of Afrofuturism's historical backdrop, there are many passages which demonstrate hostility toward historical and political thinking. His embrace of what I have characterized as opacity and invisibility sometimes gets taken to extreme ends in passages where

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13 K. Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism", 295.
14 See for example, J. Derrida and M. Ferraris, *Le Gout du secret*, Paris: Hermann, 2018.
15 I use the vocabulary of Deleuze and Guattari because, as well as being appropriate for discussing this issue, their work has been particularly influential on Eshun.
16 K. Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism", 297.

"identity" and historical context are too easily dismissed. For example, where he celebrates the negation of authenticity in electronic music, its indifference to the street, he writes of how "Machine Music therefore arrives as unblack, unpopular, and uncultural, an unidentified Audio Object with no ground, no root and no culture" (07 [131]). The taste for technology leads to a somewhat naïve faith in technology's neutrality, as if technology escapes the muck of history and its traces, as if it were simply objective or neutral. The implications of this technophilia for even more difficult questions concerning identity and history are evident elsewhere when Eshun writes:

> One side effect of the alien discontinuum is the rejection of any and all notions of a compulsory black condition. Where journalism still insists on a solid 'blackness'. *More Brilliant* dissolves this solidarity with a corpse into a *fluid*arity maintained and exacerbated by soundmachines. (00 [-003])

13.   This conception of anti-essentialist black expression warrants consideration from a number of perspectives. The above passage, and other comparable moments, suggest an understandable reaction against simplistically political and sociological interpretations of black cultural expression. As Toni Morrison has remarked "Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious rigorous art form." Black culture is too often reduced to simply a benign anti-racist message rather than being aesthetically challenging and disruptive on its own terms. And Eshun's above quote could thus be read as kicking against those kinds of aesthetically conservative and politically patronizing tendencies, of narrowly sociopolitical contextualization in street culture and essentialist "solid" notions of "blackness".

14.   Relatedly, another intellectual orientation to consider is the influence of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, a work which considers the transatlantic slave trade as foundational to modernity. Gilroy focuses on *diaspora* and the idea of a black Atlantic culture, arguing that the implications of this history have resulted in hybrid rather than fixed identities. This has implications for culture too, undermining cultural nationalism and "the overintegrated conceptions of culture which present immutable, ethnic differences as an absolute break in the histories and experiences of 'black' and 'white' people."[17] Against ethnic essentialism it forces us to confront the real nature of identity as being characterized by creolization, metissage and hybridity. He offers a critique of ethnic absolutism which obscures the cultural legacies that emerge from "processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents." Gilroy's work thus strongly resonates with writers like Eshun who develop a vision of black modernist abstraction, but where the "black" is not stably anchored in identity, or in

17 P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 2.

essential notions of "blackness", but instead hybridity and dislocation. The modernism of the Black Atlantic counter-culture is also crucial here. Eshun cites Toni Morrison who takes up this point in an interview with Paul Gilroy where she argues that "the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern."[18]

15.   Viewing African-Americans as "the first moderns" informs the counter-cultural modernity which Afrofuturism asserts. A noteworthy example of this is found in Akomfrah's *The Last Angel of History*, when the Data-Thief links Detroit Techno to the blues music of Robert Johnson. Where the blues had often been seen as a "traditional" form in opposition to conventional notions of the modern, Akomfrah's film places it in an Afrofuturist continuum, described as a "technology", a "black secret technology" comparable to futuristic techno in a lineage of black counter-cultural modernism.

16.   However, as I have been suggesting, Eshun's writing sometimes smoothens out, or glosses over, the tensions and frictions constitutive of such modernism. Despite his highly seductive writing and ideas, an overzealous embrace of aesthetic abstraction leads to a slightly facile attitude towards historical complexity. At certain points, the complex interdependent relationship of politics and aesthetics constitutive of Afrofuturism is simplified into a kind of aesthetic accelerationism, at the expense of difficult political and historical thinking. The dismissal of "blackness" in favour of an anti-essentialist hybridity is indicative of this. Anti-essentialism is a crucial starting point for highlighting the ways in which race is a construct and fiction. But one of the formal complexities of anti-racist movements and solidarities is that racialized subjects are trapped in the position of assuming, to a certain extent, part of the fiction in order to combat it. In other words, racialized subjects must *identify* in solidarity with other racialized subjects as part of this *constructed* identity in order to collectively combat racism. There is nothing incoherent or hypocritical about this: it is simply an example of the recognition that one cannot magically exit from historical entanglement into a "colorblind" space of abstraction. What simplistic forms of anti-essentialism and celebrants of "hybridity" against "identity" sometimes overlook is that historical entanglement. The work of Fred Moten is highly instructive in this regard. He says that "Insofar as blackness comes from nothing it is something after all, the commonness of the improper."[19] His work offers a way of resisting essen-

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18 Morrison cited in Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism", 288.
19 F. Moten, *Stolen Life*, 26.

tialisations of blackness but also of resisting those anti-essentialisms which leave unthought the contradictions of historical situadedness. With reference to Fanon he writes that the refusal of blackness leaves unclaimed:

> an irremediable homelessness common to the colonized, the enslaved and the enclosed. That is to say that what is claimed in the name of blackness is an undercommon disorder that has always been there, that is retrospectively and retroactively *located* there, that is embraced by the ones who stay there while living somewhere else. Some folks relish being a problem.[20]

Moten's conception of "blackness" is not to insist on an essential grounding but on relentless disruption and evasion. It is described in terms of insurgent social life because, to paraphrase Moten, the assumption of blackness is about the refusal to be what the world of the political will not let black lives be. Rather than plead for recognition and integration, blackness (for Moten) is about embracing disruptive insurgency. It is bound up with experiences of being constantly policed, surveilled, managed, "cornered in a seemingly open space", but blackness also signifies how these experiences of confinement and containment are resisted through an evasive supplementarity, "an aesthetically and politically dangerous supplementarity, an internal exteriority waiting to get out".[21] For Moten, then, his conception of the political is not one where aesthetic adventurism is restrained for political responsibility. In this sense, his work is instructive in avoiding the kind of reductions which Eshun and Morrison rightly criticized. Moten is interested in blackness as supplementarity which evades capture. When diasporic hybridity is thought of in neat opposition to blackness, this leads to erasures and unfortunate simplifications, as Margo Natalie Crawford argues in her recent article "The Diasporic Power of Black Abstraction". Thinking about the tensions between lived experience and aesthetic practice, she writes of the uses of "black" as a "strategic abstraction":

> The use of 'black' as a powerful unifying concept that produces an *outer space* solidarity and alterative kinship created by choice (not birthplace or biology) is often erased when liminality (diasporic in-betweenness) is viewed as being antithetical to the project of Black studies and when the 1960s and 1970s black consciousness movements are viewed only as a facile nationalism and a desire for rootedness, not as a complex rooted wandering…[22]

Moten similarly refuses the antithesis of diasporic liminality and Black Studies. For him, on political and social terms this means a receptivity towards what he refers to as the insurgency of "black social life", while also on more aesthetic terms it means a commitment to difficult, opaque and ob-

20 F. Moten, "The Case of Blackness", 187.
21 F Moten, "Black Op", 1745.
22 MN Crawford, 48.

scure forms of expression, via methods which may seem abstract but which carry an ontological and historical weight. That will to elude interpretation and reading, the persistence of opacity found throughout Afrofuturism's, Afro-pessimism's and Black Optimism,[23] could also be described in the terms of Saidiya Hartman as a form of "black noise":

> … the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise – the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man.[24]

The suggested relation here between song and narrative, noise and opaque excess, and the insistence on the disruptive force of the latter bring us back to the guiding idea of this article: the challenges posed, by Afrofuturism and black radical theory, to conventional ideas of referentiality, and processes of world-making in antagonism with the world as it is. In a more recent interview, "Afrofuturism, Afro-pessimism and the Politics of Abstraction", Eshun expressed his frustration at the ways in which Afrofuturism has become popularized and reduced to a set of "tropes" of black science fiction which are legible and instantly readable. But Eshun still insists on the mystique: that interesting culture "should push back against you. It shouldn't be quite so legibly transparent. And the question of hermeticism is about that. It's about the work retreating from you when you go towards it".[25] Moten tends to give more explicit politicizations of these sorts of strategic moves. He celebrates the black "refusal in interpretation of interpretation's reparative and representational imperatives" but he reminds us that the refusal comes from "the ones who are refused the right to interpret at the militarized objecthood already compromised by the drama of subjection…".[26] Moten's work helps clarify some of the problems I have suggested in Eshun's perspective, but both theorists offer essential guides to textual disorientation. I have attempted to show how they challenge traditional codes of interpretation and referentiality through a kind of hermeticism working against hermeneutics, while interrogating some of the productive tensions encountered in their differing conceptions of the politics of opacity.

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23 Moten has referred to 'Black Optimism' in a number of his talks and articles. Afro-pessimism mainly refers to the work of Jared Sexton and Frank B. Wilderson III. See for example *Afro-pessimism*: *An Introduction*. Wracked and Dispatched, Minneapolis, 2017: https://rackedanddispatched.noblogs.org.
24 S Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", 12.
25 K Eshun, "Afrofuturism, Afro-Pessimism and the Politics of Abstraction", 8.
26 F Moten, *Stolen Life*, 8.

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