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Further Considerations on Afrofuturism

KODWO ESHUN

Imagine a team of African archaeologists from the future—some silicon, some carbon, some wet, some dry—excavating a site, a museum from their past: a museum whose ruined documents and leaking discs are identifiable as belonging to our present, the early twenty-first century. Sifting patiently through the rubble, our archaeologists from the United States of Africa, the USAF, would be struck by how much Afrodiasporic subjectivity in the twentieth century constituted itself through the cultural project of recovery. In their Age of Total Recall, memory is never lost. Only the art of forgetting. Imagine them reconstructing the conceptual framework of our cultural moment from those fragments. What are the parameters of that moment, the edge of that framework?

THE WAR OF COUNTERMEMORY

In our time, the USAF archaeologists surmise, imperial racism has denied black subjects the right to belong to the enlightenment project, thus creating an urgent need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence. This desire has overdetermined Black Atlantic intellectual culture for several centuries.

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To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble countermemories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity.

The Founding Trauma

In an interview with critic Paul Gilroy in his 1991 anthology *Small Acts,* novelist Toni Morrison argued 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. Instead of civilizing African subjects, the forced dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect.

Ongoing disputes over reparation indicate that these traumas continue to shape the contemporary era. It is never a matter of forgetting what it took so long to remember. Rather, the vigilance that is necessary to indict imperial modernity must be extended into the field of the future.

Futurism Fatigue

Because the practice of countermemory defined itself as an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten, the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counterfutures was understood as an unethical dereliction of duty. Futurological analysis was looked upon with suspicion, wariness, and hostility. Such attitudes dominated the academy throughout the 1980s.

For African artists, there were good reasons for disenchantment with futurism. When Nkrumah was deposed in Ghana in 1966, it signalled the collapse of the first attempt to build the USAF. The combination of colonial revenge and popular discontent created sustained hostility towards the planned utopias of African socialism. For the rest of the century, African intellectuals adopted variations of the position that Homi Bhabha (1992)

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termed "melancholia in revolt." This fatigue with futurity carried through to Black Atlantic cultural activists, who, little by little, ceased to participate in the process of building futures.

> *Imagine the archaeologists as they use their emulators to scroll through the fragile files. In their time, it is a commonplace that the future is a chronopolitical terrain, a terrain as hostile and as treacherous as the past. As the archaeologists patiently sift the twenty-first-century archives, they are amazed by the impact this realization had on these forgotten beings. They are touched by the seriousness of those founding mothers and fathers of Afrofuturism, by the responsibility they showed towards the not-yet, towards becoming.*

Control through Prediction

Fast forward to the early twenty-first century. A cultural moment when digitopian futures are routinely invoked to hide the present in all its unhappiness. In this context, inquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial. The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.

It is clear that power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively. Capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive, as it has done throughout the last century. Today, however, power also functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures.

In the colonial era of the early to middle twentieth century, avant-gardists from Walter Benjamin to Frantz Fanon revolted in the name of the future against a power structure that relied on control and representation of the historical archive. Today, the situation is reversed. The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow.

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SF CAPITAL

Power now deploys a mode the critic Mark Fisher (2000) calls *SF* (science fiction) *capital.* SF capital is the synergy, the positive feedback between future-oriented media and capital. The alliance between cybernetic futurism and "New Economy" theories argues that information is a direct generator of economic value. Information about the future therefore circulates as an increasingly important commodity.

It exists in mathematical formalizations such as computer simulations, economic projections, weather reports, futures trading, think-tank reports, consultancy papers—and through informal descriptions such as science-fiction cinema, science-fiction novels, sonic fictions, religious prophecy, and venture capital. Bridging the two are formal-informal hybrids, such as the global scenarios of the professional market futurist.

Looking back at the media generated by the computer boom of the 1990s, it is clear that the effect of the futures industry—defined here as the intersecting industries of technoscience, fictional media, technological projection, and market prediction—has been to fuel the desire for a technology boom. Given this context, it would be naïve to understand science fiction, located within the expanded field of the futures industry, as merely prediction into the far future, or as a utopian project for imagining alternative social realities.

Science fiction might better be understood, in Samuel R. Delany's statement, as offering "a significant distortion of the present" (*Last Angel of History* 1995). To be more precise, science fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian. Rather, in William Gibson's phrase, science fiction is a means through which to preprogram the present (cited in Eshun 1998). Looking back at the genre, it becomes apparent that science fiction was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present.

Hollywood's 1990s love for sci-tech fictions, from *The Truman Show* to *The Matrix,* from *Men in Black* to *Minority Report,* can therefore be seen as product-placed visions of the reality-producing power of computer networks, which in turn contribute to an explosion in the technologies they hymn. As New Economy ideas take hold, virtual futures generate capital. A subtle oscillation between prediction and control is being engineered in

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which successful or powerful descriptions of the future have an increasing ability to draw us towards them, to command us to make them flesh.

The Futures Industry

Science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow. Corporate business seeks to manage the unknown through decisions based on scenarios, while civil society responds to future shock through habits formatted by science fiction. Science fiction operates through the power of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility, while the scenario operates through the control and prediction of plausible alternative tomorrows.

Both the science-fiction movie and the scenario are examples of cybernetic futurism that talks of things that haven't happened yet in the past tense. In this case, futurism has little to do with the Italian and Russian avant-gardes; rather, these approaches seek to model variation over time by oscillating between anticipation and determinism.

> *Imagine the All-African Archaeological Program sweeping the site with their chronometers. Again and again, they sift the ashes. Imagine the readouts on their portables, indicators pointing to the dangerously high levels of hostile projections. This area shows extreme density of dystopic forecasting, levels that, if accurate, would have rendered the archaeologists' own existence impossible. The AAAP knows better: such statistical delirium reveals the fervid wish dreams of the host market.*

Market Dystopia

If global scenarios are descriptions that are primarily concerned with making futures safe for the market, then Afrofuturism's first priority is to recognize that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projection. African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on

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AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization.

These powerful descriptions of the future demoralize us; they command us to bury our heads in our hands, to groan with sadness. Commissioned by multinationals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), these developmental futurisms function as the other side of the corporate utopias that make the future safe for industry. Here, we are seduced not by smiling faces staring brightly into a screen; rather, we are menaced by predatory futures that insist the next 50 years will be hostile.

Within an economy that runs on SF capital and market futurism, Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia. There is always a reliable trade in market projections for Africa's socioeconomic crises. Market dystopias aim to warn against predatory futures, but always do so in a discourse that aspires to unchallengeable certainty.

The Museological Turn

For contemporary African artists, understanding and intervening in the production and distribution of this dimension constitutes a chronopolitical act. It is possible to see one form that this chronopolitical intervention might take by looking at the work of contemporary African artists such as Georges Adeagbo and Meshac Gaba. In the tradition of Marcel Broodthaers and Fred Wilson, both artists have turned towards museological emulation, thus laying bare, manipulating, mocking, and critically affirming the contextualizing and historicizing framework of institutional knowledge.

Gaba's "Contemporary Art Museum" is "at once a criticism of the museological institution as conceived in developed countries, as well as the utopian formulation of a possible model for a nonexistent institution. This dual nature, critical and utopian, is related to the artist . . . founding a structure where there isn't one, without losing sight of the limitations of existing models that belong to a certain social and economic order based in the harsher realities of domination" (Gaba 2002).

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PROLEPTIC INTERVENTION

Taking its cue from this "dual nature" of the "critical and utopian," an Afrofuturist art project might work on the exposure and reframing of futurisms that act to forecast and fix African dystopia. For the contemporary African artist of 2005, these projections of relentless social disaster contain certain conceptual implications.

The African artist that researches this dimension will find a space for distinct kinds of anticipatory designs, projects of emulation, manipulation, parasitism. Interpellation into a bright corporate tomorrow by ads full of faces smiling at screens may become a bitter joke at the expense of multinational delusions. The artist might reassemble the predatory futures that insist the next 50 years will be ones of unmitigated despair.

Afrofuturism, then, is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional.

This implies the analysis of three distinct but partially intersecting spheres: first, the world of mathematical simulations; second, the world of informal descriptions; and third, as Gilroy (2001) points out in *Between Camps,* the articulation of futures within the everyday forms of the mainstream of black vernacular expression. Having looked at the implications for African art through the first and the second dimensions, we now turn our attention to the third. To work with this material, Afrofuturism is obliged to approach the audiovisions of extraterrestriality, futurology, and technoscience fictions with patience and seriousness.

> *Imagine the archaeologists in their downtime. They sit round their liquid gel computers generating possible futures for real cities through World Scenarios, a video game that assembles alternative scenarios. Set in Lagos, with other options to follow, the game invites users to specify variables for transportation, energy consumption, waste disposal, residential, commercial, and industrial zoning. The game returns visions of what those choices will mean for life in 2240.*

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Black Atlantic Sonic Process

It is difficult to conceive of Afrofuturism without a place for sonic process in its vernacular, speculative, and syncopated modes. The daily lifeworld of black vernacular expression may be anathema to contemporary art practice. Nonetheless, these histories of futures passed must be positioned as a valuable resource.

> *Imagine that the artist Georges Adeagbo created an installation that uses the artwork of Parliament-Funkadelic albums from 1974-1980 to build a new myth cycle of politico-socio-racio-sexual fantasies from the cultural memory of this era. Imagine that the archaeologists from the future are now discovering fragments from that work, techno-fossils from tomorrow's yesterdays . . .*

Afrofuturism studies the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future, in moments where any future was made difficult for them to imagine. In 1962, the bandleader and composer Duke Ellington wrote "The Race For Space" (Ellington 1993), a brief essay that attempted to press the future into the service of black liberation. By 1966, however, Martin Luther King, in his text "Where Do We Go From Here?" could argue that the gap between social and technological achievements was deep enough to call the very idea of social and economic progress into question (Gilroy 2001).

Afrophilia In Excelsis

Between the demise of Black Power in the late 1960s and the emergence of a popular Pan-Africanism in the mid-1970s with Bob Marley, the Afrodiasporic musical imagination was characterised by an Afrophilia that invoked a liberationist idyll of African archaism with the idea of scientific African modernity, both held in an unstable but useful equilibrium.

This equilibrium was personified, in populist terms, by the Egyptological fantasias of Earth, Wind, and Fire. The oscillation between preindustrial Africa and scientific Africa, however, was established in the 1950s with Sun Ra, the composer and bandleader whose lifework constitutes a self-created cosmology.

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THE COSMOGENETIC MOMENT

In 1995, the London-based group Black Audio Film Collective released *The Last Angel of History,* also known as *The Mothership Connection,* their essay-film which remains the most elaborate exposition on the convergence of ideas that is Afrofuturism. Through the persona of a time-traveling nomadic figure known as the Data Thief, *The Last Angel of History* created a network of links between music, space, futurology, and diaspora. 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 diasporic future. The notion of a black secret technology allows Afrofuturism to reach a point of speculative acceleration.

> *Imagine the archaeologists squinting at the cracked screen of the microvideo installation that shows the Data Thief trapped in the history vaults of West Africa . . .*

Black Audio director John Akomfrah and scriptwriter Edward George integrated a thesis from critic John Corbett's "Brothers from Another Planet," a 1993 essay whose title references John Sayles's 1983 science-fiction movie of an alien that takes on African American identity to escape his interstellar captors. Akomfrah and George take up in particular the oeuvres of Sun Ra and his group, the Arkestra; Lee Perry, reggae producer, composer, songwriter, and architech of dub reggae; and Parliament-Funkadelic funk producer George Clinton, three figures analyzed in terms of their use of the recording studio, the vinyl record, and the support of art work and record label as the vehicle for concept albums that sustain mythological, programmatic, and cosmological world pictures.

Corbett pointed to Ra's group, the Arkestra; Perry's 1970s recording studio, the Black Ark; and the *Mothership Connection,* Parliament's 1974-1981 album cycle to argue that "largely independent of one other, each is working with a shared set of mythological images and icons such as space iconography, the idea of extraterrestriality and the idea of space exploration."

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Identification Code Unidentified

By the 1980s, the emergent digital technology of sequencers, samplers, synthesizers, and software applications began to scramble the ability to assign identity and thereby racialize music. Familiar processes of racial recognition were becoming unreliable. Listeners could no longer assume musicians were racially identical to their samples.

If racial identification became intermittent and obscure to the listener, for the musician, a dimension of heteronomy became available. The human-machine interface became both the condition and the subject of Afrofuturism. The cyborg fantasies of the Detroit techno producers, such as Juan Atkins and Derrick May, were used both to alienate themselves from sonic identity and to feel at home in alienation. Thelma Golden's notes towards the formulation of a twenty-first-century "post-black" aesthetic describe this cultural moment of studio-based sonic process more satisfactorily than it does gallery-based visual practice.

The Implications of Revisionism

Gilroy argues that the articulations sketched above tend to overlap with historical flashpoints. To analyse black popular futures in this way is to situate them as fallout from social movements and liberation movements, if not as direct parts of those movements. These moments may be historicized by politico-spiritual movements such as Black Christian Eschatology and Black Power, and postwar politico-esoteric traditions such as the Nation of Islam (NOI), Egyptology, Dogon cosmology, and the Stolen Legacy thesis.

The Nation of Islam's eschatology combined a racialized account of human origin with a catastrophic theory of time. Ogotomelli, the Dogon mystic, provided an astronomical knowledge of the "Sirius B" Dog Star, elaborated by French ethnographers Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, that demonstrated a compensatory and superior African scientific knowledge.

Egyptology's desire to recover the lost glories of a preindustrial African past was animated by a utopian authoritarianism. Before Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* (1988), George G. M. James's *Stolen Legacy* (1989) simultane-

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ously emphasised the white conspiracies that covered up the stolen legacy of African science, reversing Hegelian thought by insisting upon the original African civilization.

Afrofuturism is by no means naively celebratory. The reactionary Manichaenism of the Nation of Islam, the regressive compensation mechanisms of Egyptology, Dogonesque cosmology, and the totalising reversals of Stolen Legacy–style Afrocentricity are immediately evident. By excavating the political moments of such vernacular futurologies, a lineage of competing worldviews that seek to reorient history comes into focus. In identifying the emergence and dissemination of belief systems, it becomes critical to analyze how, in Gilroy's words, "even as the movement that produced them fades, there remains a degree of temporal disturbance."

By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates.

Revisionist logic is shared by autodidact historians like Sun Ra and George G. M. James of *Stolen Legacy,* and contemporary intellectuals such as Toni Morrison, Greg Tate, and Paul D. Miller. Her argument that the African slaves that experienced capture, theft, abduction, and mutilation were the first moderns is important for positioning slavery at the heart of modernity. The cognitive and attitudinal shift demanded by her statement also yokes philosophy together with brutality, and binds cruelty to temporality. The effect is to force together separated systems of knowledge, so as to disabuse apparatuses of knowledge of their innocence.

Afrofuturism can be understood as an elaboration upon the implications of Morrison's revisionary thesis. In a 1991 interview with the writer Mark Sinker, cultural critic Greg Tate suggested that the bar between the signifier and the signified could be understood as standing for the Middle Passage that 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.

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The Uses of Alienation

Afrofuturism does not stop at correcting the history of the future. Nor is it a simple matter of inserting more black actors into science-fiction narratives. These methods are only baby steps towards the more totalizing realization that, in Greg Tate's formulation, Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science fiction are one and the same.

In *The Last Angel of History,* Tate argued that "The form itself, the conventions of the narrative in terms of the way it deals with subjectivity, focuses on someone who is at odds with the apparatus of power in society and whose profound experience is one of cultural dislocation, alienation and estrangement. Most science fiction tales dramatically deal with how the individual is going to contend with these alienating, dislocating societies and circumstances and that pretty much sums up the mass experiences of black people in the postslavery twentieth century."

At the century's start, Dubois termed the condition of structural and psychological alienation as *double consciousness.* The condition of alienation, understood in its most general sense, is a psychosocial inevitability that all Afrodiasporic art uses to its own advantage by creating contexts that encourage a process of disalienation. Afrofuturism's specificity lies in assembling conceptual approaches and countermemorial mediated practices in order to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, previously inaccessible alienations.

> *Imagine that later, on that night, after the site is sealed off, ready for the next day, after the AAAP have all been disinfected, one of the archaeologists dreams of six turntables; the realisation of the Invisible Man's dream of hearing Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Have to Do to Be So Black and Blue" multiplied to the power of 6.*

The Extraterrestrial Turn

Afrofuturism uses extraterrestriality as a hyperbolic trope to explore the historical terms, the everyday implications of forcibly imposed dislocation, and

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the constitution of Black Atlantic subjectivities: from slave to negro to coloured to *evolué* to black to African to African American.

Extraterrestriality thereby becomes a point of transvaluation through which this variation over time, understood as forcible mutation, can become a resource for speculation. It should be understood not so much as escapism, but rather as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance within the high-pressure zone of perpetual racial hostility.

It is not that black subjectivities are waiting for science-fiction authors to articulate their lifeworlds. Rather, it is the reverse. The conventions of science fiction, marginalized within literature yet central to modern thought, can function as allegories for the systemic experience of post-slavery black subjects in the twentieth century. Science fiction, as such, is recast in the light of Afrodiasporic history.

Afrofuturism therefore stages a series of enigmatic returns to the constitutive trauma of slavery in the light of science fiction. Isolating the enigmatic phrase "Apocalypse bin in effect" from the 1992 Public Enemy track "Welcome to the Terradome," Mark Sinker's 1992 essay "Loving the Alien" argued that this lyric could be interpreted to read that slavery functioned as an apocalypse experienced as equivalent to alien abduction: "The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry. . . . Africa and America—and so by extension Europe and Asia—are already in their various ways Alien Nation."

Temporal Switchback

Afrofuturism approaches contemporary digital music as an intertext of recurring literary quotations that may be cited and used as statements capable of imaginatively reordering chronology and fantasizing history. The lyrical statement is treated as a platform for historical speculation. Social reality and science fiction create feedback between each other within the same phrase. The alien encounters and interplanetary abductions people experienced as delusions in the Cold War present had already occurred in the past, for real.

All the symptoms specific to a close encounter had already occurred on a giant scale. The collective delusion of the close encounter is transplanted

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to the Middle Passage. The effect is not to question the reality of slavery, but to defamiliarize it through a temporal switchback that reroutes its implications through postwar social fiction, cultural fantasy, and modern science fiction, all of which begin to seem like elaborate ways of concealing and admitting trauma.

Black-Atlantean Mythos

In 1997, this aesthetic of estrangement was pursued to its limit-point by Drexciya, the group of enigmatic producers, synthesists, and designers operating from Detroit. In the liner notes to their CD *The Quest,* Drexciya (1997) proposed a science-fictional retelling of the Middle Passage. The "Drexciyans" are water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of "pregnant America-bound African slaves thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo."

> Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A foetus in its mother's womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment. 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, a premature human infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs. These facts combined with reported sightings of Gillmen and Swamp Monsters in the coastal swamps of the South Eastern United States make the slave trade theory startlingly feasible.

In treating Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993) as a science fiction which is then developed through four-stage analysis of migration and mutation from Africa to America, Drexciya have constructed a Black-Atlantean mythology that successfully speculates on the evolutionary code of black subjectivity. In turn, their project has inspired a series of paintings by the contemporary African American abstract artist Ellen Gallagher, and responses in the form of essays by the critics Ruth Mayer and Ben Williams.

Drexciya's project has recently extended itself into space. For their *Grava 4* CD, released in 2002, the group contacted the International Star Registry

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in Switzerland to purchase the rights to name a star. Having named and registered their star "Grava 4," a new installment within their ongoing sonic fiction is produced. In wrapping their speculative fiction around electronic compositions that then locate themselves around an existing extraterrestrial space, Drexciya grant themselves the imperial right to nominate and colonize interstellar space. The absurdity of buying and owning a distant star in no way diminishes the contractual obligation of ownership that the group entered into. The process of ratification therefore becomes the platform for an unexpected intervention: a sono-fictional statement that fuses the metaphorical with the juridical, and the synthetic with the cartographic. Contractual fact meets sonic fiction meets astronomical mapping in a colonization of the contemporary audiovisual imagination in advance of military landing.

To conclude: Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken. The manufacture, migration, and mutation of concepts and approaches within the fields of the theoretical and the fictional, the digital and the sonic, the visual and the architectural exemplifies the expanded field of Afrofuturism considered as a multimedia project distributed across the nodes, hubs, rings, and stars of the Black Atlantic. As a tool kit developed for and by Afrodiasporic intellectuals, the imperative to code, adopt, adapt, translate, misread, rework, and revision these concepts, under the conditions specified in this essay, is likely to persist in the decades to come.

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