

ATLANTA TRAP AND THE CURRENT DIRECTIONS OF AFROFUTURISM

by

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## ABSTRACT

Atlanta is the cultural hub of the hip hop industry and home to some of the latest and most exciting examples of contemporary Afrofuturism. As the city's primary musical export, trap generally reads as apolitical; however, modern deployments of Afrofuturism's operational concepts by artists and producers in the genre illuminate a nuanced politics that is a sign of the times. A commercialized sub-genre of gangsta rap, trap is often overlooked as a source of valid social commentary and political critique, as a gap in hip hop and Afrofuturist scholarship would suggest. Building on previous research, this paper will establish a theoretical framework to interpret the sights, sounds, and narratives of trap music to examine how they speak to issues of race, technology, and representation. Future, Migos, and Young Thug are a few of the latest artists in a lineage of iconic figures to embrace the paradigm-shifting potential of Afrofuturism.

Word count [150]

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## INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the Atlanta trap scene seems like an unlikely place to encounter the latest and most visible manifestations of Afrofuturism (AF) in popular music. On its face, trap resonates dissonantly with the politics and philosophical values that have been inscribed within the modus operandi of hip hop and Afrofuturism; however, by operating outside the visibility of mainstream political ideologies, the gangsta rap subgenre is taking hip hop culture and Afrofuturism in new directions. The first inceptions of what would come to be known as Afrofuturism emerged during the 1950s post-war era as a form of radical political critique, using science-fiction tropes and narratives to challenge the hegemonic ideologies at the root of systemic white supremacy in the United States. Mark Dery first coined the term ‘Afrofuturism’ in 1993 as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture” (Dery 1994, 182). As one of the most innovative expressions of black culture, music has been the primary focus for thinkers who are interested in Afrofuturism’s intersections of race and technology.

Pioneering musical artists Sun Ra and George Clinton incorporated science fiction themes and tropology in their work and influenced subsequent generations of hip hop Afonauts to do the same. Inserting representations of race within the social commentary that is part and parcel of science fiction frames its political commentary, as Clinton recalled his aim to “Put niggers in places that you don’t usually see ‘em. And nobody had seen 'em on no spaceships! Once you seen ‘em sittin’ on spaceships like it was Cadillac then it was funny, cool” (Hollings 2000, 37). Over the decades, artists have incorporated themes of extraterrestrial lifeforms and space travel, along with appropriations of blackness to provide new narratives in dialogues with the past, present, and future. Socio-political commentaries appear within various engagements with technology, constructions of identity, and utopian impulses as artists blur the lines between

myth and reality, fact and fiction. While the moral panic surrounding gangsta rap has subsided in recent years, trap's association with Afrofuturism is still contentious, or at least somewhat uncomfortable when presented with some of its more problematic elements; however, trap Afrofuturism has proven its paradigm-shifting capacity, most notably through its ability to meet or subvert expectations of race and masculinity in popular culture.

Known as the 'Motown of the South', Atlanta has been the hotbed of the hip hop industry since the explosion of trap music in the early 2010s, when some of the genre's most prominent artists emerged. With its explicit nihilism and hedonism, gangsta rap has been scrutinized within ongoing debates regarding 'conscious' vs. 'commercial' rap, with many critics denigrating the genre as irrelevant at best, and at worst, downright harmful (Louis 2015). Its rampant misogyny, unabashed materialism, and celebration of drug culture are common points of contention; moreover, trap's place at the forefront of pop culture and its perceived betrayal of hip hop culture's musical traditions and values have drawn the ire of many purists. Largely seen as apolitical on the surface, trap music is often dismissed as unworthy of serious critical investigation as evidenced by the lacuna of scholarly writing on the subject. However, its ascension to the forefront of popular culture warrants close critical and musicological attention.

My aim here is not to validate or apologize for trap music. Rather, my goal is to consider the ways in which trap music articulates idea(s) associated with Afrofuturism, while addressing, or at least highlighting, issues of race and representation. Atlanta trap has proven to be more than a passing fad as it has made its sonic mark on popular music genres from around the world, and can no longer be ignored by scholars who are interested in hip hop music and culture. As a white, middle-class male, I was an adolescent through the 'golden age' of hip hop and the explosion of gangsta rap in the early 1990s, which means that I was a member of the demographic that was

perceived and widely accepted as the primary consumer of the genre. (Kitwana 2002; Rose 2008). Witnessing the waves of moral panic throughout its evolution, its influence on popular music, and its commodification, I am interested in the discourses surrounding gangsta rap, which have always shone a light on race and racism in North American society. As the most recent musical example of the gangsta rap ethos, trap music continues this tradition while articulating—and complicating—Afrofuturist discourse.

Hip hop was slow to be accepted in academia, as it was only fully legitimized through the work of pioneering critics in the 2000s when scholars such as Tricia Rose, Mark Anthony Neal, Jeff Cheng and others began to explore it as a ‘serious’ musical art form. The widespread exclusion of commercial gangsta rap genres such as trap from hip hop scholarship reflects ideological biases that limit our understanding of how such genres reflect and shape culture. As a movement that is defined by its political, social, and cultural commentary, Afrofuturism has been the subject of a rich body of scholarship and has received a recent influx of attention in popular culture since the 2018 release of the Marvel Studio’s blockbuster film *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018). Several scholars have written extensively about musical expressions of Afrofuturism, including Kodwo Eshun, Greg Tate, Mark Sinker, and Alondra Nelson, who elaborated on its definition stating that Afrofuturist narratives offer perspectives on race, culture, and technology that “open up space for new ideas about politics and new visions of black life: new icons, new heroes, new futures” (Nelson 2000, 35). While conventional approaches to the study of hip hop music almost always frame it from a biographical, historical, geopolitical, and/or social perspective that prioritizes the value of the spoken word—a position that tends to champion the work of ‘conscious’ hip hop artists—some of Afrofuturism’s foundational texts encourage us to adopt alternative perspectives when analyzing the music. Anderson and Jones’ *Afrofuturism 2.0*:

*The Rise of Astroblackness* expands on previous interpretations of Afrofuturism to include a more transdisciplinary approach that includes the five dimensions of “metaphysics; aesthetics; theoretical and applied science; social sciences; and programmatic spaces” (Anderson and Jones 2016, ix-x).

Afrofuturist writers, artists, and musicians have used science fiction tropes, technological innovations, and creative sonic symbolism to challenge the status quo with counternarratives of the past, alternate realities of the present, and imagined possibilities for the future. Over the past three decades of Afrofuturist scholarship, a variety of perspectives have emerged regarding the definition and scope of Afrofuturism. Interpretations of Afrofuturism are understood through observing overlapping operational concepts at work—*chronopolitics*, *MythScience*, and *concepttechnics*—that address temporality, subjectivity, blackness, and technology. The following section will provide an overview of these operational concepts and the theoretical framework behind them before examining the ways in which they are deployed in music.

#### KEY CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

My understanding and analysis of trap music is informed not only by Afrofuturism, but also by insights drawn from cultural studies, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and sound studies, among others. Fundamentally, hip hop and Afrofuturism are both innately postmodern, with a variety of artistic approaches that encompass self-consciousness, skepticism, irony, a rejection of hegemonic ideologies, and a suspicion of Enlightenment rationality. The study of hip hop vis-a-vis Afrofuturism welcomes a postmodern approach that situates value systems and knowledge claims as socially conditioned by-products of various historical, cultural, or political discourses.

Much like Afrofuturism, hip hop employs chronopolitics, MythScience, and concepttechnics as counter-hegemonic mechanisms that articulate a plurality of alternative cultural identities relegated to the margins a dominant culture. Afrofuturism’s chronopolitics (the politics of time) seeks to manipulate spatial and temporal experiences regarding the hermeneutics of identity. tobias c. van Veen summarizes the concept as:

[...] a series of temporal interventions in the historical record of the past just as it constructs “AlterDestinies” of the future so as to destabilize the coordinates—the register of possibilities and impossibilities—of the present. It is also an analytic framework by which temporality is comprehended as cyclic, retroactive, and mutable. (van Veen 2014, 10)

MythScience is a philosophy invented by Sun Ra that works to create ‘countermythologies’ by assembling myth from science and vice versa (Eshun 1998, 09[158]). Evoked through representations of blackness within science fiction, meaning is extracted from the ‘digital divide’ binary that positions blackness in contrast with technological progress. MythScience is commonly enacted through sci-fi tropologies such as the adoption of alien and cyborg identities, space travel, and depictions of utopian and dystopian fantasies. Sonically, artists have performed MythScience through the deployment of ethnocentric markers juxtaposed with technologically-produced hyperfuturistic sounds. In his article ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism’, Eshun stresses the importance of starting with the sonic, discussing the chronopolitics of sound and its ability to manipulate spatial and temporal experiences regarding the hermeneutics of identity (Eshun 2003). Simon O’Sullivan draws parallels between MythScience and the Deleuzian concept of ‘fabulation’, describing them as “the imagining and imaging of alternatives, but also their insertion into reality—to augment or disrupt the latter” (O’Sullivan 2016, 212). Grounded in W.E.B Du Bois’ concept of African American ‘double consciousness’ (Du Bois 1903), theorists have explored MythScience as a psycho-social division

of African American consciousness in response to the after-effects of slavery in a white-dominated society. Afrofuturists create alien and cyborg character roles to recreate identities and redefine subjectivity. Similarly, ideas of time and place are imagined with utopian and dystopian settings that create existential counternarratives for the past, present, and future. MythScience works by simultaneously meeting and upsetting expectations of blackness to reprogram race as a technology.

Concepttechnics, a term coined by Kodwo Eshun, can be defined as the rewiring of a “conceptual technology” (Eshun 1998, 31), or what Sun Ra referred to as “manufactured memory”—a manufactured cultural memory through past and present interactions with technological objects (van Veen 2014, 11). Concepttechnics signifies the reconceptualization of objects and the creative misuse of technologies to serve a new purpose, as exemplified by the repurposing of the turntables in the hip hop DJ tradition. This reconceptualization of technical details can also apply to more general categories such as subjects, ideas, events, and words as a means to disrupt historical narratives. Examining race as a technology, Ytasha L. Womack describes its deprogramming as a “journey of self-discovery” that “unchains the mind” from the fictional mythologies of European colonialism and the American slave trade (Womack 2013, 15). Situated within the framework of a postcolonial approach, chronopolitics, MythScience, and concepttechnics constitute what postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy calls “an alternative constellation of concepts [...] to accelerate the de-naturing of ‘race’” (Gilroy 2004, xiv). From a musicological perspective, beyond *what* the music is saying and *why*, it is important to understand *how* the messages are performed in the context of place and time, for the rich tradition of black musical tropology unveils narratives that are not always obvious at first glance.

Trap is the latest genre in a line of musical traditions that has incorporated Afrofuturism to frame alternative worldviews of culture. In its coalescence with AF, trap builds upon a repertoire of rhetorical devices, tropes, and signifiers to communicate its operational concepts. Similar to a simile or metaphor, tropes<sup>1</sup> convey meaning through intimate associations. Appearing as recurrent sounds and themes, their meanings are often evasive with figurative representations that evolve and change over time. In his study of black musical tropology, Maxile writes,

The ‘how’ represents the fulfillment of expectations, be they performer or audience driven, and it comes in the form of a number of musical emblems specific to vernacular performance practices such as bent notes, call and response, distinctive manipulations of rhythm, and wordplay. Some of these musical emblems or forms, through their consistent, creative use and longevity, might be viewed as tropes. Such tropes provide ways to analyze and investigate the symbolic and sonic references that contribute to the many shared associations across the wide spectrum of practices, experiences, and genres that make up the African American musical tradition. (Maxile 2011, 594)

Henry Louis Gates developed the theory of *signifyin’*, exploring literary tropes and black cultural products in his provocative book titled *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (Gates 1988). Inspired by Gates’ work, Samuel A. Floyd Jr. expanded upon his ideas toward black musical tropology and musical signifyin’ as a means for the “informal to inform the formal” (Floyd 1995, 7). Floyd’s *Troping the Blues* is another pioneering work on black musical tropes that seeks to “demonstrate the applicability” of Gates’ theories “to black music over time and across genres” (Floyd 1993, 32). In the literary sense, signifyin’ is related to the mythological ‘trickster’ archetype, using double-talk with encoded

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<sup>1</sup> The word trope has other specialized meanings in literary theory and topic theory that are different from what is intended here. For the purposes of this paper, I use the term to refer to recurrent motifs, clichés, and rhetorical devices in African American expressive culture.

intentional gestures, figurative language, and defying rules and convention. Citing African American poetry narratives, Gates demonstrates how such figures are the "functional equivalent" and a "New World figuration" of the Eshu trickster of African Yoruba mythology (Gates 1983, 688). Applying these theories to a musical analysis, we will also consider how performance and production techniques work to bring added layers of meaning through sonic representations. In this thesis, I will examine musical topologies and significations through the lens of Afrofuturism to reveal how a seemingly apolitical music genre, trap, articulates meaning for those who make and listen to it. In order to contextualize trap music within the discourse of Afrofuturism, it is useful to trace the development of both hip hop and Afrofuturist discourse.

### TRAP AFROFUTURISM

The lineage of Afrofuturist music begins with Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra in the mid-1950s, followed by George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic in the 1970s. Heavily influencing the inception of hip hop in the late 70s and early 80s, Clinton's brand of Afrofuturism influenced many hip hop pioneers including Afrika Bambaataa, Kool Keith, and Public Enemy. Moving into the mid-1990s and spearheading the southern takeover of the hip hop industry, the Atlanta duo Outkast were among the most prominent Afrofuturists of the rap game. The new millennium saw New Orleans Martian Lil Wayne transform hip hop, ushering in a new era of commercial gangsta rap that transcended some of the restrictive standards and social norms of the music and culture. Today, a number of trap artists are offering new perspectives on race, culture, and technology that build on Afrofuturist narratives.

Trap emerged in Atlanta in the early 2000s. As a southern brand of gangsta rap, it doubles down on the thematic clichés of the genre: gritty lyrics about drugs, violence, sex, and money. Sonically, however, trap is distinguished from earlier gangsta rap by its dark, ominous

sound. The pioneers of the genre are Gucci Mane, T.I., and Young Jeezy who are known as the ‘holy trinity’ of trap, and T.I.’s *Trap Muzik* (2003) is regarded as the first trap album. On the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the album T.I. told *Noisey*, “I wanted *Trap Muzik* to make people care about drug dealers and see us as human beings” (Hobbs 2018). Ironically, the trap artists of today seem more concerned with distancing themselves from the status of being human and have adopted concepts and themes from Afrofuturism to do so. While the first generation of Atlanta trap artists and producers shaped the genre’s sound and aspects of its cultural identity, it was the second generation of trap artists in the 2010s who began incorporating Afrofuturism, taking a page from Lil Wayne’s playbook.

With controversial representations of black hypermasculinity and other racialized stereotypes, trap music has drawn criticism from liberal and conservative critics alike. Conservative critics traditionally target gangsta rap for inciting deviant behaviour while liberal-minded voices take issue with negative portrayals and appropriations of blackness that exploit America’s racialized fears (Quinn 2005; Watkins 2005). I do not wish to challenge the validity of either standpoint, nor do I deny that there are problematic issues within hip hop culture. Instead, I want to explore aspects of the music and culture that have been largely overlooked despite, or perhaps because of, the polarized receptions of the music. For today’s trap artists, hedonism, nihilism, and misogyny are entrenched in their lyrics as they blend gang and drug culture with Afrofuturism. The questions I seek to examine are: *What is this music saying? Why is it connecting with the youth culture on such a mass scale? How do these artists translate meaning in their music?*

Far too often, pop-cultural phenomena such as trap music are written off as examples of capitalist commodification that are devoid of artistic merit and unworthy of critical investigation.

Such views severely limit our understanding of contemporary popular culture. Indeed, the paradoxes that surround trap music not only make it challenging and complex, but also important to our understanding of contemporary society and culture.

Hip hop can be defined loosely as “the culture of the urbanized underclass, of the disaffected and the disillusioned masses. A culture of rebellion and revolt that employs every mode of communication known to humanity to get its message across” (Rahkyt and Rockeymoore 2011). As a cultural movement initiated by African American and Hispanic youth who represented the ‘urbanized underclass’ of the South Bronx in the late 1970s, it is impossible to discuss hip hop without examining issues of race and class. Indeed, hip hop artists shoulder a burden of representation that warrants close critical consideration.

Part of gangsta rap’s appeal—especially to young white audiences—can be explained by its controversial lyrics and subject matter, which often focus on drugs, sex, money, and violence. After all, America has always had a fascination with drugs, sex, money, and violence. But it is the inherent value of ‘keeping it real’ that lends itself to hip hop’s perceived authenticity and elicits the empathy necessary to generate fear. As Osumare writes, “hip hop has created *ghettocentricity* that posits the black and poor ghettos internationally as a central trope of identity” going on to note that “street level acknowledgment remains the badge of ‘authenticity’ in hip hop culture” (Osumare 2008, 158, 162). Comparing the counter-cultural narratives of hip hop music and punk rock, David Foster Wallace argues in *Signifying Rappers* that while the commercialization of punk effectively reduced it to mere spectacle, “Hard rap’s always informed by incident or named condition, and thus anger by cause, threat by some kind of recognizable (to the Scene) provocation” (Wallace and Costello 1990, 35). Famously described by Public Enemy’s Chuck D as ‘CNN for Black people’, rap’s authenticity is often measured and identified

by location-specific cultural markers. Rap is a commodity that is founded on the principles of a certain degree of journalistic integrity attached to its brand; however, one of the points I hope to demonstrate is how contemporary trap is blurring the lines between fact and fiction, bringing to light nuanced meaning with artistic expressions of Afrofuturism.

Stuart Hall proposes that popular culture should be analysed from a standpoint that examines it as a “double movement of containment and resistance” (Hall 1998, 443). Hall’s overall point is that popular media is not only a by-product of capitalist commodification, nor is it only a tool for radical resistance, but it is often a synthesis of both processes (1998, 446). Contrary to Adorno’s rather uncharitable assessment of popular music (Adorno 2002), Hall’s approach makes clear the importance of examining why audiences identify with certain music. Trap music is a particularly compelling case of cultural inquiry in part because of the ways in which it draws on, and reconfigures, tropes associated with Afrofuturist discourse.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Before we dive into trap Afrofuturism, it will be useful to provide an overview of examples from Afrofuturism’s musical canon that have been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. Chapter one will serve as a brief overview of Afrofuturism’s place in music from its first appearances toward the development and popularization of trap music. Starting with the prototypical examples of Sun Ra and George Clinton, I will consider various perspectives and interpretations of their music, outlining some of the foundational theoretical framework of Afrofuturism. I will then examine examples of Afrofuturism within hip hop culture, focusing in particular on the work of Public Enemy, N.W.A, Outkast and Lil Wayne, as well as some of the artists and producers responsible for shaping trap’s aesthetic. Chapter two and three will explore Afrofuturism’s operational concepts with examples from three of Atlanta’s most prolific trap

artists: Future, Migos, and Young Thug. Looking at selected works by these artists, chapter two will focus on trap Afrofuturism's poetics of identity, exploring alien 'othering', sounding posthuman, and the reconstruction of identity through fashion. Here I will draw connections with the foundational theories discussed in chapter one, expanding on them to reframe trap's politics of representation. Chapter three will follow a similar format, analyzing tropes of location and mobility in works by Future, Migos, and Young Thug. From the trap house to the moon, the chariot to the mothership, I will explore the vehicles and destinations that are moving Afrofuturism in new directions from within the Atlanta trap scene.

## CHAPTER 1: AFROFUTURISM'S CONCEPTS-IN-EFFECT

So, what does Afrofuturism sound and look like? Put simply, instances of black voices and bodies within works of speculative fiction are often identified as Afrofuturism. As a genre that has traditionally omitted issues of race, science-fiction has become a space that can provide a better understanding of the idea of blackness in relation to science, technology, politics, and culture. The following section will examine some of the most relevant figures and theories in Afrofuturism. These will lay the theoretical foundations that I use to examine trap Afrofuturism.

### IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS SUN RA

The first, and arguably the most important, figure to set Afrofuturism to music was the avant-garde jazz artist Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra. Born Herman Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, he changed his name in 1952 to Le Sony'r Ra, after the Egyptian Sun God and introduced himself as a visitor from Saturn (Adriano 2015, 87). Ra is regarded by many as the grandfather of Afrofuturism, and his artistic output serves as a template that outlines many of the key ideas, techniques, and concepts.

Sun Ra's prolific career saw the output of close to two-hundred albums and multiple performances with up to one-hundred-piece orchestras, including one in front of the Egyptian pyramids in 1971. Growing up in racially segregated Alabama in the 1920s, Ra escaped into the sci-fi serials of Buck Rogers and immersed himself in the music program at his public school. His philosophies were influenced by esoteric Christianity and Egyptian mythology, drawing from the teachings of Armenian mystic G.I. Gurdjieff, Elijah Mohammed of the Nation of Islam, and self-taught historian J.A Rogers (Corbett, Elms and Kapsalis 2010). For Ra, space was a universal idea and a location that was not bound to the issues of race. In the biography *Space is the Place: The Lives And Times of Sun Ra*, John Szwed quotes Sun Ra discussing his 'space

music’: “So I leave the word space open like space is supposed to be, when I say space-music [...] Blacks thought I was talking about whites. But I was talking about everybody” (Szwed 1998, 384, 382). As one of the first examples of Afrofuturism, space was a blank slate for Sun Ra to construct alternative identities and counternarratives of the past, present, and future.

Ra’s innovative uses of technology created rich sonic tapestries that conveyed the MythScience concept by deploying ‘traditional’ African sonic markers juxtaposed with futuristic sounds, thereby destabilizing the ‘digital divide’ which normalizes blackness in opposition to technological innovation, producing a tension that, according to J. Griffith Rollefson, “gives Afrofuturism its critical power” (Rollefson 2008, 85). Arkestra members often wore colourful costumes in performance that combined African tribal wear and space-age attire. The most extravagantly dressed member of the band was, of course, Sun Ra, who would often perform wearing headdresses, long, flowing cloaks, and sunglasses or facemasks. A spectacle of sights and sounds, Ra’s performances were a cosmic journey through space and time that pioneered new performance techniques and the use of new technologies to translate his MythScience.

In the 1950s, Ra recorded pieces such as “Saturn” (1956) and “Ancient Aiethopia” (1958), which explored sci-fi themes while pairing African diasporic grooves with progressive blues and jazz harmonies. In 1968, Ra was the first artist to be given a prototype of the MiniMoog synthesizer by Robert Moog (Youngquist 2016, 216). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, his works included various traditional West African instruments in addition to electronic instruments such as the MiniMoog, Wurlitzer, and electric violin. Discussing Ra’s use of the MiniMoog, Eshun explains, “he’s using the Moog to produce a new sonic people” (Eshun 1998, 185). By juxtaposing sounds that meet expectations of blackness with ones that upend them, Ra’s

MythScience radically reimagined the relationship between blackness and technology, effectively subverting the so-called digital divide.

The dual impulse described here also relays Du Bois' concept of double consciousness that he describes as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 1903, 8). Ra's construction of alternate identities plays on the racial tensions of the digital divide while articulating the condition of alienation experienced by black people in a white-dominated society. In the 1974 film *Space is the Place*, the alien Ra addresses a black youth from an Oakland community announcing:

I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, your people would have some status among the nations of the world. So, we're both myths. I do not come to you as the reality, I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are, myths. (Coney 1974)

Space travel in Ra's myths removed him from the earth and opened the door to a new world of possibilities, creating politically charged counternarratives that contrasted the earthly realities of the past, present, and imagined futures. In Ra's 1970 piece "Angelic Proclamation" (1970), his MiniMoog synthesizer solo emulates the warmup and launch of a spaceship with increased volume and distortion of intertwining sawtooth waves. This programmatic music conveys extra-musical narratives that demonstrate Ra's mastery of sonic language to deploy tropes of identity and mobility. Ra's reimagining of reality and his imagined alternatives became the definition of what we now see as Afrofuturism. His chronopolitics undermined received ideas concerning race, Western progress, and U.S. and global citizenship with critiques of Enlightenment rationality and white supremacy. The framework of Sun Ra's musical speculative fiction influenced many notable artists including John Coltrane, Jimi Hendrix, Pharoah Sanders,

Miles Davis, and George Clinton to name a few. In the decade that birthed rap, George Clinton's contributions to Afrofuturism and to the development of hip hop music make him an especially relevant case study for the purposes of this paper.

#### GEORGE CLINTON'S PARLIAMENT-FUNKADELIC

In the 1970s, Parliament-Funkadelic made use of technological innovations of the time to create a new sound that embodied Afrofuturist ideals. Author Rickey Vincent points out that P-funk synthesized "European chord structure and African rhythms into a large, ensemble sound", going on to assert that it "introduced the electronic age into modern black music" (Vincent 1996, 231). Clinton's brand of electro-psychedelic funk was comprised of science fiction tropes, ironic ethnocentric markers, and futuristic sounds that Rollefson argues, "balanced his critique of white supremacy with a healthy suspicion of black nationalism" (Rollefson 2008, 98). In an era of disillusionment after Watergate, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and the assassination of several prominent social activists including Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., the optimism of the 60s flower power movement gave way to a certain cynicism in the popular media of the 1970s. In a new age of musical escapism, Parliament-Funkadelic constructed new identities and transported audiences to outer space aboard the Mothership.

Assuming various alter egos such as Dr. Funkenstein and Starchild, George Clinton created theatrical space-aged utopian fantasies in his futuristic funk party anthems. 'P-Funk', the first song of Parliament's monumental *Mothership Connection* album (1975), features a heavy groove from Bootsy Collins' signature electric 'space bass'. Collins' much sought-after tone was produced by running his instrument through the Mu-Tron III envelope filter, creating blips, growls and modulated frequencies that emulated the imagined sounds of a space station (Gore

1994). With Clinton's low-pass filtered voice announcing the launch of the Mothership on 'Star Child' (1975), Bernie Worrell's Moog-synthesized melodies depart into soaring lines depicting its ascension in a manner not unlike Sun Ra's sonic voyages. Parliament-Funkadelic were pioneers in the use of vocal processing technologies as a stylistic tool to sonically shape a posthuman persona, a trend that has re-emerged in modern hip hop and other popular music genres.

Under the mentorship of George Clinton and Bootsy Collins, Zapp was one of the first acts to use the talk box to produce robotic vocal timbres in tracks such as 'More Bounce to the Ounce' (1980). Bootsy Collins would recall, "The talk box was unfamiliar territory. That was so funny to be there to watch a mug take hold of his audience" (Tompkins 2010, 202). Clinton and Collins' use of vocal processing techniques to render the voice non-human works to bypass the dehumanizing effects of slavery, moving the African American subject from sub-human to post-human, creating a 'digitally divided' identity. These Afrofuturist sonic constructions of posthuman identity reflect the psycho-social divisions of the African American double consciousness, as Eshun observes, "It's in the music that you get this sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human (Eshun 1998, 192-193). In Alexander G. Weheliye's study of vocal processing technologies, he identifies the electro-mediatisation of the human singing voice as 'hypersoul', describing it as, "The interaction between the audibly mechanized and more traditionally melismatic and 'soulful' voice [...] not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity, and a subjectivity located in the sonic arena rather than the ocular (Weheliye 2002, 22). Building on Eshun's ideas on the sonic construction of identities with the MiniMoog, hypersoul focuses on MythScience aspects of the technologically disembodied human voice.

As one of the biggest influences on hip-hop music and culture, P-funk would inform many of the sonic elements heard in rap, as well as the adoption of Afrofuturist themes by some of hip hop's biggest stars. Throughout the golden age of hip-hop and into the new millennium, Afrofuturism has continued to resurface in rap music as a vehicle for transformation.

### THE GOLDEN AGE OF HIP HOP

Given its heavy reliance on mechanical and electronic technologies, rap music effectively morphed human and machine. Both postmodern and posthuman, rap became the music of global youth culture and the sound of rebellion and discontent, providing fertile grounds for a new generation of Afrofuturists to explore black identity. Rap music was derived from disco DJing practices; Jamaican sound systems and toasting; and African rhyming traditions. At its earliest stages, the hip hop DJ and MC were not separate or distinct roles until artists like DJ Hollywood and DJ Kool Herc refined the practices in the late 1970s. Kool Herc began creating 'breakbeats' by mixing, sampling and speeding up samples from obscure R&B records. DJ Hollywood is recognized as 'the father of hip hop' and the first to establish the MC role when he started rhyming over records as a disco DJ trying to work his way through school (Ford Jr 1979). As the first music genre to use technologies such as turntables, mixers, samplers, and drum machines to produce its sound, Chuck Galli discusses the morphing of man and machine in the role of the DJ:

It was neither completely the DJ nor completely the sound system equipment which the audience praised, but the events that occurred when the two organisms—one biological and one mechanical—melded into one. [...] The DJ thus left the realm of musicians and embraced the roles of engineer, sensor, processor, physicist, and ultimately, cyborg. (Galli 2009, 13-14)

Hip hop DJing provides a trenchant example of Afrofuturist concepttechnics: by repurposing turntables and mixers, early hip hop DJs turned technologies that were designed for the passive consumption of music into instruments that created new music by remixing samples

of existing music. Delany regards this as an act of resistance framing it as “a specific mis-use and conscientious desecration of the artifacts of technology and the entertainment media” (Dery 1994, 193). Repurposing technologies to remix sounds and recreate identities, hip hop’s conscientious misuse of artifacts and media typify Afrofuturism’s concepttechnics as a nuanced form of social and political critique.

In the 1980s Afrika Bambaataa and his Zulu Nation channelled Clinton, creating a mix of cosmic electro-funk that augmented his embracement of black nationalism. Bambaataa started as a DJ spinning records at parties and was one of the first in the scene to incorporate elements of social activism and cultural awareness in his music. Speaking about his sound, Afrika credits Kraftwerk, Gary Newman, John Carpenter, James Brown, Sly and the Family Stone, and Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic among his biggest influences (Bambaataa 2014). In the 1983 release “Renegades of Funk” (1983), Bambaataa sings and raps over funk-inspired grooves that are laid to a drum machine breakbeat and electronic synthesizer melodies. Listing himself among historical renegades such as Chief Sitting Bull, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, he declares they are “From a different solar system many many galaxies away” (1983). As a former gang member, Afrika Bambaataa turned to music and used it to inform, educate, and imagine new possibilities for future generations; however, the explosion of gangsta rap in the 1990s started a trend that shifted mainstream rap toward nihilism and hedonism.

One-quarter of the Compton-based quartet N.W.A, producer and rapper Dr. Dre popularized the West Coast G-Funk sound which typically features hypnotic P-Funk-inspired bass grooves, catchy synthesizer melodies, and driving drum machine rhythms. N.W.A revived Clinton’s Afrofuturist message and sound while incorporating a more nihilistic and rebellious variety of rap that projected gangsta mentality and gang culture values. One of the earliest and

clearest examples of P-Funk's influence on the West Coast sound is the 1991 single, "Always into Somethin'" (1991) which features bass-driven beats, brass samples, and soaring synthesizers. Lyrically, the song takes aim at the police and 'commercial' rappers, labelling themselves as 'the worlds most dangerous group' as they rhyme about making money, driving expensive cars, committing crimes, and objectifying women. Ironically, as gangsta rap became more popular, the G-Funk aesthetic would epitomize commercial hip hop and help construct the commodified gangsta rapper identity.

N.W.A (Niggaz With Attitude), were among the first acts to adopt and embrace new identities through the reclamation and reinterpretation of the word 'nigger'. Mark Anthony Neal writes about the paradoxical implications related to N.W.A's deployment of the term as a struggle against oppression.

Throughout the recording, N.W.A employ the terms 'nigga' and 'niggaz' to construct a distinct black masculinity that wallows in homophobia, misogyny, and sexual violence but clearly also represents an attempt to locate an authentic self in the midst of increasing commodification, surveillance, and mediation of the images of said 'niggaz'. (Neal 2013, 558)

In N.W.A's song "Niggaz 4 Life" (1991) they respond to criticisms of their use of the controversial term, clapping back "Why do I call myself a nigga you ask me? Because police always wanna harass me" and "because I'm treated like a fuckin' disease". The lyrics portray 'real niggaz' as the most authentic political black subjects and gangsta rap is the most effective space for social activism. The sonic rupture and political antagonism of gangsta rap caused a great deal of moral panic and outrage as rappers gained a greater deal of cultural capital in the early 1990s. N.W.A was confronting the socio-economic issues of the inner cities head on and painting a picture that threatened the civil order of the status quo.

The hostile and explicit protest song “Fuck Tha Police” (1988), drew attention to issues of police brutality and racial profiling, while also becoming one of the iconic pieces at the center of legal debates regarding freedom of speech and censorship in music. As rappers became influential figures in mainstream culture, the shock, fear, and rebellious aspects of their music that contributed to its commercial appeal, was perceived by many as a threat to the order and moral fibers of society. Dr. Dre and N.W.A were pioneers of G-Funk and gangsta rap, introducing sounds, lyrics, and themes that struck a chord with young audiences and struck a nerve with critics. With the semblance of optimism subsiding from mainstream rap, deployments of Afrofuturism veered from utopian impulses toward a more dystopian slant—one that is most apparent in the post-apocalyptic cataclysms portrayed in the music of N.W.A’s East Coast counterparts, Public Enemy.

#### PUBLIC ENEMY’S ARMAGEDDON-IN-EFFECT

Operating out of Long Island New York, Public Enemy adopted a more militant approach to hardcore rap, depicting a cultural revolution amidst a post-apocalyptic cataclysm. Among the more subtle differences with their West Coast competition, Public Enemy’s politically charged narratives are closer to what is customarily considered ‘conscious’ hip hop. Communicating a more familiar political perspective, PE’s music was nonetheless controversial as it provided counterhegemonic perspectives of the cultural upheaval in a divided decade. In the late 1980s and early ‘90s, Public Enemy took rap’s political message to a new level of militancy with albums titled *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* (1988), *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990), and *Apocalypse 91...The Enemy Strikes Black* (1991). Public Enemy simultaneously celebrated African American culture and fought the powers of a system that reproduced white supremacy, reframing and rewriting narratives of the past, present, and future. Public Enemy’s

radical reimaginings frequently relied on apocalyptic tropes, thereby flipping the utopian fantasy script on its head: Public Enemy's revolution is set in a dystopian world that is a metaphor for reality.

Building on Amiri Baraka's reflections on futurism in jazz (Baraka 1999), Samuel R. Delany's *Black Science Fiction* (Delany 2012), and Greg Tate's music and cultural criticism (Tate 1992), Mark Sinker was one of the first to explore science fiction tropes as a reconceptualization of slavery, likening the experience and after-effects of slavery with alien abduction and Armageddon, respectively. Sinker summarizes the lived experience that is reflected in *Black Science Fiction*, declaring:

The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America—and so by extension Europe and Asia—are already in their various ways Alien Nation. No return to normal is possible: what “normal” is there to return to? (Sinker 1992)

For Sinker and Public Enemy, the Armageddon has already happened for black people in America who now live in a post-apocalyptic dystopia. This concept is embodied in the phrase ‘Armageddon been-in-effect’, from the opening track on Public Enemy's sophomore album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold us Back* (1988). The dystopian soundscape of “Countdown to Armageddon” (1988) enters with screaming sirens and Professor Griff announcing “Armageddon been-in-effect. Go get a late pass!”. Sonically, the Armageddon effect is produced using a collage of sounds with low bass frequencies, heavy effects, jarring harmonies, and haunting samples that create an atmosphere of what Steve Goodman identifies as ‘dread’—the process of using ‘Sonic Rupture’ to tap into an ecology of fear (Goodman 2010), rendering audible the traumas of the Middle Passage. The phrase ‘Armageddon been-in-effect’ is a temporal rupture that reassembles the normalized cultural memory of the slave era to reframe current issues in the

broader context of history. In his essay, Greg Tate writes that “*Nation of Millions* is a will-to-power party record by bloods who believe (like Sun Ra) that for black folk, it’s after the end of the world” (Tate 1992, 123). But where Sun Ra envisioned a racially-homogenous utopia in space, Public Enemy framed the fight for racial equality within a dystopian heterogeneity that was really a metaphor for contemporary American society infused with skepticism, cynicism, and pessimism.

Recontextualizing symbols of black nationalism in their lyrics, videos, and album artwork, Public Enemy depict what a present-day revolution might look like. The vitriol in their music was aimed largely at the forces upholding the structures of systemic racism in the United States in a time when race relations were reaching a boiling point. Tensions peaked in 1992 when the acquittal of four police officers involved in the Rodney King beating resulted in six days of riots in South Central Los Angeles. Public Enemy’s brand of militant rap provided an important counterpoint to gangsta rap, which became increasingly nihilistic throughout the 1990s, reaching a climax in 1994 with the tragic shooting deaths of Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, who were at the forefront of a bitter East Coast vs. West Coast hip hop rivalry. Around the same time, the South was establishing itself as an entity in the hip hop industry, led by the Atlanta duo Outkast. With its contentious history of race relations and poverty-stricken urban sprawls, Armageddon was still in effect in the South, and ATLiens<sup>2</sup> Big Boi and André 3000 had something to say.

#### OUTKAST: THE SOUTH HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

Outkast embraced Afrofuturism to accentuate their outsider status with science fiction themes and extra-terrestrial personas that promoted southern values and a southern identity.

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<sup>2</sup> ATLiens is a portmanteau term used for the title of Outkast's second studio record that blends "ATL" (an abbreviation of Atlanta, Georgia) and "aliens".

Winning the award for ‘Best New Rap Artist’ at *The Source Awards* in New York City in 1995, André 3000 famously announced to a disparaging crowd that “The South got something to say” (Cantor 2015). Outkast is the group that put southern rap music on the map in the mid-1990s, distinguishing themselves from the more dominant East and West Coast genres with a slower, more laid back ‘southern’ sound. Using heavily accented southern African American Vernacular English, the duo rapped their tales of the street over funk-inspired instrumentals produced by Organized Noize. In 1994, Outkast and Organized Noize pioneered the South Coast sound, creating a style of their own with their debut release of *Southernplayalisticadillacmuzik* (1994). In a review of the album for *The Source*, Rob Marriott notes the duo’s deep funk roots writing, “The Outkast sound doesn’t just ride atop the funk, it aspires to it” (Marriott 1994, 83). Changing the sound of mainstream rap and balancing street consciousness with social consciousness, Outkast bridged hip hop’s golden era into one where the familiar brand of politics in ‘conscious’ rap began to subside among many commercially successful artists.

Outkast later worked to set themselves apart from the regional sound they popularized. Observing this move in the naming of their second album titled *ATLiens* (1996), Serig contends, “As the conflated title suggest. Outkast would not be tethered simply by region, it had one foot in outer space” (Sarig 2007, 141). As the more predominant and unique MC of the rap duo, André 3000 is generally credited with the group’s associations with Afrofuturism. As Howard Rambsy states, “In the context of Afrofuturism, André 3000’s tendency to augment his voice in different songs, his fondness for exuberant wordplay, and his frequent references to extraterrestrials are a few of his defining technical approaches that shape the distinctiveness of his artistry” (Rambsy 2013, 212). From his flamboyant fashion statements to his musical experimentations, André changed rap and opened up new possibilities in the South and for hip hop culture in general.

André 3000's Afrofuturist tendencies resulted in increased creative mobility that allowed him to venture outside of hip hop's standardized conventions. For example, the double album *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* (2003) featured Big Boi and André separately, highlighting their different artistic directions. On *The Love Below*, André ventured further outside the realm of hip hop with pop, funk, and jazz-inspired tunes that addressed themes of love and incorporated more singing than rapping. Expanding the hip hop genre, André 3000 demonstrated how Afrofuturism's poetics of identity could create spaces for artists to explore new directions within the genre while maintaining authenticity. As well as redefining black masculine identities within hip hop culture, Outkast also sought to reappropriate African American subjectivity in the southern United States. With a tense history of race relations, and a deepening economic divide between social classes, Armageddon had been in effect, and the South was ready to tell their story.

The Mississippi Delta, the Southeastern Cotton Belt, and central Appalachia regions of the American South contain clusters of extreme poverty that are disproportionate to levels in the rest of the United States (Partridge and Rickman 2007). The South had the most significant increase in urban development between 1982 and 1997 where five out of the top-ten most sprawling major U.S. metropolitan areas are located (Smart Growth America 2000). Increased poverty rates are both a cause and a byproduct of urban sprawl due to racial discrimination, economic inequality, immobility, and gentrification (Bullard, Johnson and A.O. 1999; Carruthers and Ulfarsson 2003; Glaeser, Kahn and Rappaport 2008; Powell 2007; Wiewel and Schaffer 2001). As one of the most sprawling metro areas in the South, Atlanta consistently tops the list as the city with the worst income inequality in the U.S. (Foster and Wu 2018). The abandoned-

house-turned-drug-dens that litter Atlanta's urban centers became an emblem of the extreme poverty and inequality experienced in the city, and a space tied to the identity of trap culture.

A trap house is a place where drugs are manufactured and sold with a single point of entry and exit. As an iconic symbol of Atlanta's drug culture, the trap house came to represent the existential paradoxes of the lifestyle. Big Boi was one of the first MCs to popularize the use of the term in Outkast's 1998 single, "SpottieOttieDopaliscious" (1998) where he raps, "The United Parcel Service and the people at the post office didn't call you back because you had cloudy piss, So now you back at the trap just that, trapped, Go on and marinate on that for a minute". While Outkast balanced their brand of commercial gangsta rap with the politics of conscious hip hop, they marked the end of an era which saw a shift in values among the next generation of artists. The new millennium and the birth of trap music would sway the tide of mainstream rap toward new extremes—a divide that critics and purist have lamented as a betrayal of traditional hip hop values. Author M.K. Asante Jr. remarks on this shift saying:

Although hip-hop was founded on the principles of rebellion, over the past decade [2000–] it has been lulled into being a conservative instrument, promoting nothing new or remotely challenging to mainstream cultural ideology. Even in the midst of an illegitimate war in Iraq, rap music remains a stationary vehicle blaring redundant, glossy messages of violence without consequence, misogyny, and conspicuous consumption. As a result, it has betrayed the very people it is supposed to represent; it has betrayed itself. (Asante 2008, 10)

Despite Asante Jr.'s claims, rap was actually moving in many different directions with more nuanced modes of resistance. Some of the top-selling artists from 2000-2004 include Eminem, 50 Cent, Outkast, Kanye West, and Jay-Z. This is the time in hip hop history where commercial rap lyrics became overwhelmingly nihilistic and hedonistic. Jay-Z's "Moment of Clarity" (2003) puts a fine point on the incentive to embrace themes that promote gang culture values over more traditionally progressive ones with the lyric, "Truthfully I want to rhyme like

Common Sense, But I did five Mil, I ain't been rhyming like Common since” —referring to the ‘conscious’ hip hop artist Common Sense. Winning numerous accolades, Outkast led southern hip-hop’s takeover of the genre, thereby destabilizing the East and West coast dominance of the charts. In addition to Outkast, artists such as Ludacris, Lil’ Jon, and Three 6 Mafia played important roles in this historic shift. southern-based genres including Atlanta crunk, Memphis horrorcore, Miami bass, New Orleans bounce, and Houston hip hop were forerunners of the trap genre, contributing to the increased emphasis on hedonism and nihilism that would come to define trap music. A few influential artists and producers out of Atlanta in the 2000s were responsible for developing what would become the sound of the South, and by the 2010s, the sound of contemporary rap.

#### TRAP IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The trap genre is characterized by its hyper-digitized synthesizer melodies, heavy bass frequencies, syncopated rhythms, pitched 808 kick drums, and rapid-fire percussion and hi-hat fills. DJ Toomp from Atlanta is largely responsible for developing the trap sound and bringing the genre to the mainstream. While the influence of Dr. Dre’s G-funk can be heard in Toomp’s earliest productions, artists and producers that came later generally abandoned any traces of its analog origins. This progression began to fuse trap’s sound more closely with EDM and pop in the productions of Atlanta trap’s ‘holy trinity’, Gucci Mane, Young Jeezy, and T.I. Other producers who helped lay the foundations for the trap sound include Zaytoven, Shawty Redd, and Drumma Boy.

Zaytoven’s collaborations with Atlanta rappers Gucci Mane and Migos moved trap into a sound that is strictly digital with songs like Gucci Mane’s “Icy” (2005), evoking the nostalgia of chiptune and 8-bit gaming music with its electronic timbres. One thing that stands out while

listening to Zaytoven's beats is that they are generally brighter and more cheerful than the more modern sound of producers such as Metro Boomin. While Zaytoven steered the trap sound into a more futuristic sounding tapestry, producers Shawty Redd and Drumma Boy can be credited with moving it into darker territory. Drumma Boy's production of Young Jeezy's "Put On" (2008) sounds like a horror movie score beneath its heavy 808 kit trap rhythms and creates an eerie tension for Jeezy's gritty raps. Like Jeezy, most popular trap artists in the first decade of the 2000s rapped about themes restricted to drug dealing, violence, sex, and wealth. Toward the end of the first decade of the 2000s, trap was defined by dystopic soundscapes and narratives that created a space for the latest musical incarnation of Afrofuturism.

While trap was becoming a prominent genre in the 2000s, there were many related genres developing throughout the South and Midwest. Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, Memphis, and Miami are the 'Southern Network' of hip hop, each with crucial players whose regional aesthetics contributed to the sounds and styles of the 'Dirty South'. As trap was establishing its sound as a synthesis of snap, horrorcore, grime, bounce and other Dirty South genres, the biggest star of the decade would ascend from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The breakthrough success of Lil Wayne would change hip hop culture and reignite Afrofuturism within the music, most notably in the Atlanta trap scene.

#### WEEZY PHONE HOME

As one of the most successful and influential rap artists of all time, Lil Wayne reshaped hip hop culture on multiple fronts and brought Afrofuturism into mainstream rap in 2008 with the release of his triple-platinum certified breakout album, *Tha Carter III* (2008). Signing to the Cash Money label at the age of eleven, Wayne was the youngest artist on the roster and was mentored and developed by its founder, Birdman. As the most unique and eccentric figure to

emerge on the scene since André 3000, Wayne's image and persona(s) expanded the artistic possibilities for the next generation. With his long dreads, multiple piercings, a canvas of face and body tattoos, surgically implanted diamond-encrusted teeth, and his skinny jeans hipster-skater fashion sense, Lil Wayne represented something new in rap.

Adopting the pseudonym Weezy F. Baby for his alter ego, Wayne's multiple personas transcend the boundaries of the rap genre while retaining authenticity and credibility in the eyes and ears of hip hop enthusiasts. Exploring hip hop pseudonyms in relation to an Africanist aesthetic, Halifu Osumare asserts that the power of *Nommo*, combined with the labelling and naming processes in hip hop utilizes "the contemporary politics of persona and spectacle in popular culture" (Osumare 2008, 36). *Nommo*, with its roots in African orality, is an African American delivery expression that emphasizes the creative power of the word. Combining notions of orality with the theory of Afrocentricity, *Nommo* is best understood with a familiarity of African and African American folklore, and storytelling traditions (Walker and Kuykendall 2005). The aforementioned Eshu trickster mythology and the *play mas* tradition that will be discussed in the following chapter are two examples of practices that obscure the meanings of words to translate a different politics of representation. With less emphasis on constructing overarching coherent themes and storylines, contemporary commercial rap lyrics often lend themselves to phonological and semantic interpretations of tropes and signifiers. Wayne's special gift of wordplay and unique lyricism allowed him to create new meanings, possibilities, personas, and paradoxes using obfuscation, double entendres, synecdochic figures of speech, in-the-know jargon, and signifyin' tropology. His delivery marks a shift in new school rap toward what has been referred to as 'post-text', a term used to describe Young Thug's combination of speech-sounds and words (Serrano 2015). Wayne's intentionally ambiguous language sprung

from the argots of Dirty South gang culture and science fiction, and his lyrics are accentuated using wordplay, augmentation, and vocal processing technology to create layers of meaning.

Coming from the Hollygrove neighbourhood of New Orleans, Wayne's passionate homages to his hometown are paired with frequent claims of being a Martian. Hard rap and Afrofuturism are both informed by incidents and conditions, where biographical rap lyrics and protest music tend to address them directly, AF addresses them through themes of speculative fiction. Balancing his various identities and personas, Wayne has kept one foot planted in the streets, and one foot in space, thereby 'keeping it real' and 'unreal' at the same time. This 'doubleness' demonstrates the potential for resistance through a commodified persona. As Hess notes, "rap artists confuse or split their identities to subvert the often-conflicting standards of authenticity and marketability" (Hess 2005, 298). Using the informal to inform the formal and vice versa, themes of speculative fiction bring an added dimension to confuse the conflicting customary standards of the rap genre. Hurricane Katrina is one named incident in Lil Wayne's work where he depicts the dehumanizing conditions that followed the disaster.

Hurricane Katrina was a category five hurricane that ravaged the Gulf coast of the United States hitting New Orleans on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, resulting in the deaths of 1833 people; the displacement of over 1,000,000 more; and damages costing an estimated USD 108 billion (Knabb, Rhome and Brown 2011). Disadvantaged low-income housing communities such as New Orleans' 9th Ward with high minority populations faced the worst devastation in the wake of Katrina, eliciting questions regarding the government's rationale in their fumbled response to the mass destruction. Appearing on the *His & Hers Podcast* commemorating the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Wayne commented on the implications of the government's mishandling of the disaster stating,

It's no change, it's just what they—and when I say 'they' that's a quote, unquote. Meaning I don't know who 'they' are—but it's what they wanted [...] That's what I see. 'Move who we don't want out and bring what we want in' [...] It's what they want in—money. And we—as in quote, unquote 'me and my people'—we scare that money away, that's what they figure. 'So, wash them out.' (Carter 2015)

Katrina served as a glaring example of racial discrimination that was evident in biased media coverage and inadequate relief efforts. Wayne drew attention to the Armageddon-like devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina and the government (non-)response both lyrically and sonically in “Georgia Bush” (2006). The song targets the media, the police, and the government, saving the bulk of Wayne’s criticism for then sitting President George W. Bush. Produced by Daz Dillinger and Vudu Spellz, the piece samples Ray Charles’ “Georgia on my Mind” (1960) and is layered with a bouncy 808 kit drum beat, ambiguous piano chords, a dissonant synthesizer pad, and ascending and descending synthesizer sounds. The racially charged lyrics describe the dehumanizing effects of the society’s response to the disaster: “The white people smiling like everything cool, But I know people that died in that pool [...] New Orleans baby, now the White House hating, Trying to wash us away like we not on the map” (2006). Lil Wayne’s double consciousness as both an American citizen and a person of African descent whose community had been failed tragically—yet again—by the American government is on full display in his rhetoric on Hurricane Katrina. However, themes of alien othering and space travel did not become commonplace in his work until his massive output of singles and mixtapes in 2007 leading up to the release of *Tha Carter III*.

Shifting between pseudonyms Lil Wayne and Weezy as well as his birth name, Dwayne, Lil Wayne splits his identities and alters his performance persona, mutating between human and non-human life forms. On the single “A Milli” (2008), Wayne takes on his boastful battle rap persona spitting “Hopin’ them crackers see me like look at dat bastard Weezy, he’s a beast, he’s

a dog, he's a mutherfuckin' problem, okay you're a goon but what's a goon to a goblin?". The track "Phone Home" (2008) similarly features Weezy taking on various extraterrestrial forms claiming, "We are not the same I am a Martian" and "We are not the same I am an alien". Throughout the track, Wayne erratically leaps between themes of guns, sex, and drugs, while presenting himself as a moving target, finishing the song with the lines "So I'm polar, And they can't get on my system cause my system is the solar, I am so far from the others I mean others, I can eat them for supper get in my spaceship and hover". The disparate nature of Wayne's various adopted personas makes it extremely difficult to nail down meaning in his lyrics, which are at times unintelligible, contradictory, perverse, and/or offensive.

While Wayne spends much time disassociating himself from the categorization of human, he surprises listeners once again on the last track of *The Carter III* where he returns to human form with another one of his rare ventures into a political narrative. The track "DontGetIt" (2008) is set to the hook and instrumental sample of Nina Simone's "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" (1964). Presenting himself as a misunderstood Messiah throughout the rap ballad with numerous biblical references, Wayne finishes the final verse explaining "Cause you thought Lil Wayne was Weezy, but Weezy is Dwayne". Returning to human form, Dwayne Carter proceeds into a six-minute spoken word critique of America's systemic white supremacy, contemplating what it means to be human with self-reflective passages where he explains, "But, since I am human, I am good and bad as well. But I try my hardest to stay good. And some of the things I do and say may be bad, or just, not too good. But I do try". He goes on to finish his sermon with a message to Al Sharpton who has been critical of the language rappers use saying "I'd much rather you talk to me first and see if you can learn an opinion before you make one

[...] And that just means you're a little un-human, then use humans, and now let me be human and say, fuck Al Sharpton and anyone like him”.

It seems Lil Wayne is acutely aware of what he is doing with his constructed personas and how they are perceived by both hip hop insiders and outsiders. Throughout the track “DontGetIt” (2008), Wayne wades between defending his actions and words and repenting for them, finally leaving the audience with a question to ponder, “It's not like in the suburbs, we don't have what you have. Why? I really don't wanna know the answer. I guess we just misunderstood”. The point here is not to defend misogyny in rap lyrics, but to acknowledge the double-edged sword that emerges between anti-sexist and anti-racist debates, and in doing so, highlighting how this intersection serves as a reflection of culture. As bell hooks writes,

The sexist, misogynistic, patriarchal ways of thinking and behaving that are glorified in gangster rap are a reflection of the prevailing values in our society, values created and sustained by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As the crudest and most brutal expression of sexism, misogynistic attitudes tend to be portrayed by the dominant culture as an expression of male deviance. In reality, they are a part of a sexist continuum, necessary for the maintenance of patriarchal social order. (hooks 1994, 2)

Wayne’s commodified personas reflect both Afrofuturism and DuBoisian double consciousness. Using humour and parody, Lil Wayne led hip hop music and Afrofuturism in new directions, taking on various identities to frame his artistic expression in both reality and science fiction. His particular twist on ‘thug life’ realities and ‘American Dream’ fantasies demonstrates the polarized binaries of Wayne’s double consciousness, and the evolution of representations of black masculine identity.

In a September 2018 interview with *Complex*, Houston rapper Bun B discusses Lil Wayne’s influence on rap declaring, “Wayne’s an amazing writer above all. I would say 75 percent of new rappers are the children of Lil Wayne” (Tharpe 2018). From his fashion sense to

his flow, his use of new production technologies, and his unapologetic excesses, Wayne's footprint extends far and wide in hip hop culture, including the Atlanta trap scene of the past decade. Most notably for the purposes of this paper, Wayne began to steer hip hop's associations with Afrofuturism in a new direction.

## CHAPTER 2: TRAP AFROFUTURISM AND POETICS OF IDENTITY

Identity is socially constructed. Both individually and collectively, identity is formed dialogically through social relationships and interactions with family, peers, institutions, and the mass media. One's identity politics are often informed by their membership within a social group or groups. Given its origins and history, hip hop identity politics are generally understood and interpreted in the context of social roles defined by race, gender, and class. Science fiction, on the other hand, tends to evoke the more existential self-reflective question of 'what am I?'

The post-human or anti-human dimensions of Afrofuturism question the universal definition of 'human'. In his article 'The Poetics of Identity', Theodore R. Sarbin makes the case that the formation of identities are influenced as much by social relationships as they are imagined ones and those cultural myths are part of the framework that assembles the plot structures of individual self-narratives (Sarbin 1997). This chapter examines the social, political, and metaphysical implications of what I am calling "trap Afrofuturism", examining the construction and performance of identities within trap, specifically how identities and character roles are represented symbolically with words, sounds, and visuals. Future, Migos, and Young Thug embody different aspects of trap Afrofuturism and a poetics of identity that is self-reflective from both social and existential standpoints. Looking at works by Future, I will discuss the concept of 'playing mas' in relation to alternate identities through the use of technology. Using Migos as an example, I will address the sonic elements of trap that make it posthuman, demonstrating its emancipatory potential and the legibility of its politics. Finally, I will consider how fashion statements participate in the dialogues that form identity. Known for his androgynous style, Young Thug has become a fashion icon who is breaking down gender barriers in the rap game with his image, forcing the mainstream culture to rethink its

conceptualizations of black masculinity. From a social, political, and metaphysical perspective, contemporary trap music's poetics of identity are negotiated through sights, stories, and sounds that are moving hip hop and Afrofuturism in new directions.

#### FUTURE: PLAYING THE BAD GUY FROM PLUTO

If Lil Wayne affirmed the potential of using vocal processing technologies to push the artistic boundaries of gangsta rap, Future took the practice to new heights, becoming a sentimental gangsta cyborg with his auto-tuned rhymes and croons. Born Nayvadius DeMun Wilburn in Atlanta, Georgia in 1983, Future is one of the biggest proponents of trap and a paradigm-shifting figure in the genre. The low register and timbral characteristics of his voice interact with a unique treatment of autotune technologies, where the hoarseness of his voice cuts the robotic buzz of the effect, evoking a sense of soulfulness. Besides his distinct voice, he is also known for his songwriting that explores a range of emotion, breaking certain stereotypes and recycling others at the same time. Assuming different personas and life-forms, Future's representations of identity introduce elements that disrupt the mechanisms of their construction.

Future is a man of many masks: Future Hendrix, Astronaut Kid, and Super Future, to name a few. His work goes well beyond the idea of double consciousness, enacting a kind of multiple-consciousness that can be fruitfully examined through the concept of 'playing mas'. Playing mas comes from the Afro-Caribbean carnival tradition of wearing masks and costumes to assume alternate identities. Marlo Davis contends that the contemporary black artists' ability to play mas affords "the mobility to shift personae in ways that counteract the limitations of identity imposed by the hegemonic gaze of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion" (David 2007, 697). While the hypermasculinity of classic gangsta rap permeated most trap in the 2000s, Future's strategic 'othering' allowed him to effectively explore a range of emotions foreign to

the genre while maintaining credibility as a hard rapper. Much of Future's lyrical content relies on gangsta rap tropes and clichés that reinforce stereotypical representations of black masculinity; however, Future has found a way to transcend the limitations of the identity imposed by the genre, exploring themes of love, loss, and pain.

Future's multiple identity roles allow him to adopt and perform the gangsta persona while going beyond its uniformity, revealing a vulnerability that is uncommon in the trap genre. Commenting on Future's debut release *Pluto* (2012), Stephen Kearsse observes that, "Pluto was layered with allusions to space and astronauts and even ATliens, but at its core was a desire to become a new person, through love, through drugs, or through sheer ambition" (Kearsse 2017). Like Lil Wayne and André 3000, Future uses his constructed persona to break free from the limitations of the rap genre, while at the same time redeploying many of the well-worn clichés to redefine it, highlighting the complex nature of his own identity and, arguably, contemporary blackness more generally. Two of the standout tracks on *Pluto*, "Turn on the Lights" (2012), and "Tony Montana" (2012) demonstrate the breadth of Future's identities and the range of artistic possibilities that they enable.

Future is not the first rapper to use autotune technologies, but he is the first to use it consistently and successfully in the gangsta rap genre as a defining characteristic of his sound, while also blending rapping and singing. Exemplifying Alexander G. Weheliye's concept of *hypersoul* (Weheliye 2002), the electro-mediatization of Future's 'soulful' voice sonically indicates a new realization of posthumanism. The mechanization and disembodiment of Future's voice through vocal processing sonically disassociates the performer from designations of human and assigned social roles. The process of robotizing the voice to explore human emotion is a prime example of MythScience and concepttechnics. With his shifting personae, innovative uses

of technology, and a distinct lyricism, Future finds a way to convey the dualities of mania/depression, subject/object, and human/non-human in the musical and lyrical representations of his identity.

“Turn on the Lights” (2012) is a love ballad about a quest for the ideal woman who is described as an unattainable mythical figure. The ominous and psychedelic-sounding instrumental that is produced by Mike-Will-Made-It starts with an arpeggiated synthesizer melody as the beat builds. The four-chord progression ascends halfway through the circle of fourths leaving it perpetually ambiguous and harmonically unresolved. Rhythmic accents are syncopated and unsymmetrical, and Future’s flow and intonation can be described as loose, if not sloppy. Trap music, like EDM, is produced using digital audio workstations to integrate software generated sounds and effects. Many of trap’s most well-known producers like Mike-Will-Made-It license and brand software plugins and VST’s (Virtual Studio Technology) that mimic their signature trap sound. The autotune software settings used on an artist’s vocals, however, are more closely guarded secrets. The autotune effect that was popularized in hip hop by rap-singer T-Pain in the mid-2000s was in itself a misuse of software technology. Designed to correct pitches fluidly and undetected, setting the pitch shift to zero milliseconds causes it to be abruptly jolted to a prescribed note, acquiring a distinct ‘buzzy’ tone in the process. Ironically, T-Pain has relayed his opinion in interviews that Future is misusing the technology with an arbitrary approach that lacks technique (Reagans 2013). T-Pain also addressed his use of the vocal effect to transcend the barriers of the rap genre, noting his contribution to Kanye West’s *808s & Heartbreak* (2008) album which is credited as a prominent influence on the thematic content and style of subsequent hip hop artists such as Future. *808s* created the ‘sad robot’ identity—one that Future adopts when tapping into emotion in his trap ballads.

Future begins the first verse of “Turn on the Lights” with his raspy croaked singing, asking, “is that her in the VIP-line?” (2012). He goes on to offer money, drugs, and his loyalty in hopes of attaining the evasive ‘good girl’ he is looking for. From hanging in the hallways with ‘dope boys’, to living in luxury, Future constructs various identities that communicate layers of meaning. Unorthodox for trap artists of the previous decade, the song is almost entirely sung with a delivery that ranges from deadpan indifference to celebratory bravado and at times, a choked-up restraint that sounds as if he were on the brink of tears. The result is the hyper-soulfulness that Weheliye’s describes as “a mechanized desire at the cusp of the human and posthuman” (Weheliye 2002, 32). The tension in Future's robotic voice, the unresolved harmonies, and the ambiguous chords and lyrics convey Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘desiring machine’ where the subject is lost in in desire, or his desire is missing a fixed subject (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 26). In “Turn on the Lights”, Future becomes a sentimental cyborg performing a longing flow of mechanical desire for the subject of his love, without ever finding her. The technological mediation of his voice augments the various representations of his identity as he engages lyrically in the dialogues that inform them. Making something new from something old, Future’s concepttechnics create new sounds, meanings, and identities through the use of technology, and by signifyin’ on tropes drawn from science fiction.

On the other side of the spectrum, Future’s hypermasculine gangster persona presents itself on the single “Tony Montana” (2012) where he channels the protagonist played by Al Pacino in the 1983 film *Scarface* (De Palma 1983). Produced by Will-A-Fool, this eerie trap banger features a guest verse by Toronto rapper Drake, which gave the track an extra boost, making it Future’s first major hit and elevating him to star status almost overnight. *Scarface* has been widely referenced in hip hop, so much so that we might expect its appeal to be worn out by

now; however—in true trap fashion—Future bravely tackles the reference, endowing it with new meanings. In the article ‘Understanding Old Words with New Meanings’, Clark and Gerrig discuss the process of sense creation based on biographical knowledge of a subject, which they identify as a “characteristic of eponymous expression—that is, expressions built around references to people or eponyms” (Clark and Gerrig 1983, 591). Future’s eponymous expression of Tony Montana, therefore, can be considered a performative deployment in which the subject is presented in a new context and becomes the mask of his new identity. “You want me to be the bad guy?” Future raps. “Okay, it's on then”.

In an interview with Peter Rosenberg, Future offers some insight on the allure of ‘Tony Montana’ and the turning of a phrase through repetition, “If I could just say ‘Tony Montana’ on the whole song, that shit hard [...] a moment of just a phrase, it just change your whole perspective of the way you look at somebody” (2013). Future repeats the words ‘Tony Montana’ a total of 52 times throughout the piece, at times slurring his speech to the point of near unintelligibility. This unorthodox vocalization has come to be known as *mumble rap*, a style of rapping that signifies a state of inebriation. Future identifies the raw spontaneity of his delivery as the main reason why he liked it so much, and the reason why he decided not to change the recording upon listening to it the next day. His mechanically-processed vocals combined with the mangled repetition of the iconic character’s name breathed new meaning into the *Scarface* trope, signifyin’ not only on the character as portrayed by Al Pacino, but also on the myriad of other references to the character in earlier gangsta rap recordings.

Future pivots seamlessly from the character role of violent gangster to troubadour on the same album, adding an emotional depth to trap’s poetics of identity. In one song, he becomes the bad guy that he is expected to be, and on another, he subverts the hegemonic gaze and defies

those expectations. By becoming a musical cyborg, Future explores a range of emotion and meaning beyond the limitations of typical gangsta rap orthodoxy. The hypersoul of his disembodied voice opens the door for more introspective emotion and sensuality in his lyrics. By playing mas, and by his signifyin' on themes, characters, and tropes drawn from science fiction and popular culture, he adopts and performs a kind of multiple consciousness, articulating different aspects of trap Afrofuturism.

### MIGOS SOUNDING POSTHUMAN: SONIC BLACKNESS

Migos are made up of members Quavo, Takeoff, and Offset, who are all directly related with one another and grew up together twenty-six miles outside of Atlanta in the suburb of Lawrenceville, Georgia. With their meteoric ascension in the Atlanta trap scene, the three Migos have become the de facto spokespersons for the culture, and pioneers of the genre's sound. Referred to as "the Beatles of this generation" by Donald Glover in a post-show interview at the 2017 *Golden Globe Awards* (Lang 2017), Migos' influence on hip hop, mainstream popular music, and popular culture more broadly is undeniable. From the 'dab' dance fad craze to viral social media memes, Migos' cultural reach is visible in the most unlikely places (such as Hillary Clinton's 'dabbing' on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in 2016). Through an analysis of "Versace" (2013) and "Bad and Boujee" (2016), I will show how Migos articulate an Afrofuturist sense of post-humanity through lyrics and sound.

'Sonic blackness' references intimate associations that fulfill audience or performer-driven expectations. Justin Adams Burton discusses the political nature of trap music using the concept of sonic blackness stating "trap generally reads as apolitical, but in its ironic performance of blackness in a post-race society, it digs in to blackness in a way that undermines post-race ideology without directly addressing it" (Burton 2017, 72). Nina Sun Eidsheim first

coined the term ‘sonic blackness’ to refer to a political spirit among black people that is expressed and performed through music and sound (Eidsheim 2011, 664). While Eidsheim focuses mostly on the human voice, Loren Kajikawa considers the production of hip hop music and argues that one of the ways in which rap music ‘sounds black’ is “by promoting highly visible (and often controversial) representations of black masculine identity” (Kajikawa 2015, 5). No strangers to controversy, Migos uses ironic stereotypes of black masculinity and a variety of musical tropes to meet and contradict certain expectations around blackness, thereby challenging dominant society’s hegemonic gaze and assumptions about race. My intention is not to suggest that trap ‘sounds black’, but rather to identify *how* trap uses particular sonic markers to tap into—and complicate—socially-constructed and ideologically-coded assumptions about race.

Migos’ breakthrough single “Versace” (2013) is dedicated to their favourite fashion brand. In addition to discussing drugs, money, and guns, the song is peppered with references to Egypt, pharaohs, Medusa, and the Illuminati. Produced by veteran producer Zaytoven, the track is another that received a boost in popularity when Drake contributed a verse for the remix, subsequently elevating the group to the forefront of hip hop. Demonstrating the increasingly minimalist production style of the trap genre, the backing track features high-pitched, bright staccato synthesizer motifs that are layered over droning orchestral brass samples, thereby creating a wide-frequency spread with a sparse midrange that is reserved for the vocals. Describing his goal of fitting words to music Zaytoven explains, “The music I create has a certain bounce, a certain hop to it, in order for artists to stay in a certain pocket or deliver words a certain way” (Lee 2018). Zaytoven’s work on “Versace” provided an effective backdrop for Migos’ innovative and influential vocal style, which has come to be known as the ‘Migos flow’.

The ‘Migos flow’ involves a triplet-based vocal delivery that creates a 3:2 or 3:4 cross-rhythm against the 4/4-time signature instrumental track. While the group was not necessarily the first to rap with a triplet delivery, Migos adopted the rhythmic phrasing as the foundation of their prosody which has since become a ubiquitous technique and a defining characteristic of trap music. Examining the relationships between Atlanta trap and African rhythms and melodies, South African artist Sjava remembers, when first hearing the music,

I felt like I'd heard this before. I've heard these melodies all my life. It's just that now they are in English. When I heard trap, the melodies to me were too traditional. Because at the end of the day, we are all from Africa, it's just that they are overseas and all of that. Somewhere somehow, we are still linked within the music. (Mkhabela 2018)

Another recognizable characteristic of the ‘Migos flow’ is that it rises in pitch on the third subdivision of the triplet figure, as if posing a question. The members of Migos adlib responses to most lines in their songs, acting as hype men for each other in a call-and-response conversation of question, answers, assertions, confirmations, and vocables. “Versace” is striking in its simplicity, repetitiveness, and sheer infectiousness. The chorus is essentially the word ‘Versace’ repeated in triplet flow a total of eighteen times before Quavo breaks into his first verse rapping, “Versace, Versace, Medusa head on me like I'm 'Luminati” (2013). The ‘Migos flow’ and back-up adlibbing sonically voice both positive affirmations of blackness and solidarity in a participatory musical performance. The band’s relentless dedication to the triplet flow has made it a musical marker of sonic blackness in trap.

Like “Versace”, Migos’ 2016 hit “Bad and Boujee” ft Lil Uzi Vert (2016) became an internet phenomenon. With Glover’s endorsement and endless internet memes and twitter references to the ‘raindrop, drop top’ lyric, the song became an overnight sensation and reached the number one spot on the *Billboard Hot 100* in January 2017 (Trust 2017). The song explores

multiple meanings of the words ‘bad’ and ‘bougie’, juxtaposing symbols of so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture with ironic, contradictory, and controversial representations of race and class. Migos declare themselves ‘bad’ to denote a sense of toughness and street cred (in much the same way that James Brown declared himself to be ‘superbad’). They also reappropriate the pejorative term ‘bougie’, with the alternative spelling of the word which has become hip hop slang for someone of high social class (derived from *bourgeois*). They declare themselves to be both bad (in all senses of the word) and ‘bougie’, thereby embracing and performing a new identity that represents the younger generation of hip hop. While much of the heavy lifting of representing identity in hip hop is achieved through lyrics, images, and videos, the sound of trap music is another crucial aspect of its identity politics.

Produced by Metro Boomin, one of Atlanta’s foremost producers and songwriters, the “Bad and Boujee” backing track sticks to Zaytoven’s minimalist formula, mostly staying true to the standard trap aesthetic. Using the iconic 808 kit, the snare hits typically fall on the second and fourth beats of the bar with quieter and shorter punctuations on selected upbeats. The pitched kick drum, usually landing on beat one, is ‘misplaced’ in spots creating instances of syncopation. The hi-hat rhythms follow somewhat random patterns that switch between eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and triplet figures. While the more iconic examples of trap hi-hats often roll into thirty-second or sixty-fourth notes creating a rapid-fire rattle effect, Metro’s use of them in “Bad and Boujee” is less pronounced, tucking them further in the mix at a lower volume. The bright synthesizers that have become part of trap’s sonic template have an almost metallic or ‘digital’ sound which may be produced by running the signal through frequency modulators. The synthesizer’s high pitch and brightness effectively create space for the dense bass frequencies, adding to its effect when it finally drops. One of the defining characteristics of trap—and

southern hip hop in general—is its exaggerated bass frequencies. The extended decay of the 808-kick drum works rhythmically and melodically as it doubles up the low end of the woofer-loving bass notes. The prioritization of bass frequencies and complex rhythms in trap music signify on a host of Afrological musical signifiers articulating a strong sense of sonic blackness despite the neoliberal tendencies within popular culture, which tend to favour of a more homogenized brand of commercial music.

As one of the most commercially-successful music producers and songwriters of the 2010s, Metro Boomin’s innovation in the trap genre is best showcased in his ability to orchestrate the sonic rupture of the Armageddon effect with an experimental harmonic language that creates tension and friction with haunting dissonances. “Bad & Boujee” is in the key of Eb and creates a polytonal crunch between the upper range minor key synthesizer melodies and the Phrygian mode bass line, a rare and experimental venture for any popular music genre. Discussing the band’s sound, Quavo remarks, “I feel our music is like, dark. Dark grime but more hype and energetic. It brings happiness along with attitude. I wouldn't consider it as punk. We gotta call it something else. Trap funk” (Zeichner 2017). With his keen grasp of harmony, melody, tone, timbre, and texture, Metro produces heavy, dark sounds not unlike those found in horror movies, stating “I’ve always liked horror movies and scary sounding stuff” (Venable 2014). Trap evokes a sense of both happiness and horror, hype and grime, punk and funk; it invokes a multiplicity of associations that work together to perform a highly nuanced sense of sonic blackness.

In order to understand the idea of sonic blackness more fully, Loren Kajikawa contrasts it with another theoretical construction, that of sonic whiteness. Writing about Eminem’s debut single “My Name Is” (1999), Kajikawa states “the majority of rap beats in the 1990s drew upon

the generic conventions of funk music, featuring eight- or sixteen-count hi-hats with syncopated snare/kick drum patterns”. He goes on to conclude that Dr. Dre purposely removed such syncopations and subdivisions from Eminem’s track to signify “a rhythmic parody of whiteness” (Kajikawa 2009, 352, 353). Trap, on the other hand, employs heightened syncopation and micro subdivisions as exaggerated versions of black signifiers paired with an ironic redeployment of tropes associated with gangsta rap.

With lines like “cookin’ up dope with an Uzi” and “my niggas is savage ruthless” (2016), Migos invoke negative stereotypes surrounding black masculinity in an ironic way. In Gavin Mueller’s interpretation of “Bad and Boujee”, he observes:

Such wealth in the face of so much misery is fundamentally absurd, and so it is best consumed on ridiculous vehicle customization, diamond-encrusted chokers, and Louboutin sneakers. They know that being bad and being bourgeois go together like white and T-shirts. (Mueller 2017)

Neoliberal humanism’s embrace of diversity and multiculturalism is at ideological odds with trap’s representations of blackness. In *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*, Jared Sexton examines the ways in which multiracial policy and discourse has been “the source of social crisis” and “the barrier to a postracial future” (Sexton 2008, 65-66) precisely because of the ways in which it targets blackness specifically. Following Sexton’s logic, it can be argued that liberal receptions that champion the work of ‘conscious’ artists such as Kendrick Lamar perpetuate hegemonic ideas surrounding race. Spin columnist Jessica Hopper describes Kendrick Lamar as a “rap savior” and “the most important rapper since Jay-Z” (Hooper 2012) while political scientist Marc Lynch professes his admiration Lamar’s quest of “overcoming the manufactured differences that keep subordinated communities weak” (Lynch 2015). Lester Spence argues that the discourse surrounding ‘conscious’ rappers such as Kendrick Lamar award them “a modicum of political and cultural power” (Spence 2011, 9),

relegating artists who do not follow such a format to the margins. This neutralization of black solidarity is in line with post-racial neoliberal ideologies that view trap's sonic blackness as an anathema. As Burton argues, "the rationale that makes Kendrick politically legible also renders trap illegible", going on to assert "trap's sonic blackness is also its politics, what I'm calling *trap irony*" (Burton 2017, 94). Indeed, the sonic blackness of "Bad and Boujee" proved to be tremendously popular, broadcasting Migos' particular brand of Afrofuturist trap irony to listeners around the world, providing an important counterpoint to, and critique of, contemporary neoliberal conceptions of race.

#### YOUNG THUG'S AFROFUTURISTIC FASHION: LOOKING POSTHUMAN

In addition to the lyrical and musical content of trap, fashion trends associated with trap are playing a significant role in reshaping representations of contemporary black identity in popular culture. Fashion is often referred to as the fifth pillar of hip hop. As the Atlanta trap scene has established itself as a powerhouse in hip hop and popular culture, trap artists have become some of the most influential fashion icons of our time.

The massive international success of the critically acclaimed superhero epic *Black Panther* (2018) brought trap-inspired Afrofuturist fashion to the world stage in 2018, and in turn on to the runways of the fashion industry. *Black Panther*'s imprint on fashion trends include nods toward both African tradition and futuristic technology, visually depicting the MythScience of the digital divide and double consciousness. Many of the high fashion designers who are the favourites of today's trap artists include African textiles and prints as well as futuristic neon and reflective metallic material in their designs. Tasked by Marvel Studios with designing a couture piece to interpret *Black Panther* for the *2018 New York Fashion Week*, Ikiré Jones designer Walé Oyéjidé remarked on his vision and the film's relationship with fashion:

I think the film is very much a metaphor for the work we try to do [...] It's the same message of using this beautiful facade to uplift people who don't generally get to have a platform, whether that be ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality. For me, even watching the film, seeing people of color [in] both the villain and hero roles and the love interest roles, it's the full scope of what people can do. That's what I do with fashion. (Oyéjidé 2018)

German designer Philipp Plein's extravagant science fiction-themed *Fall/Winter 2018 NYFS* showcase featured futuristic garments and an 18-meter-wide floating spaceship in a spectacle that was topped off with a performance by Migos and Rich the Kid. Also in attendance was Atlanta rapper Young Thug who was there supporting his partner Jerrika Karlae who took part in the showcase modelling Philipp Plein's latest pieces. In an interview at the event, Thug stated, "I am fashion [...] I don't think I can even get in no deeper. I wake up and breathe this" (Montes 2018). Thug also made a splash at the VFILES showcase where he ended up stealing the spotlight as he proceeded to light up what appeared to be a blunt before walking onto the runway, interrupting the show to adjust a model's outfit mid-routine. Featured on the cover of a *V Magazine*'s November 2016 special issue, Thug was honoured as a leader in "shaping popular culture and carrying it into the future" (Defebaugh 2016). The same year, *GQ* called him "at once a hero and an outsider and a leader of the psychedelic fashion movement of rap hippies" (Friendman 2016). Known for his eccentric and androgynous style, Thug's fashion statements speak volumes in the dialogues that form his identity.

Speaking to French journalist Mouloud Achour, Young Thug says "Yeah I'm not from here... It's another Earth they just found, another planet... I'm probably from there" (Thug 2015). Born Jeffery Lamar Williams, Thug is one of the most talked about and debated artists in hip hop. Discussing Thug's nonconformist image and his unique blend of rap-singing, *The Seattle Times* notes that his "fashion sense as unconventional as his rapping" (Ramos 2015). Stuart Hall points out the historical use of the black body as "cultural capital" and how *style* has

become the primary cultural mode that is encoded within “canvases of representation” (Hall 1996). Much like Migos’ celebration of badness and bougieness, trap fashion is informed by both a street-level consciousness and an ethos of luxury lifestyle, and this combination is making a significant mark on mainstream and high fashion trends. Where Lil Wayne introduced a new look for contemporary hip hop artists with his face tattoos, long dreadlocks, and skinny hipster jeans, Young Thug took the image into the future with his flamboyant gender-bending fashion sense that both shocks and inspires audiences and critics.

In 2016, Young Thug became the second high-profile artist (after Jaden Smith), to model womenswear for a fashion brand. For Calvin Klein’s advertising campaign, he was featured wearing a black pinstripe dress/baggy pants ensemble that is completed with an orb-like medallion hanging from a metallic necklace. The ad was placed on a billboard at the major intersection of Houston and Lafayette on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with a tagline caption reading: “I disobey in #mycalvins” (A. Walker 2016). Discussing the CK ad, Thug explained, “In my world, you can be a gangsta with a dress or you can be a gangsta with baggy pants. I feel like there’s no such thing as gender” (2016). As a trap artist who builds many facets of his identity through associations with drug and gang culture, his defying of gender norms is seemingly at odds with gangsta rap’s construction of black masculinity.

Young Thug’s lyrics are similar in many respects to those of other trap artists, replete with references to aliens, space, drugs, violence, and misogyny; however, there is almost always certain ambiguity to his words—much like his image—that confuses the meanings of his messages. He is frequently pictured in music videos and on social media sporting makeup and womenswear and he refers to his peers and colleagues as ‘bae’ or ‘lover’. Although gender-bending traits are not uncommon in popular music and culture, it is a radical statement for a

gangsta rapper to deviate from the strict hypermasculinity that has been so central to the genre historically.

Young Thug used the 2016 CK advertising campaign as a platform to promote the anticipated release of his mixtape titled simply, *Jeffery* (2016). The cover art for the album featured him wearing a violet Japanese-inspired Alessandro Trincone dress and sedge hat making a flamboyant fashion statement that would frame his work in a new light. Regarding the genderfluidity of his garments, Trincone says “The feminine side of every male is explicitly shown through the whole collection, hoping to introduce a new meaning of masculinity, far from the traditional imagery society has carried through time” (Petrarca 2016). Each track of the album is named after iconic figures including Wyclef Jean, Kanye West, and Floyd Mayweather. Thug’s provocative fashion statements were met with resistance, criticism, and speculation within the hip hop community as his authenticity, sexuality, and masculinity were subject to intense scrutiny. While Young Thug’s fashion choices have challenged some gender norms within hip hop culture, other aspects of his work complicate the legibility of his sartorial and Afrofuturist politics.

In this regard, his identity politics resonate with some of Octavia Butler’s ideas around the resistive potential of black sexuality. *Dawn* (Butler 2001), the first novel in Octavia Butler’s *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy, is an Afrofuturist dystopia centered around protagonist Lilith Iyapo, who is abducted from earth in an effort to save the human species in the wake of an atomic firestorm. Lilith is tasked with being the progenitor in the next step of human evolution with the goal of eradicating inherent flaws of humanity through procreation with her alien saviours, the Oankali. Justin Louis Mann interprets Butler’s politics as a synthesis of Afrofuturism and what he terms ‘futuristic pessimism’, which he defines as contradictory “oscillations between certainty and

skepticism” (Mann 2018, 62). Central to Butler’s pessimistic futurism is the relationship between death and sexuality that according to Christina Sharpe engages blackness in a way that “produce and enforces links, discursive and material, between the womb and the tomb” (Sharpe 2014, 62). Given the weight of her responsibilities, Lilith’s anxieties shift between feelings of hope, skepticism, fear, and uncertainty. In a passage from *Dawn*, Lilith awakes to find superficial comfort in being granted life’s pleasantries of food and clothing despite her precarious position. She feels “more secure than she had at any other time in her captivity. It was a false security she knew, but she had learned to savor any pleasure, any supplement to her self-esteem that she could glean” (Butler 2001, 6). Like Lilith, Young Thug’s persona is constructed at the intersections of race, class, and gender with Afrofuturist dystopian impulses. His rags to riches narrative in the track “Lifestyle” (2014), juxtaposes the comforts of a luxurious lifestyle with the inherent nihilism of gang culture mentality: “I just might wake wantin' Chanel and these bitches can't see me, I'm in a whole other league, I ain't got AIDS but I swear to God I would bleed 'til I D.I.E”.

Writing about science fiction, Samuel R. Delany contends that writers “suffuse one discourse with a systematically different discourse and watch the places where strain and tension result” (Delany 1994, 268). As one of the authors who helped define Afrofuturism, Delany’s work explores sexuality and society, demonstrating Afrofuturism’s ability to reshape black queer identity. Young Thug’s complex identity politics open a space for dialogue at the intersections of blackness, gender, and Afrofuturism. As a ‘canvas of representation’, his body, and his body of work, challenge hip hop’s heteronormative gender politics, remixing cultural signifiers related to race, gender, sexuality, deviance, and technology. Afrofuturist scholarship has only recently begun to seriously investigate issues of gender and sexuality in the work of Janelle Monáe and

others. As an unorthodox example of contemporary Afrofuturism, the metanarratives of Young Thug's identity politics create new spaces to discuss race, gender, and sexuality.

## CHAPTER 3: SPACE AND MOBILITY

Trap and Afrofuturism draw upon tropes of location and transit from both African American musical traditions and science fiction to convey meaning. Using the trap house and outer space as spatial tropes, Migos articulate their quest for the American dream from Atlanta to far away planets. The group's dystopic take on Afrofuturism is a contemporary example of the Armageddon effect. With an affection for luxury vehicles and hard drugs, Future demonstrates a range of emotion in his music as he explores the highs and lows of life in the fast lane. Finally, Young Thug continues to push boundaries of hip hop music, channelling the spirit of Afrofuturism from early jazz pioneers who used improvisatory stylistic devices like quoted motifs, dissonance, repetition, and extended techniques to communicate layers of emotion and meaning.

### MIGOS BLASTING OFF FROM THE BANDO

The 'Armageddon effect', as employed by artists like Public Enemy, points to what Sinker identifies as the central argument of Black Science Fiction: the idea that for black people, the Apocalypse has already happened (Sinker 1992). This idea frames present-day issues of racial discrimination, oppression, and inequality within a larger historical context that starts with the abduction and forced emigration of Africans from their homeland during the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. Within Black Science Fiction, references to Armageddon and space travel endow geopolitics with spatial and historical counternarratives. Where earlier Afrofuturists such as Sun Ra and George Clinton tended toward utopian fantasy and escapism, hip hop acts like Public Enemy and N.W.A gravitated toward sonic and lyrical representations of dystopian societies. Paralleling real-life consequences of urban decay with imagined apocalyptic scenarios and sounds, 90s rap refashioned Afrofuturism to address social issues with less optimism. While still

informed by lived experiences, trap abandons the militant protests of ‘golden age’ hip hop for a grandiose theatrical portrayal of spaces reclaimed in the name of unity, solidarity, and prosperity. The trap sound and sub-culture is built around one iconic and mythicized Atlanta landmark, the trap house. Producer Drumma Boy alludes to the politics and cosmology of the genre’s sound stating, “Trap is a lot like trance music, but it’s southern trance music...and most trap has scary music or some type of ambience. Sometimes it makes me think of The Twilight Zone. It makes you feel like you’re in a dark dungeon, like you’re in the trap itself” (DJ Mag 2013).

The trap house has become a symbol that has been reclaimed as part of the culture’s identity. The artists’ brick-and-mortar studios are often located in former trap houses, which have been transformed from vacant houses that symbolize Atlanta’s ghettos, to places of innovation and entrepreneurship in the music industry and the drug trade. These houses have become spaces for social and economic mobility, subverting negative connotations of ‘low’ culture to find pride in what society has vilified. Applying tactics drawn from the drug trade to traffic in popular media, trap artist’s like Migos typically enshrine the trap house both as a symbol of the Armageddon effect—but also as an emblem of perseverance and redemption.

“Bando” (Cordero 2014)—another term for a trap house—is the title of Migos’ short biopic that was inspired by Jay-Z’s hip hop musical, *Streets Is Watching* (Abbott 1998). The film pays homage to the trap house and trap culture, documenting Migos’ humble beginnings and their rise to fame, featuring previously released tracks. The movie opens with a scene that looks like a social documentary on poverty, capturing a drive-by street view of spray-painted murals on dilapidated buildings with boarded-up windows. The loosely constructed plot proceeds through dramatic re-enactments of drug deals, robberies, and police raids that prelude musical scenes which recapitulate them lyrically, sonically, and visually. The film presents the trap house

or 'bando' as a place of danger, threat, and anxiety, but also a place for socialization, creativity, and business; a location where the band claims to have written and recorded their earliest hits and the spot where the infamous 'Migos flow' originated. In the musical performance of the film's title track "Bando" (2013), Migos paint a picture of themselves "trapping out the house with the boards on the windows" while drawing comparisons to scenes of mass destruction rapping, "Trap house look like it got hit by Hurricane Katrina". The videography and music in the film juxtapose binaries of poverty and wealth, disparity and joy, subjugation and liberation; elevating the trap house to a mythical status using systems of signifying'. Matt Miller's study of southern rap helps to contextualize trap regionally as an imagined space that is a central feature of its geopolitics:

Spatial imaginaries arise, already connected with material concerns and economic struggles. A shift in imagining the geography of rap opens possibilities to new participants. Imagined in a different way, the economic, material, and cultural resources of the South, once reserved for an entrenched white elite, open to the possibility of other claimants. The imagination of space (and the relative centrality or marginality of particular interpretations of imaginary spaces) lies not at the periphery of larger inequalities of economic, cultural, or political power, but is central and constitutive. (Miller 2008, 25)

In an interview promoting the group's biopic, Quavo explains, "We always trend set. And we had some people down. I was down. But we came back up all together and all together we winning. This is how it all started" (Nostro 2014). Compared to the bellicose references to the Armageddon effect in earlier gangsta rap, Migos' performances reclaim ownership of their apocalyptic environment, portraying themselves as the victim-heroes of the trap legacy. The lifestyle that Migos celebrate in their music and videos transcends biographical realism to ironic tongue-in-cheek and self-aware nihilism. Defiantly laughing in the face of adversity, Migos use humour, parody, and sarcasm in their music that contrasts the animosity, intimidation, and hostility of their gangsta rap predecessors. Migos' videos are often jovial performances that see

them residing in clouds of thick smoke wearing large smiles and flashy outfits that are reminiscent of Parliament-Funkadelic's farcical, psychedelic, and surreal wit. Regarding George Clinton's P-Funk, Portia Maultsby states that "Funk became a form of escapism: a temporary respite from the uncertainties and pressures of daily life." She goes on to identify the political dimensions of the music in terms of:

(1) self-liberation from the social and cultural restrictions of society and (2) the creation of new social spaces in which African Americans could redefine themselves and celebrate their blackness 'As One Nation Under a Groove'. (Maultsby 2006, 299)

Much the same could be said of trap music, which (re)claims and redefines the image of the trap house, transforming it into a social space and a centre for self-liberation. Throughout its evolution, trap has taken on symbolic affiliations with subsequent styles, sounds, ideas, and stories. Trap music is an allegorical journey from the trap house toward a realization of the American dream. Its doctrine—informed by myth, lived experience, and rooted in history—is a testament to the fundamental values of an oppressed class. By memorializing the past with sonic signifiers, by referencing mythological destinations as well as modern-day realities, trap's identity politics are thoroughly connected to time and place.

The youngest member of Migos, Takeoff, does not get the same media attention as his counterparts Quavo and Offset; however, his bandmates acknowledge him as the most talented among them. Interestingly, Migos' most low-key figure is also the one who engages with Afrofuturist themes most frequently. Takeoff lives up to his name by referencing space travel and outer space in multiple ways, even in the fashion accessories he wears. His extensive collection of extravagant custom jewellery pieces includes a 'spaceship' ring, an 'alien space traveller' pendant, and a 'galaxy' chain, worth a reported \$33,000, \$60,000, and \$500,000 respectively (TMZ 2017). In 2018, Takeoff travelled to outer space in his solo debut, *The Last*

*Rocket*, visiting various planets in the solar system on the lead single “Last Memory” (2018).

Trap music’s associations with outer space bring into focus the metaphysical dimension of MythScience, examining the nature of reality and relationships between actuality and possibility, substance and attribute, the trap house and the moon.

Produced by Monsta Beatz, “Last Memory” features a sparse and spaced out backing track with an arpeggiated pad, an upper range vowel synthesizer lead, and a rumbling pedal tone in the bass. Saturated with effects to create a wet, pulsating, psychedelic texture, Beatz builds an ominous cosmic landscape using dissonant intervals, and rhythmic melodies reminiscent of the theme music for *The Twilight Zone* (Sterling and Herrmann 1959-64). The video version of the song features a brief refrain with white noise that is ascending in pitch, depicting the takeoff of a rocket before the MC breaks into the first stanza. Narrating the voyage in his husky monotone voice and ‘Migos flow’ delivery, Takeoff wraps up the hook with the lines, “I go to space with the stars, might smoke a blunt with my pilot, Saturn, Moon, Earth, and Mars, NASA takeoff with the rocket”.

According to Paul Gilroy, space themes of soul and funk music in the 1970s and 1980s are a form of cultural mockery that speaks to the frustration and desperation within African American communities:

The celestial and interplanetary themes in the soul and funk music of this period provided a means to satirize American imperialism and advance utopian visions of a reconstructed society in which the black nation, united under a groove, would thrive in peace [...] The means by which black America was to get from where it was to its reconstituted future was as inconceivable as time travel itself. The political repertoire which stretched between mass non-violent direct action to open militarization appeared to have been exhausted. (Gilroy 1991, 179-180)

Gilroy’s assessment of the P-Funk era’s use of space themes is tied to the disillusionment felt by many African Americans about the failure of the Civil Rights Movement to deliver on

many of its promises. The deployments of interplanetary themes in trap music reflect a feeling of renewed hopelessness in today's political climate. Donald Trump's presidency—seen as a reaction to the Obama era's optimistic aspiration toward unity and reconciliation—has been characterized by extreme divisiveness, scorched-earth campaigning, and strident American nationalism. Part of a trend that is seeing populist movements gaining traction all over the globe, Trump's brand of politics has proven effective in capitalizing on the frustrations and insecurities of white middle-class Americans and stoking the country's racial tensions. In this context, trap Afrofuturism's spatial tropes can be looked at as a response to, and/or an escape from, the Trump-inspired surge of white nationalism we see today. While right-wing politics are trending toward nationalism and populism, trap's localism promotes a cultural capital and localized identity that is grounded in Atlanta.

For the most part, "Last Memory" is about selling drugs, doing drugs, sexual conquests, accumulating wealth, and claiming territory. With stops in outer space and London, Takeoff makes sure to give a shout out to Atlanta's 'Nawf' side where, as the story goes, his mob ties are raising the crime rate. With one foot in space and one foot in the trap house, the lyrics convey a sense of tension within the binaries of good, evil, utopia, and dystopia. Confronting his moral dilemmas, Takeoff reserves a few lines for biblical references, specifically 'Psalm 51:2' and 'Isaiah 54:17', "I prayed to God to wash my sins, nothing formed against me, not a weapon, ask Him where do I begin, Devil tryna take my blessings" (2018). Utopianism is a central concern of contemporary Christian theology, and Christianity is the source for much Western utopianism. As discussed in the previous chapter, trap works to subvert certain hegemonic ideologies of the status quo as an oppositional discourse; however, its narratives frequently and counterintuitively promote other values associated with mainstream commercial culture including the American

dream and, somewhat paradoxically, Christian eschatology. It is a central criticism of Christianity that the church is perceived to support the rich and powerful while pacifying the underclasses. Where neoliberalism and capitalism provide arenas for success, they also function to reproduce large-scale inequality. Therein lies the bipolarity of capitalism, trap music, and Afrofuturism. As critics have suggested, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism (Jameson 1994; Žižek 1994). Rather than reflecting a contradictory or ‘false’ consciousness, it can be argued that trap Afrofuturism assembles an alternative form of multiple consciousness that reflects conflicting ideologies. On “Bando” and “Last Memory”, Migos rework the tropes of space exploration and Armageddon in response to a host of societal pressures and prejudices.

#### TRAPPED MOBILITY: FUTURE IN THE FAST LANE

Signifying both social and economic mobility within mainstream popular culture, the highs and lows of trap are navigated and explored via spaceships, cars, and narcotics. Future’s penchant for space travel, luxury vehicles, and illicit drugs is remixed with a blend of science fiction, hip hop car culture, psychedelic surrealism, and social commentary. Known for expressing a wide range of emotions in a genre that has traditionally adhered to hypermasculine gender norms, Future has not been afraid to reveal glimpses of the man behind the mask, revealing his emotions, his ambitions, and at times, even his politics.

A quintessential trap banger, the lead single from Future’s 2015 *56 Nights* mixtape, “March Madness” (2015) mostly stays true to form but also stands out as one of the rare instances in which he explicitly addresses or engages with any specific socio-political issues. The psychedelic trap beat produced by Tarentino is a minor-key chord progression that is accentuated with a ping-pong-delayed arpeggiator synthesizer melody. Future’s tone is both sombre and

strained as he rhymes about drugs, outer space, fast cars, money, jewellery, and police brutality. By drawing on standard trap tropes as well as a critique of police brutality, Future shows us a glimpse of the political motivations behind, and potential of, trap Afrofuturism.

Cars are a reoccurring trope in the time-honored custom of ‘hip hop automotivity’, a term coined by Adrienne Brown to refer to the multiplicity of meanings that automobiles symbolize in rap music (Brown 2012). Horace J. Maxile Jr. traces the evolution of ‘tropes of transit’ from the chariots of early spirituals to blues gospel trains and Parliament’s Mothership, noting that in a similar vein, the automobile in black popular music has come to symbolize arrival and freedom (Maxile 2011, 605). Future references automobiles in the chorus of “March Madness”: “200 miles on the dash, and gotta roll a pound up and gas it, switching lanes in a Grand Rapide”. Here future is referring to the Aston Martin *Rapide S model*, which has a top speed of over 200mph and a price tag of \$200,000. ‘Switching lanes’ is a common hip hop figure of speech that refers not only to driving, but also to upward social and economic mobility. Future uses a similar double entendre in the second verse when he refers to ‘bending the curve’ in his Bentley *Flying Spur*.

Switching cars, like he is switching lanes, Future narrates “March Madness” from the front seat of his vehicles while travelling to drug deals and strip clubs or escaping police pursuit. The music video opens with audio clips and images from the news coverage of incidents of police violence against African Americans. There is a hint of guilt as Future raps “All these cops shootin’ niggas, tragic, I’m the one who’s living lavish”, drawing attention to the disparities of America’s income gap and his position of privilege. Future is able to break the law and evade police because of his fast cars and power status bragging, “I’m on a one way, flushin’, loud pack smellin’ musty, these fuckin’ police can’t touch me, these bogus police can’t touch me”.

'Flushing' is Atlanta slang for driving, and also the name of a neighbourhood in Queens, New York that is known for drug and gang-related activity. Driving forward on a metaphorical one-way street, Future preaches a 'rags to riches' narrative, referencing luxury cars to signal his arrival.

Trap artists frequently voice a preference for foreign cars, while also embracing American hot-rod culture. In the chorus of "March Madness", Future raps, "I drive the foreign like it was a Chevy, drive the foreign like it was a Chevy [skrrt], Lift it up and gon' and offset it". Here Future describes both the modification of his foreign-made car with a lift kit and his reckless driving that is echoed with the 'skrrt' backing vocal adlib that represents the screeching of tires. Commenting on the connection of car culture and rock and roll in America, Paul Grushkin states, "Hot rodding . . . speaks to the American penchant for promoting individuality and finding freedom" (Grushkin 2006, 8). Car culture's connection to rap music speaks to similar ambitions, but with marked differences to represent the cultural values of a marginalized minority underclass, first seen with the modification of inexpensive 'hoopties' in early hip hop. By suggesting that he would modify foreign luxury vehicles in the same way, Future emphasizes his upward social mobility while also maintaining his ties to hip hop culture and to the streets.

Hip hop's origins and evolution have been linked with the post-industrial era's effect on inner cities, notably the effects of urban planning projects such as the Cross Bronx Expressway and urban sprawl (Brown 2012, 265). Referencing Hurricane Katrina, Paul Gilroy acknowledges that, "car ownership remains an unspoken prerequisite for the exercise of substantive citizenship" (Gilroy 2011, 13). The fact that black residents in New Orleans were five times less likely to have access to private vehicles explains the heightened threat that they faced when the city issued the evacuation order (Dawson 2011, 28). Despite Gilroy's acknowledgement

regarding the connection between car ownership and substantive citizenship in America, he maintains that hip hop's infatuation with automobiles equates to a form of commodity fetishism that results in "a diminution of citizenship" (Gilroy 2011, 22). On the contrary, I would argue that hip hop automotivity galvanizes trap's MythScience and concepttechnics, symbolizing ideas of mobility and freedom that are informed by 'insider' cultural capital. From blues trains and spaceships to extravagant automobiles, tropes of transit connect the musical realizations of African American consciousness across time, place, and genre. In addition to celebrating spatial, social, and economic mobility, trap celebrates what might be termed "psychological mobility" through the use of illicit substances.

Tied intrinsically to Atlanta drug culture, trap music espouses the distribution and consumption of nearly all drugs. Known for his love of opiates, MDMA, cannabis, and champagne, Future's love-hate relationship with illicit substances is somewhat complicated. The song "Substitute Everything" (2016) is a departure from his usual braggadocio as he acknowledges the pitfalls of drug dependencies. Trap music is one of the latest instances of psychedelia in popular music, sharing some of the psychedelic characteristics of other hybridized genres including psychedelic rock, funk, and newer electronic genres such as trance, house, and rave music. In his book, *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Musical Topic Theory*, William Echard explains how the psychedelic experience refers to both "a particular kind of experience, usually drug related, and to the cultural/historical contexts within which that experience was valued and understood" (Echard 2017, 14). Understanding drugs as a form of technology, Echard raises the idea of *normalization* and critiques of pharmacological and technological determinism to highlight the sociological nuances that help relay the ways in which "topical meanings arise and are mediated" (2017, 12). Trap Afrofuturism signifies topics

of space and altered states of consciousness through both lyrical and sonic references. As Michael Hicks writes,

To understand what makes music stylistically ‘psychedelic,’ one should consider three fundamental effects of LSD: *dechronicization*, *depersonalization*, and *dynamization*. *Dechronicization* permits the drug user to move outside of conventional perceptions of time. *Depersonalization* allows the user to lose the self and gain an ‘awareness of undifferentiated unity.’ *Dynamization*, as [Timothy] Leary wrote, makes everything from floors to lamps seem to bend, as “familiar forms dissolve into moving, dancing structures”... Music that is truly ‘psychedelic’ mimics these three effects. (Hicks 2000, 63-64)

Like the politically charged psychedelic party anthems of soul and funk, Future’s drug references are often used alongside science fiction themes as a form of celebration, satirization, and escape. In “Substitute Everything” (2016), Future uses drugs as a trope of transit, exploring space travel and altered states of consciousness, blending psychedelia and Afrofuturism in a way that articulates a sense of nihilism and hedonism in response to entrapment. The downtempo beat and Future’s subdued delivery mimics a dechronicization effect as he raps, “I’m sippin’ codeine, I’m sippin’ codeine, wishin’ I could slow down fame”.

The sedation effect of Future’s opiate-laced dirty sprite can be seen as a response to the oversaturation and fast pace of the times we live. In his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, James Gleick identifies acceleration as the defining quality of our technocratic age, with every aspect of life running faster than it has ever before (Gleick 1999). In the slowing of the music, the slurring of his speech, and the desire for inebriation, Future seemingly slows down time. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio philosophises *picnolepsy*, an epileptic consciousness symptomatic of the speed of culture that results in a “life beyond the senses”. He summarizes: “the mystical ego of inner change and the techno-scientific ego of the changing of the Universe merging here in a single desire to annihilate sensory life, the heterogeneity of our consciousness of the world as such” (Virilio 2002, 8). While trap artists primarily boast of their lucrative

trafficking of stimulants cocaine and crack, Future and his contemporaries most commonly voice their preferences for the sedative and mind-altering effects of depressants and psychoactive substances. Travelling to outer space, Future rhymes, “Roll up the kush, and let’s get high, and take you to a galaxy, see I just wanna be in my zone, where nothin' bothers me” (2016). Using molly to lift him off the ground, pills to take the pain away, and codeine to slow down fame, Future uses drugs to celebrate accomplishments, transport himself to new places, alter the perception of time, and to escape emotional pain.

“Substitute Everything” achieves *dynamization* with filtered delays, oscillations, and phased vocal effects in the J.U.S.T.I.C.E League-produced backing track, creating a dizzying sense of movement and space. The psychedelic soundscape mimics the hallucinogenic effects and altered states of consciousness that Future describes in his lyrics as the imagery melts and bends in a woozy, pulsating sonic space. The song ends with a recorded sample of Nancy Reagan’s voice from a PSA for her ‘Just Say No’ anti-drug campaign, which was part and parcel of a number of ineffective policies behind the government’s war on drugs in the 1980s and led to the disproportionate arrests and mass incarceration of African American juvenile drug offenders. The same era saw the implementation of neoliberal economic policies that more-or-less ended the industrial era, moving jobs from cities, jobs that were often tied to the automobile industry. Like cars and spaceships, drugs have been adopted as tropes of mobility and a symbol of resistance in trap Afrofuturism, serving as a counternarrative to society’s hegemonic views of citizenship and a reflection of our accelerating culture.

#### THUG’S (E)MOTION IN SOUND

Improvisation, dissonance, and repetition with difference are musical tools that make up the bedrock of African American music. Afonauts Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Jimi Hendrix

used improvisation, extended techniques, and new technologies to make music that sounded as if it were coming from another planet. Anything different or new in popular culture can cause some form of backlash as breaking from the conventions of a genre is often met with resistance from cultural gatekeepers. Adorno considered improvised jazz to be standardized nonsense (Adorno 2002); he described listening to jazz as “capitulating to barbarism” (1981: 205). As swing era jazz evolved into bebop and later into free jazz, musical innovations that flouted norms were described by detractors as ineptitude (Hentoff 1975, 196). With the emergence of hip hop culture, rap music fought to be considered music at all. For an example of the vitriolic backlash to rap, see Considine’s 1992 article ‘Fear of a Rap Planet (Considine 1992). Considine quotes several musicians including Lita Ford, Ozzy Osbourne, and Al Di Meola who each criticize rap as boring and un-melodic, effectively denying its status as music. Today the merits of different periods of rap are generally fought from within the culture on each side of a symbolic generational divide. The spirit of improvised jazz lived on in early hip hop through MC freestyle battles and DJs sampling and scratching records drawn from many genres including jazz. But in the case of Young Thug, he uses his voice primarily as an instrument, where his lyrics are arguably of secondary importance to the emotional effect of his music.

Aside from specific stylistic associations with Lil Wayne, Young Thug’s vocal delivery is also reminiscent of the spontaneous sing-rapping of Wu-Tang Clan’s *Old Dirty Bastard* (ODB). Paul Watkins draws a link between ODB’s use of obfuscation and scat-like poetics on Wu-Tang’s *36 Chambers* (1993) and jazz pianist Thelonious Monk’s improvisatory style. Like ODB (and, if we accept Watkins argument, Thelonious Monk), Thug ‘misplaces’ notes, ‘displaces’ rhythms, and ‘mispronounces’ words—according to standard Western practices—making the music unpredictable if not surprising or alarming. As Baraka argues “The scat is the

cultural memory of African languages, so essential in its fundamental powering of the music (Black Speech!) that it demonstrates it exists without and before American lyrics” (Baraka 2009, 227). Introducing techniques, sounds, melodies, rhythms, and words that are unfamiliar to the rap genre, Young Thug is proving to be one of the most avant-garde voices in contemporary hip hop.

One needs to look no further than the online reviews of his music to understand that Young Thug is breaking new ground in hip hop. His unconventional rap-singing style incorporates warbles, screeches, and angular melodies that have been described as ‘post-verbal’ and ‘post-text’ (Serrano 2015, 230). In a phonological analysis of Thug’s delivery, linguist Darin Flynn notes that he, “mixes together lyrics with a series of syllables that just sound good together, like scat” (Genius 2017). Unlike ‘traditional’ hip hop, *how* Thug says the words in the context of the music takes priority over *what* is being said in his verses, leaving the meaning up for interpretation. Thug’s abandonment of hip hop customs has prompted considerable dialogue among critics, fans, and scholars who try to make sense of the twenty-seven-year-old rapper, placing him at the center of some of the most interesting discussions on the current directions of hip hop. Thug introduces new techniques and reinvents old ones, demonstrating a dialogical conversation with other Afrological musical traditions.

Young Thug’s song “High” (2018) featuring Elton John has been referred to as a ‘remix’ of Sir Elton’s “Rocket Man” (1972), but ‘remix’ doesn’t seem like the right word to use in this instance as the music and words are reworked to create an entirely new piece. The Stelios Phili-produced track does use samples of Sir Elton’s voice along with some of his original instrumentation; however, Thug’s version is more of a revisioning that samples and quotes the popular piece to create a new tune with new abstract meanings. Dick Hebdige links the process of revisioning in African American music to the Jamaican concept of ‘versioning’, describing it

as “different kinds of quotation [...] a democratic principle because it implies that no one has the final say” (Hebdige 1987, xv). While sampling has been a common practice in the development and evolution of rap music, the versioning of “Rocket Man” by Young Thug and Stelios Phili reworks the original pop standard into a cosmic trap banger. Demonstrating a practice that is becoming more common in the trap genre, Thug does not rap at all in the song as it is mostly sung with his signature autotuned staccato vocal delivery.

There has been much speculation regarding the opening verse of Elton John’s “Rocket Man”. Many people have interpreted the line “pre-flight zero hour, nine a.m., and I’m gonna be high, as a kite by then” as a drug reference. In actuality, the original song was inspired by Ray Bradbury’s science-fiction short story, titled *The Rocket* (Bradbury 1950), which is about actual space travel. That being said, the open-for-interpretation drug reference, Elton’s funky piano part, and the space theme all lend themselves to Thug’s Afrofuturistic trap version of the famous pop song. The track’s hook features Elton John singing, “and I’m gonna be high”, which blends into Thug’s falsetto voice to complete the autotuned melisma on the word ‘high’. Instead of landing on the downbeat, Phili shifts the placement of the melody so that the word ‘high’ lands on beat three, decaying into the chorus as Thug mumbles “I’m a rocket man, I’m a rocket man”. The angular verse melodies are a succession of quoted motifs with asymmetrical and fragmented phrasing.

Commenting on Thug’s creative process, frequent collaborator Metro Boomin reveals, "When Thug hears a song, he knows how the whole shape of the thing goes [...] He can nudge the whole frame to the left to make it offbeat and sound how he wants it to sound" (Greene 2015). This syncopated displacement of notes and accents is one of the things that make his music so unique, and one of the elements that brings new meaning to Elton John’s classic ballad.

But it is Thug's unconventional rapping, even for a trap artist, that sets him apart from his Atlanta peers as he experiments more freely with the tone, timbre, and dynamics of his voice. Compared to the music that came before it, bebop was heard as erratic, fragmented, nervous and overly fast. Listening to Young Thug's music, it is easy to understand how reviewers and critics often describe his music with the same puzzled bewilderment.

Young Thug's "Harambe" (2016) is a tribute to the gorilla that was shot and killed at the Cincinnati zoo after a toddler fell into his enclosure. With the killing of the Western lowland gorilla, there was a torrent of grief and public outrage that turned into a series of online viral memes that quickly took a dark turn. While the song's lyrics do not specifically reference the animal or incident, Thug seems to synthesize the emotions of the event mixing absurdity and sincerity as he experiments with words, rhythms and melodies and extended vocal techniques that reveal a new persona among his morphing identities. A loose interpretation of the song's lyrics could be understood generally from the position of one who is being hunted down by a hostile authority.

While Thugger tends to stay loosely within the song's key of G minor on the Billboard Hitmakers-produced track, the range of his melodies span more than an octave with multiple instances of dissonance throughout the  $i - i - VI_{maj7} - iv_{7+9}$  piano chord progression. As the chords are spelled out in the intro of the song, Thug enters with a prolonged guttural holler of the word 'Mafia' starting on the G note and descending to an F, grating against the instrumental's established harmony. Played for any hip hop fan or otherwise, it would be unclear during the intro whether the song is a parody or serious endeavor; however, the tension and absurdity embody the spirit of trap that explores both pleasure and pain in the same vein.

The first verse opens with a monotone, punctuated staccato rhyme scheme before Thug breaks into a throaty, overblown vocal technique that I will refer to as the ‘Harambe voice’ where he raps, “Ape shit nigga, Godzilla, nigga, act up, Go ape shit, go Godzilla, bae, back it up” (2016). Mostly staying within the minor pentatonic scale, Thug always uses the natural minor seventh common to the blues genre rather than the sharpened leading-note that is more common in mainstream Western popular music. His vocal contortions mirror the emotion in Coltrane’s overblown cosmic saxophone sounds that van Veen (through Eshun) describes as, “the forceful style of Energy Music combined with the cosmic spirituality of Universal Sound that leads to Eshun’s ‘clairaudience’, in which *clairvoyance* and *audience* merge into a spiritual-sonic feedback loop” (van Veen 2014, 167). After one gets past the initial shock of the jarring timbres and acrobatic melodies in “Harambe”, the sincerity of the song begins to shine, and we get a sense of something approaching the kind of ‘clairaudience’ described by Eshun.

Young Thug’s rhythmic language is more complex than that of Migos and Future as he employs multiple syncopated patterns and triplets over the 4/4 backing track, creating a circular feel that emulates 6/8 or 12/8 feel of traditional African and Cuban bell patterns. With fragmented phrases that often start after the downbeat and cross bar lines, Thug’s rhythms and melodies are some of the most unique in hip hop; the spontaneity of his vocals suggests that they are largely improvised. Producer Dun Deal’s comments on his time in the studio with Young Thug attest to his improvisatory approach. Deal remembers that Thug relied on jotted pictures of “weird signs and shapes” while recording his vocals rather than written lyrics (Greene 2015). “Harambe” is in 4/4 at 132bpm but is generally heard at 66bpm where his vocal flow delivery is accented in 12/8 triplets, often starting on the weak beat after the downbeat. His words are slurred, squashed, and extended to create musical quotations that are repeated and transformed to

convey added meaning of the words through his elaborate autotuned vocals. Like a jazz solo, Thug uses his voice more like an instrument—where the contortions of his voice and words translate the emotion of the song.

Scholar, composer, and musician George E. Lewis suggests that improvisation is “not so much a practice, but an aspiration toward freedom, that, even as it is doomed to failure, nonetheless produces a consciousness that continually transgresses limits and resists their imposition” (Lewis 2007, 120). “Harambe” seemingly produces the kind of transgressive consciousness that Lewis describes. Indeed, the song seems to capture the range of emotions associated with silverback gorilla’s viral online memorials with Thug’s deliveries evoking sadness, humour, and rage. Linguist Darin Flynn concludes, “It’s almost like a Rorschach inkblot test. In a way, what Young Thug originally meant becomes less interesting than your own interaction with and interpretation of his music, which depends entirely on who you are” (Genius 2017). However one interprets “Harambe”, Thug’s improvisation transgresses the limits of rap music’s conventions, opening multiple possibilities for musical, semantic, and phonological interpretations.

As trap music becomes rhythmically, harmonically, and texturally richer, Young Thug is redefining the role of the MC. In many ways, he can be thought of as a soloist who uses specific techniques to evoke emotion through his vocal delivery, generating layers of meaning. While hip hop has traditionally emphasized the power of the spoken word to translate politics into poetics, Thug and other contemporary trap artists are finding ways to convey meaning beyond the words. This is not to say that those earlier generations of rap did not use wordplay, vocal inflection, and intonation to convey meaning, but those things were generally complementary to the lyrics. Young Thug does the opposite, and a newer generation of Atlanta trap artists, including Lil

Baby, Travis Scott, Lil Uzi Vert, and Lil Yachty, have followed his lead, developing their own vocal styles.

When an artist like Young Thug or Andre 3000 ventures far enough from the conventions of rap, people start to question how to categorize the music. Is it still rap if the entire song is sung? Is it still rap if one cannot understand what is being said? This emphasis on creative mobility has been central not only to trap, but also to hip hop, jazz, and Afrological modes of music making in general. For Young Thug and his contemporaries, gangsta rap tropes are part of their vocabulary wherein they take on new significations. Thug's improvisatory approach has given him freedom to break from—and signify on—many of rap's conventions, giving his music a heightened sense of expressivity.

## CONCLUSION

As the current Mecca of the hip hop industry, Atlanta is home to the trap music scene, which offers the latest expression of Afrofuturism in music, taking it in new directions. As the dominant subgenre of hip hop music, trap has become a commercialized and commodified artform that invokes and Signifies on the controversial tropes for which gangsta rap is known. Operating largely outside the purview of politically conscious hip hop, trap has not garnered the attention it deserves as a topic of serious academic inquiry, leaving a gap in the literature which can no longer be ignored.

I have analyzed the work of some of the most prominent trap artist—sonically, lyrically, and historically—to examine the ways in which trap Afrofuturism engages with issues of race, gender, and representation. I did not set out to argue the validity or effectiveness of trap’s politics, but rather to acknowledge its importance within hip hop and the contemporary cultural landscape more generally and to explore the politics of trap Afrofuturism. Where discourses concerning the political merits of hip hop tend to focus on ‘conscious’ artists who engage directly with social issues, a close look at trap music’s connection to Afrofuturism reveals an alternative set of issues, ambitions, and politics. Circumventing many of the burdens of representation that are projected upon rap music as ‘the Black CNN’, Afrofuturism allows trap artists to imagine alternate realities and identities. By acknowledging trap’s place in contemporary hip hop as a form of Afrofuturist speculative fiction, we find layers of meaning in its reconstructed identities, rewritten histories, and reimagined destinations.

Building on the pioneering work of Kodwo Eshun, this thesis examines the Afrofuturist concepts of chronopolitics, MythScience, and concepttechnics in relation to Atlanta trap music. As a central means of conveying meaning in Afrological modes of music making, black musical

tropology and signifyin' provide a methodology for peeling back the layers of meaning in sound, text, and imagery.

By discussing the examples set by artists such as Sun Ra and George Clinton, I discussed some of the central principles of Afrofuturism as a way of historicizing the ways in which trap engages with, but also complicates, Afrofuturism. Moving toward early rap music and its encounters with Afrofuturism, new ideas regarding socio-political, utopian, and technological impulses began to take shape throughout the golden age of hip hop. With the development of the West Coast G-Funk sound and Public Enemy's Armageddon effect, rap music was becoming a dominant force in popular culture while also taking Afrofuturism in new, dystopian directions.

In the 1990s, Outkast heralded the arrival of the South in hip hop culture. Infusing hip hop with southern African American cultural signifiers and science fiction tropes, Big Boi and Andre 3000 pushed the Afrofuturist elements of hip hop even further. Where Big Boi remained relatively close to standard gangsta rap conventions, Andre pushed the creative boundaries of the genre, layering the group's identity politics with themes of speculative fiction. His fashion sense, experimental musicality, and abstract lyricism were balanced by Big Boi's gangsta persona, which grounded the group more squarely within commercial rap music. Outkast opened the doors for a new generation of Atlanta rappers who would build upon their legacy. At the turn of the decade, the South had established itself as a major force in the hip hop music industry, spawning an endless list of subgenres by the early 2000s including the first incarnations of Atlanta trap. Marking a shift from hip hop's practice of engaging consciously with political and social issues, the emergence of trap was part of a trend that promoted controversial representations of black masculinity and a tendency toward heightened nihilism and hedonism.

While MCs T.I., Gucci Mane, and Young Jeezy defined the thematic content of the genre, the pioneering work of key producers helped shape its digitized futuristic sound with a mastery of software-based digital workstation technologies. As one of the most influential artists of the first decade of the 2000s, Lil Wayne was largely responsible for the merger of trap and Afrofuturism. Synthesizing the contrasting personas of Big Boi and Andre 3000, Wayne changed the culture and became the face of a new school of hip hop. With alternate identities, science fiction themes, and creative uses of technology, Wayne effectively broadened the scope of artistic possibilities for contemporary hip hop artists, introducing performance techniques and poetics that Signified on past practices while developing new ones. Influenced by Lil Wayne and the pioneering sounds of T.I., Gucci Mane, and Young Jeezy, contemporary trap music took shape in the 2010s, a decade that would see hip hop replace rock as the most consumed music genre.

From Sun Ra to Young Thug, I focused on the work of key figures to demonstrate how musical meanings transform and evolve over time depending on historical, social, and cultural contexts. Commercial forms of rap, including Atlanta trap, are often dismissed as trivial and ‘low brow’ compared to politically conscious hip hop music. In contrast to this view, I sought to demonstrate that trap does indeed have meaning and a set of complex politics owing in large measure to its Afrofuturist trappings. Questioning ideas of ‘authenticity’ in his book *Race Rebels*, Robin D.G. Kelley challenges us to “not only redefine what is ‘political’ but question a lot of common ideas about what are ‘authentic’ movements and strategies of resistance” (Kelley 1994, 4). Trap’s politics are located within the domain of what Kelley defines as ‘infrapolitics’, a term used to describe the struggle for agency and autonomy by subordinate cultures that is informed by a “history from below” (1994, 8, 5). Trap’s politics are nuanced and contradictory,

-serving as a vital indicator of past, present, and future. The chronopolitics, MythScience, and concepttechnics of trap Afrofuturism operate through the appropriations of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Deploying tropes and Signifiers that take on added layers of meaning over time, trap is best understood as an extension of the references and tropes that it purposefully and creatively re-appropriates. Raw, explicit, and unabashed, trap is reshaping hip hop culture and taking Afrofuturism in new directions from its headquarters in Atlanta.

### TRAP IDENTITIES

Trap music inverts racial stereotypes and re-appropriates others with controversial representations of black masculinity. As Tiffany E. Barber writes, “While earlier expressions of Afrofuturism may have left notions of black identity formulated in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s undisturbed, current expressions of Afrofuturism center on reimagining and resignifying blackness and black identities” (Barber 2016, 11). Trap artists retain mechanisms of racialization that work to disrupt historical narratives while reinforcing others.

In my analysis of Future’s performance of identity, I examined two works that exemplify the ways in which trap both inverts and adheres to racialized stereotypes. Claiming Pluto as his second home, Future transforms himself into an extraterrestrial cyborg. Donna Haraway explains how the cyborg trope can work to reform identity stating, “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway 1991, 181). Future achieves his metamorphosis by altering his distinct voice with autotune technology. As digital technologies have become more ubiquitous in the production of trap, the artistic process is the result of body and machine coming together as one. As a creative tool, cyborgism disrupts our default notions of identity, especially in regard to race and gender. By adopting and performing a hybrid identity that is both human and machine, Future conforms

to certain stereotypes, while challenging systems of oppression. His 2012 recording *Pluto* was a paradigm-shifting work that transcended conventional representations of black masculinity in gangsta rap, using technology and science fiction themes to create new identities.

Trap's technologically-produced futuristic sonic tapestries meet certain expectations of sonic blackness while confounding others, challenging hegemonic ideas that posit blackness as antithetical to technological progress. Musically, the MythScience of trap can be heard in the juxtaposition of ethnocentric and futuristic sonic markers. In my analysis of Migos' music, I argue that their performance of racial difference is a political expression that uses posthumanism to reassert blackness in the sphere of popular music and culture. With their meteoric rise in the Atlanta trap scene, Migos and their collaborators have made a lasting mark on the genre's sound and on the performance of blackness therein. Migos' sound, developed in collaboration with a team of pioneering producers, has come to define trap music. With producers like Zaytoven and Metro Boomin moving the genre's aesthetics into darker territory with influences from horror film scores and dystopian science fiction imagery, trap combines sonic blackness with the Armageddon effect to articulate a sense of posthumanity. Where Future constructs identities that allow him to experiment with new expressive thematic content, Migos' sonic constructions of posthuman subjects set the standard for trap's sonic language and performance techniques.

In breaking from the dominant culture's designation of identity roles, trap's brand of Afrofuturism has offered counternarratives to those surrounding racial and gender identities in hip hop and more broadly. Young Thug is a shapeshifting chameleon who has made a career of upsetting expectations. Making a name for himself in the fashion industry, Thug's androgynous style defies standardized representations of black masculinity in hip hop and popular culture. With his colourful dreads, tattoos, a tendency to wear makeup, and a wardrobe full of streetwear,

high fashion, and womenswear, Young Thug's body is a canvas of representation that portrays a multiplicity of identity roles that include, but are not limited to, that of gang-affiliated rapper, fashion icon, and gender-neutral extraterrestrial. The latter dimension of his performance persona has generated the most public attention, and it has further complicated trap's identity politics. Playing 'a gangster in a dress', Thug became the first rapper to appear in a major fashion brand's advertising campaign. This is significant because it is symptomatic of a shift in consciousness within popular culture, one that indicates that audiences are growing weary of homophobia in hip hop, while generally remaining tolerant of misogyny. In the 2000s, two of the most popular rappers, Eminem and Lil Wayne, regularly spit homophobic slurs in their raps, while they have all but disappeared from their lyrics in the 2010s. In fact, caving to a palpable public outrage, Eminem issued an apology for his use of a homophobic slur in his latest release (Hohman 2018). Young Thug has been at the forefront of this trend, challenging and remixing received ideas concerning blackness, gender, and class.

#### TRAP MOBILITY AND DELIVERY DESTINATIONS

It is impossible to discuss hip hop without addressing regional or localized associations; likewise, it is impossible to understand how Afrofuturism's tropology works without acknowledging the effects of slavery and the Middle Passage. Gospel, blues, jazz, funk, hip hop, and other Afrological music genres have historically drawn on tropes of mobility—chariots, trains, spaceships and automobiles—to signify a move towards freedom, transformation, and escape. Decoding Afrofuturistic musical expressions requires us to consider them in the context of space and time. Originating in Atlanta, trap culture is a result of legal, economic, and urban planning policies that resulted in high unemployment, increased crime rates, extreme poverty, and mass incarcerations among minority populations. Defined by drug and gang culture, trap is

tied to notions of entrapment and escape that are associated with such lifestyles. The frequent emphasis on nihilism and hedonism in trap is symptomatic of the scorched earth policies that are prevalent in today's political climate with the impending threats of global warming, nuclear war, and economic collapse. Using Sinker's theory of the Armageddon effect—which signified a turn of Afrofuturism from utopian toward dystopian impulses—I view trap's spatial and racial politics as a post-apocalyptic narrative that travels from the trap house to outer space. This journey is enacted sonically through the use of improvisation, dissonance, syncopation, and repetition—musical processes that have a rich history in Afrological musics. Young Thug recontextualizes these devices to create layers of meaning within his music.

In my assessment of trap Afrofuturism's utopian and dystopian impulses, I examined spatial tropes in Migos' track "Bando" (2014) and Takeoff's "Last Memory" (2018) to demonstrate the ways in which they signify on the Afrofuturist tropes of the Armageddon effect and space travel. The trap house, for which the genre was named, has become an iconic monument within trap music. Trap artists like Migos routinely commemorate the trap house as a symbol of their culture's heritage in their rags to riches narratives. The trap house is mythologized as the starting point where they developed the values, skills, and work ethic for survival and prosperity. Their music transforms the trap house from a symbol of disparity to a sanctuary in a present-day dystopia.

Redeploying the trope of space travel, Takeoff frequently describes voyages from the trap house to his favourite locations in our solar system and beyond. Unlike previous Afrofuturist artists, who portrayed outer space as a destination of new possibilities for black communities, contemporary hip hop artists such as Takeoff are more inclined to embark on solitary escapes from reality. In distancing themselves from earth, artists like Andre 3000, Lil Wayne, Future,

Young Thug, and Takeoff seek to separate themselves from their competition, from limitations that are imposed on their creative practice, and from life's hardships. At times, their description of space travel implies super-human capabilities in keeping with the hip hop battle-rap tradition; other times, stories of space travel describe a self-imposed exile filled with loneliness, longing, and heartbreak. The robotic autotuned vocals, dissonant harmonies, and brooding instrumentals further articulate the dystopian characteristics of trap's space-themed narratives. With unique takes on Armageddon and space tropology, trap's dystopian turn is indicative of the divisions, inequalities, and instabilities in today's socio-political environment.

As the latest version of hip hop mobility and automotivity, Trap artists frequently reference luxury cars as signs of arrival, modes of escape, and symbols of wealth, status, and business acumen. In the American South, which has disproportional poverty rates in comparison to the rest of the country, car ownership is a significant concern. Owning a car provides access to education, employment, and in some cases, survival. The astronomical price tags on trap artists' extravagant vehicles contrast the dystopian imagery that is described and sounded in their music. Future's "March Madness" (2015) epitomizes this juxtaposition: he talks about 'living lavish' while describing tragic scenes of black men being gunned down by police. Despite the hedonistic braggadocio, trap rhymes are often delivered in a way that adds a tragic element to the tone of the piece. In "Substitute Everything" (2016), for example, Future furthered his reputation as an introspective rapper who is in touch with his emotions by documenting his involvement with drugs. He illustrates the nihilistic side of trap by using drugs to escape the harsh realities of life, and by and selling them to gain upward social and economic mobility. Furthermore, the psychedelic elements of trap highlight sociological nuances of conscious experiences that can be understood in the context of trap and popular culture.

While Young Thug's lyrics do not have the emotional depth that Future's lyrics exhibit, he is a resounding, if controversial, influence in hip hop and popular culture. With a "fashion sense as unconventional as his rapping" (Ramos 2015), his eccentric style is also reflected in his vocal technique. Having been described as 'post-verbal' mumble rap (Serrano 2015, 230), Young Thug's lyricism is better understood as improvised musical performance rather than spoken text. In Sinker's discussion of rap vis-a-vis bebop he notes how "ways of technological interaction inherited from the jazz and now the rap Avant Garde can reintegrate humanity with the runaway machine age" (Sinker 1992). Like Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Sarah Vaughan, Young Thug is a genius improviser, original vocalist, and a master of reversioning popular songs. With his scat-like performances, asymmetric rhythms, angular melodic motifs, and extended techniques, he is known for his unhinged improvised vocal acrobatics that recall the emotion and cosmology of a Sun Ra or John Coltrane solo. In *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison writes, "because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it" (Ellison 1995, 234). In "High" (2018), Young Thug remixes Elton John's classic and flips the meaning of the narrative, turning it from a love ballad into a drug ballad. "Harambe" (2016) paid homage to another pop-cultural reference—a martyred silverback gorilla. The piece draws inspiration from the online viral frenzy that ensued after Harambe's highly publicized death. The dynamics, timbres, and tones displayed in Thug's vocal techniques range from guttural growls to soaring screeches, and syncopated slurred deliveries. Arguably the most experimental and innovative artist in hip hop today, Young Thug is a resounding presence in the Atlanta trap scene despite his music receiving a less commercial success than some of his counterparts.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This thesis examines the paradigm-shifting ways in which trap artists are deploying Afrofuturism's operational concepts. Home to the latest manifestation of Afrofuturism in popular music, Atlanta has given rise to a variety of trap artists who are engaging in a new brand of 'infrapolitics' in their stories, sounds, and sights. Trap artists construct their multi-faceted identities visually, lyrically, sonically, and mythically. They are transforming hip hop aesthetics, complicating certain gender and racial stereotypes (while conforming to others). Beneath the surface of this seemingly apolitical genre, trap music is challenging some of mainstream society's hegemonic assumptions about hip hop culture. Carrying on the tradition of Afrofuturism's science fiction tropology, and signifyin' on the rich histories of black musics—including earlier forms of gangsta rap—trap articulates layers of meaning through references to harsh realities and imagined fantasies. Examining trap through the lens of Afrofuturism offers new perspectives on a genre that reflects—and shapes—the ever-increasing speed and complexity of the world we live.

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