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## **“Africa As an Alien Future”: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds\***

RUTH MAYER

### *ABSTRACT*

This paper investigates recent revisionist representations of the Middle Passage, enacted in the visual arts, literature, and pop music. Most of the texts I explore can be subsumed under the heading ‘Afrofuturism,’ an artistic and theoretical movement which has become a vital part of contemporary black diasporic (pop) culture. Afrofuturist artists turn to black history in order to recreate it in a markedly fantastic mode. Mixing up the imagery of the Middle Passage with contemporary experiences of displacement, migration, and alienation, they turn the project of recuperating the past into a futuristic venture.

### **1**

At one point in *Amistad*, Stephen Spielberg’s 1997 filmic epos about the historical revolt on the Spanish slaver by that name, we witness the desperate efforts of Cinque (Djimon Hounsou), the leader of the African rebels, to escape from the American soldiers who have come across them. Cinque first tries to get away swimming, but is overtaken by a boat. This is when he chooses to take another course, letting himself sink deeper and deeper into the water, the camera tracing his drift to the bottom of the sea—a movement which is suddenly and violently interrupted, when his body refuses to be drowned, forcing its way back up to the surface, where Cinque is promptly pulled into the boat of his American captors.

The scene is fascinating because it is both utterly hopeless and absurdly enticing: for once, Cinque’s way out is obviously no way out, his effort at getting away a suicidal undertaking. But on the other hand, and simultaneously, the scene is replete with an aura of a total escape, absolute freedom. Briefly, Cinque seems to have drifted into a realm where the laws of the land do not hold. Of course, once the African comes back to the surface, Spielberg’s film sets out to steer an altogether different course, leaving the underwater world and its strange logic behind and turning to the world of American law and order. This world, by contrast, is presented as neat and linear, and it is here where the initial conflict is finally resolved.

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\* This paper constitutes a follow-up to reflections set forth in my “Revising Slavery: Contemporary Black Culture and the Turn to the Past,” *Annals of Scholarship* 12.3,4 (1999): 83-90, and is part of a chapter in my forthcoming book *Artificial Africas*, which moves from Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” to contemporary representations of the Middle Passage such as Stephen Spielberg’s *Amistad*, Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, and Haile Gerima’s *Sankofa*. Many thanks to Gesa Mackenthun and Marcel Reginatto for their critique of earlier versions of this text.

With this, *Amistad* manages to downplay precisely the aspects at the heart of the horrors of slavery, the fact that thousands of people were dragged into a world which could not possibly make sense to them, and from which they could not escape other than at the risk of self-annihilation. This is what the underwater scene briefly captures early in the film, and it is no accident that it presents one of the film's most unreal scenes. But then, to capture events that were never documented in writing by the ones who experienced them might very well require another structure than the realist ones of representation. All narratives around the Middle Passage are invariably and necessarily speculative, and the more so today, over one hundred years after the fact. And thus fantastic, mythic, or grotesque narratives seem so much more adequate to tackle the estrangement and *angst* erupting in its wake.

This is, at any rate, the course a series of recent reenactments of the Middle Passage take, brought forth by artists working in most diverse fields. All of these revisions, as different as they are, concentrate on the fantasy spaces in-between and nowhere at all, spaces that present themselves as mixed-up, ambivalent, floating. The most obvious of these in-between spaces is, of course, the sea, this paradigmatic space of openness and indeterminacy which gains so radically contradictory connotations once it becomes the setting for abduction, violation, enslavement, and revolt. Placed into the context of the Middle Passage, the ocean becomes the 'oceanic,' as Hortense Spillers argued: "... removed from the indigenous land and culture and not-yet 'American' either, these captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all."<sup>1</sup>

When reenacted from the perspective of today, the last decades of the twentieth century, the Middle Passage acquires a whole set of new connotations, the theme of enforced displacement and violent abduction merging with other, more contemporary, scenarios of migration, dislocation, and contact. Paul Gilroy's study *The Black Atlantic* set out most impressively to trace the imageries of travel in the African diaspora, imageries which often enough managed to translate the starkly negative into accounts of liberation and self-fashioning, rewriting the past from the vantage point of the present.<sup>2</sup>

It is in the contemporary arts—literature, installation art, pop music—that such transformations become most obvious, and it is here that the passages between Africa and the Caribbean are most glaringly reenacted and transformed. In such reenactments, "the metaphor of travel is emptied of a purely retrospective thrust, in which the ship is envisioned as the vehicle of an original abduction or of the return to an original territory. Now the metaphor, especially in contemporary youth cultures of the African diasporas, is opened up to harbor all kinds of notions of development, muta-

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<sup>1</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's May-be: An American Grammar Book," *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994) 454-81, 466. On the Middle Passage in African-American literature, see also Wolfgang Binder, "Uses of Memory: The Middle Passage in African-American Literature," *Slavery in the Americas*, ed. Wolfgang Binder (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993) 539-64; Carl Pedersen, "Middle Passages: Representation of the Slave Trade in Caribbean and African-American Literature," *Massachusetts Review* 34:2 (1993): 225-39.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

tion and crossover.”<sup>3</sup> By consequence, speculations and fantasies arise which move ceaselessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographical time zones, and thus “between Africa as a lost continent in the past and between Africa as an alien future.”<sup>4</sup>

2

“There are no stories of the middle passage. One hundred million people were stolen and sold from their homes, shipped across the world, and not a single story of that journey survives.”<sup>5</sup> The photographer and installation artist Carrie Mae Weems is very well aware of the perils of representing the Middle Passage. To avoid the pitfalls of ‘porno-trope’<sup>6</sup> and retrospective exculpation, she focuses on the very logic of recollection and reconstruction in her turn to black history. In an installation concluded in 1995, *Untitled* (Sea Island Series), Weems approaches the entangled histories of Africa and America from a markedly contemporary perspective, juxtaposing photographs and folk narratives from the Gullah Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, to present a picture of the past inflected with the knowledge of the present.

The bulk of the series consists of large-format landscape photographs combined with text panels. But Weems also takes resort to a device familiar from another series, entitled, tellingly, *Commemorating* (1992), in which she imprinted cheap ceramic dinner plates with the names of famous Americans. In her Sea Island series, she uses dinner ware to display general reflections about the project under the joint heading “Went looking for Africa.” One such dinner plate inscription reads:



WENT LOOKING FOR AFRICA  
and found Africa here  
in the proverbs  
of McIntosh  
in the voices  
of Sapeto  
in the songs  
of St. Simons  
Along the highways  
of Jekyll  
in the gardens  
of Johns  
in the grave-yards  
of Hilton Head

Fig. 1: Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled* (Went looking For Africa)

<sup>3</sup> Diedrich Diederichsen, “Verloren unter Sternen: UFOs, Aliens und das Mothership,” *Globalkolorit: Multikulturalismus und Populärkultur*, ed. Ruth Mayer and Mark Terkessidis (St. Andrä-Wördern: Hannibal, 1998) 237-52; 239-40 (my translation).

<sup>4</sup> Kodwo Eshun in an interview in *Last Angel of History*, dir. John Akomfrah, with Edward George, researchers: Kodwo Eshun and Floyd Webb (Death Audio Film Production 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Carrie Mae Weems—quoted in Maren Stange, “Memory and Form in Recent African American Photography: From *12 Million Black Voices* to Carrie Mae Weems,” unpublished manuscript 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘porno-trope’ is Hortense Spillers’s and refers to the spectacular enactment of black suffering and pain for an audience both shocked and thrilled by it. Cf. Spillers 67.

By dint of this approach, Africa and America are no longer conceived of as geographical entities, to be neatly separated, but as convoluted concepts, flightlines of beliefs, memories, and projections that are far too intersected to be told apart. Africa is engrained in the very core of American culture, its language, its folklore, its soil. Characteristically, Weems expresses this insight both verbally and formally, the dinner ware figuring as an emblem of commemoration, invested with a significance that is visible only at second glance and to the initiate, as Houston Baker remarked: “The dishes are memory, and they are luxury. They pass through generations as family inheritance. Carrie Mae Weems reclaims such ceramics for the everyday uses of cultural conversation.”<sup>7</sup>

The Gullah Islands, once the last illegal resort for slavery in the United States, epitomize a central predicament of contemporary African-American culture: the fact that black history is both there and not there, evident in countless traces, scars, and memories, yet largely submerged when it comes to written accounts and first-person documentations of the past from the viewpoint of the victims. To come to pass in its own right, the African presence in the United States has to be pried away from the mainstream culture of which it has become an integral part—not by choice, but by necessity, as Samuel Delany pointed out:

... until fairly recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past. . . . every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants. That some musical rhythms endured, that certain religious attitudes and structures seem to have persisted, is quite astonishing, when you study the efforts of the white, slave-importing machinery to wipe them out.<sup>8</sup>

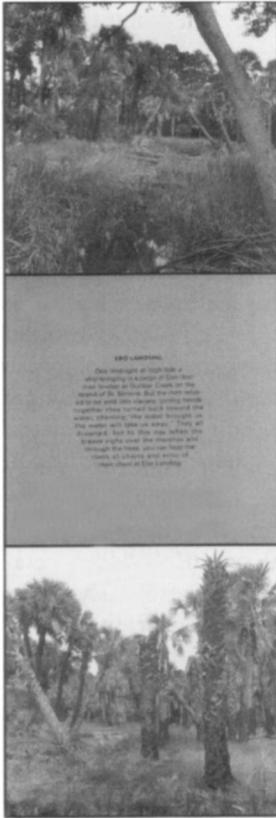
Weems’s series can be seen as an effort to remobilize these remnants and draw them to our attention, “reassembling traces of the past into new, if only temporary, unities.”<sup>9</sup> The same idea motivated a later project, in which she documented the traces of New World slavery in West Africa. Both projects evince that in the field of the visual and narrative arts the project of excavating an African past will invariably deviate from its anthropological and historiographical premises and venture into the realm of fantasy and myth to compensate for the lack of concrete and indubitable material. Time and again in the Sea Islands series, the rhetoric of historical fact is replaced with the vernacular of personal fantasies and sense impressions.

In *Untitled* (Ebo Landing), a triptych of two silver prints and a text panel, Weems displays two scenic views of the island St. Simons, framed in black and mounted one over the other (fig. 2). In between the photographs she inserted a panel set in circular print:

<sup>7</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., “Islands of Identity: Inside the Pictures of Carrie Mae Weems,” *Carrie Mae Weems: In These Islands. South-Carolina—Georgia* (exhibition catalog) (University of Alabama Sarah Moody Gallery of Art, 1995) 12-19; 16.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 92.4 (Fall 1992): 735-78; 747.

<sup>9</sup> Stange, “Memory and Form in Recent African American Photography” 12.



**EBO LANDING**

One midnight at high tide a ship bringing in a cargo of Ebo (Ibo) men landed at Dunbar Creek on the Island of St. Simons. But the men refused to be sold into slavery; joining hands together they turned back toward the water, chanting, “the water brought us, the water will take us away.” They all drowned, but to this day when the breeze sighs over the marshes and through the trees, you can hear the clank of chains and echo of their chant at Ebo Landing.

Fig. 2: Carrie Mae Weem, *Untitled* (Ebo Landing)

Here the African past becomes a ghostly present, and a collusion of different time spheres sets in which is all the more disconcerting for the detached and depersonalized representation of the event. The Ibo men appear in strange isolation, because their enslavers do not come into view and because the Africans’ desperate act is related not so much as a tragic group suicide than as a weird and moving ritual. The photographs emphasize this aura of timeless detachment or suspension of time and place: the marshland at view a curious mixture of water and earth, and the entire set-up of irregular palm trees and lush vegetation looking as ‘African’ as it is ‘American.’ The Ibos’ act seems to have fundamentally affected the land, giving vent to a haunting that is intricately connected with the region’s history—its function as a port for slave ships and its plantation culture—even if, or precisely because, this history turns into fantasy and myth.

The same collusion of history and myth, the repressed cruel past and a seemingly enlightened present, runs through a much earlier text which traces the horrors of the Middle Passage while well aware of the impossibility of representing the viewpoint of its victims: Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno” (1855).<sup>10</sup> After all, Melville’s novella

<sup>10</sup> Herman Melville, “Benito Cereno” (1855), *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) 217-307.

figures forth a “spectral marionette show,”<sup>11</sup> presenting the slave ship along the lines of gothic horror as a haunted place in the middle of nowhere:

Always upon first boarding a large and populous ship at sea, especially a foreign one, with a nondescript crew such as Lascars or Manilla men, the impression varies in a peculiar way from that produced by first entering a strange house with strange inmates in a strange land. Both house and ship—the one by its walls and blinds, the other by its bulwarks like ramparts—board from view their interiors till the last moment: but in the case of the ship there is this addition; that the living spectacle it contains, upon its sudden and complete disclosure, has, in contrast with the blank ocean which zones it, something of the effect of enchantment. The ship seems unreal; these strange costumes, gestures, and faces, but a shadowy tableau just emerged from the deep, which directly must receive back what it gave.<sup>12</sup>

These observations foreshadow the story’s later revelation of a pervasive masquerade enacted on the ship, a revelation which leaves no doubt that the phenomena which “[emerge] from the deep,” are not necessarily more truthful or significant than the “blank” surface they disrupt. To the contrary, their uncanny effect might reside exclusively in their meaninglessness, the “spectacle” or “shadowy tableau” only the more frightening because it has lost any melodramatic significance: it does not permit itself to be read.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, it is only against the backdrop of the high seas, the ‘blank ocean,’ that the spectacle of social and cultural interaction (the “nondescript” foreign crew, presumably under American leadership) fully reveals its cruel, uncanny, and absurd character. In “Benito Cereno,” the sea figures not as the land’s opposite, but as its epitome: here the incongruities of the land—most notably the system of slavery—are too conspicuous to be entirely ignored. And this is where Melville’s novella calls to mind Weems’s installation which likewise associates the sea with a repressed and gruesome past—the Ibos’ death by drowning. But while for Melville the ‘blank sea,’ just like the ‘tableau’ of the land, ultimately does not make sense, because it is an empty melodrama or tautological masquerade, Weems turns it into a meaningful entity. In her enactment, the sea turns from blankness to myth—the history of slavery mixed up with the myths of Africa bringing about the dead men’s return and their haunting takeover. Where Melville discloses a dead end, Weems’s horror scenario figures as a point of departure for a new symbolic repertoire.

With this, Weems posits herself firmly in a postcolonial scene which insists upon reading established dichotomies of meaning and insignificance, essence and blankness against the grain, siding with the ‘nondescript crew,’ or the drowned ones whose viewpoint is irretrievably lost, by implementing another concept of history and historiography. In Derek Walcott’s poem “The Sea is History,” this new notion of history is associated with a new beginning out of the pain and horror of the Middle Passage, a new beginning stemming from the victims, the drowned slaves:

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<sup>11</sup> Michael P. Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 209.

<sup>12</sup> Melville 221-22.

<sup>13</sup> On the logic of melodrama, which “demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible,” see Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (1976; New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995) 20.

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
 Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,  
 in that grey vault. The sea. The sea  
 has locked them up. The sea is history  
 .....  
 Sir it is locked in them sea-sands  
 out there past the reef's moiling shelf,  
 where the men-o'-war floated down;

strop on these goggles, I'll guide you there myself.<sup>14</sup>

Insisting that the ocean's “blank pages” are not as empty as they seem, Walcott's poem fashions the very history it then sets out to pronounce in the last line: “in the salt chuckle of the rocks / with their sea pools, there was the sound / like a rumor without any echo / of History, really beginning.”<sup>15</sup> Black diasporic history, it seems, is a thing of the future, not of the past, a subject of fantasies, dreams and speculations—the currents and changes of the sea—which is created in the process of its recuperation.

Thus, Walcott refutes Melville's notion of the ocean as irretrievably ‘blank.’ But even more importantly, his turn to the sea as both a burial ground *and* the space of a new beginning, just like Weems's enactment of memory as survival, indicates that the subject matter of black history requires a methodology of its own, new goggles, if you will, that make readable what seemed blank and reveal the ghosts of the past at loose in the present world. It is precisely the openness and indeterminacy of the sea, its ‘oceanic’ quality of the ‘*nowhere* at all’ as Hortense Spillers had it, which privileges this space for a pervasive revision from the vantage point of present needs and desires. This is why the underwater world, the submarine, gains so much attention in turn: by contrast to the chartered and mapped high seas, this world below emerges as a realm beneath existing lines of power and signification, an ambivalent space, “neither European nor Caribbean, neither metropolitan nor colonial, neither within the ‘West’ nor without it,” as Ian Baucom wrote<sup>16</sup>—a fantasy space which is always as much of the future as it is of the past.

3

We must not forget that the futuristic fantasy spaces in black culture are always also spaces of retreat from very real pressures, testifying—if often only indirectly—to these pressures and their traumatic effects. “Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine,”<sup>17</sup> Greg Tate noted, and for that matter it is no accident that so much black art that currently deals with this ‘life feeling’ is not only clearly futuristic, but also, and just as clearly, highly morbid—telling ghost stories and tales of haunting. The British director John Akomfrah thus cast this peculiar obsession with the past

<sup>14</sup> Derek Walcott, “The Sea is History,” *Poems 1965-1980* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980) 237-40; 237, 238.

<sup>15</sup> Walcott 238, 240.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Baucom, “Charting the ‘Black Atlantic,’” *Postmodern Culture* 8.1 (1997): [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v008/8.1baucom.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v008/8.1baucom.html).

<sup>17</sup> Mark Dery, “Black to the Future” 767-68.

as an obsession with the dead: “I think necrophilia is at the heart of black filmmaking.” To come up with a history of one’s own against the pull of oblivion and decay—to enforce the return of the repressed—is to face some ugly truths:

The most powerful moment, for me, in my earlier film *Testament*, is the very end and the very beginning, which are both images of death, stultification, atrophy. When she goes to the graveyard and buries her father, or when the man walks into the river, which is a wish-fulfilment of death, a drowning wish going on there. There is a level of morbidity which I think people have to realise in the quest for identity. Identities are a morbid business.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, Akomfrah’s emphasis on a morbid black imagination is, to a certain extent, polemic—pitted against all-too-familiar stylizations of blackness as mindlessly joyful, happy-go-lucky and a-historical. But there is more to the obsession with the alien and the uncanny in black culture than sheer provocation, as Weems’s and Walcott’s ghost stories exemplify, and as comes even more trenchantly to the fore in contemporary pop-cultural turns to the Middle Passage and its imagery of travel and displacement. It is in this context, the workings of pop culture, that the spirits and ghosts of yore turn into quite contemporary figures of horror and haunting: aliens, extraterrestrians, creatures from the deep.

Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A fetus in its mother’s womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment.

During the greatest holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air?

Recent experiments have shown mice able to breath liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and conclusive was a recent instance of a premature human infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs.

These facts combined with reported sightings of gill men and swamp monsters in the coastal swamps of the Southeastern United States make the slave trade theory startlingly feasible.<sup>19</sup>

These are excerpts from the liner notes to the album *The Quest* by the Detroit electronic duo Drexciya, a project which has for many years fashioned itself around similar ruminations about ‘Drexciyans’—sea creatures of a superior submarine civilization invading the United States systematically.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, this narrative epitomizes the logic sketched above, from the move to the sea as an alternative history deeply infused with fantasy and myth, to the evocation of aliens arising out of alienation, up to the morbid imagery of creatures between death and life and beyond identification, which the entire album then sets out to consolidate.

The narrative of the liner notes is, after all, the only ‘information’ we are given about the album. The music tells no story, apart from disjointed bits and pieces of lyr-

<sup>18</sup> Kass Banning, “Feeding Off the Dead: Necrophilia and the Black Imaginary. An Interview with John Akomfrah,” *Borderlines* 29-30 (Winter 1993): 33.

<sup>19</sup> Drexciya, *The Quest* (Detroit: Submerge, 1997), liner notes.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the act and its aesthetics see Kodwo Eshun, “Fear of a Wet Planet,” *The Wire* (January 1998): 19-20. I came across Eshun’s piece through *Loving the Alien: Science Fiction, Diaspora, Multikultur*, ed. Dierich Diederichsen (Berlin: ID Verlag, 1998), in which a German version of this text appeared.

ics that not so much add up to a narrative, but disorient and confuse. Instead of learning more about the Drexciyans, we are literally forced into an underwater world, a sound pattern meshing together the synthetic and the natural, bubble tones and electronic scales which could be called breathtaking in more than one sense. An aesthetics of alienation takes hold, as Kodwo Eshun has argued:

. . . there is no singer, no redemption, no human touch. Far from rehumanizing electronics, Drexciyan fiction exacerbates this dehumanization, populating the world with impalpable hallucinations that get on your nerves. . . . At Love Parade and Tribal Gathering you can still hear DJs saying electronic music is universal music. The frequencies can unite us all in a tonal consensus. After listening to Drexciya, it's audible that if electronics ever unites, then it does so through obfuscation. It communicates through mystification.<sup>21</sup>

By dint of this reading, electronic music could become *the* vehicle for dissent in a Deleuzian control society, which operates not “by confining people, but through continuous control and instant communication.”<sup>22</sup> Drexciya seem to comply exemplarily with Deleuze’s demand for “vacuoles of noncommunication, circuit breakers,” which the French critic deemed indispensable to “elude control.”<sup>23</sup> For Eshun, Drexciya’s aesthetics of alienation forms the blueprint for a new form of cultural interaction and contact: “Each track title . . . functions as a component in an electronic mythology which the listener assembles. . . . A new geography of morals.”<sup>24</sup>

Of course, such enthusiasm about the potential of music to bring forth a fundamental disruption, a new mythology, must always face up to the ‘fluidity’ of musical expression—the fact that music, even when not purely instrumental, is so much more ambivalent than any other artistic medium, especially when it comes to ideological positions and projections. It is, after all, by way of lyrics, liner notes, performance, and artistic comments both on and off stage that this ideological dimension enters the field of music. By consequence, the political and social effects of music turn out to be a matter of style—highly unstable, open to all kinds of adaptations, revisions, and appropriations.<sup>25</sup> While I hesitate thus to join into the enthusiastic chorus of critics like Eshun and celebrate electronic music as the manifestation of an altogether new ‘post-human’ form of expression, I do believe that Drexciya’s style politics are indicative of an interesting turn, as they produce self-destroying narratives, fictions that strain against the conventional pull of identification and closure.

Seen that way, the effect of mystification evoked by Eshun is very well given in Drexciya, but located on an altogether different level, as it is inscribed in the very interaction of instrumental music and the narratives around it. While the narratives, presenting the

<sup>21</sup> Eshun, “Fear of a Wet Planet” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Control and Becoming” (Conversation with Toni Negri, 1990), *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia UP, 1995) 169-76; 174.

<sup>23</sup> Deleuze 175.

<sup>24</sup> Eshun, “Fear of a Wet Planet” 20. For a more detailed discussion of electronic music and its cultural potential, see Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> On this issue, especially with regard to so-called ‘protest music,’ see Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996); and my “Pop As a Difference Engine: Music, Markets, and Marginality,” *Simulacrum America*, ed. Elisabeth Kraus and Carolin Auer (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000).

Drexcians as social outcasts and fighters from below, offer patterns of identification—if markedly fantastic ones—the music takes these patterns apart, moving between recognizable structures (the underwater sounds) and pure noise and thus discouraging any attempt at making sense eventually, erecting a code that cannot be deciphered.

Of course, Drexcia are not the first musical act to come up with this strategy. Indeed, their aesthetics can be traced back to the free jazz experiments of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, not only with regard to musical, but also to conceptual developments. Time and again, the space narratives evoked in this context ran analogous in their effect to the musical strategy of free jazz to move from established harmonies to sudden transgressions and to confront closure with chaos. Just like the music veers between signification and rupture, so the space narratives establish recognizable structures only to disavow them in turn: “. . . they have thrown their own identities into question, taking on a multitude of costumes and alter egos, each of them is a myth-making, alias-taking, self-styled postindustrial shaman,” writes John Corbett on Sun Ra’s and other musicians’ ‘space madness.’<sup>26</sup> By consequence, the aliens and extraterrestrials invoked by so many black musical projects of the 1950s and 1960s are not to be understood as neat inversions of the dominant value system, but as more extensive tactics of confusion—instead of “only turning around the relation of ‘us’ against ‘them,’ and other binaries,” Diedrich Diederichsen wrote, “most of these artists tend to mess up the entire matrix of binary distinctions.”<sup>27</sup>

In the works of contemporary artists, this technique of ‘messing up’ has become a much more strategic—and theoretical—affair than in, say, Sun Ra’s fantastical mythology. This comes not only to the fore in musical projects from Drexcia to DJ Spooky and 4hero, but also in the films of John Akomfrah, the fiction of Darius James or the art of Keith Piper. All of these artists, together with many more, have been subsumed under the heading “Afrofuturism,”<sup>28</sup> as all of them focus one way or another on the intersecting imageries of pastness and future in black culture, setting out not so much to rewrite the history of the African diaspora, but to systematically deconstruct it, rendering Africa an ‘alien future,’ as Kodwo Eshun put it in John Akomfrah’s film to the movement, *Last Angel of History* (1995). The aliens and monsters haunting Afrofuturist narratives explode the confines of historiography and realism, collapsing established patterns of signification and identification, and put forth undecipherable codes and fractured images.

One prominent means of generating the atmosphere of alienation so characteristic for many of these works is technology. In Drexcia’s *Quest*, synthetic sounds imitate natural ones, sounding almost, but not altogether, the same, so that the underwater

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<sup>26</sup> John Corbett, “Brothers from Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton,” *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1994) 7-24; 7.

<sup>27</sup> Diederichsen, “Verloren unter Sternen,” 242 (my translation). On this aesthetics and its implications see, apart from Corbett and Diederichsen, the contributions to *Loving the Alien*, ed. Diederichsen, especially Tobias Nagl’s “‘I wonder if heaven’s got a ghetto’: Aliens, Ethnizität und der SF-Film,” and Renée Green’s “Leidige Liebe: My Alien / My Self—Readings at Work,” 68-87, 134-51.

<sup>28</sup> For a definition of the—awkward—term ‘Afrofuturism’ and an introduction to the development at its outset, see Mark Dery, “Black to the Future,” 735-43.

world disclosed seems strange in several respects—a sphere underneath the human world which is at the same time a realm outside of nature: artificial, alien, and uncanny. In the work of the British installation artist Keith Piper, similar strategies of technological alienation are employed, and again the result is the collapse of long-standing symbolic systems—not in order to replace them, but to expose them in their constructedness and arbitrariness. And once more aquatic imagery, or what Kobena Mercer called the aesthetics of “oceanic feeling,”<sup>29</sup> is at the heart of these techniques of alienation, and deconstruction: certainties are set afloat, and stable identities go down the drain.

Piper’s installation falls into three parts, all of them opening up different time frames to trace the interrelations between black British history and the African diaspora. One such part, “The Ghosts of Christendom,” reflects the Middle Passage between Africa and the Caribbean, and leaves no doubt that Piper, too, conceives of black history as also being always a horror story. The ship called Jesus is the *Jesus of Lubeck*, the first official British vessel to take part in the slave trade, sent off by Queen Elizabeth in 1564, and figuring forth the intricate convolution of religion and politics, spirituality and ideology at heart of colonial history and the history of slavery likewise, as we learn from an inscription on a tombstone displayed in the exhibition. And yet, religious history is not to be written along the lines of domination and subjugation alone, as Piper’s project evinces: “[T]he slave ship called Jesus has experienced a mutiny of radical proportions. The same Africans for which the ship had been a mechanism of imprisonment had seized control of the helm and were steering the ship in a totally different direction.”<sup>30</sup>

The exhibition, which comprises a variety of different representational techniques, unfolds around a series of huge computer-montaged transparencies mounted on light-boxes to simulate stained-glass church windows (fig. 3). Here, the obviously high-tech emulates the ancient, the up-to-date and the traditional enmeshed with each other, while African and Western symbols and emblems appear in intimate interlinkage. This effect is driven home most impressively in a montage showing the feet of a black crucified body on a cross-shaped frame, hanging over a water-filled basin with a broken mirror inside (fig. 4). Ian Baucom has read this installation as a strategy of enforcing an impossible point of view, another means of pulling us under water:

Looking down into these waters, we see not simply a reflection of the agonized black body which hangs above, we see that bleeding figure as if from beneath, from below the surface of the water. Manipulating a trick of light to reverse our optic of inspection and to reposition our space of observation, Piper’s installation displaces the viewing subject, draws us beneath the water to gaze at the scene of violence played out above. The work forces us, if only for a moment, to occupy the submarine.<sup>31</sup>

If this relocation of the perspective is definitely one effect of the installation, there is more to it. The tormented black body on the cross, just like the entire exhibition,

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<sup>29</sup> Kobena Mercer, “Witness at the Crossroads: An Artist’s Journey in Post-colonial Space,” *Keith Piper: Relocating the Remains* (exhibition catalog) (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1997) 13-85: 79.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Keith Piper, *A Ship Called Jesus* (exhibition catalog) (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 1991) unpaginated.

<sup>31</sup> Baucom, unpaginated.

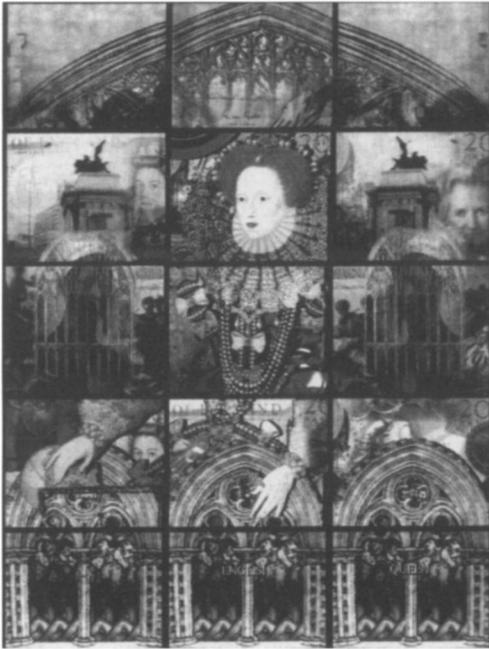


Fig. 3: Keith Piper, *A Ship Called Jesus* (detail)

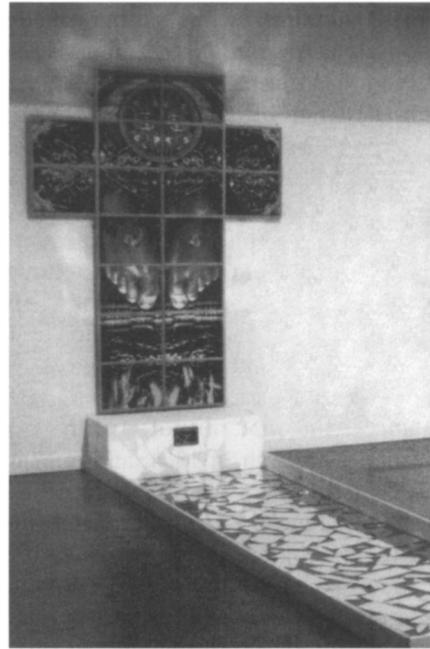


Fig. 4

points to a deep skepticism *vis-à-vis* the very symbolic systems at work here: the self-same system—Christianity—which triggered the history of suffering figures now as a means of representing it. With this, Piper for once does invert a set of dominant signs and symbols, as his catalog essay indicates. But he also goes beyond mere inversion, pinpointing the difficulty of representing positively what happened and what happens in the history of cultural contact and race relations. After all, the installation is not content with relating a clear-cut ‘other’ story of salvation and redemption; it does not merely ‘blacken’ the imagery of Christianity. The doubly fractured reflection of the black body we see in the water instead brings about the shortcomings of such neat reversals, which merely turn around prefabricated value systems, ideologies, and props, and thus add speculations to speculations: fragments of meaning and knowledge that are as broken up and distorted as the body reflected in the water. Thus Piper’s installation seems to comment on the other projects I presented here; all of them collapsing past, present, and future, and all of them interlinking historiographical and mythical rhetoric and imagery, not so much in order to reconstruct a lost history (as did Spielberg’s *Amistad*), but to dismantle the established one and give scope to altogether different, highly fantastic scenarios instead, which are as much of the future as they are of the past. In any case we end up with strange sights—alien, aquatic, artificial—which force us not only to reconsider the past, but most of all the present we like to take for granted.