Back on the Planet: An Egyptological Perspective on the Reception of Ancient Egypt in Afrofuturist Music

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Abstract

This essay explores ancient Egypt and Nubia in Afrofuturist music. Evaluating the work of Afrofuturist artists, including jazz musician Sun Ra, who has himself inspired contemporary jazz, funk, soul, and rap artists, it addresses album art, performances and music videos to show how Afrofuturists use imagery from Egypt and Nubia to imagine new worlds, often situated in the future or in outer space. This essay argues that Afrofuturists' critiques of Eurocentric perspectives on ancient history are valuable to archaeologists and curators, addressing questions such as: should we use native or Greek names for ancient gods and localities? Are the African aspects of Egypt and Nubia underappreciated? How, and for whom, is history written?

Keywords

Afrofuturism; Sun Ra; science fiction; music; music videos; art; archaeology; Egyptology.

Since the early twentieth century, ancient Egyptian and Nubian spirituality, art and history have inspired and informed intellectual and artistic productions in the African diaspora. African American intellectuals striving to obtain social equity and to improve the social-economic position of their communities believe that fostering self-awareness should stand at the basis of real change. By looking at the past, they have endeavoured to inform the present and shape the future. They challenge Eurocentric and racist historiography of African cultures and promote Afrocentric and Pan-African perspectives on the ancient cultures of the Nile Valley.[1] This paper explores African American musicians working in the style of Afrofuturism, who have created imaginaries of ancient Egypt, examining music in the broadest sense, taking into account the sound, lyrics, album art, music videos, and outfits of the musicians. Focusing on artists who came after jazz musician Sun Ra, working between the 1970s and the 2020s, I highlight the ways in which ancient Egypt is remembered and (re)imagined in Afrofuturism in the Afrodiasporic community of the US. Unjustly, Afrofuturism has largely been ignored in studies of the Western reception of ancient Egypt. This is particularly regrettable because Afrofuturist narratives are widespread and influential.

1 Bruce, "Ancient Africa and the Early Black American Historians".

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As I argue, some perspectives presented in Afrofuturist music are relevant to Egyptological practices. Some examples of Afrofuturist music critique Eurocentric vocabulary in Egyptology and favour the ancient Egyptian language to better reflect emic concepts. Other music highlights the extractivist, colonial aspects of archaeology in Egypt and how they tie into structures of white supremacy. In addition, Afrofuturist music challenges knowledge production within Egyptology and deconstructs the idea that Egyptology generates an objective truth about ancient Egypt, demonstrating the potential of adopting explicitly speculative views of life in ancient Egypt. Available with this essay is a Spotify playlist of the music discussed herein.[2]

Html 1: [URL: http://open.spotify.com/embed/playlist/5Nz0oZoOgTmtIvJIw4q9eT?utm_source=generator]

Afrofuturism

In the twenty-first century, Afrofuturism is expressed in metaphysics, religion, speculative philosophy, and philosophy of science and technology, as noted by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones.[3] This article, however, deals with Afrofuturism as a form of speculative fiction that addresses contemporary concerns of Black African communities and the African diaspora. The term Afrofuturism was coined in 1994 in a conversation between Samuel Delaney, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Mark Dery by the latter when he wondered how Black communities whose histories have partly been erased by the transatlantic slave trade are able to imagine futures, especially since futures are often monopolised by the dominating white culture.[4] Afrofuturism operates in the realm of science fiction by exploring themes such as metaphysics, space exploration, robotics, and, more recently, neuroscience, gender fluidity, and posthuman possibilities, in order to describe the early twenty-first-century technogenesis of Black identity and to present alternate understandings of the experiences of African diasporas.[5] Afrofuturist narratives are often revisionist counter-narratives: political interventions in collective, nor-

2 See Soliman, "Back on the Planet". [http://open.spotify.com/playlist/5Nz0oZoOgTmtIvJIw4q9eT?si=1fa55000812d45f4].
3 Anderson and Jones, "Introduction", ix.
4 Dery, "Black to the Future", 180.
5 Anderson and Jones, "Introduction", ix–x.

mative memory.[6] Time travel, for instance, is used as a device to free Black people from the restrictions and hardships of their own time.[7] Afrofuturist art engages with the past to construct futures,[8] and re-contextualises or reimagines the past (be it glorious or disastrous) with the urgency of the present to effect change in the present and the future. Often, Afrofuturism entails a refusal to define the past by the tragedies of slavery or the Middle Passage.[9] Afrofuturists emphasise that such retellings are necessary and argue that the way in which the past is understood is inherently political because it is produced and sustained by hegemonic institutions, including universities and museums.[10] From an Afrofuturist perspective, and as is explored later in this article, the ways in which futures are created and imagined are just as political. As such, Afrofuturism is concerned with history as much with how history is remembered and reiterated,[11] or to use Jan Assmann's terminology, with mnemohistory.[12]

The Afrofuturist concern with time enables Afrodiasporic artists to connect with ancient African cultures, seeking to interpret its art, knowledge and spirituality, but also, in the same vein as Afrocentric intellectuals, to forefront underappreciated contributions of African cultures to global knowledge and science.[13] Specifically, the cultures of ancient Egypt and Nubia have been great sources of inspiration.[14] There are presumably many reasons for this, among them the fact that artefacts from these cultures have been widely studied and collected in the West,[15] and that ancient Egypt plays an important role in mainstream white Western cultural and pop-cultural production.[16] Indeed, in many Afrofuturist works of art ancient Egypt in particular comes to represent the African continent as a whole, and its history can be approached from Afrocentric and Pan-African points of departure.[17] Following early twentieth-century Egyptological interpretations, some Afrofuturists regard ancient Egypt as a "high civilisation" with advanced, often unmatched technologies that enabled the Egyptians to realise the previously unthinkable, such as constructing colossal pyramids. To Afrofuturists, ancient

6 See, for example, Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 83; van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 80.
7 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 158.
8 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 79.
9 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 64–65, 79–80.
10 Eshun, "Further considerations of Afrofuturism", 292, 297, 301.
11 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 217.
12 Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 8.
13 Fritze, *Egyptomania*, 300–315; Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 80.
14 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 80.
15 Versluys, "Haunted by Egypt", 16–19.
16 Fritze, *Egyptomania*, 9–22.
17 Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 241; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 91.

Egypt thus provides the proof that African people of colour developed complex societies and produced knowledge, technology, music, spirituality, art, and so on, that shaped the rest of the world. Afrofuturist musicians may reach out to this past and connect it to the present as well as the future, to give those contexts new meaning. This is well illustrated by the activist and musician Moor Mother[18] on the track *Shekere* (2021):

> We will outlast, rise up from the past
> Our future sway with that ass
> Guess we Osiris in Cali' now
> We rise up, who gon' hold us down?
> Black fist and golden crown, ancient sound

The Afrodiasporic community in California is here identified with the Egyptian god Osiris, while social justice and progress is linked to ancient Egyptian royalty. Besides ancient Egypt's sovereigns, its spirituality and mythologies are often interpreted and exercised to challenge the hegemony of Eurocentric philosophy and religion.[19] This reinterpretation of ancient Egyptian spirituality has most famously been at the centre of the life and work of jazz artist and performer Sun Ra, generally seen as one of the first Afrofuturists, whose music has inspired acts like Parliament-Funkadelic, Earth, Wind & Fire, Erykah Badu, Sa-Ra, Janelle Monáe, Madlib and Flying Lotus. As illustrated by Rita Lucarelli in this special issue, Sun Ra connected the notion of recursive time in Egyptian solar mythology to the cosmos and interplanetary travel, and saw himself as an ancient Egyptian king from Saturn. His persona was loosely based on the concept of the Egyptian pharaoh, but ultimately Sun Ra also transformed for himself the idea of ancient Egyptian kingship.[20] Arguably, this spiritual, mystic side of ancient Egypt often central to Afrofuturism functions as a counterbalance to the vapid and destructive technology frequently depicted in science fiction.[21]

18 Camae Ayewa, who uses the stage name Moor Mother, is cofounder of Black Quantum Futurism (BQF) together with Rasheedah Phillips (for whom, see below). BQF is a "multidisciplinary collective exploring the intersections of futurism, creative media, DIY-aesthetics, and activism in marginalized communities through an alternative temporal lens", collaborating with Black Futurists such as Joy KMT, see "About", *Black Quantum Futurism*, 2020, http://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/about.

19 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 81.

20 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 74.

21 Many examples are found in works about often anonymous alien invasions and AI that turns against humanity. Compare Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, 240.

Fig. 1: Aaron Douglas, *Building more stately mansions* (1944). Source: Wikiart.org

Like all forms of popular culture, Afrofuturist art is often biased in its worldview. Cultural politics and historicity aside, Afrofuturist imaginaries of ancient Egypt are often reductive, preoccupied with royalty, and prone to Orientalist tropes. Moreover, some Afrofuturist artists have presented gender and race in

very essentialist terms.[22] Davarian Baldwin's criticism of Afrocentric hip-hop and the way its artists voiced their connection to ancient Africa applies to several Afrofuturist works as well, in the sense that it is primarily positioned in the patriarchy.[23]

Nevertheless, it is unjustifiable that Afrofuturist music that draws upon ancient Egypt has for so long been a blind spot in studies of so-called Egyptomania or the *Nachleben* of ancient Egypt in the West. This oversight may give the reader the impression that Afrofuturist engagement with ancient Egypt is not a part of Western popular culture or that it is a recent form of niche, alternative music. Neither, of course, is the case. It would be an understatement to say that the music of the (West) African diaspora has influenced Western and, in fact, global pop-culture and music. Moreover, Sun Ra, Earth, Wind & Fire, Grace Jones, Erykah Badu, Outkast and the Black Eyed Peas, to name a few, have reached worldwide audiences of millions.

Outside of Egyptology, Afrofuturism has received renewed attention in the last decade, but it is not merely a twenty-first-century phenomenon. Afrofuturist practices are often traced back to the North American Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s,[24] but even in the first half of the twentieth century, African American writers and artists were creating work around themes that we would now label Afrofuturist.[25] Examples can be found in the paintings of Aaron Douglas, whose work *Building more stately mansions* (1944) depicts the construction of a futuristic metropolis with an Egyptian pyramid and sphinx towering in the background (Fig. 1). As early as the 1910s, African American sociologist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois saw the potential of song and performance for the dissemination of his perspectives on African history to inspire the development of the African American community and to foster solidarity and collective consciousness. To that end, he co-authored and staged several pageants, the most famous of which is the *Star of Ethiopia* (1913) (Fig. 2). A pageant was a large folk play, often presented outdoors, with hundreds of performers who told a story through music and dancing. The *Star of Ethiopia* is Du Bois' vision of the history of the African continent and the African diaspora, with a scene dedicated to

22 See, for example, Steinskog, "Performing Race and Gender", 247, 249.

23 Baldwin, "Black Empires, White Desires", 164. It should be noted that there are several examples of influential feminist Afrofuturist artists, such as Janelle Monáe, whose work also engages with ancient Egypt. See Gipson, "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe", 103–104.

24 Anderson and Jones, "Introduction", ix; Barber, "Cyborg Grammar?", 10–11.

25 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 17; Anderson and Jones, "Introduction", viii–ix.

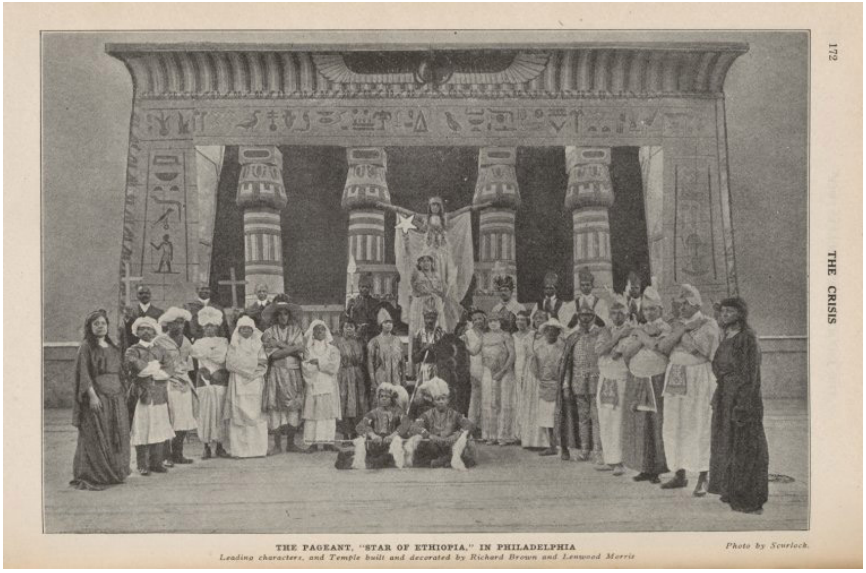

Fig. 2: The pageant *The Star of Ethiopia in Philadelphia*, 1916. Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library

ancient Egypt and a finale with an outlook on the future.[26] In short, Afrofuturism is a longstanding and influential form of art.

I would suggest that the fact that Egyptology has so long overlooked or ignored Afrofuturist art speaks to the whiteness and perhaps the cultural elitism of the field. Regardless, as I outline below, Afrofuturism has much to offer to Egyptologists who try to understand the different ways in which ancient Egypt is remembered, interpreted, and employed in a postmodern world. This essay's following sections consider how Afrofuturist music in the broadest sense of the word engages with ancient Egypt and Nubia. This is most obvious in the imagery and lyrics of the music but, as is shown below, also its sound. These three dimensions of Afrofuturist music combined explore African antiquity to make statements

26 Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*, 81–3; Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 120. Since antiquity, the word "Ethiopia" had been an unprecise designation overlapping with various cultures, including ancient Kush and the Aksumite empire. W.E.B. Du Bois' own scholarship, based on the works of authors like Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus, argued that the "ancient Egyptian civilisation" had its origins in ancient Ethiopia, which some African American intellectuals saw as a counterargument against the then common view that black cultures were "uncivilised"; see Gebrekidan, "Ethiopia in Black Studies", 4–6; Nurhussein, *Black Land*, 5.

about the nature of the Afrodiasporic experience, the concept of time, and the status of the Black body.

Enslavement and robots

Reflecting both on ancient African cultures and on the history of slavery and the commodification of the body, Afrofuturist artists have explored what it means to have a Black body in a modern world.[27] Some Afrofuturist art argues that due to commodification and dehumanisation of the Black body, rationalised by racist theories in enlightenment Europe in favour of slavery, the boundaries between Black bodies and humanoid robots are blurred. Enslaved people and robots become analogous, both not fully human and potentially dangerous in the eyes of their masters, and condemned to forced labour.[28] Some Afrofuturist artists subvert this narrative, however. Erykah Badu and The Egyptian Lover have depicted themselves as robots, but as autonomous, sentient machines with an aesthetic that blends the futuristic with the pharaonic. For example, the cover of Erykah Badu's album *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh* (2010) depicts the singer as a high-tech android with decorative elements that symbolise ancient Egypt (Fig. 3). The triangle on the robot's metallic body is perhaps a reference to Egyptian pyramids and the shoulders show an *ankh* sign. In a similar fashion, the cover of the album *1984* (2015) by The Egyptian Lover features a golden android, reminiscent of *Star Wars*' C-3PO, with a Roland TR-808 drum machine – first manufactured in the early 1980s – incorporated into its chest. In addition, the robot wears the Egyptian divine beard and a *nemes* crown in the style of the mask of Tutankhamun. Engraved on the robot's chest and forearm are an *udjat* eye in a triangle, an *ankh* sign and a depiction of Duamutef. The robot's arms are spread in the *Walk like an Egyptian*-pose, signalling both an imagined Egyptian-ness as well as robotic dance moves. The androids presented by The Egyptian Lover and Erykah Badu thus embody several layers of time, while challenging their relation to servitude. In particular, the latter is achieved through references to ancient Egypt, interpreted as a superior, pre-colonial, complex African culture. For The Egyptian Lover, specifically, the robot's autonomy is indicated by its self-determination in the shape of the royal and divine attributes. In the case of Erykah Badu's

27 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 32–33; 34–35; David, "Afrofuturism and Post-soul Possibility", 696–697; van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 68; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 186.
28 Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 54, 61; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 38, 104; Montefinese, "From Slaveships to Spaceships".

Fig. 3: Cover art for *New Amerykah Part Two (Return of the Ankh)* by Erykah Badu (Universal Motown, 2010). Source: Wikipedia.org

android, meanwhile, the *ankh* hieroglyph for "life" emphasises that she is indeed alive. These androids are their own masters, and celebrate an imagined African, Egyptian past.

Aliens and space travel

Closely related to topics of sentience and autonomy are questions of the origin and nature of the Afrodiasporic experience, often explored by Afrofuturist art. Here, Afrofuturist artists may draw a parallel between enslaved Africans and space explorers or aliens.[29] Music journalist Mark Sinker claimed that the African diaspora is intimately acquainted with alien life in the sense that ancestors had been enslaved and abducted by aliens and transferred to a new world.[30] In a similar vein, Afrofuturist artists like Sun Ra employed the allegory of feeling like an alien to express their experiences with the notion of double consciousness. The concept of double consciousness was developed by W.E.B. du Bois to describe the

29 Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 54; Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 17, 31–35.
30 Sinker, "Loving the Alien in Advance of the Landing", 30–33. See also van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 63–90; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 98–99.

internal conflict of individuals in social minorities who see themselves as they are but simultaneously feel compelled to view themselves through the eyes of the dominant social group.[31] To articulate this idea, Afrofuturism sometimes borrows from mainstream science-fiction tropes that deny ancient Egypt its cultural and technological achievements and instead posits that it was enlightened by alien intelligence.[32] On occasion, artists even make direct references to such stories, like the title of Ras G's album *Stargate Music* (2018). Yet, Afrofuturist art is different from such narratives in two important ways, namely through: a) the idea of alien pharaohs who bring solace and refuge to Afrodiasporic communities, and b) the characterisation of Egypt as a hyper-technological ancient civilisation, sometimes compounded by the aforementioned imagery of robots and androids.

Firstly, there are fantasies of visitors from outer space who initiate or develop ancient Egyptian culture in Africa. Thanks to their advanced alien science, Egyptian culture can thrive and the aliens remain hidden or act as gods to guard over their people. A narrative along these lines is implied in the work of the famous jazz musician and performer Sun Ra. Both as an artist and an individual, Sun Ra stated that he was not a human being and that he came from the planet Saturn.[33] He claimed to be visiting Earth to bring healing to the world by re-tuning it through music, through frequency itself.[34] Besides philosophies like occult studies and Eastern spirituality, his mission combined ancient Egyptian mythologies and aesthetics, Egyptological interpretations and spiritual jazz music. Similar ideas stand at the core of the film *Space Is the Place* (1974), co-written by and starring Sun Ra as an interplanetary alien traveling in a space craft powered by his music.[35] Sun Ra is accompanied by his Arkestra, a reference to the solar barque of the god Re, who are depicted as ancient Egyptian animal-headed gods. In the city of Oakland, Sun Ra finds a group of African American youngsters, and he offers to transport them to a new planet he has located, where they could live in freedom and dignity. Sun Ra's deliberate denial of his own humanity, instead identifying as an extra-terrestrial, is a reflection on how Black subjects exist in the African diaspora. His fictional spaceship, moreover, subverts the idea of the historical

31 Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 1–2; Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 41; Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 34; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 6–7, 14.

32 A famous example is the film *Stargate* (1994), but the trope is also present in much older English literature, for instance, Garrett P. Serviss, *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898) and Stanley G. Weinbaum, *Valley of Dreams* (1934). More tongue-in-cheek examples include the Futurama episode "A Pharaoh to Remember" (2002).

33 Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 29–30.

34 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 59.

35 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 115.

slave ship that transported Black people to a new world, but here bringing them to safety to demonstrate that the past allows to construct new futures.[36]

Sun Ra's art has been and still is very influential, and his music and aesthetics can be recognised in the work of several artists who followed in his footsteps. Similar to Sun Ra's spacecraft, the space vehicle of the funk band Parliament, called the Mothership, was summoned by the tunes of their music. Afrofuturist themes run throughout Parliament's work and sometimes touch upon ancient Egypt, as in the prelude of *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976). Here a tale is told of extra-terrestrials who planted the design of the Afronauts on earth. The "concept" of the Afronauts, "capable of funkatising galaxies", was hidden in the pyramids of Egypt, lying dormant among the pharaohs, until it could be released in the present.[37] This narrative is not unlike that of Sun Ra, but closer similarities are found with other artists. One of them is Ras G, whose repertoire and sound also abound in the futuristic and the pharaonic, often heavily sampling Sun Ra. On the cover of his album *Back on the Planet* (2013), he is depicted as an Egyptian king wearing a *nemes* crown and holding an *ankh*, surrounded by ancient Egyptian symbols and hieroglyphs as well as stars and planets (Fig. 4). As with Sun Ra's spaceship, the image suggests that his power comes from his music, emanating from the speaker in the *ankh* sign. Other artists who were inspired by Sun Ra appear to be in on the pun that is Sun Ra's name. Both parts of the name refer to the sun, but since the word "sun" is homophonic with "son", the name can also be seen, or rather heard, as the title of the pharaoh, *s³ rʿ*, or son of Re.[38]

36 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 98.

37 In the words of Parliament: "Funk upon a time / In the days of the Funkapus / The concept of specially-designed Afronauts / Capable of funkatising galaxies / Was first laid on man-child / But was later repossessed / And placed among the secrets of the pyramids / Until a more positive attitude / Towards this most sacred phenomenon / Clone Funk / Could be acquired."

38 Of Sun Ra's creative ways with words in his poetry, Paul Youngquist has stated: "Sun Ra emphasizes and exploits the sonority of words independent of their apparent meanings. He writes a poetry of assonance, in which one sound leads to another and another and another, to identify equations concealed by the appearance of different meanings. Hence his emphasis on the 'phonetic and associated sense[s]' of words, the sounds they make and relations among them that conventional attention to meaning deems insignificant. […] As word substitutes for word, sonority displaces meaning, resolving differences by the measure of 'Cosmic Wisdom,' an abstract, intangible, fugitive excess"; Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 88. Coincidentally, the ancient Egyptians also made use of wordplay to explain the spiritual and the nature of the divine world. See, for example, Loprieno, "Puns and word play in ancient Egyptian"; Noegel and Szpakowska, "'Word play' in the Ramesside Dream Manual".

Fig. 4: Cover art for *Back on the Planet* by Ras G (Brainfeeder, 2013). Source: Wikipedia.org

This title finds echoes in the name of the band Sa-Ra Creative Partners,[39] whose work has Afrofuturist aspects including interplanetary imagery, exemplified by the album art of the EP *Cosmic Dust* (2005).[40]

The cover art of Outkast's album *Aquamini* (1998) features a zodiac with an ancient Egyptian landscape and hieroglyphs inside its ring, adjacent to a flying saucer (Fig. 5). Their vision of Egyptian aliens is elaborated in the music video for their song *Elevators (Me & You)* (1996). On a red version of planet Earth, a community is led through the jungle by Outkast's André 3000 and Big Boi. These scenes are revealed to be a sequence in a comic book story called *ATLiens*, "the Outkast encounter". The community is chased by military personnel and men in

39 Nevertheless, Taz Arnold provided a looser translation of the band's name in a 2004 interview: "Sa-Ra is an ancient African term. Kemetic. Kemet is the original name for Egypt. The name translates to, 'Be the offspring of the most powerful energy in the universe', or 'Child of the cosmos.' You hear 'Ra', it's the same concept, so the name is 'Sa-Ra.'". In the same interview, Om'mas Keith and Taz Arnold also refer to Sun Ra as one of their ancestors, see "Sa-Ra Creative Partners".

40 Another example may be Dutch artist Ray Fuego, who has described himself as Son of the Sun in his biography on Spotify. The art for his album *HEMELSCHIP* (2021), which translates to "sky ship", includes an image of the rapper in a space capsule decorated with an *ankh* sign. Considering some of the Afrofuturist lyrics and recurring ancient Egyptian symbolism in his work, the artist may be employing a similar pun with his first name, which is homophonic with the name of the sun god Re.

Fig. 5: Cover art for *Aquemini* by Outkast (LaFace Records, 1998). Source: Wikipedia.org

hazmat suits. Through their scanning devices, Outkast and their group appear as aliens with elongated skulls and huge oval eyes. The community flees and reaches a clearing in the jungle, where André 3000 and Big Boi look into the distance and see a green landscape sporting ancient Egyptian pyramids. The community begins to rejoice, and Black children start to run towards the pyramids, where other aliens are scattered. Outkast have found their home in an alien society that built pyramids, and the scene calls to mind Sun Ra's mission to establish a better life for the African American youth on another planet.

Html 2: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqB_UVlhlPA]

Secondly, there are narratives that depict ancient Egypt as a hyper-technological culture capable of constructing monumental pyramids as well as spacecraft. The imagined Egyptians are no extra-terrestrials but have the ability to travel to outer space to manifest their power and freedom. These Egyptians can transcend time and space and can thus meet or fuse with the Afrodiasporic community in the present. On the cover of Sylvester's album *All I Need* (1982) this idea is only subtly expressed, showing the singer in profile and with an Egyptian wig and side lock, smoking a cigarette but also wearing a metallic and therefore futuristic eyepiece reminiscent of the *udjat* eye (Fig. 6). More often, however, references to interplanetary journeys and time travel are more obvious. A staple image is one

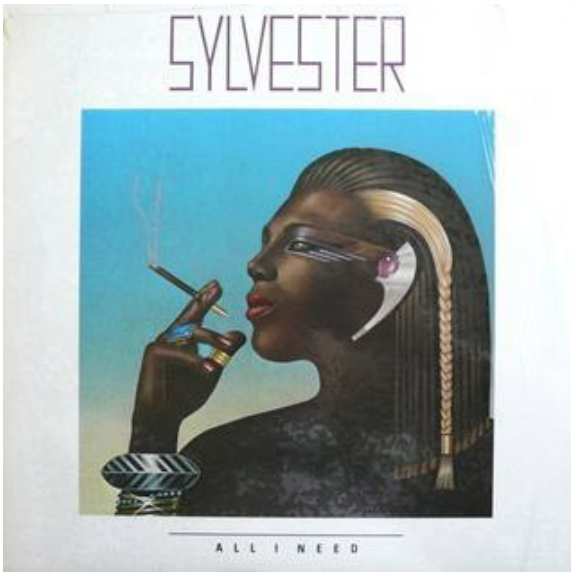

Fig. 6: Cover art for *All I Need* by Sylvester (Megatone, 1982). Source: Wikipedia.org

of enormous, floating pyramids as gigantic domains or spaceships as depicted, for example, in the album art of Earth, Wind & Fire's single *Fantasy* (1978), Common's *The Dreamer/The Believer* (2011) (Fig. 7), and Grand Puba's *Black from the Future* (2016). In a similar fashion, the bird-shaped spacecraft in the music video of Juice Aleem's *Rock My Hologram* (2009) is decorated like the *udjat* eye, and the album cover of *Raise!* (1981) by Earth, Wind & Fire depicts a colossal statue of an Egyptian queen blending with a towering space rocket (Fig. 8). The connection between space technology and ancient Egypt is further explored in the music video of Earth, Wind & Fire's disco hit *Fall in Love with Me* (1983). At the centre of the video is an imagined Egyptian desert landscape, but a night sky with stars and rising sun are prominent in the background. During the band members' and dancers' performance, ancient Egyptian monuments fade in and out: the Great Pyramid of Giza, sphinxes, columns, temples, and statues. The video's futuristic character is largely evoked by its special effects. In addition, the desert sand turns into a grid to emulate a digital environment, as in the film *Tron* (1982). Images of a sarcophagus and a barque with ancient Egyptian gods float in the air and seem to be powered by an unexplained, advanced technology.

Html 3: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/embed/VyZ9skprt8w]

Html 4: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GfLwdu8Arps]

Other narratives are more explicit about the mission of space-travelling ancient Egyptians. The music video of Grand Puba's at times homophobic and misogynistic song *UDK* (2016) is one example, depicting white scientists in a cave conducting medical experiments on captured Black children.[41] In order to save them, Grand Puba, a cosmic traveller aboard a spaceship wearing a hoodie which features an image of the mask of Tutankhamun, journeys to earth. Space travel is sometimes accompanied by time travel, as in the music video of the song *BACK 2 HIPHOP*, the first track of the Black Eyed Peas album *Masters of the Sun* (2018)—perhaps a nod to Sun Ra's heliocentrism. Only the band's founder will.i.am—a stage name that in itself defies time by combing a present tense (*am*) and a future tense (*will*)—is African American, but his interest in Afrofuturism is well documented.[42] He, his band members and rap star Nas recall an older style of the hip-hop genre in *BACK 2 HIPHOP* and want to "bring it back" and "resurrect it". In the music video, the vehicle for this time travel is ancient Egypt itself. The Black Eyed Peas are beamed out of a pyramid-shaped spaceship and drive around a landscape with contemporary motorways as well as ancient Egyptian temples and pyramids. Inside the spaceship is the rapping image of Nas as famous pharaoh Tutankhamun, modelled after the cover of his album *I Am…* (1999) (Fig. 9), suggesting that he and the Black Eyed Peas are advanced ancient Egyptians who have returned from antiquity to spread both ancient Egyptian culture and old school hip-hop culture.

Html 5: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgZel2G40tE]

41 This is perhaps a reference to the story of Yakub in the teachings of the Nation of Islam, a Black nationalist religious organisation whose theology has influenced the work of numerous notable rap artists in the USA. According to this story, 6600 years ago an evil scientist called Yakub and his followers experimented in eugenics to turn the original Black people into an evil white race while killing dark-skinned babies. See Corbman, "The Creation of the Devil", 4. Grand Puba is a known supporter of the Nation of Islam and on Brand Nubian's track *Drop the Bomb* (1990), Grand Puba references both the story of Yakub ("We gonna drop the bomb on the Yakub crew") and ancient Egypt ("Unlike a pimp, I'm more like an Egyptian").

42 See, for example, Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 53–54. Additionally, Pentagram created the Afrofuturist work *Pyramidi* with will.i.am for an exhibition at the Barbican art gallery in London in 2014 and the artist collaborated with Marvel Comics in 2017 on *Masters of the Sun*, a comic book series with Afrofuturist and ancient Egyptian themes.

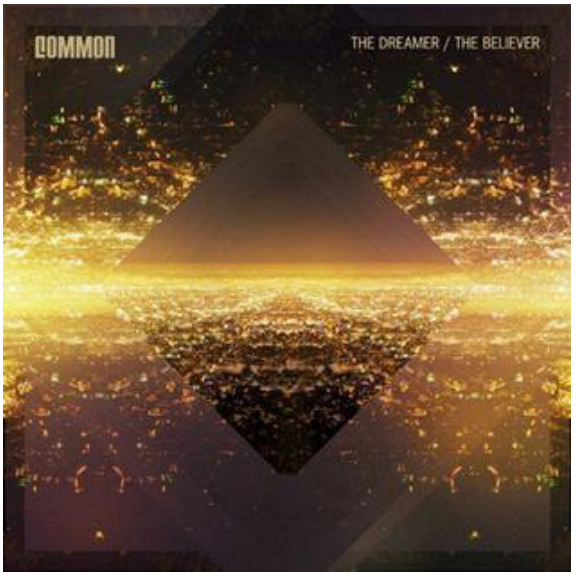

Fig. 7: Cover art for *The Dreamer/The Believer* by Common (Warner Bros., 2011). Source: Wikipedia.org

Fig. 8: Cover art for *Raise!* by Earth, Wind & Fire (Columbia Records, 1981). Source: Wikipedia.org

Html 6: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3um72hrtrk]

The sound of space and time

In addition to its visual and lyrical aspects, the sonic dimension of Afrofuturist music reveals much about the ways in which the artists interpret time and space as sound is a temporal and spatial experience, vibrating through a space over time.[43] Sound itself can represent distant times and spaces and, in that sense, the act of making sound is to engage in time travel.[44] Of course, sound and music originate at specific, meaningful places. Erik Steinskog has argued that bands such as Earth, Wind & Fire reimagine history by combining references to ancient Egypt, modern African instruments and technological innovations. For example, the band's leader Maurice White introduced into their music the kalimba, an instrument traditionally used by the Shona people in southern Africa. In an Afrofuturist turn, the kalimba used by Earth, Wind & Fire was electronic and was therefore a reinterpretation of an ancient African sound. The band's soundscape thus fuses a specific African musicality with technological innovation.[45] In the same vein, the 808 drum machine first popularised in the 1980s allowed The Egyptian Lover, a pioneer in electronic music, to create a futuristic, synthetic sound with electro beats and laser sound effects, while reimaging ancient Egypt. His Afrofuturist music celebrates the triumph of technology and wields it as a tool to empower the Afrodiaspora without dismissing the past. The music presents a sonic world where the human and the robotic overlap, and where the futuristic is encased in an ancient Egyptian world. In his song *Egypt, Egypt* (1984), lyrics and sound work together to achieve this effect:

> Egypt is the place to be
> Pyramids are oh so shiny
> The women here are oh so cute
> The freaks are on the floor now
> Dancing to beats that I compute

43 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 75, 80.
44 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 160; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 66–71. For Black music as a technology, see Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 65–66.
45 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 78–80, 95.

The lyrics evidently describe Egypt, and the incorporation of the *Arabian Riff* melody (also known as *The Streets of Cairo*) in the song augments this picture.[46] The melody is played on a synthesizer and each sentence is followed by a robot voice that exclaims "Egypt, Egypt". As is mentioned in the lyrics, The Egyptian Lover is a robot that conjures up ancient Egypt by using the technologies of the future.

Html 7: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/embed/nkTRpZDT_V8]

Another, perhaps the most significant mode to establish diachronic connections in Afrofuturist sound is the sampling, remixing, and versioning of music from various times and places. Artists are able to defy linear understandings of time by producing music that sounds futuristic while sampling songs from various earlier periods. Here, Erik Steinskog's analysis of the track *42 Laws of Maat vs 10 Commandments* (2016) by Ras G is an interesting case. Again, the music can be read on both a textual and a sonic level. The reference to the 42 negative confessions of the Book of the Dead in the title of the track represents the ancient Egyptian tradition, here juxtaposed to the biblical tradition represented by the ten commandments. The track samples an old soul song with roots in the tradition of gospel music, signalling Christian religious thought. Simultaneously, the track is infused by a voice that shouts "Oh Ras", referring to Ras G himself, who arguably embodies ancient Egypt. Like Sun Ra, his persona reflects an intimate relation to the Egyptian culture. Through the sounds in the track, Ras G challenges the Western Christian tradition by contrasting it with ancient Egyptian religious concepts.[47]

An imagined Egyptian sound does not have to be purely musical. It can also be created by chanting words from the ancient Egyptian language, as is demonstrated in Erykah Badu's song *Twinkle* (2008). In the song, Erykah Badu laments the circumstances of underprivileged African Americans:

> They don't know their language
> […]
> They take what they're given
> […]

46 The *Arabian Riff* is one of the oldest popular Western melodies associated with fantasies of the Oriental East. See Drury, *Sonic Affinities*, 1–2, 16–17.
47 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 168–169.

> And we still in this ghetto
> So they end up in prisons
> They end up in blood
> […]
> Started with a rhyme from old ancient times
> Descendants of warlocks
> Witches with ill glitches
> Children of the matrix be hitting them car switches

According to Badu, African Americans do not "know their own language", and so she offers an alternative by pointing to a "rhyme from old ancient times" and the magic of her ancestors. By calling her confederates "children of the Matrix", she addresses systemic exploitation in contemporary society, while drawing from the imagery of science fiction. Later in the song, the "rhyme from old ancient times" is performed by Amen Khum Ra, a spiritual artist and Kemetist.[48] In this chant, the language of ancient Egypt is performed, and therefore the artist's interpretation of the time and place of ancient Egypt become accesible to the listener. Regarding the meaning of the chant, Amen Khum Ra has stated that the first part translates as "We the brightest light, born from the deepest black, children of the divine Mother Father, true right and exact, open the way shining ones, open the way, listen to these divine words I say".[49] To the ear of the Egyptologist, the translation, grammar and phonetisation – for example, *khu* for *ꜣḫ.w*[50] – are inaccurate and antiquated, and may therefore obstruct the meaning of the artists' message, but Egyptological accuracy is not the main objective of the song. It is a sonic imaginary, and the dramaturgical and performative aspects of the chant speculate about how ancient Egypt may have sounded.[51]

48 For Kemetism, see Harrison, *Profane Egyptologists*.
49 Amen Khum Ra's original post on Myspace is no longer accessible, but the translation is recorded online. See "Twinkle".
50 See, for example, Budge, *Egyptian Language*, 66, nr. 58.
51 Compare, for example, Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 57, 156.

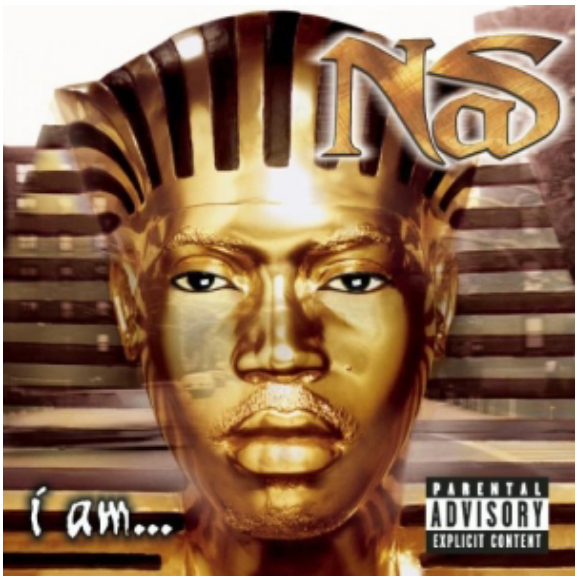

Fig. 9: Cover art for *I am...* by Nas (Columbia Records, 1999). Source: Wikipedia.org

The politics and interpretations of time

Sound enables Afrofuturists to travel through time. This presents the pop-culture industry opportunities for entertaining narratives, but more than that, some Afrofuturists suggest that their forms of time travel are an acute political necessity. There is a strain of Afrofuturist thought that posits that the world has already ended once, and that time has come to an end. The devastation of the Middle Passage had terminated the humanity of Black subjects and had ruptured time and space of the premodern world. Afrofuturists in the present therefore ask: what comes after the end of time?[52] tobias c. van Veen has argued that this question leads to one of the main objectives of Afrofuturism, which is to create temporal interventions that "break with, remodel, or revise the timeline to remake a recursive future" as part of "transformative strategies" that impact "the boundaries of 'authentic' Black culture".[53] In van Veen's analysis, Sun Ra is an ancient alien from the future who enters the present from the ancient Egyptian past,

52 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 64–65, 68; Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 40.
53 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 77.

thereby creating an alternate timeline. This timeline has a different past, which allows Sun Ra to speculate that ancient Egypt is still a thriving culture in the present, changing the here and now of Afrodiasporic communities and suggesting "a recasting of temporal and cosmic possibilities".[54] Kodwo Eshun explains why it is so significant for Afrodiasporic communities to establish counter-memory:

> It is clear that power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively. Capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive, as it has done throughout the last century. Today, however, power also functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures.[55]

In other words, Afrofuturism has a critical interest in revisioning the past and imagining alternate futures because past and future are predicated on the conditions of the present: a better future is projected only by changing, through questioning and reinventing, the past.[56] Eshun and van Veen call these processes chronopolitics:[57] strategies employed in Afrofuturism to intervene in the production of collective memory by, for example, the majority of mainstream popular culture, institutions, and museums, and to produce instead counter-memories and counter-realities to challenge techno-capitalist, whitewashed futures.[58]

This perspective on revisioning time allows us to understand to a greater degree the aforementioned Prelude to Parliament's album *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* (1976), in which the band announces that funk music is a prehistoric science for genetic engineering.[59] In their narrative, funk was planted in ancient Egypt by aliens so it could open up and shape new worlds in the present and claim a future for Afrodiasporic communities. Turning to more recent music, the concept of chronopolitics offers an Afrofuturist reading of the track *Not for Radio* (2018) by Nas featuring Diddy and 070 Shake. With the track's opening lines, "Black Kemet gods, Black Egyptian gods / Summoned from heaven / blessed, dressed in only Goyard", Nas generates a new timeline and creates a present for

54 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 77–78.
55 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism", 289.
56 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 81.
57 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism", 292; van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 80.
58 van Veen, "The Armageddon Effect", 80–81; Gaskins, "Afrofuturism 3.0", 30.
59 This is plausibly another reference to the story of Yacob in the theology of the Nation of Islam, with which Parliament's George Clinton seems to have been acquainted. See Rollefson, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis", 96–97.

Black, Egyptian divinities clad in contemporary *haute couture*. Nas then states that "Abe Lincoln did not free the enslaved" and that "Edgar Hoover was Black". The track thus allows him to speculate about the past and forcefully disrupts our understanding of the present. One way to interpret his line about Abraham Lincoln is that, in the reality created by Nas, enslaved African descendants had collectively freed themselves, even more so than they had through our reality's uprisings, revolts, and so on. His image of a Black J. Edgar Hoover—in our timeline the white first director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in the US, widely accused of undermining and blackmailing leaders of the Civil Rights movement—turns our past on its head. The song's title could then be taken as an indication that Nas' counter-memories are meant to be broadcast outside of the institutionalised radio-channels, outside of the archive, where his revision of the canonised past and present will not be redacted. From his new present, the Afrodiasporic future looks radically different from ours.

Related to the concept of chronopolitics is another form of politicisation of time. Some Afrofuturists contend that the way in which time as a construct is understood is at stake for the present, but also the past and the future. Rasheedah Phillips, for instance, has described the modern, Western construct of time as linear with an emphasis on irreversible events on a forward moving timeline.[60] Jan Assmann would likely disagree with this characterisation, having argued that within a given culture there are specific sites for linear time and for cyclical time, which are interconnected.[61] Nevertheless, Rasheedah Phillips connected Western linear time to capitalist extractivism and the oppression of Black people, pointing out that slave masters in the American South had imprinted their construct of time on enslaved Africans.[62] The latter would lose their indigenous time constructs, while the Western construct of time reinforced exploitation through discipline and efficiency at their expense:

> Slavery was where time was inculcated into our very skin, where the ring of the bell or the tick of the clock regulated our fate, labor, birth and death, taking over the natural rhythms and spirits, spatio-temporal orientation and consciousness.[63]

60 Phillips, "Dismantling the Master(s) Clock(work Universe)", 15–16.
61 Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 12–15.
62 Phillips, "Dismantling the Master(s) Clock(work Universe)", 19–20.
63 Phillips, "Dismantling the Master(s) Clock(work Universe)", 27.

As an Afrofuturist, she therefore called for "a more natural, ancestral temporal-spatial consciousness and presentism", for a time construct before from the trans-atlantic slave trade, which could exist next to the dominant idea of linear time.[64]

Afrofuturist music may have found such a premodern, African construct of time in ancient Egypt, where the notion of cyclical time existed as well in the concept of never-ending recurrence called *nḥḥ*, which is related to the sun god's cycle of the rising and setting sun.[65] I want to propose here that the music video of Erykah Badu's song *Didn't Cha Know* (2000) can be read as an Afrofuturist interpretation of Egyptian cyclical *nḥḥ* time embedded in ancient Egyptian solar mythology, perhaps inspired by the heliocentricity of Sun Ra. The sun and the sky feature prominently in the video, which opens with a beetle crawling through a desert landscape. This may represent the scarab-shaped god Khepri and the regeneration of the sun god in the morning. At the distant horizon, heavy smoke drifts away from a flickering light. A spacecraft seems to have landed, from which Erykah Badu appears in a futuristic outfit. She traverses the landscape that is later revealed to contain circular marks and abstract patterns so enormous that they look as if they were created from space. The sun has now risen in the sky and permeates the landscape. Erykah Badu and the sun are often seen in the same shot and the image of the scarab is overlaid on her face, suggesting that she is a form of the Egyptian sun god. As she has arrived from outer space, the cosmic journey of the sun becomes intertwined with space travel and alien life. When the sun sets, it disappears behind the hills in a scene that is reminiscent of the Egyptian *akhet* symbol. Day turns into evening, and with the sun Badu enters the night and lies down to sleep. At night, she is approached by a lizard, perhaps representing the snake Apep, the enemy of the sun god who threatens the solar barque on its nocturnal journey. But like Re, Badu remains unharmed and with the rising of the sun the next morning, she wakes. At the end of the video, we see Badu emerging from a pool of water in the middle of the desert. Her skull is closely shaven. The imagery may be also a nod to the Egyptian deity Nefertem, a solar god associated with the sun god Re, who at the beginning of time emerges from *nun*, the primeval waters. Specifically, the scene might have been modelled after the wooden sculpture from the tomb of Tutankhamun that depicts Nefertem on a lotus flower as the young king with a closely shaven head (Fig. 10).[66] It should be noted that nothing in the video refers explicitly to Egypt, but to my mind, the

64 Phillips, "Dismantling the Master(s) Clock(work Universe)", 27–29.
65 Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 18–19.
66 Egyptian Museum Cairo, JE 60723; Silverman, *Masterpieces of Tutankhamun*, 28–29.

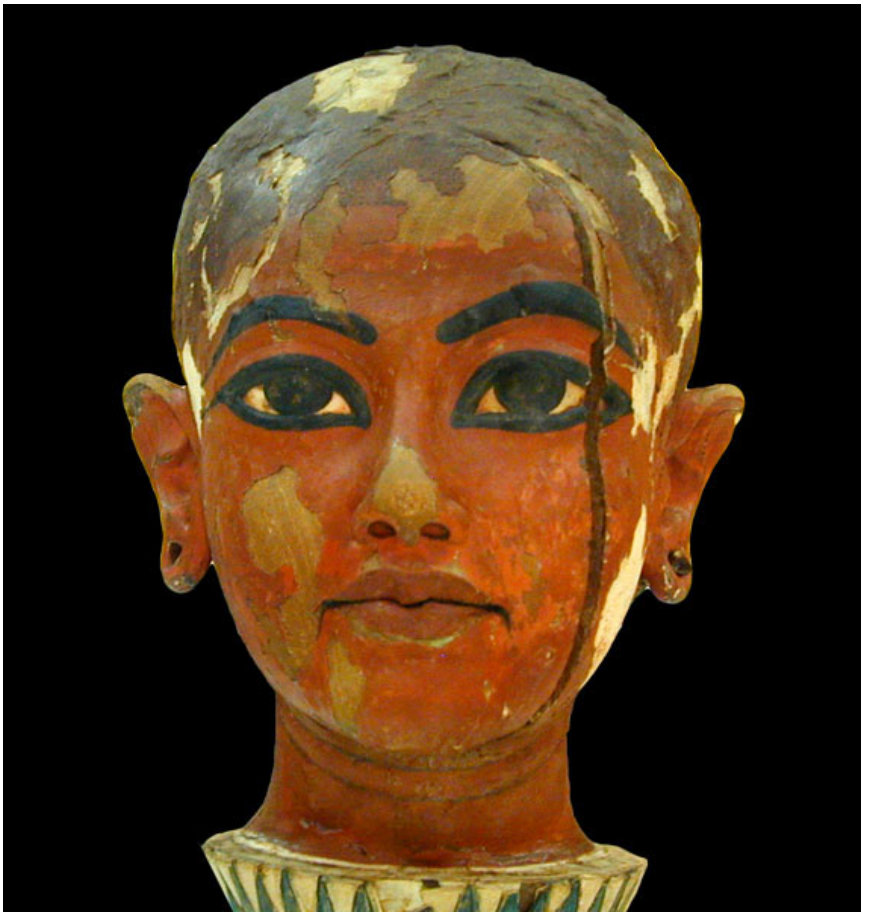

Fig. 10: Wooden sculpture of the Nefertem from the tomb of Tutankhamun, Egyptian Museum Cairo, JE 60723. Source: Wikipedia.org

many ancient Egyptian elements in the oeuvre of the artist allow for the proposed interpretation. In addition, Erik Steinskog has argued that in other songs, Erykah Badu evidently challenges the presumed linearity of Western time in favour of a cyclical time in the context of African spirituality.[67]

Html 8: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Np21rH7Ldto]

67 Steinskog, "Performing Race and Gender", 245–246, 248, 251.

On the subject of premodern African, cyclical time, Greg Tate has stated that such an understanding of temporality essentially collapses time on itself, so that the ancient and the futuristic come to coexist.[68] If the past, present and future are part of the same cycle, all time blends, or as Ras G clarified: "You say futurists, I say timeless".[69] This perspective of time often reoccurs in Afrofuturist music. The playful cover art of The Egyptian Lover's album *1986* (2021) interweaves three different eras. Its title refers to the 1980s, the starting point of the musician's career, whereas the Egyptian pyramids point to the pharaonic period and the golden space craft to a distant future. More profound is the collapse of time in the music video of the song *California Roll* (2015) by Snoop Dogg featuring Stevie Wonder and Pharrell Williams, a collaboration between musicians from two different generations. The narrative of the video begins in 1946, when a group of African Americans sits down in a theatre where they are welcomed by a robotic sphinx called Canubis 4.20. The stoner reference is fitting because the robot is voiced by Snoop Dogg. The sphinx is dog-headed, and his name is evidently a pun on the name of the dog-headed god Anubis and a nod to the name of the artist. After the robot's introduction, the theatre transports its audience into a future that merges the 1940s, a distant future, and ancient Egypt. Flying vintage cars pass by futuristic pyramids and the hills of Hollywood, whose letters are replaced by hieroglyphs. In the escapist video, a woman from the audience is absorbed by the spectacle and she chooses to remain with Snoop Dogg to become a star in this future's Egypto-Hollywood. Arguably, the video reaches what Sun Ra has called "the end of time", by blending timelines in a manner that can also be seen in the aforementioned music video *BACK 2 HIPHOP* (2018). Like Sun Ra, Canubis 4.20 offers a portal to a timeline with a new future, which is mixed with ancient Egypt.

Html 9: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNDKCHGW70w]

Evidently, many Afrofuturist artists have turned to contemporary knowledge of ancient Egypt to intervene in collective memory, to create alternate futures, to find alternatives for Western concepts of time and even to collapse time on itself. Simultaneously, some Afrofuturist art challenges the ways in which academic knowledge of ancient Egypt is produced, presented, and exploited.

68 Dery, "Black to the Future", 208.
69 Kenfe, "The Afrikan Space Program".

Critiquing Egyptology

In its intentions, the Afrofuturist exploration of ancient Egypt is decolonial and opposed to Eurocentric perspectives on history, which, if only on a theoretical level, renders it of relevance to the field of Egyptology and its methodologies. In a few specific ways, Afrofuturism appears to have a more invested interest in emic ancient Egyptian concepts such as cyclical *nḥḥ* time discussed above. This approach is expressed in the Afrofuturistic vocabulary. As in Afrocentrism and Kemetism, Afrofuturist artists may apply terminology that is more closely related to ancient Egyptian words than the Greek and Latin nomenclature common in Western Egyptology. For decades, Egyptologists have employed notions from the classical European tradition, words whose literal translations impose additional layers of meaning. For instance, Egyptologists continue to use the term "canopic jar" to refer to the receptacles that held the viscera removed from the body during mummification, even though Egyptology now agrees that such vessels are completely unrelated to the city of Canopus and its Osiris cult. Another commonly used word, "sarcophagus", or "flesh-eater" in Greek, is even antithetical to Egyptian words like *mn-ʿnḫ* and *nb-ʿnḫ*, which designate the continuance and protection of life. For these two cases, Afrofuturism has, to my knowledge, not proposed any alternatives,[70] but in other ways it does attempt to bypass Eurocentric aspects of Egyptology by relying on the indigenous ancient Egyptian language. Afrofuturism sometimes rejects words derived from the Hellenistic tradition, commonplace in Egyptology, instead adopting their more or less original Egyptian equivalents. As part of this strategy, Afrofuturism favours the word *Kemet* from ancient Egyptian *km.t* instead of "Egypt", as exemplified in the title of the track *The Sound of KMT* (2016) by Hieroglyphic Being. By the same token, the names of Egyptian divinities are given in (albeit outdated) phoneticised versions of their Egyptian designations rather than in their Latin forms. Hence, the triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus are mentioned as *Ausar Auset and Heru (The Trinity)* in the title of the first track of Ras G's album *Gospel of the God Spell* (2016).[71] Particularly insightful is the title of the song *Tekhenu (Obelisk)*, released by the Lonnie Plaxico Group in 2009, referring the Egyptian word *tḫnw*. The word "obelisk", from Greek *obelós*, describes a shape, while the Egyptian *tḫnw*, assumedly from the verb *ḫn* "to alight, to bring offerings",[72] relates to its meaning in ancient Egyptian culture

70 Outside of Afrofuturist music, Afrocentric scholars like Anthony Browder do prefer ancient Egyptian words for "sarcophagus", see, for example, RockNewmanShow.

71 Compare *Ausâr* or *Asâr*, *Auset* or *Ast*, and *Ḥeru*, in Budge, *Egyptian Language*, 52–54.

72 Erman and Grapow, *Wb* III, 286.16.

and describes the relation between the sun god and the king.[73] The case could be made that usage of the word "obelisk" in traditional Egyptology transforms the monument into an artefact[74]—an object, coincidentally, of a type that has historically been removed from Egypt and brought to Europe to represent imperial power—whereas the Afrofuturist preference for *tekhenu* is directed at its emic, ritual meaning.

Other Afrocentric and Afrofuturist artists are critical of the entire disciplines of archaeology and Egyptology, claiming a more intimate and legitimate relationship to the ancient Egyptian culture than researchers, and specifically white academics. On *A.D.A.M.* (1992) by the X Clan, Brother J summarises this view by saying: "To define me in simple '-ologies,' hell no!". Such a view is well illustrated in the music video of *Xodus* (1992) by the X Clan. The beginning of the video addresses Western colonial archaeology in Egypt and argues that it thrived in a system of power that is still in place and oppresses people of colour.[75] The lyrics of the track are profoundly Afrocentric and Black Nationalistic, including a few Afrofuturist elements in phrases like "cosmic child", "earthly residents" and "Dark Sun Riders". The viewpoint of the artists is that of an omniscient god, of the pilot of a spacecraft in Earth's orbit, or both. The song's music video opens on two white archaeologists wearing pith helmets, as they approach two sarcophagi (as conventional Egyptological terminology would have it) in a dark tomb chamber. Pointing at the *ankh* sign on the lid, they immediately identify the tomb owners:

> This is the symbol of the Underseer!
> - Let's open it!
> […]
> If this is the Underseer, then this must be the Overseer!
> - Let's see if we can open this. Get it on that side.

One of the two archaeologists then uses a hammer to break open the sarcophagus, and the bang of the hammer coincides with the first drop of the song's beat. The video cuts to a snippet of footage of African American civil rights protesters who

73 Martin, *Ein Garantsymbol des Lebens*.
74 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 16, 60–71; Del Vesco, "Forming and Performing Material Egypt ", 247–248.
75 For recent studies on the colonial origins and practices of Egyptian archaeology see, for example, Riggs, "Shouldering the past"; Matić, "De-colonizing the historiography"; Doyon, "The History of Archaeology through the Eyes of Egyptians"; Gold, *Victorian Egyptology*; Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson, "Egypt's dispersed heritage"; Jurman, "Pharaoh's New Clothes".

are beaten with a baton by a police officer in riot gear. The video cuts back to the archaeologists: "Hit it again!". At the second strike of the hammer, the video cuts to footage of fleeing protesters. Back in the tomb chamber, the archaeologists have opened the sarcophagus, which contains the body of X Clan's Professor X, and spot an object on his chest:

> Look, the book!
> - The book of Exodus.
> We're gonna go down in history!

The mention of the Overseer is a reference to the American plantation supervisor who controlled enslaved labourers. Overseers were most often white and have in Black popular culture come to represent white supremacy and evil in general, for example in KRS-One's track about police brutality, *Sound of da Police* (2000), in which "overseer" is phonetically connected with police "officer". The character of the overseer also appears in Sun Ra's film *Space is the Place* (1974) as an antagonist called The Overseer. Notably, this overseer is Black, but in the narrative of the film he is clearly not part of the Black spirit.[76] I suggest that this is not the case in *Xodus*, but that instead X Clan deliberately use the very common ancient Egyptian title of overseer to refer to Professor X in the coffin, thereby denoting him as a Black overseer and subverting the power structure to which his ancestors had been subjected. Simultaneously, the narrative of the video claims that the violence of the oppression of African Americans today is directly related to white supremacy and extractivist archaeology in colonial Egypt. It also criticises Western archaeologists for violating the ancient tombs of a non-Western culture, only to aggrandise themselves in what could be called an act of chronopolitics. The short, dramatised dialogue staged by X Clan oversimplifies the manifold, entangled incentives that have driven archaeologists and Egyptologists, but it ties into the assessment that Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology were and are in part motivated by sentiments of empire and national pride,[77] and that the fields have long been committed to an uncritical celebration of individuals from their disciplines.[78]

76 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 214, 224.
77 Del Vesco, "Forming and Performing Material Egypt", 242–245.
78 Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 11–12; Carruthers, "Introduction", 4–7.

Html 10: [URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNCQhq6Ua70]

Finally, knowledge production in Egyptology as an academic discipline can be critiqued through an Afrofuturist lens. In the context of Afrofuturism, Ytasha Womack, for one, has pointed out that many African cultures traditionally did not distinguish between science and art.[79] Similarly, Sun Ra problematised the theories and concepts on which Western thought and tradition are based, including Egyptological scholarship. He rejected the division between myth and science, both Western, Eurocentric inventions to his mind. For Sun Ra, historiography as a part of science was the same as mythmaking. He adhered instead to a concept that he called "MythScience", striving to include the "African dimension of history".[80] Afrofuturism thus argues that myth and history are not opposing concepts. Erik Steinskog points out that here Sun Ra is in complete agreement with Jan Assmann:[81]

> I call this [scholarly process of knowing history] mythological because I am of the decided opinion that the formation of significant events into tradition is a basic function of myth. Myth is not to be understood as being "in opposition to" history. On the contrary. All history that finds its way into collective memory as normative tradition becomes myth. Myths are the fundamental figures of memory. Their constant repetition and actualization is one of the ways in which a society or culture affirms its identity. […] We are what we remember, which is another way of saying that we are nothing other than the stories we can tell about ourselves and our past.[82]

In this sense, Afrofuturism reminds Egyptologists that the validity of their claims on the formation of knowledge about the history of ancient Egypt, presumed to be unbiased and firmly based in the scientific method, is open to scrutiny. It deconstructs the idea that Egyptology generates an objective truth about ancient Egypt. This is also true for Egyptian archaeology, as archaeologist Paolo Del Vesco has pointed out:

79 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 90.
80 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 87–88.
81 Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 89.
82 Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt*, 10.

> It is clear today that very little in the practice of archaeology is expression of a scientifically objective and detached approach. The archaeological fieldwork, as any other human experience, is mostly the product of the historical and social contexts in which the archaeologist lives.[83]

Whereas Afrofuturists embrace that the history of ancient Egypt provides opportunities for speculation,[84] Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology generally do not explicate that this is also true in these fields. This is ironic considering that scholars in both fields occasionally dabble in the speculative. Recent examples can be found with two Egyptologists blurring the lines between supposedly objective science and historical fantasy by wearing early twentieth-century colonial-era attire during fieldwork in Egypt,[85] or in the remarkable case of a research group who reproduced the sound of a mummified Egyptian named Nesyamun based on the reconstruction of his vocal tract.[86] Were it not for the latter study's basis in colonial archaeology and scientific racism,[87] which Afrofuturists generally aim to avoid, this case would dovetail with the interests of Afrofuturism, which, as discussed above, is attracted to, and invested in, the sound of ancient Egypt.

The speculative aspects of Egyptological research are evident, furthermore, in museums where Egyptologists showcase tentative facial reconstructions of embalmed Egyptian bodies that seem to "bring viewers face to face with the dead, erasing time, distance, and difference",[88] or in archaeological publications with drawings or 3D models of reconstructed temples in landscapes, intentionally left desolate so as not to introduce any unsubstantiated elements,[89] but thereby still creating a fictional building isolated in a void. For both types of images of ancient Egypt, Egyptology will acknowledge its hypothetical elements, but these disclaimers are always minimised by the authoritative, scientific vocabulary meant to explain the images and by the contexts of the academic publication and museum in which they are presented.

83 Del Vesco, "Forming and Performing Material Egypt", 249.
84 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 82; compare Steinskog, *Afrofuturism*, 83: "[T]here is something almost science fictional about history, a relation to the past understood as speculative from the point of view of the normative understanding of history."
85 Blouin, Hanna and Bond, "Colonialist Cosplay".
86 Howard, et al., "Synthesis of a Vocal Sound".
87 Matić, "Talk like an Egyptian?".
88 Riggs, *Unwrapping Ancient Egypt*, 210.
89 Gillam, "Inhabiting the Landscape", 167.

Only occasionally do archaeologists welcome the possibility to venture further into the speculative, still relying on collected data, but extending the limitation of ways to present hypothetical landscapes. Discussing the Virtual Reality environment reconstructing the site of the Old Kingdom pyramids of Saqqara in a publication by Audran Labrousse and Marc Albouy,[90] Robyn Gillam praises the potential of such an approach:

> One of the strengths of these virtual landscapes is their strikingly counterintuitive character. The shocking and unexpected transfer of Egyptian pyramids from a sandy desert setting to a savannah grassland forces observers to "think outside of the box," questioning their preexisting conceptual frameworks and especially the mental shortcuts that assume similarity rather than difference between the past and the present. […] Visualizations make explicit all the assumptions and mental shortcuts that can be hedged and qualified in textual expositions, and they are generally reserved for broader educational and outreach purposes. However, it can be argued that they are a necessary, even essential, exercise in attempting to reconstruct past landscapes.[91]

I hope to have shown with the aforementioned examples that understanding Afrofuturist practices is pertinent to the field of Egyptology. It inspires to make explicit and potentially adopt speculative views of life in ancient Egypt, as well as to exercise an alternative vocabulary that is concerned with the emic understanding of ancient Egyptian concepts. One can only conclude that the aims and methodology of Afrofuturism and Egyptology, both fields that intend to interpret Egyptian antiquity, overlap to some degree. Although the radically revisionist approach of Afrofuturist art is difficult to reconcile with the general aims of Egyptology, Egyptologists too are continuously reconsidering ancient Egyptian history. Even though Egyptology has long ignored Afrofuturism—and more broadly, Black cultural perspectives on ancient Egypt—it seems that the two have more in common with each other than one might initially think.

90 Labrousse, *Les pyramides des reines*.
91 Gillam, "Inhabiting the Landscape", 168–169.

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