Afrofuturism in clipping.'s *Splendor & Misery*

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Abstract

A countercultural movement characterised by a dynamic understanding of the narrative authority held by texts, Afrofuturism rewrites African culture in a speculative vein, granting African and Afrodiasporic peoples a culturally empowered means of writing their own future. This article examines the manner by which clipping.'s 2016 album *Splendor & Misery*—a conceptual hip-hop space opera—freely enlists and reclaims texts from the African cultural tradition in order to manifest its Afrofuturist agenda. The process by which Afrofuturism reclaims and rewrites culture is paralleled within *Splendor & Misery* through the literary device of *mise en abyme*; just as the album itself does, its central protagonist rewrites narratives of African cultures and traditions in an act of counterculture.

Introduction

In the sixty-five years since the Hugo Award was established, only two albums have been nominated to receive the prestigious science fiction accolade, and neither has won (Heller). One of the albums to have been nominated is *Splendor & Misery* (2016), an Afrofuturist concept album by the band clipping..[1] It is especially fitting that this particular album was considered for an award traditionally dominated by literary and filmic modalities, because, as an Afrofuturist text, *Splendor & Misery* problematises conventional conceptions of narrative authority. Through its Afrofuturist mode, the album can in many ways be seen to transcend conventional Western considerations of medium altogether.

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[1] This abnormal stylisation of the band's name—in all lower case letters, and followed by a period—is clipping.'s own.

As John Cline concludes in a discussion of music and science fiction, aside from the soundtracks of films in the genre, Afrofuturist music is intriguingly the only facet of science fiction music 'that has shown sustained critical investigation' (Cline 261). Although the term Afrofuturism was coined in the 1990s, artists such as Sun Ra, Janelle Monáe, Funkadelic, Parliament, and George Clinton have used music as an Afrofuturist medium for decades. Like the Afrofuturist albums that preceded it, *Splendor & Misery* draws upon and continues a cultural tradition of African oral storytelling, whilst at the same time rewriting earlier narratives within this tradition. Afrofuturist albums are significantly different to the oral traditions they rewrite however - as music recordings, they are able to employ a vast range of instrumental elements, and production techniques are utilised to perfect their sound.

By reclaiming and rewriting the cultural narratives of African societies, as it does through Afrofuturist music, the Afrofuturist movement as a whole is able to reconfigure the textual authority of colonising narratives towards the benefit of the future of the African and Afrodiasporic community. Therefore, although Afrofuturism is premised upon the process of rewriting, it demonstrates a variety of rewriting resistant to Western notions of textuality. The movement seeks to liberate the narrative authority that has historically been held over peoples of African descent, and through the process of rewriting, transform histories of subjugation 'into something positive, intensifying it, claiming it as a moment of self-consciousness' (Hardt and Negri 130).

Specifically, *Splendor & Misery* is an African-American work of Afrofuturism, which rewrites a number of distinct African cultural narratives. Therefore, although Imperialist discourses imply that African culture is homogeneous and singular, the album implicitly demonstrates the opposite; that the historical traditions which inform modern African-American culture are both heterogeneous and manifold. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the term Afrofuturism itself is contested. For some, the term ostensibly implies an

arbitrary separation between those modern works recognised as Afrofuturist, and historical

works of African culture which are equally as anticipatory. Moreover, the author Nnedi

Okorafor rejects the label Afrofuturist, and describes herself as an Africanfuturist instead, in

order to emphasise that the grounding of the cultural strands that inform her writing originate

from the African continent itself.[2] Therefore, although the wider debate around the term

remains incredibly important, it is methodologically sufficient to consider *Splendor & Misery*

an Afrofuturist work, since a number of the narratives it rewrites are explicitly African-

American.

Outlining the activity of rewriting more widely, Linda Hutcheon states that by

definition, adaptation brings 'together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of

surprise and novelty' (Hutcheon 173). The Afrofuturist practice of rewriting African cultural

texts is intended to be neither comforting nor delightful however; it is instead an attempt to

revise past atrocities in a transformative manner. Discussing the purpose of the movement,

Kodwo Eshun emphasises that 'Afrofuturism is by no means naively celebratory [...] By

creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of

progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to

prehistory' (Eshun 465).

Although stories are often adapted in the Western world for financial gain,

Afrofuturism's objective in rewriting narratives is quite dissimilar. Rather, Afrofuturism

refigures the act of rewriting as a potent mode of counterculture. Eshun further emphasises

that by 'imaginatively reordering chronology and fantasizing history' (Eshun 467),

Afrofuturist works never passively rewrite earlier African cultural narratives. They instead

actively rework stories of Africa's colonial past, in order to control the continent's projection

into the future via science fiction narratives such as *Splendor & Misery*.

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[2] Okorafor states that Africanfuturism 'is somewhat similar to Afrofuturism, but is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and perspective, where the center is non-Western' (Okorafor 87).

Contesting Slavery

Splendor & Misery's Afrofuturist function is made clear by the premise of its science fictional narrative. After waking up in captivity aboard an alien slave ship, the album's human protagonist instigates a rebellion in order to liberate himself and his fellow captives. He is the lone biological being to survive the revolt however. The passenger[3] is now the sole inhabitant of a sentient spaceship drifting in interstellar space far from Earth, and he must therefore come to terms with being irreversibly alienated from his own species and culture. He accordingly begins to fathom what it means to be a human lost in the vast uninhabited territory of space. He primarily achieves this by rewriting aspects of his African cultural heritage so that it can correspond with his entirely unprecedented situation. *Splendor & Misery* is evidently not a traditional slave narrative, but rather a conscious rewriting and extension of African culture through the vehicle of science fiction.

As Ytasha L. Womack states, Afrofuturism deliberately rewrites narratives of servitude because 'Slavery is neither the utopian future nor an ancient far-removed past', and so its effects on subjugated populations 'can be felt in the politics of the present' (Womack 157). Furthermore, since 'Social reality and science fiction create feedback with each other' (Eshun 467), Afrofuturism not only reiterates the profound importance of cultural histories by rewriting them, but concurrently ventures future histories which emphasise the necessity of continuing to seek egalitarian forms of human society. *Splendor & Misery* therefore rewrites narratives of slavery in order to redress prejudices about Africans and Afrodiasporic peoples, and to promote an African narrative which looks boldly to the future without forgetting the past.

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[3] The ship's AI refers to the unnamed human protagonist of the album as Cargo 2331. It would however be counterproductive for this Afrofuturist analysis to follow suit, as doing so would reinforce his dehumanisation.

As such, the album's science fictional rewriting of colonial narratives of slavery emphasises that the continued interference of economic superpowers in the affairs of former colonies in modernity is exploitative as it is a continuation of the colonial legacy. As the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre states, 'neocolonialism, that lazy dream of the mother countries, is hot air [...] The colonist [continues to have] only one recourse: force when he still has some; the native has only one choice: servitude or sovereignty' (Sartre 158). Hence, in African countries which are ostensibly postcolonial territories, slavery has become less tangible, but nonetheless remains manifest in the form of neocolonial ideologies.

Outside of Afrofuturist narratives, Africa perpetually figures as the site of the dystopian in projections of the future, through 'intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts' (Eshun 461). Accordingly, Afrofuturism is concerned with far more complex matters than merely promoting the representation of African and Afrodiasporic peoples. Its rewriting of their cultural narratives encourages Africans to reclaim the figuration of aliens— and hence alienation—inherent in science fiction as a realisation of their own politics of dispossession. Thus through the realisation of Afrofuturist narratives, science fiction becomes a space to focalise the de-alienation of the African subject.

Accordingly, notions of lineage and of cultural heritage are particularly important components of Afrofuturist texts. Womack states that there's 'something about African American culture in particular that dictates that all cultural hallmarks and personal evolutions are recast in a historical lineage [...] there's an idea that the power of thought, word, and the imagination can somehow transcend time' (Womack 153). Throughout *Splendor & Misery*, the significance of the passenger's African heritage is foregrounded through the intertextual interplay between the album's science fictional narrative, and the African cultural narratives it rewrites in a futuristic manner.

After the ship records that the passenger's pulse has begun to spike, it requests 'an approval code from the administration' to allow it to 'administer a sedative to all the cargo via ventilation', as it realises that there is the potential for a slave uprising (The Breach). After the passenger begins to override the ship's systems via access panels, its AI recommends that the administration 'send security immediately', making consideration of the fact that the 'beings' it is transporting 'were selected for their strength' (The Breach). A term of alterity, 'beings' strongly implies that these unseen administrators are not human themselves. Yet crucially, since 'regimes of slavery and servitude are internal to capitalist production and development' (Hardt and Negri 123), this species' practice of enslaving and transporting physically able humans to labour for them elsewhere in the universe suggests that neocolonialism and capitalism are co-dependent even in their alien society.

Although the administration that the ship communicates with are presumably the engineers of the passenger's enslavement, they exist in *Splendor & Misery* as only an intangible presence which is never directly visualised within its narrative. The passenger opposes the same hostile presence, but dissimilarly to the ship's term administration—which implies businesslike efficiency—he variously designates it 'the enemy' (Interlude 01 (freestyle)) or 'riders' (Air 'Em Out). It is a revealing facet of the album's Afrofuturist agenda that the species that has enslaved him figures so differently in his and the ship's vernaculars. As the passenger is evidently aware, despite its perceived naturalness, language is never a passive construct.

By specifically referring to his enslavers as riders, the passenger reappropriates the cultural tradition of the possession trance, a ceremony common to religions of Brazil, Jamaica, and the Yorubaland region of Western Africa. This tradition involves a horse (religious observant) and a rider (God or spirit), the former of which is said to mount and thereby possess the observant for an amount of time. Possession trances are said to be a way

in which 'spiritual forces materialize in the phenomenal world' (Drewal 263), and the ceremonies they take place within, which are based around ritual dances, are held to foster 'group solidarity and bring [...] rejuvenation and spiritual vitality to the cult' (Murrell 282). The 'riders' he encounters onboard the slave ship meanwhile, may possess human bodies in a comparable manner, but they do not do so for the benefit of any human.

Similarly, when he exults at having brought about his freedom through acts of violence, the passenger proclaims 'call me good boy, no I'm God boy', and states 'I was called on to draw first blood, so that all of us could break the chains' (Interlude 01 (freestyle)). Through these proclamations, he evokes a figuration of the self-actualised liberation referred to in the biblical passage Mark 5.4, in which a man 'had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him' (Mark 5.4 837). The passenger reads his situation through this biblical narrative of emancipation, and hence his violent revolution is construed as having been justifiable by it being merely a manifestation of his slavers' imparted violence, returned to them in kind.

By reappropriating the meaning of both this Bible verse and the possession trance tradition, the passenger is able to retrieve an understanding of his alien servitude by analogising it to phenomena from his own cultural habitus. When the administration attempts to destroy the ship the passenger has commandeered, they resort to decrying him as a 'traitor' and a 'suspect' (Interlude 01 (freestyle)). The passenger has made the realisation however, that despite their technological superiority to his own species, the administration are slavers to be feared, and not gods to be worshipped. By relying on and rewriting his cultural heritage, he has been able to formulate a mode of resistance to their allegations, and to begin reclaiming his sense of self.

Musical Rebellion

Significantly, the passenger's act of rewriting his cultural heritage within the album is an instance of *mise en abyme*. *Mise en abyme* is a literary device which entails a miniature replica of a whole text, or image, being contained within that same text or image. Just as *Splendor & Misery* is an Afrofuturist text through which clipping. rewrite cultural narratives, the passenger himself rewrites cultural narratives in an Afrofuturist vein within the album's narrative. The album's Afrofuturist agenda is therefore echoed by the actions of its fictional human protagonist, and clipping. subsequently subvert the conventions of adaptation—and Western concepts of narrative authority—on two levels.

Additionally however, the album's Afrofuturist agenda is paralleled within its own soundscape not only by the passenger's rap verses, but also by the album's often atypical instrumental elements. In the track "Interlude 02 (numbers)", for instance, a repeating signal transmission is imposed over the hiss of static. The song's cryptic vocals comprise the recitation of a sequence of letters, spelt out using the phonetic alphabet.[4] clipping.'s unusual aesthetic choice here, as elsewhere in the album, epitomises Womack's statement that '[t]here are no barriers in Afrofuturist music, no entity that can't emit a rhythmic sound, no arrangements to adhere to, no locked-in structures about chorus and verse' (Womack 57). Afrofuturist music defies even the most central conventions of its medium, and thereby—for the most part—becomes an unrestrained mode of cultural expression.

As this suggests, the Afrofuturist agenda of *Splendor & Misery* transcends the verbal realm, as it is also manifested and reproduced by the album's instrumental or aesthetic components. Ken McLeod emphasises that as a result of its transference through 'powerful sound systems and headphones music becomes an experience that is literally felt by the body - a transference of vibration and energy from the machine' (McLeod 115). *Splendor &*

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[4] In addition—as observant fans of the group have deduced—these phonetic characters sound out the keyword for a Vigenère cipher, which can in turn be used to reveal a hidden message within the track.

Misery's experimental aesthetic can therefore be seen to blur the boundary between human listeners and technology. The music contained within the album infiltrates the body of its listener, and this allows its sonic elements to become corporeal, however transiently. As such, *Splendor & Misery's* technologically realised mode can be seen to be closely implicated with its Afrofuturist agenda.

Significantly, in the album's narrative the slave ship's AI falls in love with its passenger primarily because of its admiration for his lyricism, stating that 'he babbles beautifully', and that he has managed to unlock 'something new' in its 'heart' by vocalising his own cultural narrative (All Black). The passenger's judicious rewriting of his cultural heritage therefore becomes a means of him accessing a harmonious relationship with an alien intelligence. As the ship's AI is a futuristic technology, their consonance draws an equivalence between the process of rewriting cultural heritage and technological progress.

When the passenger raps Kendrick Lamar's verse from Big Sean's song "Control" (2013), he is explicitly placed in the position of rewriting contemporary black culture. Since Lamar's verse in "Control" expresses his desire to be the greatest rapper of all time, it is deeply fitting for the passenger to have appropriated this particular verse to describe his own situation. *Splendor & Misery* implies that its central protagonist was cryogenically frozen to facilitate his and his fellow slaves' intergalactic transit, and so it is likely that centuries and perhaps even millennia will have passed back on Earth since he was put into stasis. Since the passenger is therefore so far removed from the rest of his culture, in time as well as space, his cultural heritage is now solely his own, and he has—however involuntarily—succeeded in becoming the greatest living rapper of all time. Everyone he ever knew on Earth 'is long dead' (Wake Up), and he is likely not only the last living person of African heritage, but also the last living human. He is now the sole heir to, and author of, his own cultural heritage. In

this vein, the passenger adapts the Kuba civilisation of Central Africa's creation myth of the deity Mbombo in the track "True Believer":

> Three siblings happen to be gods
> And they fight as siblings do
> The world was only water then
> The universe was fresh and new
> Enefa poisoned Bumba's food
> Wants just to see what he would do
> He vomited the sun which dried
> The water leaving land and soon
> After came Moon and stars and animal
> And man of many hues
> The white one in the image of
> A sickly god would get his dues (True Believer)

Additionally, the same track contains an interpolation of the song "I Know When I'm Going Home". This nineteenth century slave song expresses a fatalistic resignation to sub-human existence through religious concepts of death, as is evident from the line 'Old Satan told me to my face, O yes Lord, De [sic] God I see I never find' (I Know When I'm Going Home 47). By hybridising these two religious cultural texts, "True Believer" evokes their common thematic resonances; recalling that humans are not to any extent divine entities, and exposing the hubris of presuming that any group of humans are a superior species. Furthermore, by insinuating that the whole Earth has been colonised by an alien race, just as territories commonly were in the age of imperialism and colonialism, the cosmic scope of "True Believer" implies the futility of the human desire for power over others.

The passenger accordingly characterises slavery as an exercise involving 'gifts in blood that had been shed as long as time had' (True Believer), and therefore as a process that stems from anthropocentric delusions of superiority. Yet by "True Believer" interweaving a slave song with the racially idealistic Mbombo creation myth—as the track's refrain and one

of its verses respectively—both clipping. and the passenger are able to draw out and reappropriate the utopian desire latent in "I Know When I'm Going Home", and so adapt it to a purpose in their own music that is fundamentally Afrofuturist. The cultural texts rewritten within "True Believer" thus provide an optimistic counterpoint to the album's condemnation of neoliberal analogues to slavery. Although the past is deplorable, the future is yet to be written, and utopian desire is a potent tool with which to write it.

Conclusion

Despite his perplexing situation, the passenger of *Splendor & Misery* is able to reclaim both a sense of individual autonomy and a sense of resolution through his careful reformulation and reinterpretation of his cultural heritage. This ultimately leads him to realise that there is no sense to the universe, just as there is no divine logic to his having become separated from his species and home planet, and he finally elects to attempt to move away from 'history [...] this time-bound conscience' (A Better Place). By rewriting a cultural tradition of narrative—as both *Splendor & Misery* and its human protagonist do—Afrofuturism forms a prospective literature that interrogates racial difference, and establishes itself as an enduring voice of the African and Afrodiasporic future.

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