

Astropelagic Afrofuturism

Outer Space Im/mobilities in Canisia Lubrin's "Voodoo Hypothesis"

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I. Introduction

Afrofuturism is a diasporic discourse of artistic resistance and empowerment that fundamentally rests upon spatiotemporal, mobility-related re-imaginings of Black pasts, presents, and futures. While some of its proponents – most famously, Sun Ra – claim(ed) they descend(ed) from other planets, others – such as Octavia Butler (e.g., *Parable of the Sower*, 1993; *Parable of the Talents*, 1998) – have imagined a liberating future through space travel. At the heart of such Black reconfigurations of spacetime stands the claim that the Middle Passage can be read (and was indeed experienced) as an alien abduction and a radical, even apocalyptic break that propelled the enslaved to another world of which they had no prior knowledge (see, e.g., Mayer 2000); an event that can also be understood, with Paul Gilroy (1993), as delineating the beginning of a distinct Atlantic modernity. Mobility and immobility have been leading tropes in Afrofuturist writing: mobilities of the Middle Passage, generative to modernity, have been shown as intricately entangled with the immobilizations of enslavement, for instance. But Afrofuturist texts notably break the confinements of past and present immobilizations as they bridge spatiotemporal dimensions and imagine alternative, liberating, and empowering futures. Delineating Afrofuturist spatiotemporalities and imaginaries of im/mobility as well as the concept of the cosmos as an “astropelago” (Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 286) rather than a terripelago (i.e., an extension of territorial, earth-bound epistemologies; see Santos Perez 2015) in the first part of this essay, an Afrofuturist reading of Saint Lucian-Canadian author Canisia Lubrin's poem “Voodoo Hypothesis” (2017) follows in the second in order to showcase

how contemporary Black poetry enacts astropolagic epistemologies in opposition to the fledgling outer-space frontierism of the Second Space Age.¹

“Voodoo Hypothesis” is set in outer space and poetically engages with the speculative mode: it was written in response to the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) documentary film *Ultimate Mars Challenge* (USA 2012), following space rover *Curiosity*’s travels to and on Mars. As such, it tackles already existing mobilities – those of robotic machines sent to other planets – as they foreshadow dreams about and techno-optimist projects concerning future human mobilities to outer space. We read Lubrin’s “Voodoo Hypothesis” as a poetic articulation of the post/colonial entanglements of space travel as a material and technological praxis dependent on the exploitation of Black land and labor, e.g., in the aluminum industry (Sheller 2014). The poem is concerned with both the materialities of outer space mobilities as well as with reflections on colonial conquests throughout global history and racist technologies dehumanizing Black bodies by means of their objectification. As Nicola Hunte points out, “Caribbean plantation societies have acted as laboratories for harvesting technologies that have also seen the human body being treated like a machine” (2019, 18), an insight that acts as a point of departure for much Anglophone Caribbean Afrofuturist literature. In this contribution, we propose that “Voodoo Hypothesis” offers a poetic trajectory which builds on Afrofuturist imaginations of Black, de-subjectified ‘techno-bodies’ and their concomitant coerced mobility to present a critique not only of contemporary territorializing, extractivist-colonial Astrofuturist projects of outer-space conquest, but also of the history of Black alienation and dehumanization on Earth. In this, the poem echoes the groundbreaking theorizations of the category of the human through the lens of Blackness as its Other by Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter (see, e.g., “1492: A New World View”).

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the articulation of Caribbean and Caribbean-diasporic future narratives and poetics, resulting,

1 A watershed moment that is often seen as the beginning of the Second Space Age is the launch of the first nongovernment spaceship, SpaceShipOne, in 2004. In many respects, the Second Space Age, of course, differs from the First, e.g., with regard to the intensified militarization, privatization, transnationalization, and commercialization of outer space (see, e.g., Peeters 2021). However, it is fundamentally built on a large-scale continuation and mobilization of the techno-optimism that characterized its cold war predecessor. In terms of outer space as a “medial complex”, Haupts and Pischel (2021, 8) also emphasize the similarities between the First and Second Space Ages, characterizing their relation mainly in terms of multiplication and differentiation.

e.g., in the founding of the Caribbean Futures Institute (devoted to futurist writing projects) or in the anthology *Reclaim, Restore, Return: Futurist Tales from the Caribbean* (2020, edited by Karen Lord and Tobias Buckell).² There is certainly no dearth of Afrofuturist literature in the Caribbean, yet it is often not as widely promoted by the international book industry. In a special issue of the *Journal of West Indian Literature* (2019) dedicated to Caribbean speculative fiction, Debra Providence mentions the dangers of artistic movements like Afrofuturism, popular and commercialized in the Global North, to elide “pertinent signposts rooted in Caribbean cultural aesthetics” (2019, II; see also Samatar 2017). Beyond this critique, Kelly Baker Josephs, in a reading of Erna Brodber’s novel *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* (2007) through the prism of Caribbean cosmologies (following Kamau Brathwaite [1996]), argues that Afrofuturist aesthetics “provides the means of representing multiple dimensions of a Caribbean cosmology that is not merely cognizant of, but necessarily engaged with, other spaces in the black diaspora” (2013, 135). Canisia Lubrin’s poem “Voodoo Hypothesis” can be read in this very light, as it accesses a Caribbean cosmology through an Afrofuturist poetics.

Lubrin’s work generally resists easy categorization: the poems in her debut collection *Voodoo Hypothesis* do not adhere to regular patterns or traditional poetic genres or forms; her 2020 book *The Dyzgraph^xt* presents a long poem taking its structure from drama. An Afrofuturist reading of the titular “Voodoo Hypothesis” allows us not only to explore the dis/continuities between im/mobilities across spatiotemporal configurations articulated from a Black diasporic experience, but also to conceptualize poetry/poiesis as a distinct technology to imagine otherwise. To counter teleological mobilities of the future propelled by the space industries, astropelagic Afrofuturist poetry like Lubrin’s zooms in on possibilities which complicate universalist epistemologies, instead brings to the fore, following Wynter, culturally conceptualized ways of knowing (Wynter 1995b, 20).

2 On Caribbean SF see, e.g., the anthology *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean* (2016), edited by Karen Lord.

II. Moving towards an Afrofuturist Astropelago: Theoretical Considerations

NASA's *Curiosity* rover, around which the PBS documentary *Ultimate Mars Challenge* and Lubrin's poem revolve, has been celebrated as a major stepping stone for Mars exploration and space engineering in general. By taking soil probes, it functions as part and parcel in the Second Space Age's extractivist-imperial logic. In "A Sea of Stars: Towards an Astropelagic Reading of Outer Space with Jacques Lacan and Hannah Arendt", Alexandra Ganser, Jens Temmen, and Clemens Rettenbacher have taken up Lacan's and Arendt's specific critiques of the psychological and scientific-discursive underpinnings of the First Space Age to comment on contemporary attempts at territorializing planet Mars. The problematic discourses of territoriality brought forth during the First Space Age are viewed as fundamentally sustaining the twenty-first-century reframing of outer space as a realm of extraction and exploitation in this article. While Lacan speaks about the silencing of the planets in his seminar "Introduction of the Big Other" (1955), Arendt's essay "The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man" ([1963] 2007) focuses on space science's sensory "earth alienation" (a term introduced in *The Human Condition*; Arendt 1958, 2) and the dangers of technological instrumental reason. Lacan centers on the difference between entangled and incalculable human mobilities and the calculable movements of the planets, while Arendt

is worried about the technocratic de-politicization of human-world-relations and the apocalyptic potentiality of techno-scientific detachment. [...] In the Anthropocene, [...] the terripelagic territorialization of outer space by the establishment of infrastructures of industrial conquest and extractive capitalization as well as tourism and [...] 'scientific' [...] endeavors needs to be understood in light of the political and epistemological shortcomings of a science driven by this "earth alienation." (Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 277, 281)

The dominant conception of space as a frontier of discovery via technology neglects, as Chamoru poet and critic Craig Santos Perez argues, its underlying territorializing impulses, which "demarcate[] migration and settlement, inclusion and exclusion, power and poverty, access and trespass, incarceration and liberation, memory and forgetting, self and other, mine and yours" (2015, 620). By suggesting the term terripelago (a portmanteau of *terra*, land, and *pélago*,

sea), Santos Perez expands “the concept of territoriality to include not only land, but also waters, resources, representations, rights, and (im)mobilities” (Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 275). The notion of terripelago is apt to “better grasp both the fluid territorial regimes across land and water within US imperialism while also making visible the transnational counter-currents that resist such territorializations” (Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 275).³ By gesturing towards a concept of the astropelago, the authors take Santos Perez’s argument to the cosmos, urging towards a similar perspective with regard to outer space: in opposition to an instrumental, terracentric imaginary, which is currently at work in dominant astrofuturist discourses that reduce other planets and celestial bodies to a peripheral, frontier extension of *terra*, they suggest astropelagicity as an alternative framework for conceptualizing outer space. Instead of seeing outer space as an extension or function of earth (terripelago), the astropelago puts forth an imaginary of outer space beyond expansionist imperialism and against the silencing of the planetary Other (echoing Lacan as well as Arendt). An astropelagic lens emphasizes the infinity of outer space (literally and metaphorically) for conceiving of alternate visions of human/outer space relations, a recognition that has also always been at the heart of Afrofuturist art and criticism (in the realm of art, see, for example, Yinka Shonibare’s *Refugee Astronaut* or *Cloud 9*, or Tavares Strachan’s *Bahamian Aerospace and Sea Exploration Center BASEC*).⁴

Afrofuturist counter-imaginaries such as Lubrin’s offer a conceptual poetics that articulates such an alternative, astropelagic model, countering the imperial archipelago or terripelago.⁵ They can be read, we propose, as a retort to the space sciences’ techno-scientific indifference with regard to historical-political responsibilities for human suffering, i.e., of humans reduced to masses of bodies required for the development of space travel and rocketry, from the Dora-Mittelbau camp inmates used as a workforce and in hu-

3 See also Santos Perez 2015, 619–21. We understand US imperialism more broadly than traditional conceptions that see it as beginning in the 1890s and ending with WW2. While this period established the US as a colonial power along with its European counterparts through settler colonialism in parts of the Americas and the Pacific, we see the imperial project of the New World as starting centuries earlier and continuing into the Second Space Age, though its qualities and characteristics have of course changed in many respects over time.

4 On Shonibare’s work, see e.g., Bourland 2020; Kreienbrock 2020, 114–16; on Strachan, see Sheller 2015.

5 On the conceptualization of an imperial archipelago, see Thompson 2010.

man space-science experiments by Wernher von Braun to Black mining laborers in the Caribbean.⁶ As Mimi Sheller puts it, these laboring bodies “haunt the footnotes of the Space Age” (2015, n.p.), whose dominant accounts usually eclipse the transnational mobilization of bodies on which it fundamentally rests. Based on Black experiences of earth alienation, an astropelagic Afrofuturist poetics of outer space makes these technologies visible: in Lubrin’s case, her poem brings together the paradox of dehumanized Black bodies and humanized (white) machines like *Curiosity*, and questions technocultural future trajectories that are oblivious to problematic processes of (bodily and planetary) appropriation and frontierist narratives of progress.

African American and Caribbean art and literature have imagined alternative trajectories for Black futures out of the bedrock of Black diasporic experiences especially since the 1960s (the heyday of both the First Space Age and the Civil Rights Movement), though such articulations reach back to the antebellum slave narrative (see Lavender 2019) and the Harlem Renaissance (W.E.B. DuBois’ short story “The Comet” of 1920 is often cited as the first Afrofuturist literary text). Afrofuturism – a term ascribed to Mark Dery (1994) that characterizes a cultural aesthetic underpinned by a philosophy of science and history that addresses themes and concerns of the African American diaspora with regard to science/fiction – has mostly been discussed in terms of Black music (Sun Ra, George Clinton, Drexciya, Janelle Monáe), art, and narrative. In comparison, Black poetics as a site of Afrofuturist aesthetics has been somewhat understudied despite poetry’s epistemological and ontological potential for creating alternative temporalities, subjectivities, metaphors, and tropes that serve to inspire a future world-making which takes heed of Black pasts and presents.

Arguably, Afrofuturism is utopian rather than dystopian in impulse (see Zamalin 2019, 6–18; Brock 2020, 11). It takes Black technologies of resistance (to slavery, violence, disenfranchisement, and segregation) in the past as a source of empowerment to counter the by-and-large absence of Black subjects from

6 The heritage of the Third Reich’s rocket program and the forced labor and human experiments it was built on were pivotal for the US space program, with former Nazi scientists like Wernher von Braun having been brought to the US from Germany after the War via “Operation Paperclip”; see Rainer Eisfeld’s seminal study, first published in 1996, *Mondsüchtig: Wernher von Braun und die Geburt der Raumfahrt aus dem Geist der Barbarei* (2002), or Annie Jacobsen’s *Operation Paperclip: The Secret Intelligence Program That Brought Nazi Scientists to America* (2014).

“popular culture depictions of the future” as well as from the history of science (Womack 2013, 6–7) – and hence, arguably, from ‘the future of humanity’ discourses as we also find them at work in hegemonic astrofuturism (see Ganser 2019, 39). Afrofuturism thus also suggests a revision of dominant models of linear histories of progress and modernity, as they hinge on Eurocentric humanist epistemes, mythologies, and narratives; as many Afrofuturist critiques quip, the traumatic experience of physical abduction by alien ships, for the descendants of the Atlantic slave trade, is in the past rather than in an imaginary intergalactic future (see, e.g., Bould 2007, Nelson 2000, Rieder 2008). Its exhortation to revise white linear temporal-historical models through what Frédéric Neyrat (2020, 120) calls Afrofuturist “cosmic techniques” echoes Wynter’s philosophical demand for a new poetics of a hybrid bios/logos or “NatureCulture” science (1995a, 49–50): Wynter calls for a “conceptual move into a ‘realm beyond reason’ – one able to take our present mode of reason itself, and its system of symbolic representation and mode of subjective understanding that orient the perceptual matrices that in turn orient our behaviors – as the object of a new mode of inquiry” (1995a, 40). She specifically mentions Africa’s “‘voodoo’ model of nonrationality” (42) in this context as opposing “our present model of being ‘Man,’ as totemized in the Indo-European middle-class physiognomy (together with European cultures, ways of life, and rationality)” (42). The formulaic claim to serve ‘all mankind’ by the space industries is revealing in this sense, echoing Wynter’s argument that such claims

function[] strategically to absolutize the behavioral norms encoded in our present culture-specific conception of being human, allowing it to be posited *as if* it were the universal of the human species, and ensuring thereby that all actions taken for the sake of the well-being of its referent model continue to be perceived as if they were being taken for the sake of the human-in-general. (1995a, 43)

All of this continues to happen in the face “of the mounting evidence of its costs to the planetary environment (physical and organic), as well as to the world-systemic sociohuman one” (43–44). In this light, space exploration justifications need to be read as “a struggle over sovereignty in the conceptualization of ‘all mankind,’ and as affirming the western Enlightenment anthropocentrism that keeps the universe and its celestial bodies in stable orbit around this hegemonic conception” (Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 283).

Lubrin's poem reconceptualizes technologies of planetary exploration in tune with an Afrofuturist model that questions a "reductive spectrum, or hierarchy, that moves from technology to spirituality"; rather, it highlights "[t]he interplay between technology and spirituality" to express concern with "estrangement, trauma, and powerlessness [...] in the relationship between the captive body and [the] sciences" (Hunte 2019, 17). "Voodoo Hypothesis" builds on an Afrofuturist crossing of established boundaries between science-based technologies and "more ceremonial investigations into the unknown" (2019, 17) – the "Voodoo" in Lubrin's title.⁷

With regard to dominant astrofuturist mobility regimes that posit the movement to other planets as either a natural 'human' impulse or an inevitable step in securing humanity's survival, Lubrin's poetic intervention presents a conceptual corrective in at least three ways: first, it delineates an astropelagic poetics of mobility that is marked by a dismantling of the language of the colonizer through strategies of postcolonial mimicry (e.g., by recontextualizing phrases from the PBS documentary) and by shifting subjectivities and agencies away from its hegemonic centers (e.g., mission control centers); second, it mobilizes epistemological binaries between the sacred and the profane, magic and science, the human and the alien or the machine via the curiosity trope; and third, it highlights the ontological-material dimension of outer space mobilities by placing the Black laboring body as well as natural resources at the center of astromobility discourses.

III. Astropelagic Poetics of Mobility in "Voodoo Hypothesis"

"Voodoo Hypothesis" is the opening poem to the eponymous book, preceded only by an epigraph by Derek Walcott that introduces the first section: "The

7 There are different spelling variants for "voodoo", such as "vodou", "vodoun", or "vodun." The anglicized spelling of "voodoo" is seen as a Western pejorative reference to Haitian culture. As Leslie G. Desmangles argues, "[v]oodoo is then an etic term whose history derives from racist denotations and ill-conceived notions about a religion that is practiced by millions of believers in Haiti, in West Africa, in the United States and Canada, as well as other parts of the world" (2012, 27). As Wynter explains, vodou "has been made, within the logic of contemporary Western thought, into the byword of an antithetical irrationality to its own ostensibly supra-cultural order of rationality" (1995b, 21). On debates around the spelling, see Desmangles 2012.

children of slaves must sear their memory with a torch" (Walcott qtd. in Lubrin 2017, n.p.). The epigraph steeps the collection in a Caribbean cosmology through an intertextual reference to one of Saint Lucia's (and the Caribbean's) most well-known poets. Epigraphs have an anticipatory function as they prime the reader for what is to come; here, it evokes the violence and necessity of remembrance, reminding the reader that any Caribbean future imagination needs to be related to the past. On a metatextual level, the graphic visualization of this epigraph as well as the book cover consist of a mapping atop topographic lines: moving in distinct circular patterns, some lines converge, almost overlap, whereas others are drawn further apart. In geography, they indicate the heights of landscape; in the context of the book, these lines evoke a certain kind of movement – parallel, simultaneous, or distant mobilities – across geographical space, repeated across time. As the titular and opening poem to Lubrin's book, "Voodoo Hypothesis" also sets the tone for the collection. On a spatiotemporal level, it stands out as it peers into future mobilities in outer space and thereby charts dreams of a speaker distinct from the subaltern (Black diasporic) voices of the other poems in the book. Lubrin's poetic inquiry into what she calls elsewhere "the *what if* in the chaos and candour and prismatic challenges of Black life in in this diaspora" (Lubrin in Queyras and Lubrin 2018, 47) inevitably engages ambivalence and contradictions that move into the speculative realm, as evoked in the oxymoron of the title.

The title pairs two seemingly contrastive knowledge systems, "voodoo", as linked to a religion that has moved from West Africa to the Caribbean, and "hypothesis", as a methodological baseline of Western science. The spelling of "voodoo" evokes the derogative usage of the word by US media and politics (disregarding practitioners' spelling of it as 'vodou' or 'vodun') that reduce the religion to sorcery or irrationality. "Hypothesis", in contrast, connotes scientific rationality and objectivity, which hold that facts can only be established on the grounds of repeatable experiments that either confirm or refute a hypothesis. "Voodoo" and "Hypothesis" hence allude to two distinct "culturally instituted order[s] of consciousness or belief system[s]" (Wynter 1995b, 20) and thus to different conceptions of what it means to be human. The "voodoo" in the title also inscribes what Kamau Brathwaite termed a "Caribbean cosmology" (1996) as a counterpoint to NASA's scientific endeavors of space exploration: vodou, to Brathwaite, is both part of and carries all aspects of Caribbean cosmology. Present in the title, yet not explicitly mentioned in the poem, vodou can be read as imbuing the poem with Caribbean qualities, but also casts the poem itself as the performance or enactment of a religious rite.

“Voodoo Hypothesis” takes various phrases, sometimes literally, sometimes slightly changed, from the documentary *Ultimate Mars Challenge* and recontextualizes them to create a counterpoetics via a strategy of postcolonial mimicry. Mimicry as conceptualized by Homi Bhabha describes a subversive strategy of colonized peoples that throws into sharp relief hegemonic epistemes of the oppressor (1994). As a form of repetition, mimicry potentially dismantles the ambivalences of colonial discourse; Bhabha conceives of it as “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (1994, 85). In this way, “Voodoo Hypothesis” uses the “master’s tools” (Lorde 1984, 110), that is, the technoscientific lingo of the documentary, to showcase the expansionist logics of outer space mobility discourses. The poem’s free verse stretches over three pages, evoking the sense of an epic poem that recounts the rover *Curiosity*’s travels to and on Mars. Read as mimicry, its heroic tone seems like a mockery, reminiscent of enslaved people’s techniques to ridicule their masters. In this vein, the poem plays with the words from the documentary, arranges them in poetic lines, and substitutes some of them with other words to add layers of meaning offering a more nuanced counterpoetics to the dominant discourse on space travel.

In this way, Lubrin’s poem repeats, “*but not quite*” (Bhabha 1994, 86), the words used in the documentary, using gaps, breaks, and elisions as aesthetic tools that critically inquire into what is erased or not being said. As such, a “pocket of fabric” that “catches air” in the documentary, a reference to failing parachutes crucial for the rover’s landing, is shaped into a question in the poem: “Where else is a pocket / of air more deadly than the atomic bomb?” (Lubrin 2017, 1). Through an enjambment, parts of the original utterance slip away to enable the unfolding of various meanings of “pockets of air” which are being related to the atomic bomb, one of what the poem later describes as the many “disaster[s] to befall Earth” (2) paradoxically linked to “Oxygen” (2): the poem thus entangles the deadliest military invention possible – the atomic bomb – and the most fundamental component of life – oxygen –, exposing the existential risk of scientific invention in the context of the military-industrial complex and its aligned techno-optimism. With references to “Mojave Desert, Waikiki, Nagasaki” (2) – places used for atomic testing or bombings – the poem comments on terripelagic relations between Earth and Mars, countering the belief that such disasters are an “Earth problem, not Mars problem” (1), one of the few almost verbatim *Ultimate Mars Challenge* phrases repeated in the poem. While the poem’s structure largely follows the narrative of the documentary, repetitions in another part disrupt a linear reading practice

and instead invite a relational one that not only moves back and forth between the poem and the documentary, but also between the poetic lines and the spatiotemporal dimensions that propel the reader to Mars with an awareness of its entanglements with im/mobilities on planet Earth.

Another layer of the poem's use of mimicry to dismantle hegemonic outer space discourse can be traced through the employment of pronouns, which engenders a continuous shifting of subjectivities. Pronouns are not coherently attached to one subject or voice but change throughout the poem. The ambivalence thus created reflects the disconcerting use of pronouns in the documentary: for one, the rover *Curiosity* is personified and gendered as female to the degree that one engineer even refers to her as a human subject.⁸ The poem explores *Curiosity*'s personification as the rover either finds mention in the female third person or adopts the lyric voice itself. However, pronouns remain opaque and multiple; a strategy that can be read as resistance to subjugating colonial categorizations of humans used to justify white European supremacy and legitimize slavery.⁹ The change of subject positions through pronouns also serves to challenge the reader, as the poem requires them to remain attentive to swift changes. It not only takes them out of the comfort and risk of following one dominant perspective, or strand of thought, but also asks them to reconsider their own positionalities; it thus demands a willingness to move amid discontinuity and multiplicity.

The poem also employs the pronoun "we", so readily inclusive, as it, in a mocking tone, echoes the "we" used generically for the human species by an engineer in the documentary trying to explain their reasons for exploring Mars: "We're curious creatures, human beings" (*Ultimate Mars Challenge* 2012, 1:27). This explanation is based on a supposed generalized "behavioral norm" of all (and only) humans, "as if it were the universal of the human species" (Wynter

8 "you hear us talk about her as if she is a person. Because for us she is" (*Ultimate Mars Challenge* 2012, 5:50). The space rover's personification and feminization stand alongside numerous other gendered AI technologies, such as Siri or Alexa. Performing their subservient roles as assistants, this feminization of technology is problematic in various respects, especially given the gender (pay) gap in the male-dominated tech industry, one of the most high-paying industries. Furthermore, *Curiosity*'s female gendering evokes the traditional feminization of sailing ships, forming a continuity between outer space exploration and the Middle Passage (cf. Glissant's reference to the ship as "womb", "pregnant with as many dead as living." 1997, 6; on the sexualization of women's bodies through maritime metaphors, see, e.g., Tinsley 2008).

9 See, e.g., Wynter's explanation of "mobile classificatory labels" (2006, 31).

1995a, 43–44). The collective “we”, used as a referent for the human species as a whole, legitimizes all actions as being taken in the collective interest of and for a generic ‘mankind.’ The poem dismantles the potential violence of the “we” in two longer stanzas, which climactically list performative actions of the “we”: “we declared you dead, O Mars” (Lubrin 2017, 2), “we named your heights and depths”, and, ultimately, in a bleak, sober tone, the poem plays with colonial ideas:

she'll take us deeper and convince us to send earthlings
to set up Earth colonies on your deserts. They won't ever
come back, but that's not so bad when we trade in
the grander scheme (2)

This, then, is a “we” evoking colonial actions as the poem troubles its ostensible inclusivity by pointing out its exclusionary bias:

the alien we think we know is the alien we only dream
up starting from the bottom
of the Curious (3)

Who has been included in the “we” of humanity has changed over time, as comprehensively outlined in Wynter's work (e.g., 1995a; 1995b). The alien, here, evokes all sentient beings not included in the category of the “human”, what Wynter refers to as “Man”, “overrepresented as the generic, ostensibly supracultural human” (2003, 288) and which stands in opposition to “its subjugated Human Others” (288). The capitalization of “Curious” elevates its significance for the construction of the alien; C/curiosity – the rover and the trait described as natural to humans – is used to justify “Man's” endeavor to explore other planets for the sake of ‘mankind.’

The poem subverts such hegemonic and singular understandings of ‘mankind’ or the ‘we’ of humanity by unmooring epistemological binaries. Lubrin's astropelagic poetics of mobility follows its own movement as it repeatedly breaks with the documentary's narrative, slowing down to insert new meaning, or accelerating to sharpen the poem's critical voice. As such, the text disrupts the epistemic order of linear movement, as it, according to Purewal, “sets the stage for an epistemic poetic movement that is slower – both against and beyond the flow of colonial ‘comprehension’ – and that approaches the world (and other worlds) in its entanglements. The Black knowing allows

for curiosity about worlds in their emergence, rather than in their capture” (2022, n.p.). Lubrin’s astropelagic poetics thus does not simply imitate colonial mobilities but intervenes in a teleological and linear flow of movement.

The poem’s epistemological mobilizations are highlighted in the title, which suggests that this mobilization is one motivated by a quest for higher understanding. The first stanza establishes a contrast between a theocentric Christian search for truth in the divine or sacred (Wynter 1995a, 13–14) and vodou, where any ordinary practitioner can be possessed and thus embody *lwa* (“spirit”). Both, however, rely on the imagination:

Before sight, we imagine
that while they go out in search
of God
we stay in and become god (Lubrin 2017, 1)

Vodou needs no intermediary between the divine and the human, meaning that this conception of the human finds humanity within the subject itself instead of in a quest for a higher (capitalized) Divine. “Becoming” refers to the processual nature of identity as a human subject, created, too, through “storytelling” (see Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 25). Brathwaite’s definition of a Caribbean cosmology, of which vodou is a substantial part, is central in this respect as it follows the “notion that culture is integrated at a certain level, a level of worship, of celebration, of in-gathering” (Brathwaite 1996, 8). Brathwaite and Wynter both use vodou as a counterexample to Western humanism to make the claim that “culture [...] provides the ground of all human existential reality or actuality” (Wynter 1995b, 20–21). Both Brathwaite and Wynter point out that vodou, as opposed to other religious or cultural practices, has not been fully erased by the colonizer, but in Haiti remains a dominant, albeit stigmatized, belief system that stands in opposition to that of Haiti’s elite. This contrasts the move from the sacred to the secular human of the West, which Wynter locates after 1492 with the gradual shift towards *homo politicus* (Wynter 1995a, 122–23). Putting “Voodoo” into conversation with “Hypothesis”, the poem (and the book as a whole) can be read with Wynter as a poetic inquiry into the present hegemonic Western epistemology, which is, in turn, closely linked to ontology and what it means to be (conceptualized as) human.

For Wynter, the question of the “human” is not merely biological but is culturally specific, which is why she speaks about “*genres* of the human” (2006, 117), rather than giving unchallenged preference to one ostensibly universal

overrepresented “Man.” As she proffers, “[w]e can experience ourselves as human only through the mediation of the processes of socialization effected by the invented *tekhne* or cultural technology to which we give the name culture” (2001, 53). Lubrin’s astropelagic Afrofuturist poetics complicates singular understandings of the human by offering a lyric voice that is multiple and changing, speaking to different “genres of the human”, including the posthuman variant of the rover. Through the voice of the rover, the poem mobilizes binaries and hence weaves together different epistemic and cultural practices into an astropelagic textual fabric. As an introductory poem, “Voodoo Hypothesis” thwarts the erasure of exploited, mostly non-white subjects from grand narratives of expansion and thereby reinscribes Blackness as not merely a *part of* genres of the human but as potentially overturning such dominant Western epistemes through Afrofuturistic imaginaries that build on an astropelagic poetics.

“Voodoo” and “Hypothesis” not only mark Black diasporic and Caribbean experiences but also offer a wider understanding on how dreams of outer space mobility might be – in this uninterrupted “order of knowledge” (Wynter 1995a, 30–31) – a logical consequence of former colonial dreams of conquest such as of the ‘New World.’ Wynter, who explains shifting conceptions of the “human” as partly construed by the capacity to conjure up narratives and imaginations through “linguaging” (31), evokes poetry as particularly fruitful for unsettling present epistemes (1995b, 32–33). This resonates deeply with Lubrin’s poetic inquiry:

The stuff that determines a belief in belonging extends to speech. And since language is inherent to the project of poetry, whose every ache and luminosity is music, the song and celebration premised in the mode of its creation is troubled by a faith in words. Offered here are the polyvocal rhythms of tracing the creolized landscapes that riddle the West through the immense gravity of our colonial history. Offered, too, is a geography peopled through the very act of mining the complexly unique, simultaneously exilic and concentric circumstances of diaspora. People charged by their own insistence to be alive and to be. But with a place to disembark, yet without a place to claim and to be tethered to, here is, eventually, to reckon a re-entering into humanity, into speech, into body, into life beyond the trauma of unbelonging and even death. The Black body, then, is undeniably always the modern self. This is the project of *Voodoo Hypothesis* and it is one that resists any sure categorization because to be alive in the Black diaspora is to be in constant, ‘conscious’ flux. (Lubrin in Queyras and Lubrin 2018, 44–45)

An understanding of the Black body's presence in the constitution of modernity is indeed pertinent to *Voodoo Hypothesis*. Lubrin emphasizes this presence by alluding to the violence endured by Black people in contexts related to the realization of outer space technologies – such as the “immense gravity” of Black bodies working in the bauxite and other mining industries.

This leads us to the ontological and material dimensions of outer space mobilities, which are articulated through the space rover *Curiosity*, the prosthetically enhanced body that carries out visions of ‘mankind’ in outer space. Propelled to Mars with the hopes and dreams of mankind, the rover represents a different shift towards a posthuman conception of what it might mean to be human in the future. The first stanza illustrates this development, as becoming “god” is turned into “become: *Curiosity*” (Lubrin 2017, 1). The colon requires a short break in the reading of the line and briefly pauses the text at an anticipatory moment to create suspense before introducing the capitalized rover. The colon also points to what is to come and announces a shift towards *Curiosity*, now paralleled to, or replacing, “god.” *Curiosity* embodies something god-like through her ‘divine’ quest on Mars, a quest for a futurity of mankind driven by technology. As such, the subjectivity of the rover is not merely defined by laws of physics and mechanics but also by a human languaging capacity that weaves it into part of ‘mankind’s evolution’, conjured up by their hopes and dreams. Like science/and/fiction figures such as robots, androids, and cyborgs, the rover embodies “the relationship between technology and human subjectivity” (Hunte 2019, 18).

“Voodoo Hypothesis” thus establishes a link between the rover and the Black body on several levels. From the past to the future, the plantation to outer space, the Black body has been reduced to its laboring function. This parallel between the robot and the racialized subject is also a core trope of Afrofuturist SF. As Louis Chude-Sokei argues, “technology has always been racialized” and it is thus “no accident, for example, that robots function much like slaves in science fiction” (2015, 2–3). The rover, operating on the frontier of outer space, is thus linked to the Black diaspora and the Black body, described as a constitutive part of modernity, as evoked by Lubrin: “the Black body in diaspora is the modern body because it exists in modernity before time. It is already beyond circumstance. It ushers in the next thing – the future, if you will – through sheer creative force even when it is given none of the credit” (Lubrin in Queyras and Lubrin 2018, 46). In this vein, the poem comments on the cynicism of AI machines and robots being increasingly humanized, while Black subjectivities continue to be de-humanized.

Lubrin's countering of Black erasure can be read on two levels through an Afrofuturistic lens: on the one hand, she showcases the Black body as essential for the realization of futuristic dreams of 'mankind' (despite its exclusion from the idea of 'mankind') given that the rover can be read as "black technology"¹⁰; on the other, the poem accesses Afrofuturist reconfigurations of time as it explores the temporalities linking *Curiosity's* Mars voyage to the Middle Passage and the plantation. Lubrin's poetics of a hybrid bios/logos raises questions related to the ontological and material conditions of the human as, through *Curiosity's* personification, the machine is humanized due to its function in mankind's space exploration, while humans, in turn, have been rendered machines on the plantation and beyond. As Chude-Sokei proffers, Wynter's understanding of the human illustrates

that this system of thinking in generating structural oppositions also creates *other forms of life* just as much as it denies life to other forms. It transforms humans into objects but allows objects to claim the category of the human by virtue of the fundamental errors of the episteme in its capacity to assign life and meaning. (2015, 222)

Curiosity's particles are humanized as she is given a soul in the poem: "Curiosity, / whose soul is a nuclear battery" (Lubrin 2017, 1). The soul, even though metaphorically engineered as constituted by technological parts, grants humanity to the robot.

In an Afrofuturist reading, the machine can be linked to the Black body figuring as technology on the plantation. *Curiosity's* conception as a laboring body at times evokes work both on the plantation of the past and in the mining industries today. The poem establishes this spatiotemporal conflation through a parallelism in the rover's use of idiomatic expressions of servitude: "at your service, at your sand, at your valley" (Lubrin 2017, 2). The shift from "service" to "sand" and "valley" suggests a transition from slave labor on the plantation to contemporary mining. Hence, *Curiosity's* arrival on Mars brings to mind African enslaved people's arrival in the Americas and linear temporalities are

10 Jacinth Howard suggests the term 'black technologies' in the context of Caribbean speculative fiction, which describes "an intersection of these notions of Caribbean blackness and technology as the invention of mechanisms that exhibit the application of scientific knowledge. It involves the reading of occurrences through Caribbean-rooted epistemologies" (2019, 3).

transfigured through references to both colonial projects and the plantation as past, present, and future are re-entangled.

From an astropelagic perspective, Mars can be read here as a terripelagic extension of the “repeating islands” described by Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1992), which he explains by reference to the first plantations established on European islands, then formed into larger plantations in the Americas. The island that “repeats” is “unfolding and bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs” (Benítez-Rojo 1992, 3–4). In a sense, outer space projects’ clear linkages to resources and labor in the Caribbean propels Benítez-Rojo’s “meta-archipelago” (4) beyond the earth and towards the cosmos. Lubrin establishes this by means of an astropelagic poetics, using repetition as a recurring strategy, not merely on a linguistic level as a form of mimicry, but also to establish repeating contextual patterns on Earth and Mars. The paratext and the aesthetics of the poetry collection – the cover, the topographical lines – add to the multidisciplinary map evoked by Benítez-Rojo, which here becomes a cosmological map. Repeating patterns in the poem create the impression of an endless cycle of hypotheses tested: “in her lab within a lab within / a lab” (Lubrin 2017, 1). The repeated lab extends from the rover to Mars, to the cosmos; enclosed “within” this repetitious spatiotemporal circle of racial capitalism and humanist ideas of progress, the poem signals the loop of reproduction that echoes through the laboratory sites of the cosmos.

These dreams of unlimited mobility, repeated across time and space, are embodied by the rover’s very materiality, aluminum, evoking the “aluminum dreams” carved out in Mimi Sheller’s eponymous book (2014). Sheller traces the emergence of aluminum as a crucial material to advance Western dreams of innovation and technological progress. As an essential material in all transportation industries, aluminum has been driving dreams of unfettered movement: it has enabled technologically enhanced human movement to be faster, lighter and thus to go higher, eventually reaching outer space. Aluminum dreams, according to Sheller, are those dreams that involve “hopes and idealistic projections of modernization, prosperity” (2014, 5), as well as “false hopes that led to failed technologies, pollution, social dislocation and environmental devastation” (5). These dreams and fears, projected onto *Curiosity*, are articulated in the poem as “She doesn’t need to know our fears” (Lubrin 2017, 1), yet “she” stands as symbol of hope for techno-optimism: “Curiosity / and her clues to calm our fears of what’s coming” (1). Lubrin plays with the trope of hope through mimicry as she turns the documentary’s metaphorical

reference to *Curiosity* as “hope on a rope” (in reference to the rover’s landing system) into “hope beyond hope, on the tip of your rope” (1). Doubled in the poem, hope becomes a repeating act – beyond hope, there is yet again hope. Yet, dangling at the tip of the rope, the relentless, inexhaustible successiveness of hope exists within what Christina Sharpe calls the wake: hope structures “the atmosphere” (2016, 106), from the Middle Passage and slavery, replaced by lynching and Jim Crow laws, to mass incarceration and ongoing rampant police brutality, still persistent in the aftermath of Barack Obama’s politics of “hope.”

The image of the rope also establishes a link between the slave ship and the rover in outer space, entangling past, present, and future. The poem hence unpacks the double-edged meaning of hope, not merely a positive force but also as fragile and fraught. If beyond hope people are yet again urged to hope, it can potentially obscure structural and systematic problems that keep people in dire circumstances.¹¹ The aluminum dreams embodied by *Curiosity*’s mobility are predicated on the immobilization of workers, often on sites of former colonies. Bauxite, the main source for aluminum, is taken from, among other places, the Caribbean; not without devastating consequences in terms of ecological destruction, health risks for workers, and exploitation of cheap labor (Sheller 2014, 6).¹² Again, mining is shown as a repeating extractivist act, one full of hazards and problems, as the poem retells the Apollo mission’s drilling on the moon:

Apollo drilled on the moon and got stuck
the harder we’ve drilled down here
the more we’ve loosened our screws (Lubrin 2017, 3)

Through the material of aluminum, one can thus trace the violent and fraught costs of accelerated human mobilities. The poem illustrates the ambivalence of acceleration discourses of mobility, necessary for continued capitalist flows of products, growth, and innovation, by opposing them to the decelerative forces of Mars’ gravity. In stark contrast to the acceleration and velocity that propelled *Curiosity* towards its destination, it is decelerated movement which eventually enables the rover – and thus “humanity” – to land on Mars: “with the kindness

11 See also Lauren Berlant’s argument in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) in this context.

12 On Jamaica’s aluminum industry, see also Esther Figueroa’s documentary *Fly Me to the Moon* (2019).

of antigravity slowing you down” (1). Once landed, *Curiosity* roams over Mars with the same teleological and progress-oriented impulse that has brought her there in the first place as, since there is “nothing too strange to keep *Curiosity* off course” (2):

Curiosity will keep on until the organic secrets
of Martian puzzle become as household to us
as carbon. (Lubrin 2017, 2)

The rover moves for the sake of science, and thus allegedly for ‘mankind.’ The poem points to the epistemic violence of a teleological, accelerative mobility as “we move too quick for understanding” (3) and as *Curiosity*’s postcard comes “travelling / on a space dust faster than a bullet” (3). As one of the last lines of the poem, the latter sounds out a warning, sharpened by the consonance preceding the violence of the bullet.

IV. Conclusion

In sum, the poem’s critique of fast-paced mobilities for the sake of science can be read as twofold: on the one hand, it problematizes projects of terripelagic outer-space mobilities oblivious to the concomitant violence and exploitation of those not included in the umbrella term of ‘mankind’; on the other hand, it evokes dreams of outer-space colonization that proceed with exploration in an entrepreneurial competitive urge rather than one taking into account a planetary understanding of care. Against a hegemonic cultural imaginary regarding outer space territorialization, or, in other words, “the transformation of outer space and its celestial bodies into an outer space ‘terripelago’” (Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 275), Lubrin’s Afrofuturist take on the technoscientific project of Mars exploration presents a poetic intervention that taps into the epistemic potentialities of thinking outer space astropelagically. As such, it can be read as a much-needed poetic critique concerning “the current transformation in both science and culture of celestial bodies into desirable territories of imagination, capitalization, exploitation, and imperialism” (275). Such a critique, in our view, presents an important commentary on contemporary outer-space territorializations based on Afrofuturist techno-critical discourse; it contrasts traditional atomistic or (neo-)liberalist (hyper-)individualism and promotes “a decentering of the conquering subjectivities of the Second Space

Age”, thus derailing teleological mobilities to outer space that are posited as a ‘natural’ next step in the development of a mythologized US frontierism (see Ganser, Temmen, and Rettenbacher 2023, 277).

Lubrin’s counterpoetics to the PBS documentary – the American Public Broadcasting Service stands for ‘serious’ US media channels that can be read as representing a liberal ‘common sense’ or status quo – troubles one-sided, celebratory conceptions of future im/mobilities. Her Afrofuturist poetics stands in stark contrast to linear and teleological (capitalist, neocolonial, and neoliberal) ideas of mobility. Through poetic strategies such as mimicry, opposition, the unmooring of epistemological binaries, and shifting subjectivities, the poem illustrates the entanglements of mobilities to outer space with immobilities on Earth, related to the materials that facilitate faster travel yet extract terrain resources and immobilize workers on site. It shows future im/mobilities as always already entangled with the past and present, as “repeating” in Benítez-Rojó’s sense of the “meta-archipelago”: as Black and Brown people experience physical movement through public spaces as primarily risky due to blatantly racist police violence and structural racism in general, Western dreams of cosmic hypermobilities stand in stark contrast to such immobilizations ‘at home’ on Earth.

Arguably, “Voodoo Hypothesis” turns poetry itself into a ritual or spiritual practice of exorcising violent, even fatal Western epistemologies of a humanism that excludes the majority of humanity. While, in Lubrin’s poem, “Voodoo” and “Hypothesis” allude to two distinct “culturally instituted order[s] of consciousness or belief system[s]” (Wynter 1995b, 20), it is within the opaque spaces between these conceptions that the poem provides glimpses of how to reimagine Black futures: ones that necessarily need to include hybrid genres of the human, multiple subjectivities, and their culturally constituted conceptions of what it means to move towards a future. An Afrofuturist astropelagic poetics such as the one presented in Lubrin’s “Voodoo Hypothesis” imagines not only outer space mobilities but also epistemologies *otherwise* and enables a critical engagement with questions of im/mobility, on Earth and beyond.

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