

## **Sister Moon: A Lunar Poetic in X Stanzas**

**A Composition by D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Moon Landing**

**1**

### **Oriki for the Moon**

**Cool moon**

**Blue moon**

**Red Moon**

**Blood Moon**

**This is an *oriki* for the Moon, a praise song, a spell-ing<sup>i</sup> in honor of those who have gone before.**

La Luna

The Wild Untamed

Witch 101

El Día de los Muertos

All Hallows Eve

Beckoning to watery ways of knowing, along paths of intuition, Moon meditation pulses visions of interstellar futures, replenishes, solidifies connections to Planet Earth. In her watery, misty visage, we enter dark spaces, our dreams unsuppressed.<sup>ii</sup>

“Yo nací con la luna de plata”<sup>iii</sup>

Toña La Negra’s lyrical perfume “Veracruz” swirls memories of moon-lit nights along forgotten shores.

### **The portal opens.**

Space of Ancestors

Commune in deep sea deep space

Whale calls and Saturn’s rings

What is the sound of the Moon?

In her essay “Poetry Is Not A Luxury”<sup>iv</sup>, Audre Lorde writes of “poetry as illumination”, “the black mothers in each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free.”

The Moon Tarot card, Reversed: “Listen to your instincts.”<sup>v</sup>

Shifting cerulean seas call: Enter the liminal, the unknown, shifting waters.

All is not as it seems.

With each tide, our bodies are pulled, rocked, affected.

Moon call vibrates your cells.

Afro-Futurism is illumination, a reckoning, a welcoming as in Amiri Baraka's poem "S.O.S.":  
"Black People, come on in."

Sun Ra and his Solar Arkestra: "Calling Planet Earth!"<sup>vi</sup>  
And now: Calling all Moon children!

## 2

### **Nommo, Voice, and Chiron the Wounded Healer**

Nommos, Dogon amphibious Ancestral beings  
Dagara Water People, Communicator-mediators  
Yoruba wisdom counsels, "Water always finds its level."<sup>vii</sup>

Rituals for a heated earth, with cool voices activated, we surf frequencies of blue. Haki Madhubuti pays poetic tribute to "Gwendolyn Brooks" with "...black doubleblack purpleblack blueblack..."<sup>viii</sup>, Glenn Ligon curates neon-glowing *Blue Black*<sup>x</sup>, and Chiron comes into his being through Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*<sup>x</sup>. Planet Chiron, Wounded Healer, governs our greatest childhood wounds with potential for alchemy to strength. Chiron in Aries (at the time of this writing) speaks to early wounding of the voice. Malcolm X moved through this placement to become the gifted orator whose words still rouse and ready our spirits today. "Who taught you to hate yourself?" he asks, declaring, "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."<sup>xi</sup>

## 3

### **Sister Moon: Reclaiming the Divine Black Feminine**

**"Sister Moon will be my guide.  
In your blue blue shadows I would hide."**<sup>xii</sup>

In 1986, Vanessa Williams was stripped of the Miss America title after her Playboy photos surfaced, the images igniting a damaging scandal for the first Black winner. She came back to reign as singer, actor, goddess—on her own terms.<sup>xiii</sup>

Feared, vilified, demonized, shamed, abused, outcast: histories have long been revised in an attempt to subjugate Her power, Black woman, Black femme, Black Divine Feminine.

Scarlet letters wither in the face of Santa Marta Dominadora's writhing snake.  
*Fear of a Black Planet* (aka Mother Earth) (Word to Public Enemy)  
Sexuality-morality-purity police, repulsion and desire

Banish, consume the Dark Other.

Ntozake Shange's "dark phrases of womanhood / of never havin been a girl"<sup>xiv</sup>

Jezebels, Mammies, and Sapphires dance in moonlit tides.

Lilith's Black Moon orbits forth, primal, untamable.

Queen Califia rules with her Amazons and magical griffins.

Medusa's snake-loc'd tentacled hair and beautiful countenance give rise to lore of stone.

Whitewashed history constructions of "Blackness" feed fear-lust.

Rise, rise!

Afro-Futurism is methodology, is pathway, is re-presentation, is reclamation, highlighting Black women pioneers/trailblazers/badasses, histories long-hidden. It is speaking Tarana Burke's words: #MeToo. We acknowledge, mourn, and honor those who have been forcibly conscripted to service, those enslaved African women in the Americas who, without anesthesia, were experimented upon for the foundations of modern gynecology.

"we need a god who bleeds now...

spreads her lunar vulva & showers us in shades of scarlet...

the planet is heaving mourning our ignorance

the moon tugs the seas...

i am

not wounded i am bleeding to life"<sup>xv</sup>

Epigenetics and legacies in DNA: What do we carry in our cellular code? *Alter-Destiny 888*  
durational performance investigated the use of sonic healing for legacies of trauma in the womb.<sup>xvi</sup>

Ashé, Catalytic Life Force<sup>xvii</sup>

Omi Tutu, Dance of Cool Waters

For Our Mothers

Last dying roars of the toxic masculine flares hate on the current world stage, threatening to burn us all. Band together, hold space that bright tomorrows may be birthed of hope and promise, shaped by our collective future-visioning. Audre Lorde counsels, "When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid."<sup>xviii</sup>

What is the cost? In the shifting light of the moon, what remains and what is lost?

**Afro-Futurism is holistic, healing pieces of the past to construct new futures.**

## Decolonizing the Moon

How can we move forward empathically, ethically to avoid past and present mistakes in the push for interstellar futures, Lunar occupation already begun through the sale of likely worthless “land” deeds which represent Humanity’s desperate need to own?

Artists Salome Asega and Ayodamola Okunseinde present intriguing solutions with *Iyapo Repository*, an ongoing archive of collectively conceived Afrofuturist technologies. In Yinka Shonibare’s *Spacewalk* (cat. XX), figures float in spacesuits made of wax-printed textile based on Philadelphia’s R&B music histories with adinkrahene “bullseye” pattern, king of all *adinkra* symbols, hovering next to a half-size replica of the Apollo 13 shuttle, famous for its aborted third mission to the Moon, christened “Martin Luther” in immediate reference to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. beloved guide to the Promised Land and in part responsible for legendary Nichelle Nichols aka Lieutenant Uhura remaining on *Star Trek*.<sup>xix</sup> Shonibare interrogates constructions of the “authentic”; through his work we trace personal and historical sites of memory, mnemonic threads unraveling identities in culture and commerce. I witnessed *Spacewalk* installed for *Evoking History: Memories of Water*, beyond Charleston’s quaint-bourgeois downtown in a historic Black neighborhood largely unconnected to the yearly Spoleto Festival.<sup>xx</sup> Imagine the dark coolness of a church sanctuary, looking up to see the capsule weightlessly suspended above, afronautic figures tethered by bright umbilical strands.

## 5

### You Are Myth

Sun Ra appears at an Oakland Youth Center in the 1974 film *Space Is The Place*:

“Greetings, Black Youth of Planet Earth...How do you know I’m real? I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society...I come to you as myth because that’s what Black people are. I’m...a presence sent to you by your ancestors.”

Youth: “Are there any whiteys on the Moon?”

Sun Ra: “They’re walking there today. They take frequent trips to the Moon...None of you have been invited.”

Afro-futurism affirms existence.

Afro-Futurism centers the margins.

Afro-Futurism reclaims the archive.

Afro-Futurism decolonizes the canon.

Afro-Futurism protects and invests in Black Futures.

Afro-Futurism envisions new possibilities for self, community, universe.

Afro-Futurism is “a new dawn, it’s a new day, it’s a new life for me, and I’m feeling good.”<sup>xxi</sup>

–Nina Simone

## 6

### **Jazz Aesthetics, or Scatting along Lunar Waves with Ella**

Billie Holiday croons, “Oo-oo-oo, what a little moonlight can do.”

Ella Fitzgerald scats in a now-classic live rendition of “How High the Moon”<sup>xxii</sup>, improvising, “I don’t know the words to this song but I’m gonna sing it anyway. Hope you enjoy it. Hope you enjoy it!”

Riffing, skipping, tripping into the transcendental equilibrium of free jazz, freeing jazz, dancing on sound waves, Ancestral impulses and aesthetics of the cool contained within the improvisational gesture become coded transmissions, sonic interventions, ashé moments. Jazz histories illuminate Africanist methodologies and “internally derived frameworks.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

Golden records spin in space. Nuts and bolts orbit Planet Earth, exploration’s detritus.

How will we decolonize when “Whitey’s [already] on the Moon”?

## 7

### **Black Poetics, Gravity, and the Moon**

“A rat done bit my sister Nell (but Whitey’s on the Moon).

Her face and hands began to swell (but Whitey’s on the Moon).”<sup>xxiv</sup>—Gil Scott-Heron

For *The Ramm Riff*<sup>xxv</sup> featuring *Black Light Primal Nun ‘A’*, I channelled Rammellzee’s invocation to weaponize the letter, with illuminated manuscripts as portals, hidden messages in the margins of gilded vellum, religious manifestos, the broadside. Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press in Detroit is “the rebirth of the word”,<sup>xxvi</sup> referencing broadsides as canons fired from the side of a ship. Malcolm X, our Fire Prophet, ignites the pre-revolutionary temperaments of Baraka’s essay “Revolutionary Theatre”<sup>xxvii</sup> as Ntozake Shange cultivates “combat breath.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

This is a distance race, not a sprint.

The Black Arts Movement is my foundation for Afro-Futurism as pathway to Black liberation rooted in Black Radical Imagination and Amiri Baraka’s Zoom Zone.<sup>xxix</sup> This is a Trickster’s art, site of experimentation, shifting outside of society’s constrictions of the “norm.” The Chicago collective AFRICOBRA’s manifesto declares theirs an art for the people: “We want everybody to have some.”<sup>xxx</sup> By Black people, for Black people, about Black people: the times demanded it. Sun Ra says, “Speaking things of Blackness...” Baraka’s “Bopera Theory” issues a synaesthetic call past limitations to “add five more senses to the five we know. Then we will be getting somewhere.”<sup>xxxi</sup>



The Moon's pull is code, rhythm, a celestial orchestral bow plucked on high wave-notes, slow dragging across strings, in and out of shore, and our bodies move with it.

Drexciya's mythology is history remixed: pregnant African women, enslaved in Middle Passage, thrown/jumped into the Atlantic, their babies born to indigo depths as "water-breathing Afonauts, who any day now, are coming back to delivery whitey a beatdown."<sup>xliv</sup> It is the reclamation of Ebo Landing, asserting: the people could fly.<sup>xlv</sup> Nettrice R. Gaskins illuminates the work of Sanford Biggers who "refers to Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman as an astronaut who traverses 'the south to the north by navigating the stars.'"<sup>xlvi</sup> Biggers' spectacular and amorphous *Moon Medicin* project references quilts and qwerty code as Janelle Monáe's song "Many Moons" reveals her savior android alter-ego, Afro-Futurist daughter of Tubman's legacy. Monáe's recent declaration of pansexuality, embracing of Queer identity, and hot pink ruffled labia pants all pave the way at a crucial moment in history for representation-as-resistance, offering "visions of a liberated future."<sup>xlvii</sup>

## 9

### Dark Matter to Black Light

**As I sit at Lake Michigan watching the rise of an October full moon, Ancestral voices beckon.**

We are people of the noon-day sun, brilliant, luminescent, projectors of light. Afro-Futurism is also: "hot, moist, black nutrient-rich, deep in the bowels of memory and soul iterations."<sup>xlviii</sup> This is a symbolic reversal,<sup>xlix</sup> Black Light illuminated.<sup>i</sup> Shifting shadows of the In-Between, *Dark Matter* exerts a pull invisible to the naked eye.<sup>ii</sup>

Entering the archive, we reveal those made invisible, *Hidden Figures* such as Katherine Johnson whose mathematical genius made the future Moon landing possible. In *Afonauts*, Florence Okoye presents an ethereal meditation on this quest, bridging reality and fantasy, referencing the Zambian space program to pose questions about a fated mission. Matha Mwamba takes that step, is willing to risk all.

What is revealed on the dark side of Moon? Speculative and visionary fictions, lore of the Moon and Blackness, of No-thing-ness and the Unknown: we respect those mysteries of Our Mothers without whom the *oba* does not rule. Along this Midwestern lake where recent nature foraging led to discoveries of urban resilience, memories of crescent moons in Bauchi State, Nigeria, of camping under stars with a tangerine and baboons descending from the hills: I know I can survive. Remember what our bodies know, what our taste buds can decipher, what our senses and intuitions whisper, our indigenous traditions revitalized.

10

**Moon in My Mouth**

“A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits.”<sup>lii</sup>

--Ntozake Shange, *Sassafras, Cypress & Indigo*

By the ever-morphing light of the Moon, we enter liminal space, dare to be, affirming, “I found God in myself and I loved her, fiercely.”<sup>liii</sup>

We are made stars, and this is a howling at the Moon.

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<sup>i</sup> Reference to Erykah Badu describing the use of words as spells--“spell-ing”--in order to conjure one’s future.

<sup>ii</sup> Reference to Wanuri Kahiu’s film *Pumzi*, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Lyrics translate loosely as “I was born with the silver moon” by Toña La Negra, a film star and singer born in Veracruz, Mexico, an area on the eastern Atlantic coast with a much-hidden African history. La Negra was famous for her passionate songs and delivery, in particular “Veracruz” which speaks of a longing for the land of her birth.

<sup>iv</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”, in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Freedom, CA, 1984, pp. 36-39.

<sup>v</sup> Elliot Oracle’s blog *Card of the Day*, <https://www.elliotoracle.com/blog/>.

<sup>vi</sup> Lyrical call featured in the film *Space is the Place* directed by John Coney, written by Sun Ra and Joshua Smith, featuring the Sun Ra Arkestra, released in 1974.

<sup>vii</sup> Inspired here by words from curator and art historian Moyo Okediji, PhD, in 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> Haki Madhubuti, “Gwendolyn Brooks”, in *Don’t Cry, Scream*, Chicago, 1969.

<sup>ix</sup> Glenn Ligon-curated exhibition at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis, 2017.

<sup>x</sup> Academy Award-winning coming-of-age drama film written and directed by Barry Jenkins, USA 2016.

<sup>xi</sup> Malcolm X’s speech “Who Taught You To Hate Yourself?”, May 1962.

<sup>xii</sup> From Sting’s song “Sister Moon”, in the album *Nothing Like the Sun*, 1987.

<sup>xiii</sup> “Sister Moon” (1994) by Vanessa Williams, originally by Sting based on 1124 poem by Francis of Assisi.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ntozake Shange’s seminal 1975 African-American feminist choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*

<sup>xv</sup> Excerpt from Ntozake Shange’s “we need a god who bleeds now”, in *A Daughter’s Geography*, New York, 1983.

<sup>xvi</sup> D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem performance installation *Alter-Destiny 888*, The Lab for installation+performance, Roger Smith Arts, NY, 2008.

<sup>xvii</sup> African art historian Rowland Abiodun describes ashé as “catalytic life force” in his “Preface” to *A History of Art in Africa*, London, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>xviii</sup> Quote from Audre Lorde speech at the Second Sex Conference, New York, 1979.

<sup>xix</sup> Nichelle Nichols tells the story of how she planned to leave *Star Trek* and had offered her resignation, but at an event, was told that someone was backstage who wanted to meet her. It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who told her how much her representation meant to him, his family, and Black people, imploring her not to leave the show. Who knew Dr. King was a Trekkie!

<sup>xx</sup> Curated by Mary Jane Jacob and Tumelo Mosaka for Spoleto Festival USA, 2002.

<sup>xxi</sup> Lyrics from “Feeling Good” written by Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse and recorded by Nina Simone for her 1965 album *I Put A Spell On You*.

<sup>xxii</sup> Songwriters Morgan Lewis and Nancy Hamilton.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Rowland Abiodun, “Preface”, in *A History of Art in Africa*, London, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>xxiv</sup> From the song “Whitey on the Moon” on Scott-Heron’s debut album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, 1970.

<sup>xxv</sup> *The Ramm Riff: Constructing Future Forms* featuring Black Light Primal Nun ‘A’ is an original character and composition created for “No Guts, No Galaxy” slide series as part of the programming for *Rammellzee: Racing for Thunder* exhibition at Red Bull Arts, presented on August 23, 2018.

<sup>xxvi</sup> “Rebirth of the word” is the tagline for Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press online presence.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Revolutionary Theatre.” From text provided with the essay: “This essay was originally commissioned by the New York Times in December 1964, but was refused, with the statement that the

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editors could not understand it. The Village Voice also refused to run this essay. It was first published in *Black Dialogue*.”

Amiri Baraka, *Black Dialogue*, San Francisco 1964.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Ntozake Shange describes the “pen as machete” and makes use in her poetics of Frantz Fanon’s “combat breath” as presented in *A Dying Colonialism*. “There is not occupation of territory on the one hand and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.”

<sup>xxix</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Bopera Theory”, in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paul Carter Harrison, Gus Edwards, and Victor Leo Walker II, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.

<sup>xxx</sup> AFRICOBRA Manifesto is a statement written by the collective in 1969 and disseminated in the following years for AFRICOBRA exhibitions.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Bopera Theory”, in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, Philadelphia, PA, 2002, p. 378.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Mark Rockey Moore, “What Is Afrofuturism?”,

<http://www.authorsden.com/visit/viewArticle.asp?id=4308>, 2002, retrieved 6 November 2018.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Wendy S. Walters, “Blackness in Present Future Tense: Broadside Press, Motown Records, and Detroit Techno”, in Lisa Gail Collins, Margo Natalie Crawford (eds), *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, New Brunswick, 2006, p. 128.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Rasheedah Phillips, *Black Quantum Futurism: Theory and Practice (Volume 1)*, The Afrofuturist Affair/House of Future Sciences Books, Philadelphia, 2015, p. 41.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Gil Scott-Heron, “Whitey on the Moon”, 1970.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> See recent Emory Douglas projects with Maori artists in New Zealand.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Bobby Seale, “Foreword”, in *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, ed. Sam Durant, New York, 2007, p. 10-11.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Danny Glover, “Preface”, in *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, ed. Sam Durant, New York, 2007, p. 10-11.

<sup>xi</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Revolutionary Theatre”, *Black Dialogue*, 1965.

<sup>xli</sup> Reference to “sonic architecture”, Julian Jonker, “Black Secret Technology (The Whitey on the Moon Dub)”, <https://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ctheory/article/view/14571/5418>, 2002, retrieved 6 November 2018.

<sup>xlii</sup> Paul Miller, *The Book of Ice*, Brooklyn, 2011, and “Afro-Futurism: A Statement of Intentions--Outside In, Inside Out”, 2002, published on [www.afrofuturism.net](http://www.afrofuturism.net).

<sup>xliii</sup> “T” repetition references the performance poetry of Sonia Sanchez and Black Arts Movement co-founder Amiri Baraka’s poem “On Black Art” which includes the letters to mimic the sound of a machine gun when spoken by the reader, connecting to the Black Arts Movement broadside poetic format. Additionally, this is an excerpt from D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem *The Ramm Riff* performed at Red Bull Arts NY in 2018.

<sup>xliiv</sup> Wendy S. Walters, “Blackness in Present Future Tense: Broadside Press, Motown Records and Detroit Techno”, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Margo Natalie Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins, New Brunswick, NJ, 2006, p. 130.

<sup>xliiv</sup> This references the story of Ebo Landing off the coast of Georgia in the United States and the story of how enslaved Africans who were brought to those shores saw what their future held, took hold of the ship, and committed mass suicide by walking back into the water. Whether it was this or whether a mystical return walking on water back to Africa, the story speaks to agency claimed by those seen as

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having no claim to their own lives. This also references the book *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* by Virginia Hamilton, New York, 1985.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Nettrice R. Gaskins, "Afrofuturism on Web 3.0: Vernacular Cartography and Augmented Space", in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, Lanham, MD, 2016, p. 27.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Reference to Larry Neal's title *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, New York 1989.

<sup>xlviii</sup> D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem, "Are You Ready to Alter Your Destiny?: Chicago and Afro-Futurism, Part 2 of 2", in *Chicago Art Magazine*, 2011. Web.

<sup>xlix</sup> Paul Carter Harrison, "Praise/Word", in *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora*, eds. Paul Carter Harrison, Gus Edwards, and Victor Leo Walker II, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.

<sup>l</sup> Reference to Margo Crawford, "Black Light on the Wall of Respect: Chicago and the Black Arts Movement", in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Margo Natalie Crawford and Lisa Gail Collins, New Brunswick, NJ, 2006, p. 130.

<sup>li</sup> Reference to title and concept of anthology compiled and edited by Sheree R. Thomas, *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, New York, 2014.

<sup>lii</sup> Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, New York, 1982, p. 3.

<sup>liii</sup> Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, New York, 1975, p. 63.