Funking toward the Future in Meshell Ndegeocello’s *The world has made me the man of my dreams*

As I listen to Meshell Ndegeocello’s sonic dreamscape, *The world has made me the man of my dreams* (2007), I think of the work of changing structures to create new futures, as well as the necessity of dream. It’s 2012. The State of Illinois has legalized civil unions for six months now. Gay and lesbian parents can adopt, though some organizations, like Catholic Charities, refuse to serve us. This year, at ages fifty-five and forty-five, my partner Annie and I are preparing to adopt a child. We’ve just moved into a neighborhood of small bungalows all built in 1910s, and this house will become the place where we’ll forge this new life. A dream, an experiment, an investment in the future, though making a household is also something so ordinary at the same time. We are inventing family and home, but we are also shaped by the history of this particular city and neighborhood: Chicago, Illinois, North Side, Rogers Park. Redlining, neighborhood covenants, riots, foreclosures. We’re two women, one black, one white, with hopes of raising a black child. Right now, as we walk through the neighborhood together, some might see us as lovers, but others might dismiss us as “just friends,” walking buddies, coworkers, even relatives. But with our child walking between us, the stakes are raised. We will redefine family just by being together, by demanding to be seen by our neighbors. What will our future bring? How will our community receive our child, queer by association? What will be awakened by broken rock, the pressure of elements accidental and purposeful? In her final song on the album, “Soul Spaceship,” Ndegeocello imagines the possibility of laughter, connection, communion, but only after cataclysmic change—and “episodic memory”—that is, a knowledge of history: “We were once earth / We were once flowers / Soon to be one made of light.”

In Meshell Ndegeocello’s seventh studio album, *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, she performs visionary, highly collaborative,
and often unclassifiable sound, lyrics, and performance. How, in particular in her models for collaboration, might we think of this album as a kind of “archive” for a black and queer future for the Post-Soul generation and those who come after it?

Feminist, futurist Funkateer and “Mack Diva” Meshell Ndegeocello was born Michelle Lynn Johnson in Berlin to an army lieutenant father and a health care worker mother in 1968. Ndegeocello’s chosen stage name reveals her commitment to freedom and reinvention, as well as to rootedness, Ndegeocello meaning “Free as a bird” in Swahili. Ndegeocello spent much of her childhood in Washington, DC, soaking up emerging hip-hop and go-go, and attended the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, one of DC’s public schools. Among her influences and collaborators, Ndegeocello cites Prince, Raz of the Wu-Tang Clan, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, Joni Mitchell, Fiona Apple, Bob Dylan, and Jaco Pastorius.

Harnessing the powers of butch and femme, cosmopolitan and DC go-go, funk, and jazz (and hip-hop and Soul, as well as classical and techno), her albums present a blueprint for sonic, sexual, political, and imaginative freedom, backed up by the insistent throb of her own electric bass. She is also a sought-after producer and arranger for others, and her own albums reflect the Post-Soul, postintegrationist spirit of collaboration in their wealth of influences and borrowed, remade sound. The themes tackled in her lyrics are similarly expansive, as well as challenging: from homophobia in the black community to violence and terror on a global scale to the politics of bisexuality to music as a form of space travel. Her compositions are embodied and earthy, “sounding out” a received history of homophobia, sexism, and racism, but at the same time promising a line of flight through reinvention.

Queering Afrofuturism in *The world has made me the man of my dreams*

*The world has made me the man of my dreams,* at times danceable, at times challenging, or even obscure, moves between spaces of fantasy and futurism and immediate social realities. Here Ndegeocello’s sound and performance—intimate, exploratory, emotive—is erotic in its willing push toward the unknown and ambiguous. In the short film for “*The Sloganeer: Paradise,*” the first single from *The world has made me the man of my dreams,* videographer Jason Orr captures in visuals the feel-
ing of frenetic energy, loneliness, and dislocation that we also hear in Ndegeocello’s sound in this song. Night shots of a sped-up ride down an anonymous highway, streetlights and stoplights streaming as if on Ecstasy. Colors: the washed out green/grays of urban nighttime, suddenly submerging into the black of a tunnel. The driver’s-seat view twists and turns according to its own map, moves from highway to empty city streets, travel that seems to be driven by yearning. These scenes are intercut with shots of Ndegeocello pogoing and jacking her body to the muscular beats with the rest of her all-male band. Here Ndegeocello is almost anonymous, too, in stretched-out white T-shirt, a boi among boys, playing in what seems to be a suburban basement or garage nowhere in particular. Her face, however, is the film’s main locus, its only point of distinction: caught in close-up, her eyes remain closed, as if watching this inner landscape of travel and speed, a tattooed star at the corner of her eye replacing a tear, a pledge to the future.

Ndegeocello’s voice moves from her trademark deep talk-whisper to high soprano to whine, belying the distinctly masculine dress and dance style. We also see her listening, head cocked, responding to her drummer, the ghost of a smile crossing her lips. She is modeling the power of both listening and performing, and the potential of both of these collaborative acts to transport us, to lend us the possibility of travel through sound.

Ài’s short film highlights the Afrofuturist impulse behind Ndegeocello’s music, in the ways that the yearning for imaginative freedom is dramatized as a negotiation between individual desire and collaboration, becoming and being, speed and friction, the traditions of the past, promise of a future, and the critique of a very present now. In this search for freedom, voice, along with instrument, video and filmic technologies, cars, and other machines are all fair game in this search.

In Mark Dery’s influential essay, “Black to the Future: Afro-futurism 1.0,” he describes Afrofuturism as the self-conscious appropriation of technology in black popular culture in order think out the problems of imaginative freedom in the past, present, and future. He asks, “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” Recent Afrocentric thought and creative production have explored, for example, relationships between new technologies of science and old technologies of bodily control and exploitation that began in slavery. How, for example, as Steven Shaviro
has asked, have hip-hop divas Lil’ Kim and Missy Elliott explored their own embodiment as black women through video and sonic technologies that critically “make strange” their already highly visible, highly known images, especially as they’ve been shaped by past histories of commodification? Shaviro suggests that in their videos for “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” and “How Many Licks” Missy Elliott and Lil’ Kim “raise questions about identity and otherness, and about power and control. They ask us to think about how we are being transformed as a result of our encounters with new and digital technolo
gies . . . as beings whose very embodiment is tied up with technological change, as well as with ascriptions of race and gender.”

Lil’ Kim’s and Missy Elliott’s harnessing of video technologies and high-tech mise-en-scènes in their videos reflects an Afrocentric impulse that counters the idea that black people are aliened from technology as a means of creative expansion. Indeed, as Alondra Nelson suggests, the history of black creativity and innovation forces us to challenge the idea of technological futurism as inherently “new.”

How might such creative strategies be part of a larger continuum of black creativity that spans the desires of the past and present and desires that have not yet been formed? In his 1995 film The Last Angel of History, John Akomfrah credits the drum as the first Afrofuturistic technology, in its ability to communicate both across the African diaspora and across time.

If Afrofuturism takes African American culture’s already improvisational nature—making a way out of no way—and applies it to the project of imagining a new future, for Ndegeocello, this is a project that is by necessity genderqueer. It is a space of healing, critique, and artistic and political engagement. Ndegeocello’s synthesized aesthetics is committed to a playful relationship to past black music and technology, while also always foregrounding both the sensuality of an openly queer aesthetics and the material conditions of an unjust political and economic world, highlighting the queerness of her own body and voice and the potential queerness of all bodies as they are effected, changed, and reorganized through sound.

From the otherworld visions of Sun Ra to the healing powers of the Mothership Connection, the sexy, space-funky gospel of Labelle, and DJ Spooky’s new mutations of hip-hop and electronica, Afrofuturistic sound exemplifies and continues this history of black technological ingenuity, signifying on mainstream science fiction’s fascination with technology and speed to rethink and expand the already innovative creative space of Soul, funk, blues, and beyond. In her music, Meshell Ndegeocello uses
Afrofuturism to put to question not only how the black imagination has been commodified but also how we love and how we are in community have been limited by means of war, greed, racism, and homophobia. In a world has made me the man of my dreams, future community can include our lovers, male and female, our children, and those we don't know, beyond boundaries of nation and time. Ndegeocello's is an Afrofuturism that foregrounds the escape from and return to the black body that we also hear in Sun Ra's work, as well as in George Clinton's, as I discussed in chapter three. Ndegeocello draws from Sun Ra in her expansion of gender and sexual codes, as well in her expansive artistic, national, and planetary loyalties, and does so informed by an updated politics of gender performance that includes transgender identity. Sun Ra's own eccentric queerness is a fascinating subject in its own right, though I don't have room to give it full justice here. His sexuality has been variously described in obituaries and jazz retrospectives as “asexual” and “unconfirmed” and occasionally as “homosexual.” John Gill embraces Sun Ra's image as both performatively queer and a gay man closeted by the jazz world, but in many ways who Sun Ra did and didn't sleep with isn't the point. Certainly, Sun Ra's campy, outlandish, and often gender-bending stage aesthetic, combining futurism, Egyptology, and Afroglam (pharaonic headpieces, glittery turbans, scarves, jewels, and African bubas and wraps), as well as his relationship to space and time (he believed he was an angel from Saturn) could be read as queer, as could his reconfiguration of family among his circle of musicians, where, according to journalist Val Wilmer, “he was regarded as figure embodying the qualities of both mother and father.” In his 1993 obituary of Sun Ra, John F. Szwed effectively captures his theatrical and often excessive performance style.

[I]n the 1970’s his six-hour multimedia barrages could be genuinely frightening experiences. a e music moved from stasis to chaos and back again, with shrieks and howls pouring out of an Arkestra dressed like the Archers of Arboria; dancers swirled through the audience (“butterflies of the night,” a French critic called them); fire-eaters, gilded muscle-men, and midgets paraded in front of masks, shadow puppets, and films of the pyramids. Performance rules were being broken one-a-minute.

Most significantly, Sun Ra’s sound, discombobulating, charismatic, otherworldly, visionary, and transformative, is closely aligned with the eccentric performances studied here, including Ndegeocello's.
Ndegeocello’s sound, voice and bass, sometimes assisted by technology, sometimes through the manipulation of her own breath, or throat or hands, explores and complicates the ways that gender is coded in music, drawing from and then departing from traditional forms of funk, Soul, jazz, and rock. Breath, pitch, texture, and also emotive distance all contribute to the ways that she performs, as well as “hears,” gender, and so, too, does her voice’s collaboration with other voices. This includes calls-and-responses, supplementations, and harmonies that speak to the differentials of top and bottom, power and control. This is Ndegeocello’s intervention in Afrocentric discourse: her space of creativity centers an open and formative notion of gender that tarries with the past, as well as sets up possibilities for the future. Her vocal and otherwise performative gender play is one of the many ways that she opens up and intervenes in the project of redefining blackness.

The man of my dreams: Ndegeocello’s Gender Fluidity

The very title *The world has made me the man of my dreams*—which could be read as a transgender manifesto, a Disneyed romantic yearning, or a not-quite-sexist-language-free declaration of imaginative freedom—suggests a kind of slipperiness and play with identity that has become a trademark for Ndegeocello. Ndegeocello has described herself in fluid gender and sexual terms, as bisexual, as lesbian, and as “a femme in a butch body,” for example, and, in *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, I’d suggest, as transgendered. Indeed, Ndegeocello’s career spans a period of incredible flux, invention, and new visibility in terms of the performance of specifically genderqueer identities for black women in everyday life—particularly young people, including the emergence of “aggressive,” “lesbian stud,” “femme aggressive,” and transgendered—and sometimes all of these at once—as documented in Daniel Peddle’s 2005 film *The Aggressives*. Although she’s never used the term queer to describe herself in print (as far as I know), she has publicly critiqued the term gay as centering a white male aesthetic.

Within the narrative structures of her songs, as well as through sound, Ndegeocello embodies several points of view, reaching across gender and sexuality to create new, collaborative structures. For example, in the song “Solomon,” featured on *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, Ndegeocello sings an ode to her son, performing a gender-fluid conception of parenthood. The song opens with a spoken-word introduction
by performance artist Jack Bean about fatherhood. The song then segues into Ndegeocello’s sung voice, which remains in its lowest register. She thanks the creator for her son, “All that I am / flesh and blood.” She never names her role as mother, but instead performs an open-gendered conception of parenthood, providing multiple points of entrance and identification for her listeners. In this way, the song departs from distinctly feminine-centered odes to motherhood like Lauryn Hill’s “To Zion” or Madonna’s “Little Star.”

Ndegeocello stretches the collaborative lines of gender by courting “misrecognition” and what I like to think of as deliberate “mistakes” in gender interpretation that allow her to subvert traditional relationships. A telling moment in Andréana Clay’s recent article on Ndegeocello, “Like an Old Soul Record: Black Feminism, Queer Sexuality, and the Hip-Hop Generation,” is when Clay identifies a “mistake” in her listening to Ndegeocello’s song “Leviticus: Faggot,” from the 1996 album *Peace Beyond Passion.* Clay confesses that when first listening to the line “Stop acting like a bitch / that’s all he sees / ain’t that what faggot means,” she thought that Ndegeocello was saying “Ain't that Faggot me?” I think that Clay’s mishearing of the lyrics was no mere mistake. In her exposure of homophobic violence in the song, Ndegeocello is not only expressing allegiance to gay men but also identification with them. In many of her songs, Ndegeocello deliberately performs cross-gender identification, sometimes with and at other times against the grain of her lyrics.

In her earliest music video performances, we can see how Ndegeocello’s gender-fluid and sexually ambiguous performances might be a strategy of subversion for offering queer comment within mainstream venues. In the video for “Dred Loc,” her debut on BET, from the 1993 release *Plantation Lullabies,* Ndegeocello stages a genderqueer seduction between Ndegeocello and an unnamed lover. In contrast to Ndegeocello’s strong, more dominant masculine presence, including a shaved head, her lover is presented as the more passive object of desire, with beautiful, gender-ambiguous dreads that reach below the shoulder. Although the song opens with the line “How I love a black man,” the visual story departs from traditional narratives of romance to explore the performance of gender at the heart of black hair politics. Hair, freed from traditional gender role-playing, becomes a place in which to explore gender-fluid, problack sensuality. The video begins with Ndegeocello watching herself in the mirror, surrounded by a tableau of women’s hair care products, including pink foam curlers and hot irons. Ndegeocello strokes her own
closely shaven head, and smiles at herself in approval. Is she, in fact, the black man that she loves? The video promises a departure from the traditional politics of black beauty that dominate the hip-hop and other videos that most frequently air on BET. Next we see a blurred close-up of another face through a curtain of long dreadlocks. We watch Ndegeocello twisting, then tenderly running her fingers through the other’s hair. They are clearly lovers. We watch then as Ndegeocello and the other begin to make love, the dreadlocked head now moving erotically between Ndegeocello’s legs. At this point, it’s not clear if we’re watching two women, two men, or a woman and a man. Just as the passion of the scene heats up, the video delivers its first full body shot of the lover, now visibly marked as masculine, with a lightly muscular chest, slim torso, and a very slight beard and mustache. At the same time, the song picks up tempo, and shifts from Ndegeocello’s languid, breathy, higher singing voice to a husky rap. The rap presents an Edenic vision of procreative heterosexual love, while inverting or blurring expectations of masculine and feminine roles. Her description of her male lover echoes the ways that women are often described in Afrocentric discourse as beautiful, “One with nature with his head held high,” but also silent and obeying.

He never questions why
Together we make the fruit of life
So I love and treat him right.

Even after “revealing” the presumable “fact” of her lover’s masculinity through facial hair and bared masculine torso and chest, the video continues to shoot both Ndegeocello and the lover in ways that leave room for us to change our minds about their gender. We watch the lover tenderly shaving Ndegeocello’s bald head in the middle of a forest, both now wearing flowing, feminine clothing. In this song, as well as in others on this early album, Ndegeocello performs gender fluidity in a way that is consummately soulful.

Ndegeocello’s ability to move across different positionalities of identity is linked to her performance of the bass and the sometimes-eccentric space that the bass creates in music. The makers of funk have most visibly been men—especially those associated with the popping bass, the driving spirit of the One (Bootsy Collins, James Brown, the Brothers Johnson, Prince). As a purveyor of funk through the bass, in past works as well as in *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, Ndegeocello
commandeers male funk practice to explore key and often overdetermined sounds, as well as issues shaping black humanity and black life, including parenthood (in the song “Solomon”), cultural change, and romantic love (in “Elliptical”), and the violence of corporate capitalism on the agency and freedom of black bodies (in “Article 3” and “Relief: A Stripper Classic”).

Cultural critic L. H. Stallings sees Ndegeocello as a sexual and spiritual trickster figure, one who is empowered by the open status of bisexuality to blur the lines between sacred and secular. Stallings suggests that the bass functions in Ndegeocello’s music as a kind of lesbian phallus, a site of desire that decodes the symbolic order of the phallus, a tongue “capable of pressure, penetration, fluidity and hardness.” Stallings quotes a revealing (and titillating!) interview between Ndegeocello and Allison Powell on fan behavior and the new centrality Ndegeocello provides for the bass as object of desire.

MN: I mean, you could be ugly, but as long as you play the guitar or something . . . guitar players and sax players really do O.K.
AP: But the bass is sexy, right?
MN: I don’t know. I just think because I’m up front I get a little bit more . . . I get more attention. [laughs]
AP: Well, the bass is sexy. It’s so pelvic and deep.
MN: Ye, in fact, the uterus is very responsive to bass tones. It’s the low frequencies. Go to a party or to big shows and watch how girls love to sit on the woofers.

Whereas in traditional rock and other live band structures, the guitar or sax plays romantic lead, here the bass gets new attention. Moreover, Ndegeocello configures her female fans as those who seek out their own pleasure, rather than as passive participants in the music. We can also see this decoding of the phallic in Ndegeocello’s reworking of the bass’s rhythmic function. For one thing, the bass often operates without one central point of contact, especially within polyrhythmic music. Meshell’s bass is the heartbeat of music. But it can also play against other rhythms as counterpoint. It is the pulse from below, the bottom guiding the top, a secret pact. But the bass can also open up new space in a song, make you pay attention to the silences. As a philosophy of the future, her bass is the guarantee of funkiness, as well as a shape giver to what might otherwise seem random. â the bass is the pulse of history, a chronology, and a date-
line. It is tradition and freedom at once, the timekeeper and the space for play. It can be technology, as well as hands, the reassurance of knowledge of the body and of craft in an age of colonized space and time. Although her play with the “bottom” position as well as the “top” of bass guitar and voice, Ndegeocello is able to highlight gaps in our conceptions of the funk genre, as well as in discourses about gender and sexuality.

At the same time, Ndegeocello explores the potential of technology, space, and a place for spiritual renewal and humanism, the stuff of an often male-dominated space of Afrofuturist music. Technology becomes the mechanism for desire—and we might think of this as sexual desire, as well as the desire for spiritual transcendence. She does so by worrying the lines between body, voice, and identity. We hear, for example, in the song “Elliptical” on *a world has made me the man of my dreams*, backup singer Sy Smith’s human female voice in call-and-response with Ndegeocello’s, transformed by a deep vocoder synthesizer. In this same song, the swell of an (acoustic?) coronet wraps itself around the rhythm of a drum machine. I’d argue that these juxtapositions of human and machine are queered, both in the ways that they play with and alter lines of masculine and feminine, human and nonhuman, and in the larger sense that sociologists Eva Illouz and Steven Seidman use them when they use queering as “a deconstructive and discursive strategy involving the displacement of foundational assumptions (e.g. about the subject, knowledge, society and history) for the purpose of opening up critical social analysis and political practice.” As I’ll discuss further, Ndegeocello’s intertwining of machine and “human” becomes the soundtrack for the desire for political and spiritual freedom and transcendence.

“Elliptical” is a romantic slow groove, creating a lush orchestra of synthesized and nonsynthesized sound: the acoustic sounds of coronet, cowbells, and high-hat meeting with synthesized vocals, electric bass thumps, computerized guitar arpeggios, all meshing in a landscape of human and posthuman interaction. Ndegeocello’s vocoder-altered voice, in its flattened range and coldly technical timbre, is nevertheless human in its inflection and read of words, and in its complementarity with the sweetness of Sy Smith’s very human sounding soprano. The song thus demonstrates the ability of the synthesized voice to seduce and capture. The play of Ndegeocello’s electric bass beats both perform and induce heart and blood beat; the texture and rhythm of fingers on flesh. Synthesized swoops of a theram mimic the rise and fall of the stomach anticipating making love. The sound and lyrics evoke Philip K. Dick’s *Do
Andrians Dream of Electric Sheep?, exploring the possibility of machines to give shape to our deepest desires. Sy Smith’s human voice sings to her cyborg lover: “I’ve tasted to your grace / and felt it diffuse all around me.” Meshell answers in cyborg voice: “With the sweetest hope of love everlasting.” Departing from Dick’s dystopic vision (later cinematized) in Blade Runner (1982), the song itself demonstrates the viability of this vision, the possibility of full melding: “Shall we remove these veils / So you can fully experience me?”

Elliptical” all explore the vision of a boundaryless and yet still totally soulful future, one that takes its cues from the silky, bluesy seductions of quiet storm jazz and bass-loving funk to explore issues sexual, political, musical, and spiritual. The song troubles the “proper” hierarchies of human over machine, masculine over feminine, even “live” song over programmed. All of this is done in the context of a love song sung, almost as an afterthought, between two “women.” The song’s final declaration, “Love is God’s creation,” claims the holiness of these categories of so-called unholy love: android and queer. Here Ndegeocello tarries with the negative of the post—postmodern, Post-Black, posthuman, Post-Soul—to ask us to think about this post not so much as a space of negation as a space of becoming.14

Ndegeocello’s rethinking of the black body and black voice as complexly and fluidly gendered opens up the possibilities for collaboration with others in unprecedented ways. Indeed, collaboration is the spiritual and political payoff of Ndegeocello’s gender play, and her offering to a black community in search of a future. *e world has made me the man of my dreams* imagines a new black self that is deeply and intimately connected to others, one for whom the relationship with others is able to survive because it shifts and moves and flows. Ultimately, Ndegeocello’s conceptualization of a radical black future is one that must also reimagine blackness as transnational and collaborative in character, linked to the larger struggles of war, survival, and change. At stake is a larger humanity that is diasporic, all riding a “soul spaceship” to an unknown but shared future.

Blaxploration: Transnational and Transgender Alliance

Meshell Ndegeocello’s *e world has made me the man of my dreams* points to the work still to be done with the Post-Soul project of
“Blaxploration”—by reimagining black futures that foreground transnational diasporic alliance, as well as gender adaptability. In addition to its radical exploration of gender, this is a post-9/11 album about global existential crisis, which necessarily casts a black future as part of a larger social stage. In a 2003 interview with Mark Anthony Neal, Ndegeocello describes a feeling of urgency after September 11, 2001, that first led to the production of her 2003 album *Comfort Woman*. “After September 11th,” she admits, “I would just sit at home and play music.” She adds, “*Comfort Woman* is just to say, after Sept 11th, I was like thoughts are the architecture of the mind. I wanted to put out something, like God-forbid, something happens to me.”\(^{15}\) *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, continues the sense of creative urgency in *Comfort Woman*. Moving from the architecture of thought to a kind of architecture of relation, *The world has made me the man of my dreams* is propelled by a spirit of collaboration as a resource for Afrofuturist community building. Here Ndegeocello queers Post-Soul struggles for community in the context of the “precariousness” of life in a time of recurring war and state-sponsored terror. Ndegeocello’s transgendered transnationalism pushes the boundaries of previous Post-Soul projects to link the struggle for Post-Soul blackness to transracial, transgender, global, and collective struggle.

Signifying on the more visible term *blaxploitation*, cultural theorist Bertram Ashe coined *blaxploration* as one of the key components of a Post-Soul aesthetic among black writers, artists, and musicians born and producing after the civil rights era.

*These artists and texts trouble blackness. They stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain a coherent black identity.*\(^{16}\)

*As self-conscious, denaturalizing rumination, this opening up and remixing of blackness, as an identity, aesthetic, and defense of the human, has often emphasized the individual journey, the untapped and quirky departures from an agreed-upon black collectivity—in other words, eccentricity, in the popular sense. But in Ndegeocello’s work, she moves from the individualistic exploration that we might associate with the traditional notion of eccentricity to an investment in collective change across boundaries of nation, and religion, as well as race. In this way,
Ndegeocello follows the lead of many Afrofuturist predecessors, like Sun Ra and George Clinton, and the creative forces of P-Funk in their yearning for a collective journey to new spaces, new architectures of thought to lead us to new notions of blackness. At the same time, Ndegeocello takes up the fight for peace and a global unity in the struggle for black freedom found in the work of Soul forebears like Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, and Bob Marley. Ndegeocello’s explicit foregrounding of queer gender and queer desire in her blaxploitations, I’d argue, set her apart.

Although a transnational and even intergalactic exploration of vulnerability, desire, and empathy in a post-9/11 moment of violence, terror, surveillance, and the destruction of communities, Ndegeocello widens the quest for freedom implicit in the Post-Soul project. Beginning in the middle of the experience of change and loss, *the world has made me the man of my dreams* performs the positive effects of dislocation: the realization of a shared despair. *The* album, in its timeliness, is linked globally to war, and to the ability of music, here Post-Soul music, to capture the experience of dislocation and despair, as well as an undying investment in the possibilities of a collaborative and collective future.

As sense that—especially at this important historical moment—poets (and musicians) have important, world-saving work to do is captured in Palestinian American poet Lisa Suhair Majaj’s poem, “Arguments.”

Consider the infinite fragility of an infant’s skull  
How the bones lie soft and open  
Only time knitting them shut  

...  

Consider a delicate porcelain bowl  
How it crushes under a single blow—  
In one moment whole years disappear  

...  

Consider your own sky on fire  
Your name erased  
Your children’s lives “a price worth paying”  

...
How in these lines

_world

Cracks open.  

Like Majaj, Ndegeocello explores the ways that music, like poetry, can dissolve the boundaries between genders, between races and between performer and listener. Music can crack our worlds open, and can help us understand our shared stakes in the human. In the song “_e Sloganeer: Paradise,” for example, we hear the rolling drums as a collection of miniature explosions, contained (for now) between earphones. Are the drums the fire of synapses in our brains, each explosion cracking our worlds open? Are they gunfire? Or are they the culmination of a history of explosions, the way, if we could open ourselves somehow, we’d hear a world, a history of homes, bodies, skies cracked open and burning? _e history of women, brown and black, displaced women of war? _e history of the world as a theater of war, the stage crowded with voices, with bodies? Can you hear them now? And what happens when you listen? _is is life during wartime. 

In _e Powers of Mourning and Violence, Judith Butler considers the combined state of vulnerability and aggression in a post-9/11 world, where we are forced to recognize our interdependence on others that we may never see or meet. In this state, we are all vulnerable to violence, but some of us might be more vulnerable than others, determined by our relative degrees of privilege as national and global actors. Butler asks us to reconsider the politics of “First World privilege,” which masks this state of vulnerability. We might instead build on an ethics that recognizes a fundamental lack of control over world events, and that acknowledgment might in turn commit us to act as part of a larger global community, says Butler. _rough the dislocating musical strategies of funk, hip-hop, jazz, and noise, here Ndegeocello reminds us of this dislocated and vulnerable state, weighing the privilege of First World objectivity against her complex positionality as black and queer. 

In _e world has made me the man of my dreams, Ndegeocello revisits the issues of political disenfranchisement and spiritual loss explored in her earlier albums. In her second album, _e Beyond Passion, for example, she explores the interconnections of spirituality and politics, in which she uses the language of the Bible to frame stories of queer desire and also homophobia in black Christian communities. (See es-
especially her songs “Mary Magdalene” and “Leviticus: Faggot” in *Peace Beyond Passion.*) Invested in a fluidly comparative spirituality, she is both deeply curious and critical about the politics of organized religion. In a 1996 interview, Ndegeocello says:

> For me, God is probably the source of my every breath. So I don’t throw away religion because of the people. That’s why I want to be able to eventually study all [religions]. But just as Hindus believe you find an inner self when you release the worldly self, I’m starting to wonder if religion might not be just a remnant of the world, too. I want to get to the point where I’m so one with God and so peaceful that religion is obsolete.

In *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, Ndegeocello, once a practicing Buddhist raised Baptist, and recently converted to Islam, returns to religion as a means of exploring the politics of imagining the future. Here religion is a point of inquiry rather than a solace or solution.

In the album’s exploration of spirituality, violence, and existential crisis, Ndegeocello considers the space of chaos as a potential locus of spiritual possibility. The opening song, “Haditha,” a one-minute, thirty-one-second sampled opening from a lecture on apocalypse, sets the tone for the album’s engagement in social transformation, violence, and the pursuit of freedom. “Haditha” loops spacey, twanging guitars and reverberating feedback around the voice of Muslim teacher and Islamic scholar Sheik Hamza Yusuf Hanson. Hanson describes what he calls the “intensification” of events in the Muslim world that seem to bear out the prophet Muhammad’s predictions for the future and the end of time, which we are told include the increased ingestion of intoxicants, nakedness, public sexuality, speed in travel, and the ability to move great distances in a short period of time. At the same time, the prophet Muhammad describes this moment as ecstatic and intensely musical: “Dancing will be everywhere. . . . Music will be everywhere . . . even with people wearing music on their heads.” In this short sequence, Ndegeocello is illustrating the ways that hip-hop uses sampling to create political and spiritual, as well as artistic, conversations—with the potential to widen community. Spoken over a hip-hop beat and redub, the predictions take on an additional seductive and immediate power. Ndegeocello makes a similar move in her previous album, *Cookie: The Anthropological Mix-tape*, by sampling another prophet—here Angela Davis—from one of her
speeches on the prison industrial complex, to frame and give political seriousness and weight to the album.

“Haditha” refers directly to the 2005 massacre of unarmed noncombatant Iraqi men, women, and children by the US military in the city of Haditha. Ndegeocello perhaps has chosen this context because of the ways that the war in Iraq has intensified US fears of Islam for some while signifying a crisis about the justice of the War on Terror for other Americans. More specifically, the civilian casualties at Haditha—and the military’s efforts to cover up those deaths—became a watershed moment in terms of shifting US citizen support of the war, bringing to light questionable ethical behavior, uneven reporting, and lack of accountability of the US military. Ndegeocello’s use of these contexts to advance her own “blaxploration” shows an engagement with the world, and with social justice, a particularly post-9/11 version of the “cultural mulattoism” that is one of the qualities of Post-Soul blaxploration.

The song that follows, “The Sloganeer: Paradise,” continues the thematic struggle of “Haditha” between secular and human desire. It opens with the uncomfortable question, “If you’re the chosen, why / Don’t you kill yourself now?” The previous allusion to “Haditha” makes way for a reading of lyrics from “The Sloganeer” that refer to the existential dilemma of a potential suicide bomber. The song explores a variety of persuasive voices—spiritual, commercial, interpersonal—and the larger question of living for a future on Earth. Ndegeocello engages these contexts to frame an analysis of crises in national and religious identity, and desire, ultimately revealing the false dichotomy between sexual and spiritual yearning.

“The Sloganeer: Paradise” shifts from personal angst to the politicized image of the suicide bomber to the spiritual idea of paradise to the commercial hawking of female bodies to the use of sex as a form of escape to the reembrace of the female body as a form of pleasure. Ndegeocello uses gender fluidity to launch new thinking about spiritual and political commitments. She gives her own queered and eccentric reading of the desire for spiritual answers by assuaging spiritual angst with the solace of the body, and particularly the feminine body: “Open up your legs / The waves and swells soothe my dissatisfaction.”

The soothing “waves and swells” are the place where one seeks solace in the midst of existential confusion. This is a particularly pointed choice in “Haditha” in light of its declaration that the end of the world is predictable because of appearance, the visibility of women’s bodies, sexu-
ality, and nakedness. But in the end, even sexual solace is incomplete. The song ends on a note of loss and yearning: “Can you imagine utter nothingness? / Give me a sign.”

Sonically, “The Sloganeer: Paradise” is a techno song that is post-techno, dance music postdisco, driven by the rolling drums and bass of drum ’n’ bass. The song takes jazz elements of compositional freedom—for example, the space where the solo opens up the song, or the spontaneous shifting of riffs—but presents them in cramped, claustrophobic ways. The song has a danceable beat but seems to be troubling that desire for escape that disco and psychedelically enhanced rave offered. We hear whispers of doubt and seduction. The twanging space sounds of the synthesizer that dot the drum and bass lines are not yet the space sounds of a utopic elsewhere, because we haven’t yet escaped our fears. The crowded soundscape relays a sense of cramped and overdetermined choices, as well as the pressure to push past those boundaries of confinement. The increasing shakiness and fragility of Ndegeocello’s strangled voice—her theatrical British accent evoking The Cure, suggest the looming threat of psychic breakdown. The song captures the moment of “not yet” that precedes improvisation, that haunts and chases the spaceship on its way to the future.

At the same time, “The Sloganeer: Paradise” is anticonfessional, the voice distanced from the audience, the occasion obscured, distanced from a clear time and place, and certainly from the everyday specifics of black life explored in her previous CD, Cookie. Ndegeocello takes us into a post-9/11 dystopia of troubled bodies and sounds that counter the natural, playing with distance and speed, and with what we might think of as a traditionally styled “black” voice. Rather than opening to us, seducing us with melisma, the song sits back, draws us into its vortex. Her performance is not black female “Soul,” in the traditional sense. Like her Post-Soul companions Earth Kitt and Grace Jones, Ndegeocello is contending with and transforming traditional black female Soul performance—in this case, the confessional R&B style of sexual wanting and need—which is typically conveyed stylistically by an open voice, sincerity, and heat. Nor is it a performance meant to comfort and ground a white listener. Think of all of the ways that the black female body, sometimes singing, has been used to ground the white body as it runs and pursues its future. In Baz Luhrmann’s film Romeo + Juliet, a black torch singer sings the blues while the young lovers in angel and intergalactic knight costumes kiss and pursue flight on an elevator, up and up and up,
soaring with the power borrowed from that black voice.) Instead, Ndegeocello evades the responsibility of the black Soul voice to guide others. She seeks instead something more risky, which makes the black Soul voice the site of her own exploration, as it is linked to others. Here she has a lot in common with the female narrators in Octavia Butler’s novels, each guiding us through a position of unresolved extreme dislocation.\(^22\)

In “ἀ e Sloganeer: Paradise,” Ndegeocello is exploring the potential of music to capture a state of grief while complicating the black Soul aesthetic of open feeling and emotion. While the traditions of Soul might be an obvious space in which to perform a state of grief and vulnerability, Ndegeocello chooses an alternative vocal strategy of distance and dislocation often avoided in black Soul performance. Her music offers a place to acknowledge loss and feel it “in the flesh,” creating music that reproduces the feeling of loss and grief viscerally in its listeners. Ultimately Ndegeocello’s performance of dislocation is a form of dissent in a national climate where the acknowledgment of political dissent and grief shared with our so-called enemies is a sign of being “against us” rather than “with us.”\(^25\)

ἀ e world has made me the man of my dreams continues to explore these themes of spiritual and social crisis, yearning and transcendence. If the opening songs cast the problem of spiritual crisis globally in a post-9/11 context of violence, religious suspicion, and the melding of corporate and military power, the songs that follow explore the desire for (and perhaps the inevitability of) the destruction of the material world, and the possibility for new creation. In “Evolution,” for example, Ndegeocello reimagines the ultimate in global warming, where beneath a burning sun we’re given a chance to be freed from the constraints of our flawed bodies and human relationships: “No more tears to cry / No tongue to hurt you.”

Scenarios of interplanetary transition become the backdrop for a reconsideration of change in human relationships, in songs that also wrestle with power and distrust in love and sexual relationships (in “Shirk” and “Michelle Johnson”), but even these songs might be read, alternately, as an interrogation of corporate or national regimes of power. “Shirk,” lyrics, sung by Ndegeocello and Oumou Sangare, ends with the lines “I’m sorry I left you no home / But your words shattered my bones”—a line which could speak of both a struggle for power in a personal relationship and the struggle of a refugee to find home and nation. A ballad that is both plaintive and rocking, “Shirk” features wicked Mali-style finger work on the guitars by Pat Metheny and Herve Sambe.
The final song, “Soul Spaceship,” is an Afrofuturist vision of imaginative and spiritual freedom, healing the pain of past memory through the future’s “supreme technology,” with the help of a stomping bass line. Ndegeocello sings of the ultimate ride—or is it jam?—with the power to “Transport myself into your dreams.”

A bonus track, this song stands as the capstone—a seductive promise of music to take us to new places sexually, religiously, and musically. This song recruits the listener to enlist in Ndegeocello’s imagined community, to come along for the ride. We might foreground this move with that of other thinkers about a queer black future in black science fiction writers Octavia E. Butler and Samuel Delany, who are also conceptualizing a black future as an inherently queer one. Like Ndegeocello, Butler and Delaney ground their rethinking of gender boundaries and desires for the future in the soul death of a slavery past, as well as homophobia and sexual oppression of the present. These works have been asking for the past few decades how we imagine ourselves beyond the state of death. In *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, Ndegeocello continues this question, asking: What does that still-absent future feel and sound like? What is its beat?

**Conclusion: Ndegeocello’s Third World Feminist Practice and Future World Dreams**

In *The world has made me the man of my dreams*, Ndegeocello is sounding out the relationship between queer gender and the ways that we define and delimit the human, within a frame of black, transnational, and distinctly feminist practice. While it is forward looking, I also link this album to *Our World* feminist work of the 1980s and 1990s like Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s “theory in the flesh” and its interest in the ways that the body yields knowing and a “politics of necessity,” Audre Lorde’s conception of the erotic and the deep knowledge and ethics yielded by intentional desire, and Chela Sandoval’s “differential consciousness” and its deep and hopeful investment in community and collaboration—a “hermeneutics of love.” Like Anzaldúa and Moraga, Ndegeocello uses her queerly gendered body and voice as media for critical and creative inquiry. Following Lorde, Ndegeocello’s performance of desire and shared vulnerability become starting points for widening community and spiritual connection. And like Sandoval, Ndegeocello’s
exploration of sometimes nonverbalizeable dislocation, vulnerabil-
ity, and loss are all lit with the fire of hope, and a sense of possibility.
Through her musical explorations of desire, as well as the political and
social precariousness of life, Ndegeocello helps us to better understand
the relationships between the body and ways of knowing. Ultimately,
in *a world has made me the man of my dreams*, Ndegeocello seeks to
open up black aesthetics to make connections so that black sound is also
global and even interplanetary, black feminism is about more than black
women, and blaxploration yields insight and connection to all people.
She examines the problematics of black embodiment through music to
convey the relevance of fluidity and vulnerability as key to the projects
of spirit, love, and healing—all important aspects of a free queer future.