**Alien Souls on a Prison Planet:**

**Janelle Monáe and the Afrofuturist Plato**

Stefan Dolgert

Associate Professor

Brock University

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**Abstract**:

Judging by the left-wing students protesting “Western Civ” classes and white nationalists’ love of all things Sparta (see video of the January 6th insurrection), there is something of a consensus developing on the extremes: that studying the ancient Greeks is a “whites only” affair. Against the grain of such readings, of course, stand many texts of postcolonial appropriation of “the Classics” (Walcott, Osofisan, Rankine, Padilla Peralta), and I follow these authors by reading ancient Greek political thought – Plato in particular – through the lens of the music of contemporary American recording artist Janelle Monáe. My thesis, simply put, is that Plato can be usefully thought of as a political Afrofuturist. I look to Plato’s tale of humans as alien prisoners on Earth (*Timaeus*), in order to highlight the linkages between his vision and Monáe’s *Metropolis Suite* (which narrates the revolution of her enslaved cyborg heroine, Cindi Mayweather). Monáe builds on Toni Morrison’s depiction of the Transatlantic Slave Trade as an alien abduction story, as inflected by the Afrofuturist music of Sun Ra and George Clinton, and reveals a revolutionary side to Plato’s seemingly apolitical *Timaeus* through Cindi Mayweather’s posthuman challenge to her carceral society. The upshot of my narrative is that Plato (and the Greeks) are hardly the granddaddies of Richard Spencer. Plato’s texts privilege the alien and “the Other” over the homeland and the familiar, meaning that Monáe paradoxically provides us with an essential context for understanding Plato (*pace* Quentin Skinner).

**Alabama to Saturn to Athens to Here**

In 1936, in a small town in Alabama, a young man named Sonny Blount was taken by extraterrestrials to Saturn. There he learned the true history of Africans on planet Earth – that they were fallen from the stars into bondage on Earth, but that this bondage would soon come to an end when they returned to their home planet – and thereafter began his role as a teacher of this truth to his fellow aliens, through the vehicle of his music, in order to prepare for their eventual liberation. He became Sun Ra, and he and his group (the Arkestra)[[1]](#footnote-1) became the purveyors of this message through their eclectic blend of jazz, spoken word, and film (*Space is the Place*)[[2]](#footnote-2), even into the present (continuing to play, after Sun Ra’s death in 1993) (Szwed 2020): Earth is not a home but a prison, and the goal of a life lived here is to find liberation through escape.[[3]](#footnote-3)

My thesis, in a nutshell, is that Sonny Blount’s interplanetary trip is a key to understanding Plato today.[[4]](#footnote-4) We need Sun Ra, and those who have followed in his tradition, most especially Janelle Monáe, if we want to say anything of consequence about Plato. Through them we find a Plato focused on alienation, imprisonment, and escape; though them we see a critical vantage on a world that alienates, imprisons, and deflects attempts at liberation. If the world is a prison, and if many here are jailers, and if Plato’s *Timaeus* was attuned to this in 360 BCE, maybe the “Western tradition” and “the Classics” are not places that anyone should want to hang their hat, as offering a basis for a comfortable home[[5]](#footnote-5).

We live in the era of strange convergences, where those on both the extreme Left[[6]](#footnote-6) and extreme Right seem to agree that something is wildly wrong with “Western” civilization[[7]](#footnote-7). Whether it is railing against the corruption of the political establishment, or asserting the inherent “whiteness” of such a system, both neo-fascists and decolonizers agree that “the West” as a structure – nations, economies, ideas, texts – is inextricably linked with the oppression of non-white non-Europeans, though from there the recommended solutions diverge radically of course. But who do “the Classics” belong to, really?  If white nationalists now see themselves as heirs to “This is Sparta!” and as defenders of “Western Civilization,” is it time to blow up the discipline?  While there is reason for concern, I follow postcolonial scholars who instead suggest that we hack the canon rather than chuck it. My own contribution to this effort is to read Plato through the Afrofuturist music of Janelle Monáe. I look to Plato’s tale of humans as alien prisoners on Earth (*Timaeus*), in order to highlight the linkages between his vision and Monáe’s*Metropolis Suite* (which narrates the revolution of an enslaved cyborg, Cindi Mayweather). Through Mayweather’s posthuman challenge to her carceral society, Monáe reveals a revolutionary side to Plato’s seemingly apolitical *Timaeus* that provides us with an essential context for understanding Plato.

In this paper I focus on the recent album trilogy of Janelle Monáe, the *Metropolis Suite*,[[8]](#footnote-8) in which she assumes the character of an android from 2719, Cindi Mayweather. Mayweather is born a cyborg of stolen human DNA,[[9]](#footnote-9) taught her place is to serve humans in a hierarchically segregated human/cyborg society, who then falls in love with a human (violating the key rule of this society, against human/cyborg miscegenation), is marked for death, and who then leads a revolution against this dystopian polity. Monáe’s funk opera stretches from the future into the present and past, linking the emancipatory struggles of African-Americans today with the enslavement of cyborgs in the future. Monáe connects our moment, in which the political stakes of a racialized imaginary that valorizes a particular narrative of “Western Civilization” is no longer hidden, with the increasing challenge posed by the increasing interpenetration of human and machine.

In Monáe’s work (as in Afrofuturism[[10]](#footnote-10) more generally) we see a challenge to the idea of “the human” as a centralizing tendency that constitutively excludes as it defines, and Afrofuturists look toward the future for an ever-faster erosion of the bromides and faux-certainties associated with anthropocentrism (Weheliye 2002, 2005, 2014; Eshun 1998, 2003). In that sense, Monáe’s message is not just that racist definitions of the human are wrong-headed, but that even the valorization of a hierarchical notion of “human” is an ethical dead-end. With these thematics Monáe’s antihumanism connects with posthumanist troublings seen ancient Greek writers like Plato (Bianchi et al. 2019; Chesi et al. 2019; Dolgert 2015, 2018), and in this essay I will draw out the resonances in spatio-temporal structures that he and Monáe create (and from which they then re-narrate) what it means to be human. I look to Plato’s texts in which he alters the horizon of human experience via a cosmological vision of humans as alien visitors on Planet Earth (in the *Timaeus*), in order to highlight the linkages between Plato and Monáe’s *Metropolis Suite* narrative of future enslavement (and eventual liberation).[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Contextual Misapprehensions**

I have said that I see Monáe providing an important (today, even an essential) context for reading Plato. For anyone trained in the Cambridge School tradition (Skinner 1969, et al.), this must seem like a terrible joke. Perhaps Plato’s thought could inform a part of the “complex intentionality” of Monáe, one might say – e.g. scholars such as Dan-el Padilla Peralta have explored classical references in hip-hop[[12]](#footnote-12) – but while such explorations uncover important classical echoes in contemporary art and literature, that is not what I am after here[[13]](#footnote-13). Monáe herself is a highly self-aware artist[[14]](#footnote-14) whose citations to highbrow culture (Lang’s *Metropolis*, e.g.) leave open the possibility that she was influenced by Plato or someone else in the Platonic tradition, though I have found only one oblique reference in her work (more on this, later). More importantly, however, I think that privileging a linear temporality when thinking about questions of context and meaning – where Thinker A must precede Thinker B in time in order for it to make any sense to say that Thinker A is important/essential to understanding what Thinker B meant – is probably one of primary blockages to understanding the history of political thought. Of course if context is confined to complex intentionality (Skinner 1969) then of course it would be silly to say that Monáe could be necessary to understand Plato, since Monáe could not have been in Plato’s mind; but context is far richer than the purists of linear time would have it.

` This is not to break any new theoretical ground, but I emphasize the methodological question because I see that conceptual shift as crucial to overturning centuries of “classicizing” in the service of white supremacy (Kennedy 2021). Nietzsche’s defense of “untimeliness” (Nietzsche 1980) is well-known, and in political theory we have seen his notably untimely vision employed in the tragic theorizing of Peter Euben (Euben 2003; Coles et al. 2014) and others who seek to reclaim “radical future pasts” (that is – lost possibilities from previous historical eras in the service of novel political horizons in the future), a practice which demands “both close attunement to the times and aggressive violation of their self-conception” (Brown 52, in Coles 2014). This view of the past as less canon-to-revere than toolkit-to-monkey-wrench the present (and future) has seen a wider uptake in political theory, beyond neo-tragedians, in particular via the “anachronistic” thinking championed by Margaret Leslie (Leslie 1970) and others in response to Skinner’s 1969 polemic, and even now in some “travelling” theorists (McWilliams 2014) as well. But beyond political theory and philosophy circles, the rise of “classical reception studies” (Hardwick 2003; Martindale and Thomas 2006) has helped to shift the emphasis from the stand-alone ancient text to the multiple possible texts that emerge through the ever-changing histories of how that text has been received (and thereby re-worked).

Wendy Brown frames these receptions as the curious fidelity of “critique”:

Critique passionately reengages the text, rereads, and reconsiders the text’s truth claim. In so doing, critique reasserts the importance of the text under consideration (whether a law, nation, principle, practice or treatise), its power to organize and contain us, its right to govern us. This affirmation of the text through an insistent rereading seems to me the heart of the distinction between critique and its cousins – rejection, refutation, rebuttal, dismissal. Critique, whether immanent, transcendent, genealogical, or in yet some other form, is always a rereading and as such a reaffirmation of that which it engages. It does not, it cannot, reject or demean its object. Rather, as an act of reclamation, critique takes over the object for a different project than that to which it is currently tethered. Critical theory in dark times thus affirms the times, renders them differently, reclaims them for something other than the darkness. (Brown, 54, in Coles et. al. 2014)

I take up Brown’s version of critique in this essay because it enables us to see that this taking over of the text (*Timaeus* in this case) “for a different project” is no less a reaffirmation of that text, in spite of (even because of) the altered nature of the new context from which we (now) re-write it. But I would also add, pushing Brown somewhat further, that Monáe’s particular different project calls us to shift the calculus on how to weight the ur-text (Plato) and the “act of reclamation” (Monáe). She is not just giving us an interesting footnote to Plato, engaging her superior in conversation and providing a little extra seasoning in the centuries long discourse with an “eternal” master. No, to the contrary: she tells us something essential about the world, and Plato’s thought, but her vision ought to be the primary rather than secondary one. (We need to understand *her* first in order to understand *him*). This is not to say that the dialogue is entirely unidirectional, as I hope to show in the following that Monáe’s thought also benefits from engaging in a conversation with Plato’s *Timaeus*, but I also think, with Thomas Paine, that the living have a certain priority over the dead when we’re trying to get ourselves oriented politically (Paine 2000). In America, post January 6th, “White Rage” (Anderson 2016) and the rise of “the New Jim Crow” (Alexander 2020) have expanded their targets beyond their initial African-American targets, up to and including the ostensibly universal political institutions that are seen by Trumpists and QAnons as beholden to any American deemed too “woke” to abide the longed-for past of white supremacy. Monáe may have released *Metropolis* beginning in 2007, but she speaks to the long history of oppression endured by African-Americans since at least 1619 (Hannah-Jones 2019); this history of marginalization, exploitation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young 1990) is the fraught legacy that birthed Afrofuturism as a survival-response (Hamilton 2017).

Afrofuturism speaks from within the experience of an alien abduction – from within the world of the TransAtlantic Slave Trade in which “the ships landed long ago” (Bould 2007) – where the abduction of African slaves is seen as a foundational act of modernity. Sun-Ra, George Clinton/P-Funk, Drexciya, and many other musicians (Barber et al, 2015; Bould 2007; Dery 2008; Eshun 2003, 2004; Hamilton 2017; Rollefson 2008; Womack 2013), as well as foundational writers of Afrofuturist literature like Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson (Mosley and Thomas 2000), can help us to navigate our way through a landscape that is in many ways a post-apocalypse. I turn now to discuss Monáe’s *Metropolis* directly, and the experience of a love-filled joyous liberation that she seeks, but (not to dwell in a “sunken-place” mentality) the traumas of this past are never truly past: they form the essential backdrop not just to understanding the world that created Monáe, but also the world (Cindi’s fictional 2719) that Monáe herself creates.

**From Metropolis to Wondaland**

At first glance it might seem like the *Metropolis Suite* is up to something rather different than the *Timaeus –* what after all do cyborgs have to do with an ancient story about the creation of the world, where human souls originally come from the stars?[[15]](#footnote-15) Monáe has said that she was inspired specifically to create her trilogy by the quotation from the 1929 Fritz Lang film *Metropolis*, “The mediator between head and hands must be the heart” (Smith 2019). Monáe’s heroine, Cindi Mayweather, is very much drawn with Lang’s character “Lola” in mind, as she falls afoul of the social order by being an android/cyborg who falls in love with a human being. Much like Lola in the original film, Mayweather’s love crosses the border between human and machine (in the film, between the hand and the head) and is a necessary transgression that revolutionizes an unjust present. For Monáe of course, Mayweather’s struggle is also a stand-in for the quest for racial justice in the United States, as the cyborg’s plight mirrors the dehumanization and exploitation of African-Americans used for physical labour from 1619 but fundamentally segregated from equal consideration under the law (Smith 2019). Mayweather’s Lola-figure, while an avatar for opposition to racial injustice, and perhaps even a posthuman heroine, may appear a poor fit with an alien visitation story.

We know however that Monáe is inspired by science fiction, and Afrofuturism specifically,[[16]](#footnote-16) and it is a commonplace in both SF and Afrofuturism to employ various figures of “the Other” – the monster, the cyborg, the alien, and the angelic – without carefully defining the borders between them.[[17]](#footnote-17) And Monáe blurs the distinction between cyborg and alien visitation immediately, from the very outset of the first chapter of the overt cyborg narrative in the *Metropolis Suite*. In “Violet Stars/Happy Hunting” she begins:

I'm an alien from outer space (outer space)  
I'm a cybergirl without a face a heart or a mind  
(I'm a product of the metal, I'm a product of metal, I'm a product of the man)  
See, see, see, see, see  
I'm a slave girl without a race (without a race)

So for Monáe aliens, cyborgs, and slaves share a basic kinship, such that the terms are for her interchangeable (and, to anticipate, we will see a similar alien/prisoner likeness in Plato). The basic problem for Cindi, as she articulates from the beginning of the *Metropolis Suite,* is that she is both a product of her society (“product of the man”) but also so fundamentally alienated as to feel herself as a *literal* alien. But as with Sun Ra and George Clinton and so many before her, the forced alienation that she speaks from (and which speaks to *Monáe’s* context of New World slavery, racism, and New Jim Crow) leads to an embrace of otherworldly alien-ness, taken up intentionally as a part of her reclamation and refashioning of her agency (Aghoro 2018).

Cindi’s world created her as a powerless Other, but in the song that follows “Violet Stars/Happy Hunting,” “Many Moons,” we see how the assumed identity of alien visitor will help her to navigate her liberation:

We're dancing free, but we're stuck here underground  
And everybody trying to figure they way out  
Hey hey hey hey, all we ever wanted to say  
Was chased erased and then thrown away  
And day to day, we live in a daze

And when the truth goes BANG the shouts splatter out  
(Revolutionize your lives and find a way out)  
And when you're growing down instead of growing up  
(You gotta ooo ah ah like a panther)  
Tell me are you bold enough to reach for love?

And when the world just treats you wrong  
Just come with me and I'll take you home  
No need to pack a bag  
Who put your life in the danger zone?  
You running dropping like a rolling stone  
No time to pack a bag  
You just can't stop your hurt from hanging on  
The old man dies and then a baby's born  
Chan, chan, chan, change your life  
And when the world just treats you wrong  
Just come with us and we'll take you home

Stuck “underground” (perhaps referring to the Underground Railroad) the “way out” is by “growing up” – now framed not in the sense of becoming an adult, but through a saviour-figure (Cindi) who enjoins her fellow enslaved cyborgs to “come with us and we’ll take you home.” While Monáe’s lyrics here are open to multiple interpretations, given Monáe’s explicit citation to Afrofuturism as one of her primary contexts it seems fair to infer that Cindi’s version of the Underground Railroad seeks an escape via the “violet stars” (where “growing up” then would be a literal ascension, up to the stars), and that “come with us” harkens to the spaceship deliverances of Sun Ra (*Space is the Place*) and George Clinton’s “Mothership Connection” (Barber 2015). This inference is strengthened if we also consider what Monáe says in the Wondaland Collective’s founding documents: “We believe songs are spaceships. We believe music is the weapon of the future. We believe books are stars” (Wondaland 2010). As Monáe’s alter-ego Cindi sings these songs, enjoining her fellow prisoners to come aboard the ships to escape bondage *within* the song, as Monáe encourages her listen to free themselves through the *Metropolis* songs (thus making them vehicles of escape…like a spaceship!).

Monáe continues the thematic of delivery-by-spaceship, as well the boundary-blurring between the cyborg and the alien, on the third album of the *Metropolis* trilogy, the 2013 *Electric Lady* (Suites IV & V). Here she meshes Christian and Afrofuturist imagery, but again also resonates (as we shall soon see) with the cosmology of the *Timaeus* as the “electric lady” is also the one with a “spaceship” ready to depart:

Ooh, you shock it, shake it, baby  
Electric lady, you're a star  
You got a classic kind of crazy  
But you know just who you are  
You got the look the Gods agree they wanna see  
All the birds and the bees  
Dancing with the freaks in the trees  
And watch the water turn to wine  
Out in space and out your mind  
Ooh, shock me one good time  
….  
Yeah, I'll reprogram your mind, come on, get in  
My spaceship leaves at 10  
I'm where I wanna be, just you and me  
Baby, talking on the side, as the world spins around  
Can you feel your spine unwind?  
And watch the water turn to wine  
Ooh, shock it one good time

She (Cindi Mayweather is the subject, and also the ostensible performer of the song) may just be a “star” figuratively, but Monáe’s lyrics sound like a literal riffing on the *Timaeus*: Cindi coming from outer space, beloved of the gods, back on earth in order to rescue lost souls and return them to where they belong (“out in space”).[[18]](#footnote-18)

As one can see (“dancing with the freaks,” “shock it one good time”), the emphasis here is notably more on the positive affective states that come with liberation, and in general the second and third albums of the trilogy (*ArchAndroid*, *Electric Lady*) are considerably more up-beat than in the original *Metropolis*. Monáe’s narrative comes to focus more and more on the “alien-rescue”[[19]](#footnote-19) aspects and less on the dystopian, as the trilogy evolves (and this continues with *Dirty Computer*), which also syncs up with her activism outside the confines of the fictional world of Metropolis. Among many other projects, Monáe led the creation of an artists’ collective, Wondaland, which she frames through an explicitly political origin-myth redolent with Metropolis’ escape-from-dystopia thematics:

We have created our own state, our own republic. There is grass here. Grass sprouts from toilet seats, bookshelves, ceilings and floors. Grass makes us feel good. In this state, there are no laws, there is only music. Funk rules the spirit. And punk rules the courtrooms and marketplace. Period…We have built several cities. We are always looking for a new city to live in. We have recently moved from Atlantis to Metropolis, a city of our own design. It’s the largest city in the world, but you can only see it by closing your eyes. (Wondaland 2010)

Metropolis in the Wondaland story is of course no longer the dystopia of the *Suite*, but instead is now the new Zion for the emancipated. Monáe’s artistic creation has been transformed into a new city, state, and republic, and here we find the only indirect reference to Plato in her work…the city that she has figuratively emigrated from is “Atlantis” (which is, of course the advanced city in the *Timaeus*-*Critias* that Athens must overcome, and which Plato simply made up [Gill 1977, 1979]).[[20]](#footnote-20)

**I See Politics in Your Stars, *Timaeus***

Plato’s *Timaeus* is not especially favoured in the list of classic texts of political theory or philosophy, at least in the Anglo-American canon of the 20th-21st centuries. One way of empirically documenting this is to note that in *Political Theory*, the flagship for political scientists writing “theory,” the dialogue appears in only 5 articles from 1973 (the founding) to the present, and in only one of those (Stegman 2017) is the dialogue truly featured. The *Republic*, by contrast, is mentioned in 107 articles over that same span (and is featured in most of them), but for the first forty-four years of the journal it apparently occurred to no one to take a serious look at Timaean politics. When the dialogue is not being neglected (so, mainly outside political science, in classics or philosophy), the dialogue’s politics are typically seen either in the context of Plato’s cosmology (Johansen 2008; Balassopoulos 2014; Pradeau 1997),[[21]](#footnote-21) or through a Straussian lens with the emphasis on the tensions between Socratic philosophy and Timaeus’ (questionable) “scientific”-political rhetoric (Benardete 1971; Lampert and Planeaux 1998; Zuckert 2011)[[22]](#footnote-22). The former tendency is not surprising, given the dialogue’s heavy weighting of cosmological themes, but it leads interpreters to emphasize the teleological aspects of the dialogue, which leads both toward a Plato-Aristotle convergence (the human political order ought to be oriented by our understanding of final causality in the universe) as well as the opposite (because Plato’s cosmological politics render “unity” as the primary virtue and goal, contra Aristotle’s *Politics* II).[[23]](#footnote-23)

Given the disciplinary neglect that I have already mentioned, it may not be inappropriate to say a little about the basic plot of the dialogue. Socrates is speaking with three other interlocutors when the dialogue begins, after having (apparently) just led a discussion of the *Republic* (in some form) the day before. The discussants decide to continue the conversation by putting Socrates ideal city to the test, by seeing how it acts “in motion,” which leads to a recovery of the lost history of Athens (via unnamed Egyptian priests) on the war between Atlantis and Athens. But before this can happen (it will form the text of the unfinished *Critias*), they decide that a small digression is needed…nothing less than the narration of the creation of the world, and all the living creatures on it, and also the causes of flourishing and corruption of all these various forms of life (!). Timaeus (a fictional person, from Locri in Italy) narrates this cosmic tale, which he famously calls an *eikos muthos* (often loosely translated[[24]](#footnote-24) as “likely story”), in which the earth is created as a living creature by a divine craftsman (the Demiurge) who fashions the world, surrounding stars and planets, and the creatures of the earth, out of a desire to see that all the goodness that can exist, shall exist. The details of his story will include the creation of humans (more on this, shortly), but much of Timaeus’ speech is devoted to what we would think of as explaining the basic physics, chemistry, and biology of earthly life. The dialogue was, historically, perhaps the most influential Platonic text until the rise of Newtonian physics, as it was seen as the most likely contender to the Biblical version of the creation of the world. (Broadie 2011; Johansen 2008), and was not only elevated by the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists to the apex of the Platonic curriculum, but by Medieval Christian and Islamic thinkers, as well as forming the basis for Renaissance cosmology (Dillon 1996; Witt 2013).

There are two main passages where Platonic characters describe the extraterrestrial origins of human beings, one in the *Phaedrus[[25]](#footnote-25)* and the other in the *Timaeus*. I agree with the majoritarian position on Platonic chronology, seeing the *Phaedrus* as part of the middle phase and the *Timaeus* as a product of his later period[[26]](#footnote-26). This separation of the two discussions (in different texts, over time, and across stylistic genre) is significant, in as much as the general idea that Plato espouses across these passages, one stated by Socrates (in the *Phaedrus*) and the other by an otherwise unknown philosopher from Locri (Timaeus, in the *Timaeus*), is roughly consonant with the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis (transmigration of the soul).[[27]](#footnote-27) What makes this overt Pythagoreanism significant (and metempsychosis is also discussed and defended in depth by Socrates in the *Republic*,[[28]](#footnote-28) as well as three other dialogues) is that it was a heterodox doctrine that enjoyed little social or public support,[[29]](#footnote-29) so Plato is unlikely to have been trying to esoterically undermine these otherwise sympathetically portrayed ideas (as Zuckert [2011] alleges) since he would have known that both Socrates and Timaeus would immediately appear ridiculous (at best) or politically dangerous (at worst) by their proclamation of such a doctrine.

So I think there is some reason to take the extraterrestrial thesis seriously, even though it is presented in quasi-mythic fashion.[[30]](#footnote-30) Some modern commentators have thought that Timaeus seems to take the wind out his own sails, by saying “a description of a likeness of the changeless, being a description of a mere likeness will be merely likely…Don’t therefore be surprised, Socrates, if on many matters concerning the gods and the whole world of change we are unable in every respect and on every occasion to render consistent and accurate account. You must be satisfied if our account is as likely as any, remembering that both I and you who are sitting in judgment on it are merely human, and should not look for anything more than a {likely story} (*eikon muthos,* better rendered as “rational myth”) in such matters” (*Timaeus* 29). But as Burnyeat argues (noted above), this is not a reason to discount the importance of the narrative that follows, but instead we should see Plato as attempting to join *logos* and *muthos* in such a way that they complement rather than oppose one another.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Timaeus recounts the Demiurge’s creation of humans, as follows:

So speaking, he turned again to the same bowl in which he had mixed the soul of the universe and poured into it what was left of the former ingredients, mixing them in much the same fashion as before, only not quite so pure, but in a second and third degree. And when he had compounded the whole, he divided it up into as many souls as there are stars, and allotted each soul to a star. And mounting them on their stars, as if on chariots, he showed them the nature of the universe, and told them the laws of their destiny. To ensure fair treatment for each at his hands, the first incarnation would be one and the same for all and each would be sown in its appropriate instrument of time and be born as the most god-fearing of living things; and human kind being of two sexes…And if a person lived a good life throughout the due course of his time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star, to live a life of happiness that agreed with his character. (41d-42c)

Unfortunately for humans, it seems that most of our souls were not particularly adept at living a “good life” but instead we fell into bad ways (through little fault of our own, as we shall shortly see) – at least those of us still around on this earth – due to an over-fondness for the agitations (emotions, bodily pleasures) caused by life in a material body. The way back to our stars, for we fallen-but-not-yet ascended, is to live a life in which we try to pattern ourselves on the orderliness of the circular motion of the heavens (including our home-stars), though this will (for many) mean that our souls transition through various kinds of human and animal bodies before we eventually get ourselves sorted:

On the other hand, if a man has seriously devoted himself to the love of learning and to true wisdom, if he has exercised these aspects of himself above all, then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine, should truth come within his grasp….human nature can partake of immortality…constantly caring for his divine part as he does, keeping well-ordered the guiding spirit that lives within him, he must indeed be supremely happy. (90b-c)

What to make of this description of human life on earth, where we are essentially wandering aliens, deluded about how to achieve happiness, and only really liberated when we can *leave* the earth? Seth Bernadete, oddly enough, comes closer than any contemporary interpreter to hitting on my Monáean “prison planet” view of the *Timaeus*, though it is not a view that he credits to Plato – I suppose one could say that we agree with each other in an upside-down sense, then.[[32]](#footnote-32) By way of a section-by-section commentary on the dialogue,[[33]](#footnote-33) he contends that Timaeus’ cosmological doctrines are presented by Plato in order to show either their vacuity (at best) or outright moral repulsiveness, in order to lead readers instead to a Socratic version of philosophy (which is entirely unspoken, in this dialogue). For Benardete the final implications of Timaeus’ speech are quite bleak: “The best human life consists in a return to our ancestral nature, before generation had corrupted the highest part of ourselves; it is best not to be born (cf. 90d5-6 with *Lgs* 801e7-8). The price Timaeus pays for his accounting entirely for man in cosmological terms is despair: the beautiful is the standard for the good (87c4-5).” (Benardete 1971, 63). The “return” is, of course, the escape from planet earth and the return of our soul to its home star, and for Benardete this is a teaching of gloom that his Plato (and his character, the earthly erotic Socrates) cannot countenance. While there are some details to quibble with in Bernadete, his version of the basic Timaean story is marvellously evocative – we just have to stand him on his head with Monáe’s help to see this. There is indeed something “off” about the Timaean picture of human life on this planet, but given what Plato says (via Socrates, in many places…*Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*) elsewhere there is every reason to think that facing this despair is what Plato *wants* us to do.[[34]](#footnote-34) Benardete was not alone in seeing this “despairing return” in the dialogue; this is also what the Middle Platonists and Gnostics saw (hence they as much as Plato are the original prison-planeters).[[35]](#footnote-35) With Monáe’s eyes, however, I hope that we can see that despair, while a very real kind of response to the condition of imprisonment, is the beginning of wisdom but not the end of the journey.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In the *Timaeus* we do not see Plato making any specific connections between the fallen star-souls and the institutional conditions of Athenian politics, though 1) the background framing of this day’s discussion, within the text, should make us suspicious of any attempts at an apolitical reading of the text. Socrates, Timaeus et al. have already been talking about politics, the previous day (referencing a disquisition by Socrates that certainly sounds a lot like what we know as the *Republic*), and the dialogue that follows the *Timaeus*, the *Critias*, is explicitly about the political and military struggle between Athens and Atlantis. And even in the *Timaeus* itself, of course, that (“earlier”) war is very much an informing context of the discussion about the nature of the cosmos. However, 2) Timaeus makes a very pointed criticism of some general features of the democratic polis which are also particularly relevant to Athens as well of course, since the corruption of the individual soul is essentially the failing of the society in which it was raised:

for no one is wilfully evil. A man becomes evil, rather, as a result of one or another corrupt condition of his body and an uneducated upbringing…(86e)

when men whose constitutions are bad in this way have bad forms of government where bad civic speeches are given, both in public and in private, and where, besides, no studies that could remedy this situation are at all pursued by people from their youth on up, that is how all of us who are bad come to be that way – the products of two causes both entirely beyond our control. It is the begetters far more than the begotten, and the nurturers far more than the nurtured, that bear the blame for all this. (87b)

While Timaeus’ account cannot place the original blame on social and political institutions (the star-soul initially is born “god-fearing”), across all subsequent iterations of the soul’s journey on earth in a material body, the institutions are singled out as the primary agency for the moral and intellectual health of the soul. To be a fallen-soul is to be (mainly) a prisoner of the polis in which one is born; escape, our return to our star and a happy life, is something we are going to need help achieving.

**Conclusions**

So let’s tie some of these threads together. Given the political signalling that Plato is happy to provide on the surface of the text, I don’t think it is much of a leap to make the connection between the fallen star-souls of the *Timaeus*, the “bad government” of the *Timaeus*, and the “prisoners” of *Republic* VII (515a-e). The human condition, essentially, is one of alienation, imprisonment, and a desire for a liberation-as-escape that is not solely up to the individual to realize. Plato presents us with at least three different ways of thinking about “the carceral” (across his dialogues) as a background condition in human life, and while there are resonances between these three perspectives there are also substantial tensions (at least in thinking about the ethical and political implications for individual souls[[37]](#footnote-37)). In the *Timaeus* it is the earth that is a prison for the fallen star-soul, while in the *Phaedo* it is the body (or, materiality more generally) that imprisons the soul with its desires (82c-d), and then in the *Republic* (and secondarily, the *Timaeus*) it is the educational/cultural/political “Cave” that enchains and distorts our ability to perceive the truth of the world. In each case Plato offers an abstract perspective on his target – world, body, education – that provides no specific practical or political application, but offers enough critical perspective on the world that he has been taken as inspiration for a variety of political and religious dissidents (Gnostics, against the “Rulers of the World” in the Sethian Gnostic version [Turner 2001], both Left [Badiou 2013] and Right [Zuckert 2011] versions of ‘the Cave’ as revealing a hidden cultural hegemony that inveigles the citizenry).

Adding Janelle Monáe’s vantage allows us to attend to these (oft-neglected)[[38]](#footnote-38) features of Timaean politics: outsiders of all stripes[[39]](#footnote-39) (most particularly those of the African diaspora, in the context of America and the Black Atlantic, but expanding beyond this particular experience of “alienation”) find themselves imprisoned, politically but as importantly mentally, by cultural and political institutions that teach them falsehoods about the world and themselves, and which hide or cut off paths of emancipation. Against these chains, revolution is very much a proper response (“Many Moons”). Monáe (following Sun Ra) offers us a new perspective on earthly life in Plato, from which we can draw quite radical political inspiration, though Monáe’s text is itself such a rich tapestry of mythic imagery that is as ambiguous and fecund in its own way as Plato’s (so other possible orientations could as easily emerge from her…on materiality, virtuality, minstrelsy, artistic isolation, even posthumanity – see English and Kim 2013; Gipson 2016).[[40]](#footnote-40) Monáe’s story of alien-wandering, imprisonment and eventual liberation comes as an epiphany from a very specific historical path, and is oriented toward a future political world in which alienation might no longer be the fundamental ruling principle. Her cyborg rebels are the heirs to the African diaspora that resulted from the TransAtlantic Slave Trade, but whether their sonic spaceships can deliver on the promise of “return” depends very much on the political institutions their human creators are able to craft in the very uncertain 2020s.[[41]](#footnote-41)

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1. For a sample of performances see this 1979 live performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZwW3tw86SY> and, (post-1993): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1ToFXHW5pg> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Full movie available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCalqwsicls> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Was Sonny’s visitation real or metaphorical? Are imprisonment and escape best thought of as figurative or literal? Yes! [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Not every aspect of a “one true Plato,” but rather one of the many necessary faces that Plato wears today. See the section “Contextual Misapprehensions” for a discussion of interpretive methodology, especially bearing in mind Christina Tarnopolsky’s multiple-genre lens for thinking about Plato (Tarnopolsky 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Kennedy 2021 for a summary and discussion of the recent controversies (focused on Classics as a discipline, but relevant to the larger conversation about “civilization”), and for a set of proposals for how to dismantle and reform our academic practices and institutions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, the protests by the Reedies Against Racism addressed to the HUM 110 requirement: <https://www.reed.edu/reed_magazine/march2017/articles/features/hum-110.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See chapter 4 in (Zuckerberg 2018) for alt-Right texts and blogs that focus on the theme of “saving Western Civilization.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Comprising *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (Suite I, 2007), *The ArchAndroid* (Suite II and III, 2010), and *The Electric Lady* (Suite IV and V, 2013). While technically not a part of the trilogy, Cindi’s story continues (in part) in the “emotion picture” movie for Monáe’s subsequent album, *Dirty Computer* (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Linking Cindi to the many examples of forced or unethical experimentation on African Americans, such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study 1932-72 or the case of Henrietta Lacks’s DNA. See Smith (2019) for a thorough summary. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Note that Afrofuturism as an umbrella term can also occlude, via its generality, as Nnedi Okorafor points out. She has coined the term “Africanfuturism” to register some of her caution: “Africanfuturism is similar to ‘Afrofuturism’ in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West” (Okorafor 2020). While throughout this essay I use Afrofuturism without qualification, since all of the main figures I connect with it (Sun Ra, George Clinton, Janelle Monáe, Octavia Butler) are indeed centred in North America rather than Africa, it is worth considering in what ways an “Africanfuturist Plato” would differ from the version I offer here. My hunch is that the themes of alienation and imprisonment would not figure prominently, but instead we would highlight how *Timaeus’* Egyptian wisdom connects with “Africanjujuism,” as well as the futuristic aspects of a non-Earth-based humanity. Okorafor’s Africanfuturism “is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with "what could have been" and more concerned with "what is and can/will be” (Okorafor 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. It also needs to be said that contrary to Monáe’s relative optimism, my version of Plato’s *Timaeus* is also consistent with “Afropessimism” (Wilderson 2020), and in revising this essay I will include a discussion of Wilderson in the main body of the text. Thanks to my discussant at the University of Victoria Political Science Speaker Series, for this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Padilla Peralta 2015 (“From Damocles to Socrates” in *Eidolon* [*https://eidolon.pub/*](https://eidolon.pub/)) discusses a number of classical receptions across hip-hop, from the sword of Damocles in Kanye West’s “Power” video to Jay-Z asking “*Is pious pious ‘cause God loves pious?/ Socrates asked: whose bias do y’all seek?”* a la *Euthyphro* in “No Church in the Wild.” “Classical reception studies” is itself now a booming field, since the turn of the century, most especially the work of Hardwick and Martindale (see Hardwick 2003, Hardwick and Stray 2011, Martindale and Thomas 2006, et al.). Ancient Greek influence on “SF” has also been the subject of some discussion (Fredericks 1980) though sadly Plato himself is noticeably absent from “Plato’s Stepchildren: SF and the Classics,” as the title references a *Star Trek* episode rather than a specific Platonic connection (see Brown 2008). While there is good reason that Lucian of Samosata, a Greek-speaking Syrian of the second century CE, is considered to be the first writer of “true” SF (Brown 2008) – his *True History* narrates a satirical space opera involving a journey to the moon and a battle between rival factions of aliens – on my reading Plato also has a fair claim to be considered, given the fanciful alternative past, complete with fallen star-souls and a lost high-tech Atlantean civilization, in the *Timaeus/Critias*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I would note a similar contrast of approach with Vandiver’s (2016) Plato/Eldritch Cleaver piece. “Plato in Folsom Prison.” While in some ways I follow his path, in bringing together “Black” and “Classical” traditions (in ways that question the boundaries and identities of both), in terms of methodology Vandiver is somewhat more conservative in the sense that his search for traces of Platonic influence in *Soul on Ice* (asking “What do Cleaver’s classical affiliations say about his broader theoretical project?” p.787) is still rooted in linear temporal interpretation where only the *prior* can serve as context for the *later* (even as Cleaver may challenge some of his classical “roots”). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Gipson (2016) and Smith (2019) for a discussion of sources Monáe explicitly references. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Details of the narrative of the *Timaeus* will appear in the next section. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Though she has hardly been ignored by academics, the secondary “canon” for Monáe studies is not especially deep and consists essentially in these: (Aghoro 2018; English and Kim 2013; Hassler-Forest 2014; Murchison 2018; Gipson 2016; Hines 2020; Jones 2018; Miller 2015; Painia 2014; Royster 2013; Smith 2019; Valnes 2017; Van Veen 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Sun Ra frequently refers to himself as an alien and an angel, for instance, in the video performance cited above. But see also Barber (2015), Rollefson (2008), Eshun (2003) and Szwed (2020) for the more general conceptual and historical border-crossing between these figures. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Christian imagery/theology of a “deliverer” is a notable difference from Plato, in that no individual savior/intermediary is present in *Timaeus*. One might wonder how much Plato’s Socrates could be a stand-in for such a figure, but his presence is notably subdued in this dialogue. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. While “alien abduction” is a cultural trope that garners 2.5 million Google hits, “alien rescue” has no such cultural reach (there is a popular immersive learning tool with this name, though it refers to rescuing the aliens rather than the other way round; a book with the title *Alien Rescue* was just published in 2020 but this is a romance novel where the aliens are primarily hostile). Alien rescue, however, from Sun Ra to Octavia Butler’s *Lillith’s Brood* trilogy (Butler 2012), is a staple of Afrofuturism, and seems worthy of cultural recognition. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As far as I can tell this refers is to “New Atlantis,” an alter-ego of Atlanta’s Black creative scene, and doesn’t have much to do with Plato per se (other than his incidental role as creator of the myth). See Monáe’s reference to New Atlantis here (and also just a terribly tone-deaf interviewer): <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/apr/02/janelle-monae-interview-david-bowie-prince> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Perhaps not surprisingly some have even found posthumanist themes in *Timaeus*, such as “plant intelligence” (Carpenter 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. While Zuckert focuses on the contrast between Socrates and Timaeus as contrasting types of philosopher, Lampert and Planeaux instead see a Platonic “imperialism” in Plato’s repurposing of the Atlantis myth for in the service of a kind of philosophical hegemony. In political theory, it is to their credit that Straussian scholars (for however much I disagree with most of their interpretive commitments, and substantive arguments) have been the crucial exception to the neglect I am talking about. Seth Benardete even taught (in a philosophy department, notably) an entire seminar on the *Timaeus* in 1981 (preserved by the New School, amazingly, though the audio quality makes it difficult to listen to for long stretches: <https://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NA0015_Platos_Timaeus> ). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Pradeau 1997 is emphatic on the unity thesis, though even heterodox “hermeneutical” approaches like Sallis 1999, which focus instead on the disturbing, ambiguous, and unstable elements of the dialogue (stemming from the importance of the “third” of the dialogue, the *chora* (homeland, territory, but also container, nurse, mother) see Timaean politics through a cosmic (or even metaphysical) lens. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Burnyeat (167-186, in Partenie 2009) sees this as a fundamental mis-translation that leads most translations astray, preferring instead “rational/reasonable myth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Dillon (1980) for a discussion of the “fall of the soul” in the *Phaedrus*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. So here too I depart from the otherwise careful scholarship of Catherine Zuckert (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The general Pythagorean basis for much of Timaeus’ speech has been frequently noted (Benardete 1971; Broadie 2011; Johansen 2008), most especially with reference to metempsychosis and the function of number and shape. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Dolgert 2015, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Indeed, following Detienne and Vernant (1989) on the hegemonic theology of carnivorous sacrifice we could describe Pythagoreanism as downright heretical. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For more on the “serious” interpretation of Platonic myth, see Brisson 1998; Dolgert 2015; Frank 2018; Partenie 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Brisson (1998), for instance, for a discussion that opposes *logos* and *muthos* more than Burnyeat’s, but which still sees a basically complementary relationship between them (though with clear hierarchy that privileges *logos*) because of the important utility of mythic rhetoric to assist philosophic reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. We concur on the essence (or: one important corollary) of what Timaeus’ account means for human life; we disagree on what to do with this (his Plato offers Timaeus’ account to implicitly criticize it, while my Monáen Plato endorses it). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. In his title he refers to “Timaeus’ science fiction” (Benardete 1971) but his use of the SF terminology is only superficially related to how I see Plato, Monáe, and modern SF intermingling. He is criticizing Timaeus’ account as a fictionalized approximation of what we could call “natural science” (since Timaeus discusses cosmology, physics, chemistry, biology, zoology, psychology, etc.), so in effect he is calling Timaean science a load of horseshit. He does not make any effort to show how Plato engages in the genre conventions of fiction (as Gill 1979 does) or SF, my particular concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Though as I have argued, earlier, even if he did not intend such a response that would hardly disallow us from taking that step, since I grant Monáe at least as much interpretive weight. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See Albinus/Alcinous (c. 2nd century CE) and the Middle Platonists on the “fall of the soul” (inspired mainly by their readings of the *Phaedrus*, though the essential content of the fallen-star-souls myth is the same as the *Timaeus*), and the Gnostic (especially “Sethian” Gnostic, though also of the “Barbelo” variety as well) uptake of this notion (Dillon 1980; Dillon 1996; Turner 2001; Witt 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Much as Camus says, in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, that the problem with the discourse of “the absurd” is not the absence of cosmically ordained meaning in human life, but rather the view that this ends the conversation. No, says Camus – we don’t end inquiry at “the absurd” – that is the foundation that we must work from (and through) (Camus 2013/1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Recall again that for Plato these souls are not necessarily or even primarily “human” souls. See Dolgert 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. There is a fair amount of alienation in Straussian accounts, of course, though it tends not to be framed as such (perhaps because of the Hegelian/Marxist connotations of the term). So in some sense the Monáen version of Plato is not such a strange one after all. But what is strange (in a good way), I think, is that (unlike a Straussian Plato) an Afrofuturist Plato would self-consciously embrace myth, science fiction, politics, “sonic” posthumanism (Eshun, Hassler-Forest, Weheliye), and “Black Lives Matter” as necessary pieces in the effort to emancipate the soul. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The list in “Many Moons,” for instance, includes “hood rat, crack whore, stepchild, black girl, misfit, tomboy, overweight, HIV, promiscuous,” signaling Monáe’s universalizing tendencies (stemming from particular experiences of exclusion/marginalization). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Like Christina Tarnopolsky’s Plato, we could talk about a “Rashomon Metropolis” as well as Plato’s “Rashomon Republic” (Tarnopolsky 2010, 2014)). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Thanks also to a discussion at the University of Victoria, I also realize that it may be worth adding an addendum on what Plato gives to Monáe, since I have emphasized (throughout) what Monáe gives to Plato. While some of the more radical aspects of Monáe don’t gain much from being associated with Plato, I do see two specific benefits: 1) pairing the two thinkers amplifies the power of Monáe’s voice, by revealing the deep historical precedent for her liberation narrative (there is cultural capital in reclaiming “our” shared past); 2) Plato’s non-anthropocentrism could push Monáe into a more avowedly posthuman emancipation (animal, ecological, machinic). Both of these points deserve longer mention, in the main argument (above). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)