Global Hip Hop Studies
Volume 6 Number 1
 https://doi.org/10.1386/ghhs_00107_7
Received 1 May 2024; Accepted 14 March 2025; Published Online July 2025

DIVE IN THE ARCHIVE

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# Rap beyond the Afterfuture

**ABSTRACT**

*A comparison of two visions of the future from the year 2000:* Deltron 3030 *by the trio of the same name and* Welcome to the Afterfuture *by Mike Ladd. Many aspects of these albums are considered, including production and even the cover art, although the focus is on the lyrics. Del the Funky Homosapien draws on* The Matrix, Ghost in the Shell *and* Akira *and is broadly concerned with the plight of humanity and the downtrodden, while Ladd riffs on* Star Trek, Star Wars *and* Blade Runner *and foregrounds racial concerns. The sound and range of references on* Afterfuture *take the idea of a syncretic future to the extreme. The trajectory of Del's rap leads to the blaring 'Memory Loss' and the seeming eradication of hope, while Ladd memorializes Amadou Diallo and 'all those killed by cops' in a surprisingly gentle and expansive finale. The close consideration allows us to wonder what the imagination of rappers (and others in hip hop) can uniquely offer as we envision the future – and why there has been so little future-oriented rap.*

**KEYWORDS**

future
afrofuturism
science fiction
metaphor
intertextuality
syncreticism
memory

When I wrote a slim volume entitled *The Future* (Montfort 2017) a few years ago, I discussed the idea that 'the future is an unwritten book' – a quote from Joe Strummer (1952–2002), lead singer of The Clash. I bemoaned the then-recent death of Leonard Cohen (1934–2016), referring to his song 'The Future'. I'm extending that discussion now by considering the futures presented by two rappers, with their practice emerging from the hip hop culture that formed in the blight of post-industrial New York City in the 1970s. The hip hop

imagination makes a special contribution to our futures. As Roy Christopher wrote, focusing on sampling in his manifesto-like book *Dead Precedents: How Hip-Hop Defines the Future*:

> Being made up of past bits of recorded music, hip-hop is willfully unmoored from the flow of time. The singularity of making recordings out of other recordings is neither a rapture we can return from nor a rupture we can repair. It's a break from the natural order, a repurposing of the past for all new futures.
>
> (2018: 27)

Christopher sees hip hop and cyberpunk as related ways of imagining the future. I propose to supplement his book, and my own, by focusing closely on two albums that are explicitly about the future, digging underground and returning to an earlier time to do so. I am going to put on my festive new year's goggles from Y2K, the ones where you looked through one of the zeros with your left eye, one of the zeros with your right eye, and then had one zero left over for your third eye. I will try to open all three eyes and all three of my ears: my left ear, my right ear and my final front ear. And then I will turn to two albums from 2000: Mike Ladd's *Welcome to the Afterfuture* and the eponymous album *Deltron 3030* featuring the trio of Del the Funky Homosapien, Dan the Automator and DJ Kid Koala in their futuristic personae.

My focus here (based on my own background, experience and interests) is the lyrical content of these two albums, but I will do my best to recognize that they are intentional collections of music with important sonic elements beyond what is rapped on them. I will extend the discussion to paratexts (Genette 1997) as well, including both the non-audio elements of the albums (e.g. their covers) and interviews with the rappers.

First, a brief prelude. By 1980, 'Vicious Rap' by Sweet Tee (aka Tanya Winley) had already shown an important element of future-engaged rap, social consciousness. Before the release of 'The Message' (1982, Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five), she railed against the lack of government services, high taxes and having been falsely arrested while rapping. As Tricia Rose explained in her important study, *Black Noise*, rap's development was not a simple extension of existing African diasporic traditions; the practice came about, along with other elements of hip hop culture (graffiti writing, breakdancing and DJing), in the crucible of urban decay (Rose 1994).

A different direction of engagement blared from 'Planet Rock' (1982) by Afrika Bambaataa & the Soul Sonic Force. Lyrically, there are only a few utopian hints: 'it's time to chase your dreams' and 'our world is free'. Instead of looking away to space as the place for a better life (as Sun Ra did), we hear of 'this Mother Earth, which is our rock'. There is clear innovation and engagement with the future in how electronic music fused with hip hop in such an unusual way that, as producer Rick Rubin said, 'we barely considered it a rap record' (Anon. 2012: n.pag.). The result, with a melody from Kraftwerk, was transformative and essential to the development of modern dance music. The release and success of this single also furthered the project of The Organization, or, by 1982, what was called the Zulu Nation. What is now the *Universal* Zulu Nation promotes hip hop as a global and fully inclusive community (Keyes 2004).

Several others have articulated specific futures over the years: The jazzy Dream Warriors on several tracks of *And Now the Legacy Begins* (1990); Kool

Kieth via his Dr. Octagon persona on *Dr. Octagonecologyst* (1996); OutKast in *ATLiens* (1996). To bring some focus, though, let us turn to those two future-oriented albums that dropped on the cusp of the millennium, *Welcome to the Afterfuture* and *Deltron 3030.*

## MIKE LADD, *WELCOME TO THE AFTERFUTURE*

Ladd, who was born in Boston and is now based in Paris, delivers what might be the highest of high-concept hip hop music. Yet his album is grounded in sonic specifics, and he put it together when he was living and listening in the Bronx:

> The noise outside is what fueled those records. My upstairs neighbor played nothing but Jay Z; downstairs was a Mexican Evangelical church with screaming sermons, my neighbors blasted everything from merengue, salsa, dancehall, reggaeton and house to Hot 97 through my window. I needed all that.
>
> (Khan 2018: n.pag.)

He forged his *Afterfuture* in this mix of sounds. His starship, and his future, exists in the space of religious, monarchic and capitalist histories – and of their collision.

Vocally, *Welcome to the Afterfuture* incorporates elements of post-beat and spoken word poetry. Ladd skips ahead just a few decades from the millennial release date. While oscillating lyrically through many topics, the album does actually address the concept of the future in compelling ways, several of which are not seen in mainstream science fiction or other imaginative contexts. And quite apart from the Company Flow collaboration 'Bladerunners' (a highly sexual and intertextual track), Ladd's synthesizer, sampling and production joins with other vocal, turntable, keyboard and bass contributions to create an uncanny melange of sound in which the lyrics and concepts resonate.

On the opening track, '5,000 Miles West of the Future', Ladd activates a metaphorical understanding of *time as space:* Instead of missing our proposed future by some amount of time, we missed it by a spatial distance. In this song's first verse he mentions to the future by saying 'it's come and gone like California fires', referring to an environmental crisis that has only worsened since the album's release, and promises to become a frequently repeated occurrence. The attitude of the song is expressed mainly in the hook, however, which situates the year as 2029. He bemoans false promises of the future: 'Where's my floating car, my utopia,/ my Mars colonies, like it's supposed to be?' As I hear it, the lyrics are essentially about how we missed the potential for a collective future by setting out further to the West, like individualistic cowboys. Perhaps these lyrics resonate in this way today because space travel, once a collective venture considered to be 'for all mankind', has become a tourist activity for billionaires. Or, as pointed out to me, Ladd could see the future in Africa while we (in the United States) might be displaced thousands of miles west of it.

The driving flow and wild conflations that riddle *Welcome to the Afterfuture* are in clear evidence in one of the seemingly more repetitive and less discussed tracks on the album, 'Red Eye to Jupiter (Starship N——a)'. In this song, Ladd declares himself the 'big-bang jigaboo […] the ultimate soul-funk brother/ ready to uplift one another', and thus joins braggadocio and the cosmic to

still-current concerns about the Black community. A mention of the witness protection programme makes a connection to present-day criminal justice. Ladd repudiates the white science fictional heroes of *Star Trek* (he says Kirk has put a price on his head) and *Star Wars* (declaring he is the real Skywalker) while evoking Babylon, describing the rituals of Santeria, and producing a litany in which he introduces gods and kings to Citibank. Not only does 'Babylon' clearly indicate the Rastafarian use of the term to mean European oppression, it also hints at *Babylon 5,* which itself embodies anti-colonialist ideas.

The main title of this particular track, 'Red Eye to Jupiter', brings together one of the most tedious and mundane aspects of aviation, the wearying overnight flight, with the most spectacular meteorological phenomenon in the known universe. The *real* title of the song is in those parentheses above – Ladd begins with those two words, and they are repeated incessantly in the hook. Forget the Starship Enterprise, with its normatively white crew – however devoted to civil rights Gene Roddenbery might have been – and with a name that resonates with capitalism. If the track is less musically innovative than other cuts on *Welcome to the Afterfuture* ('pretty much just Björk's "Pluto" instilled with spaced-out black rage' [P. 2000: n.pag.]) there is still something important here lyrically, something heard throughout the album. Ladd is not just raging in space. He is constructing a synthetic and syncretic future, aware of culture rather than trying to replace it with something completely new, something technologically clean and perfect.

Ladd's starship is named to align with Sun Ra's notion that space is the place for a positive future of Black unity. But instead of Jupiter, the place in space that Ladd looks to is 'Planet 10', the title of the third track. Perhaps this planet, out beyond Pluto (still considered a planet at the time) can accommodate some of the characters Ladd name-checks here: the Prince of Egypt, Tarzan and Josephine Baker?

The album's remarkable conclusion marks the day of Amadou Diallo's killing – 'Feb. 4, '99 (For All Those Killed by Cops)'. While stringent vocally and instrumentally at its turning point, the tone is overwhelmingly gentle and builds to Ladd's assertion is that 'the world is too beautiful for that'. He joins cultural elements from across registers, be they brand names like Kraft Macaroni & Cheese and La-Z-Boy or sacred references: 'Jesus, Vishnu, Mohit, Taurus, Osiris, Odin, Muhammad' who 'all wait in line for seconds just like me'.

## DEL THE FUNKY HOMOSAPIEN, *DELTRON 3030*

Del, getting into the character of Deltron Zero for this collaboration with producer Dan the Automator and DJ Kid Koala, skips ahead 1030 years in this eponymous concept album. Sort of: Many of the references are rooted in particular technologies circa 2000. While Ladd may be lord of high-concept rap, Del has been given similar designations within the underground. He has been called the 'king of oddball and abstract hip-hop' (Wesley 2018), and this collaboration would bolster his claim to that crown. The story of the *Deltron 3030* album continues in a narrative sequel to the original album (*Event 2,* 2013), and the latest news is that as the trio gear up for a 25th anniversary tour, they're also working on a third studio album. To focus on the first, most famous album, however, with its evident Afrofuturist inspirations: It has some traditional comedy and a track recorded on an amusingly-named early

German dictating machine, the Assmann 640. 'Legend has it that the lyrics were written in less than two weeks' (Zasa 2022: n.pag.). On this album's track '3030' Del boasts about how he 'battle[s] advanced through centuries of hip-hop legacy'. But its critique of our economic and political systems, although laced with humour, nevertheless has more than a glimmer of seriousness to it.

'Virus' was the first song written for the album and clearly expresses its dystopian vision and its message of resistance. On this track, Del describes developing computer malware 'to bring dire straits to your environment/ crush your corporations with a mild touch/ trash your whole computer system and revert you to papyrus'. His virus/papyrus rhyme is not just phonetically innovative; it recalls an African history of papermaking and of the organization of knowledge, beginning in Egypt. So, what is the rationale for the havoc Deltron Zero promises to wreak? The global corporations and governments 'don't wanna unify us/ so fuck it, total anarchy and can't nobody stop us'.

What is going on in 'Virus', as is often the case in science fiction, seems to be much more situated in the moment of the album than in 3030. Deltron Zero uses a modem to send the virus out. He declares that 'no Microsoft or enhanced DOS will impede' and refers to the Y2K bug. Del works to crash hard drives and to bring down the White House. (Oddly, those now in the White House itself have worked to bring technologies of disinformation to bear on the American public while also, as of early 2025, dropping the United States's cyberwarfare actions against Russia.) Del refers to the FBI's Carnivore system, future ghettos, and a 'global apartheid' brought on by 'peacekeepers' – intertwining the workings of occupying armies (organized by the United Nations, presumably) with the way the police dominate and divide in the United States.

The present of 2000 (still lingering today, politically if not with regard to modem use) does not just poke into the future in particular details such as these. The basic concerns of 'Virus', and of *Deltron 3030* overall, are corporations and globalism, vectorialist forces working to unify flows of money and power in a sinister way – to amass capital and build empire. Meanwhile, they aim to prevent another sort of unity, the connection between people that is necessary for the survival and thriving of the human race, the homosapien.

Del does not claim to be a prophet or visionary: 'I'd be at my Del shows, and people would be coming up to me like, "Deltron, Deltron!" In a frenzy or something […]. They'll start asking me questions about the future like I'm some kind of guru' (Anon. 2014: n.pag.). While he says that he wanted to offer something unconventional, he also states that his emphasis was on providing entertainment. Yet a review of the album finds Del to be a 'surprisingly acute social critic' (Anon. 2008: n.pag.). Del describes reading and viewing science fiction extensively, and reading about how to write science fiction, as he wrote the songs on *Deltron 3030.* So perhaps it is no surprise that fans heard, and believed they should heed, important warnings about global capitalism in Del's verses – as well as suggestions for how to resist this force. Perhaps some of the ways Del envisioned a system of global order and control do not ring true in early 2025, as the world seems to spiral into disarray. Other statements are extremely apt, though. In 'Turbulence', for instance: 'No president – we have a ruler'.

While the trajectory of Ladd's album takes it to a peaceful and memorial place, Del's ends with 'Memory Loss', its upbeat and celebratory trumpet a contrast to his bitter complaints about individuals not learning

algebra and hating children while '[the] city's burning overhead […] in this post-apocalypse'.

## HIP TO NOW, HOP TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Ladd's touchstones are *Star Trek, Star Wars,* and *Blade Runner;* Del, on the other hand, brings *The Matrix, Ghost in the Shell,* and *Akira* into play. Ladd often drives ahead furiously with his flow, while Del delivers his bars almost as if in casual conversation with the audience. Ladd's 'Starship N——a' cries out for a desperately needed future for Black people specifically, while Deltron Zero speaks against corporate and technological hegemony and strives to give voice to 'the homosapien' overall. The two album covers are strikingly different, too. *Welcome to the Afterfuture* features a shadowy black and white mess of pylons and cables, with type in red; *Deltron 3030* has a line of people entering a clean, immense golden sphere via a walkway. The former image suggests the shattered future of *Terminator.* The latter (as sinister as it looks, it is actually a photo of the 1939 New York World's Fair) seems like it captures more of the monolithic world of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis.*

Even though they both diverge from the mainstream sharply, Ladd and Del split off into different quadrants. What they have in common is an awareness that the future has to be built out of shards of the present, using technology subversively. In other words, they both embrace a hip hop future.

When the United States Postal Service issued hip hop stamps in 2020, these reflected four well-known figures in the culture: the MC, the DJ, the graffiti artist and the breaker. In the first manifestation of the Universal Hip-Hop Museum, however, which opened as a pop-up space around the same time, there was a special system called Breakbeat Narratives, developed by D. Fox Harrell's MIT Center for Advanced Virtuality in collaboration with Microsoft. It featured these four well-known icons along with a fifth figure, one who is also represented on the site of the Universal Zulu Nation:[1] Knowledge.

KRS-One presented an influential definition of hip hop by directly breaking it down. As he explained in his and Marley Marl's 'Hip Hop Lives' (2007),

> Hip is the knowledge, hop is the movement
> Hip and hop is intelligent movement

Knowledge, then, is not something incidentally adjacent to hip hop culture. It is an essential element, even if it is not localized in one performer. The breaker most clearly shows how movement works, the DJ lays down a beat and brings together samples, the graffiti writer spreads messages and memorializes important fallen figures (knowledge-bringers) through visual art. The MC, or rapper, has the special task of taking classic metaphors and elaborating, questioning and combining them (Lakoff and Johnson 1989). Rappers generally, and these two, certainly, weave narratives as well, including ones of resistance.

## A FUTURE OF SAMPLES AND FLOW

When I wrote *The Future,* I was not trying to expound concepts from the particular field known as futures studies. I wrote about how forward-looking cultural concepts, described in writing or modelled in practical ways, have helped us *build* and *develop* the future. I discussed utopian fiction and science fiction, Futurism and its significant flaws, World's Fairs, and the design and

1. As presented on the Universal Zulu Nation website, http://www.zulunation.com/elements/ (accessed 9 March 2025).

development of computing technologies to extend human thought. My underlying assumption is that the future is not something to be predicted and reacted to – rather, it is something we can help to make. The future is not simply lying in wait, but is an unwritten book, and we can collaboratively write it.

Yes, we face climate change and its threat of human extinction and were beset by a global pandemic. In the wake of George Floyd's murder by police, those of us in the United States could not help but notice (even if we had overlooked it before) that the 400-year-old catastrophe of the enslavement, sale, transport and subjugation of people of African descent continues to cause suffering to the present day. An actual insurrection transpired in the United States, and now the country faces the unchecked rise of authoritarianism that promises to destabilize the world in new ways. Our predicaments are serious and long term.

Given this, can we really rap, sample or otherwise compose a better future? I have never suggested that imaginative interventions would provide a quick fix – only that we accept the book we are given, in whatever tattered form, and do our best to compose a positive continuation. We can always choose to collaborate on a better outcome rather than capitulate.

One of the ways to do so is to define a clear underlying political philosophy and stage it in a utopian setting, as Edward Bellamy did in *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman did in *Herland.* Or, it is possible to take one particularly negative aspect of our current cultural, social and political milieu and exaggerate it, as in the anthology TV show *Black Mirror.* Historically (in the case of Bellamy's book in particular), some utopias have had a massive effect on popular thinking and led to political change. Such provocations do not have to just come from books. Rappers have shown that they too can imagine the future with us.

## POSTSCRIPT: THE CASE OF THE MISSING RAP UTOPIAS

Rap is topical, it is where it is at. As was the case beginning in the 1970s, it continues to have great relevance to our everyday situation, to give us the abstract, to respond to cultural and political events that happen day to day. But while rap undoubtably has a *topos,* there are only a few projects offer a *ou-topos,* a not-place, a utopia (even of the dystopian sort). The two I have discussed here are prominent among them. And, to be realistic, even the more popular of these two projects (*Deltron 3030*) has done little to prompt new thinking about the future when compared to *Looking Backwards, Herland,* and Thomas Moore's *Utopia.*

Could we drive this discussion towards an optimistic conclusion? Could a brief exhortation wrap everything up? I thought about this again after discussing this article with a professional rapper, who pointed out that, however interesting these two albums are, they did not make much of a splash in recording industry terms or in the culture beyond. It also seems remarkable that beyond these two albums, there just is not a lot of rap that envisions the future, although there are plenty of novels and even a number of albums in other genres that do – several by Janelle Monáe and 2017 albums by Björk and U2, for example.

One response would be for me to just drag what I have written onto the trash can, to conclude that even if rappers engage with the future in interesting ways, the outcome has not been that important. Even after considering how

my two objects of study here are different from ones in *The Future,* though, I feel that these two albums are not only intriguing, but important, and are worth bringing into the discussion.

They are not important because of their *influence*. Rather, they show the *potential* for a different way of thinking about the future, one that could have profound influence as hip hop continues to develop. Work with systems of metaphor, wordplay that engages new sorts of connections, future visions that embrace syncretic and historical concepts, awareness that cultural difference and divisions will persist – all of these are qualities that Mike Ladd and Del the Funky Homosapien articulate when they present their futures. These two emphasize different aspects of the future, but they also show that rappers have something unique to contribute, imaginations you will not find expressed in the same way in a book, a pop album or a TV show.

The basic questions I tried to answer here are two: What is special about the way Mike Ladd *writes the future* (or raps it)? What is special about the way Del does that? But there is a deeper riddle. Given the wide range of topics that rap deals with, why do so few rappers choose to develop their own imaginations of the future? Rap has something powerful and special to offer us as we work to build a positive future. For some, the unwritten book of the future can be a sketchbook or a journal, but it can be a spiral-bound back-pocket book of rhymes as well – and we need that book as part of our collective, cultural writing process.

The imaginations of the future that *Deltron 3030* and Mike Ladd offer are different in that they are built from earlier music, woven together from intertextual references, and alive to the way traditions persist and evolve – whether the traditions be those of Santeria or of Enhanced DOS. More imaginations of this sort are urgently needed. We need to draw on, sample and remix histories – messy ones – to write the book of our future. It is time to get out the crates and get digging, time to draw on our textual databases, metaphorical systems, structures and divergences of rap's rich verbal art.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to W. M. Jaco and M. A. Miller for their very helpful responses to versions of this article. I also greatly appreciate the anonymous comments provided through peer review.

## FUNDING

This research was partially funded by the Research Council of Norway Centres of Excellence project number 332643, the Center for Digital Narrative.

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