9 • THE HIDDEN CODE OF THE KONGO COSMOGRAM IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ART AND CULTURE

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In her essay on Afrofuturism, scholar-educator Emma Dabiri asks readers to consider the "decimation of African epistemologies, dismissed as primitive, and the wholesale destruction of vast corpuses of knowledge that existed in oral genres."[1] Visual, literary, and performance-based works across the African diaspora are folkloric, often embedded with secret technologies and hidden codes to be interpreted or reinterpreted by diverse communities of practice. Diagrams found in some artworks move viewers (travelers) "through the maze from points along the diamond or the circle from birth to life to death and then finally to rebirth," as part of a journey.[2] Codes are used to safeguard and sometimes conceal important messages. Before emancipation, enslaved Africans in the United States were infrequently permitted to gather, sing, dance, and play music under the watchful eyes of their owners. Communication such as drumming was prohibited; so enslaved Africans used their bodies and symbolic gestures as alternatives. Some gestures referenced cultural art of the Kongo people in West Central Africa, specifically the cosmogram, a core symbol of the Kongo culture. An ideographic religious symbol, it was called *dikenga dia Kongo*, shortened to *dikenga* in this essay.

Kongo cosmograms *(dikenga)* comprise information (i.e., symbols or codes) that serves as ciphers, maps, or organizing principles for communication, creative expression, and interaction. *Dikenga* is described as a quartered circle or diamond, a seashell spiral, or a cross with solar emblems representing the four moments of the sun. A person stands upon it to engage in a ritual or to signify that he or she understands the meaning of life. This chapter draws on "*dikenga* ideology" through heritage artifacts, older rituals, and contemporary cultural practices, immersive artworks, and sonic and design fictions that provide a foundation for artistic production across the African diaspora. These works advance the notion of improvisation through call-and-response participation, repetition, and the deliberate fracture or disruption of typical rhythms or patterns to create new arrangements.

The Kongo cosmogram provides an analytic framework for interpreting these works. To make the case for the Kongo cosmogram as a coded system, this study draws attention to its development over the centuries, influencing many African American artists and performers such as jazz maverick Sun Ra, painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, and sculptor Houston Conwill. The latter two artists' works intentionally reference the Kongo cosmogram while other artists

are influenced less directly. In general, these artworks provide a key for understanding aesthetic African American qualities such as rhythmic pattern or the "cut," as James Snead called the Black cultural insistence on repetition (e.g., music, literature, and dance).[3] According to scholar Robert Farris Thompson, the intersecting lines or axes of the cosmogram emphasize visual improvisation and repetition.[4] The principles illuminated by the Kongo cosmogram have guided African American cultural production spanning several decades. This information is useful for scholars and critics across disciplines and in various mediums because it reveals the modification, or amplification, of a cultural heritage artifact that bridges continental Western/Central African and African American ritual and artistic practices.

Cosmograms are geometric figures that depict a cosmology, or the science of the origin and development of the universe. A key premise of *dikenga* ideology is that nothing survives intact or in a fixed form.[5] The cosmogram is fractal, cyclic, and self-regenerating; it is eternal and infinite. Change, mixture, and innovation are givens. However, to better understand the existence of this knowledge in the present we must examine the past. Before European contact in 1482, the Kongo cosmogram, interchangeable with *dikenga* (also called *yowa*), existed as a long-standing symbolic tradition within the Kongo culture and, with the forced migration of Kongo people to the Americas, has spread and taken on different forms. In its fullest embellishment, cosmograms served as an emblematic representation of the Kongo people and summarized a broad array of ideas and metaphoric messages that comprised their sense of identity within the universe.

Scholar Robert Farris Thompson describes the Kongo cosmogram as a symbol that signifies a circular journey of human souls around the intersecting lines at its center.[6] The "turn in the path"—that is, the "crossroads"—remains an indelible concept in the Kongo-Atlantic world, as the point of intersection between the ancestors and the living.[7] The design consists of a simple cross with one line representing the boundary between the living world and that of the dead, and the other representing the path of power from below to above, as well as the vertical path across the boundary. Within its design *yowa* contains "mirrored worlds" within the spiritual journey of the sun, and it connects with funerary ceremonies and the end of life.[8] The *yowa* universe is divided into two parts with the relationship of the land of the dead or *Mpemba* and this world or *Nseke* (Figure 9.1). A body of water represented by the *Kalunga*, or water line, which is seen as a passage and barrier, separates these two worlds.

This chart visualizes the concept of ritual and movement, as well as newly established spaces that transform identities and communities. *Yowa* belongs to an ensemble of practices, meanings, and recombinant institutional forms that comprise a nexus for personal and group identity.[9] For example, in a basement floor at the First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia, which is well into its third century and one of the oldest Black churches in the United States, builders punctured holes in the floor in the cross-and-diamond shape of the Kongo cosmogram and publicly worshipped its ancient meaning. Below, there is a space that is four feet tall that held hundreds of escaping, enslaved Africans following the Savannah River to freedom. Quietly, underneath, the escapees worshipped the light and air the symbols allowed.[10] Certain elements of its design prevail in the ring shout, the oldest continuously practiced African-derived dance in the United States that is still performed today. The ring shout is an ecstatic, transcendent religious ritual in which worshipers dance counterclockwise in a circle while shuffling and stomping their feet and clapping their hands. The worshipers sing their own improvised hymns, called *shouts*, in a call-and-response format, often pantomiming actions described in songs. This performance suggests the movement around the cosmogram.

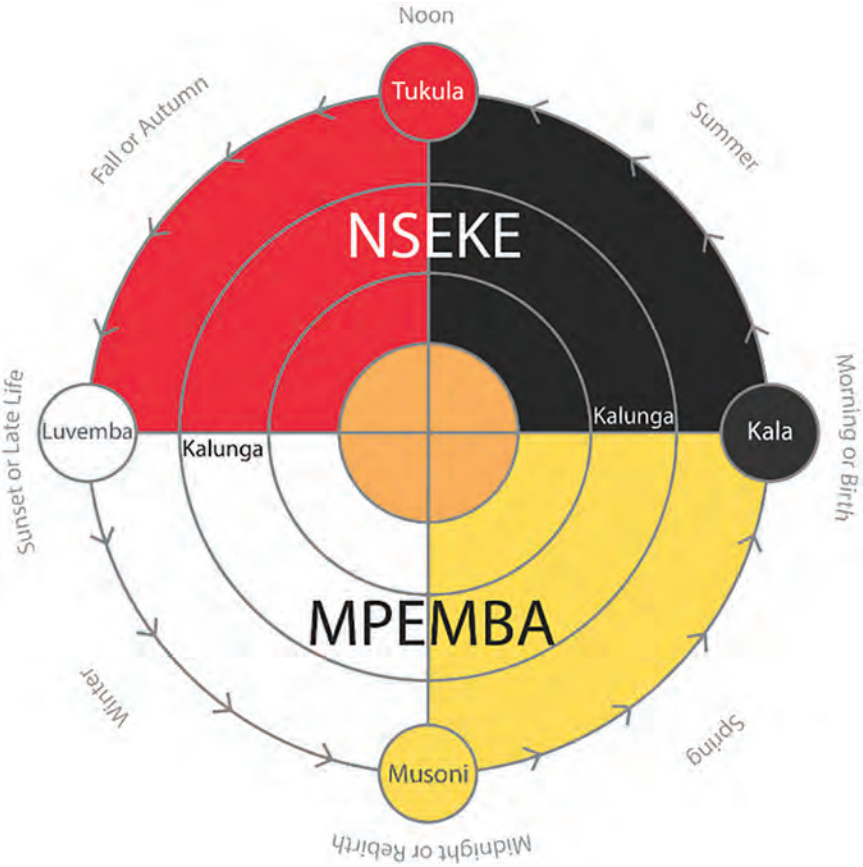

FIGURE 9.1. Nettrice R. Gaskins, "Cosmogram with Kalunga line and cross." 2015 © Nettrice R. Gaskins. Reprinted by permission of Nettrice Gaskins.

Cosmograms have been elaborated upon in contemporary dance (i.e., break dancing), showing complex intricate patterns or simplified into abbreviated *X*'s, or even *V*'s, implying an arc of travel or motion. Nelson George describes the final element of the performance as the exit, or "a spring back to verticality or a special movement that returned the dancer to the outside of the circle."[11] Watching dancers reveals the circular, spiraling movements that replicate the Kongo cosmogram. This simulation is what artist Sanford Biggers calls an "aesthetic echo."[12] The aesthetic response in this instance embraces improvisation and exists as a form of call and response, which is a pervasive pattern of participation that includes the spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener or listeners in which statements *(calls)* from a speaker are emphasized by expressions *(responses)* from the listeners.[13] Circularity pervades West African ideology, and the circle has proved equally important. Moreover, the watery barrier, or *Kalunga*, which separates the corporal and spirit worlds of the Kongo cosmogram, has also found a weighty role in African American art. This design has resonance: the ring shout has evolved to include countless other formations, including freestyle break dance and rap cyphers in hip hop and expressions that represent the universe. These examples provoke modes of perception and interaction, with the cosmogram serving as a moderator between different positions or states in space and time.

Cosmograms are also familiar symbols in Afrofuturism, a critical perspective that opens up inquiry into myriad overlaps between technoculture—the interactions between technology and culture—and Black diasporic histories.[14] Jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and Sun Ra were pioneers of Afrofuturism. Circular imagery that is central to many mystical traditions can be found in artwork related to music production, especially the crossroads, which is "the radial point of African cultural production that has seeded so much American music."[15] Adam Rudolph writes that the circularity in Coltrane's diagram for his well-known jazz composition for *Giant Steps* shows the "non-linear multiplicity of possible tone relationships."[16] Coltrane explores the rhythmic weaving of space and motion that is a common musical practice around the world; these "thematic fibers" show the weaving of threads in repeated patterns of rhythmic regularity and irregularity. These polyrhythmic patterns are produced in music, as well as in the improvisational, algorithmic, circular, or star-based patterns embedded in African American quilts.[17] Coltrane's use of melodic cells or motifs can be expanded to include other thematic contexts such as the symmetry of the solar system, or even wave patterns in water. These designs are revealed in works produced by Sun Ra and his Arkestra. The artworks highlighted in this chapter reveal a cosmological model in which the universe follows infinite, or indefinite, self-sustaining cycles based on cultural, spiritual, and ritualistic practices. *Giant Steps* and other works featured in this writing contribute to a vast resource pool on which readers can draw to unlock the hidden codes of the *dikenga* universe.

RIVERS AND CROSSROADS: *DIKENGA* IN AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

Cosmograms, in all manifestations, serve as a foundation and guide for the exploration and analysis of African American creative expression, with instances of the designs resonating in visual art, music, and film/video. Art installations have a common blueprint: a blend of Western culture (spirals inspired by the thirteenth-century floor labyrinth in the cathedral at Chartres), pictograms that echo traditional Africa, and dance diagrams that double as maps.[18] Late African American sculptor Houston Conwill created large floor installations such as *Rivers* at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York. Conwill's motif, in the shape of a cosmogram, is accented with an inscription from Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." Fragments of Hughes's poem are positioned symbolically on the map. The final words of the poem, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," are embedded in the body of a fish symbol at the center of the design that signifies life, fecundity, and transformation.[19] The center represents the *Kalunga* barrier and *yowa* cross of the Kongo cosmogram. Scholars have linked this space and the crossroads within it as a radial point of cultural production that has profoundly seeded African Atlantic creative expression and innovation.

Conwill's design contains song lines, texts, symbols, historical markers, and waterways. If we look at *Rivers* as a map key or legend we can read the embedded information. Much of the guide comes from African American vernacular, as part of a critical theory on everyday practices that are associated with local language, culture, literature, and art.[20] This language is at the heart of Black artistic expression and performance that has "produced a unique music that expresses at its base a philosophy of survival."[21]

Early twentieth-century blues musician Robert Johnson calls forth the *yowa* cross in "Cross Road Blues." In specific verses from the song, the speaker/singer kneels at a crossroads to ask for God's mercy, while another line tells of a failed attempt to hitch a ride before sunset. The

meanings of the verses in the song are open to interpretation. The significance of the sun, once rising, but now descending, is perhaps a reference to laws in "sundown towns" that included a curfew during racial segregation in the United States.[22] What is clear in the song is that, after some sort of trouble, the speaker has reached a turning point at the crossroads. He is turning himself over to stronger forces and calling to God for help. In the Kongo cosmogram, his soul would be positioned at a horizontal line that divides the world of the living (heaven and earth) from the kingdom of the dead (underworld).

The bottom half of the cosmogram or the world of the dead corresponds with Johnson's protagonist who believes he is dying at sunset. In the *yowa* cross, heaven is imagined at the top and hell at the bottom, with water in-between. The four disks at the points of the cross stand for the four moments of the sun, and the circumference of the cross represents the certainty of reincarnation, but this is not apparent in Johnson's song. What is more obvious is the connection between the setting of the sun in Johnson's song and the symbolic sunset of *yowa*, leading travelers to cross over from a physical realm to the spiritual realm.

In *Rivers*, "Cross Road Blues," and other works by Johnson, the cosmogram functions similarly to a global positioning system, or GPS, with users positioned at the center of the cross. This art acts as a springboard to explore the realm of vernacular mapping, which has a seemingly infinite capacity for the play of form and action. The world outside of this map represents displacement, migration, and movement. Artist-scholar Duane Deterville writes about director Kahlil Joseph's use of the Kongo cosmogram in his short film *Until the Quiet Comes*, with music by Flying Lotus. Deterville examines the narrative spaces depicted in this film with what he calls an *Afriscape*, or critical lens that can be used to interpret images that are closely connected with African metaphysics."[23] Deterville notes how the film's sequence highlights how closely death dwells with life—and tragedy with ecstatic joy—under the constant reminder of police surveillance of Black bodies.

Once again, water *(kalunga)* becomes a space for conflict, transition, and action. The most important elements of Joseph's film are water, the crossroads or point of intersection, and crossing over. At the crossroads, a dancer named Storyboard P, murdered by a mysterious killer's bullet in a Los Angeles housing development, begins his "ghostdance" toward the land of the ancestors. At the end of the video, a man is submerged and falls deeper into a pool of water, having made the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead.

COSMOGRAMMA: THE COSMOGRAM IN AFROFUTURISM

As noted by Wyatt MacGaffey, the Kongo cosmogram, or *yowa*, is the "simplest ritual space" that symbolically overlaps with the Christian crucifix and Buddhist mandala.[24] From graphic imagery to the mapping, layering, and cyclical rhythms of space and motion in visual art, performance, sound, and film, we can find resonances of *yowa* that are central to traditions across the African diaspora, including in Afrofuturism, which is a way that African American artists recontextualize and synthesize the past, present, and future. Afrofuturism, a term coined by writer Mark Dery, fuses African mythologies, technology, science fiction, and art, while rebuking conventional depictions of Black people in the future.[25] Considered a sacred sign to make sense of the world, the Kongo cosmogram maps the continuity of life through lines, arrows, and circles—and most importantly implies movement and change from one state or reality to another. Cosmograms can be fashioned from elements in nature, such as in the form of

two crossed sticks or the intersection of two roads, implying the intersection of two realms. Thompson writes: "This is the simplest manifestation of the Kongo cruciform, a sacred 'point' on which a person stands to make an oath, on the ground of the dead and under an all-seeing God. This Kongo 'sign of the cross' has nothing to do with the crucifixion of the Son of God, yet it overlaps with the Christian vision."[26]

In Kongo folklore and mythology, the crossroads represents a location "between the worlds" and, as such, a site where supernatural spirits can be contacted and paranormal events can take place. Symbolically, it can mean a locality where two realms—*Nseke* and *Mpemba*—touch and, therefore, it represents liminality, or a place literally "neither here nor there." According to some scholars, the Kongo cosmogram is not only a two-dimensional design but also a three-dimensional, virtual reality continuously interacted with by the community and the individual.[27] This idea of diverse dimensionality has implications for future artistic and cultural production, especially in digital media and computer-generated art. In Black speculative fiction, authors allude to African cosmology and the circularity of the life cycle. Venetria Patton links authors and scholars such as Tananarive Due and Christopher Okonkwo with the practitioners of Afrofuturism who "harness the potentials of the speculative mode and African diaspora spirituality and mythologies to represent black people's old and New World experiences."[28]

Embedded codes—images, symbols, objects—that are associated with elements of the Kongo cosmogram draw on cultural ethos, ritual and spirituality, technology, and artistic actuation (moving from thought to action) in a self-determined, representational space. Scholar Duane Deterville notes that the ideograms contained in the drawings are frequently based on Kongo and Yoruba cosmology, indicating a connection to and contiguity with the spirituality of African continental space.[29] Afrofuturism has given artists agency to repurpose the existing codes in the Kongo cosmogram to navigate the past, present, and future. African American artists, including those channeling Afrofuturism, contribute their own conceptions of these codes in their art. Steven Nelson explores the contributions of Houston Conwill and other African American artists.[30] Specifically, Nelson talks about Conwill's *The New Cakewalk*, an installation and dance floor that includes a map of the United States with a focus on the American South. The title references the cakewalk, a plantation dance in which enslaved Africans spoofed the movements and mannerisms of their owners. In *The New Cakewalk* Conwill exposes an alternate version of the dance using symbols that represent the migration and movement of African Americans.

Scholar Lisa Clark reconciles Jean-Michel Basquiat's oeuvre with the hieroglyphics and ideology of the Kongo Cosmogram.[31] Basquiat's use of the cosmogram in his paintings bridges the physical gap with body over mind. Clark analyzes several Basquiat examples that demonstrate the Black figure and the cosmogram's polarity as an intersection of opposing forces. Two works by Basquiat show figures at crossroads where opposing forces meet, or the exact locus where opportunity or action happens. *King Alphonso* is a distinct example of the Kongo cosmogram in plain sight, acting like the head of an arrow on the right side of the canvas. The title of the piece refers to Nzinga Mbemba, otherwise known as King Alfonso I, who ruled the Kongo in the first half of the sixteenth century and was best known for converting the Kongo to Catholicism, merging tribal spiritual customs with Christianity. Clark mentions how the "technical diagram aspect" of Basquiat's *King Alphonso* suggests a transition, or a change from one place or system to another. This is a common theme in much of Basquiat's work, including Black warrior figures in his self-portraits. Regarding Basquiat's 1982 *Self Portrait*, Clark notes how certain angles are reminiscent of the kind of grid and geometry we see over and over in cosmograms,

and elements in other works use the head and body as a matrix or grid, intersecting lines within a circle.[32]

The Kongo cosmogram in African American art is a device, vehicle, or engine that powers and charts action. Basquiat's use of the cosmogram, as a site for collision, change, and movement, has influenced many contemporary African Atlantic artists, including Sanford Biggers, who uses similar diagrams in his work. *Mandala of the B-Bodhisattva II*, a floor installation by Biggers (with David Ellis) makes visible the hip hop ritual of the cypher, a figure that is based on the cosmogram. Where the Buddhist mandala represents balance, holding different points simultaneously in a calm stasis, *yowa* differs by charting action over time and space, sometimes even described by geometry.

The Biggers/Ellis piece is somewhere in-between cultures, as break dancers or b-boys perform on top of floor tiles painted with designs that together form a circle. At the center is the crossroad—the clash, the butting up against or crossing over. In contrast to Basquiat's warrior figures, b-boys join the cypher; their dance suggests the balance of action, of call-and-response participation as a positive and necessary phenomenon—a colorful, dynamic opportunity for action. Similar to the ring shouts of old, dance becomes the ritual that liberates its subject from its constrictions. The Kongo cosmogram, as described by scholars, is a sign of reappropriation, as well as representing the intersections of the present and past, mundane and spiritual, and so on.[33]

Electronic musicians use sound as a way to liberate Africans who have survived the Middle Passage in such a way to explicate Kongo cosmology and tacitly connect the metaphysical space of the Kongo cosmogram to the everyday space of Black communities. The motif and themes such as *Kalunga* (water) are revealed in sonic fictions created by musicians Sun Ra, George Clinton, Detroit-based duo Drexciya, and Flying Lotus. In the liner notes to their 1997 album *The Quest*, Drexciya created a map to frame their own mythology. Drexciya, according to the duo, was an underwater country populated by the unborn children of pregnant African women thrown off of slave ships. These children had adapted to breathe underwater in their mothers' wombs.[34] These mythological muses exist between known worlds.

Elements of the cosmogram's matrix, such as Drexciya's quasi-African Atlantis, are an important aspect of Afrofuturism; they describe physical as well as spiritual transition, transformation, and movement. Like Drexciya, the Parliament-Funkadelic, or P-Funk creation mythology, is based on a Black Atlantis, or a place where one can "dance underwater without getting wet." In fact, Drexciya's *The Quest* may have been inspired by the P-Funk creation myth in which the ocean is a realm where the life of survivors continues, where the diaspora is united in rhythm and music.[35] Flying Lotus channels pioneering Afrofuturists like Sun Ra, Alice and John Coltrane, P-Funk, and Drexciya in his music. The album *Cosmogramma* explores these subjects, with tracks such as "Arkestry" and album art that references the mythical and mystical designs in Afrofuturism.[36]

WE HAVE ALWAYS LIVED IN THE FUTURE: THE AFRO-FUTURE AS A DESIGNED FICTION

Sun Ra is a central figure in contemporary African American artists' embrace of science and technology, as well as engineering and mathematics. His notion of "myth science" emphasized the ways in which artists recreate themselves in places of adversity and oppression. Myth science and other future-forward fictions present interesting ways to consider new, different, distinctive social and artistic practices that assemble around cultural models such as the cosmogram,

which is encoded in various artworks. Sun Ra's creation myth appears real and legible in the artifacts that were produced; yet these materials were also used to speculate and extrapolate, or offer reflections on how things were and how they might become something else. Artifacts such as business cards, receipts, and letterheads document how Sun Ra's artistic practice unfolded across several media and across many social contexts.[37]

Myth science is a "designed fiction," or way of "materializing ideas and speculations without the pragmatic curtailing that often happens when dead weights are fastened to the imagination."[38] Like design fiction, myth science created imaginative conversations about possible future worlds. It speculated about a near future tomorrow, extrapolating from physical reality. Some of the artifacts created during that time were cosmograms that, once made into digital form, explored virtual realms.

In the 1980s, Sun Ra and the Arkestra worked with Boston-area inventor/engineer Bill Sebastian on an Outerspace Visual Communicator, or OVC, which was a complex hybrid visual music machine with various control interfaces for electronic video effects and video generation.[39] The original OVC was played with the hands and feet, allowing artists to paint with light similar to how musicians create and explore sound with their instruments. The cosmograms and other algorithmic designs produced by the OVC resonate with contemporary African American artists' works that sit somewhere between science fiction and science fact.

Visual artists Xenobia Bailey and Saya Woolfalk pick up where Sun Ra left off in terms of reappropriating and recontextualizing the cosmogram-mandala motif to create more ethereal and abstract forms of the symbol's matrix. The notion of a universal whole permeates Xenobia Bailey's expression, underlying her definition of funk: "the constructive energy of the decomposing elements of nature."[40] Bailey's *Paradise under Reconstruction in the Aesthetic of Funk* consists of brightly colored, overlapping crocheted mandalas, as well as crowns, elaborate dresses, and domestic items such as a sewing machine. Her "funkadelic-meets-African-priestess-meets-Southern-quilting-patterns aesthetic" encompasses African and Native American craft traditions, Eastern philosophies, global religions, and 1970s funk.[41]

Bailey not only designs and crochets overlapping, algorithmic cosmogram-mandalas for her *Sister Paradise* goddess piece, but she also created the story of this goddess's passage to the Americas to help enslaved African people. Like the b-boys in the Biggers/Ellis piece, this figure stands at the center of a circular stage, once again at a crossroads. Bailey's artfully costumed mannequin "Sister Paradise," a compilation of cultural depictions, is immersed in a diversity of philosophical processes and religions and these seemingly disparate representations resonate strongly with Afrofuturism.

Saya Woolfalk's *ChimaTek* and *Empathic Morphology* consist of hybrid avatar mannequins hanging from walls or levitating in outfits with headdresses and silver shoes. These figures (Empathics) are formed from interspecies hybridization that, through biomutation and "Utopia Conjuring Therapy," develops wings that allow participation in aerial displays.[42] At the center of Woolfalk's installations are colorful mandalas. The Empathics' hybridization process allows them to live in two worlds at once. *ChimaTEK*, the third and final component of the Empathics, finds Woolfalk's fictional characters designing a product that gives access to a "chimeric existence through the creation of personalized virtual avatars." This technology facilitates the process of choosing, manipulating, and enhancing different components of the "Empathic" identity, thereby allowing them to form and inhabit a new consciousness. While not directly referencing Funk like Xenobia Bailey, Woolfalk's artwork comes very close to

P-Funk's Funkentelechy, which is derivative of Aristotle's *entelecheia*, or a sense of completeness or utopia. In other words, The Empathics stand in place of P-Funk "clones," as avatars whose job is to ensure that everyone is on "the One."

Contemporary artists and practitioners of Afrofuturism channel *dikenga* ideology by telling their own stories, from their own cultural or personal lenses. From an Afrofuturist perspective, then, the cosmogram attests to the survival and persistence of Kongo/Bantu iconography, often in terms that relate to other speculative design and sonic fictions. For example, "the One" is a unifying ideology that taps into a vast archive from which practitioners draw to confront adversity and oppression in hostile environments. The One is both a musicological place and a spiritual place, the "navigation of that beat is invested with age-old rhythms and nuances that end up propelling the rest of everything else."[43] The cosmogram is a vernacular map or portal used to travel or navigate both real and imagined worlds. In these realms, the cosmogram is a mnemonic sign and organizing structure that has a seemingly infinite capacity for the play of form and the manipulation of content.

The cosmogram-mandala in art represents a balance between worldly issues (i.e., migration, diaspora, movement) and the internal world as a springboard for analysis. Employing mystical spirituality, cosmic mythologies, utopian/dystopian homelands, and styles all their own, contemporary artists of the African diaspora present mythical matrixes that transport us to other realms that hover outside of the bounds of our temporal knowledge. Scholars and critics across disciplines will find this useful because it reveals the modification, or amplification, of a cultural heritage artifact that bridges continental African and African American creative practices.

This chapter explores the possibilities offered by the Kongo cosmogram *(dikenga)*, which is influenced by an Afrofuturist paradigm to help African American artists address past, current, and future realities. By studying and amplifying *dikenga*, African American artists can unlock knowledge of the universe through the lens of Black culture. Through its design *dikenga* tells the stories of Africans' journey to the United States, their migration from the South to the North, and the creation of mythologies that transcend the physical realm. *Dikenga* offers a lens through which we can interpret images presented to us in a way that makes clear their affinity with African mythologies and metaphysics. African American artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Houston Conwill studied the Kongo cosmogram and its design is embedded in their work. Less directly, other artists and their audiences focus their imaginations to speculate about nature, life, and the future using these motifs. The cosmogram, in all of its representations and expressions, acts as a system of knowledge that creates texts, drawings, paintings, films/videos, symbolic formulations, and so on. These representations are helpful ways to understand African American art, as well as the cultural production in Afrofuturism. This is just the beginning of the journey into a myriad of spatialities where cosmic themes help artists reimagine many cultural, scientific, and technological concepts.

Manifestations of the Kongo cosmogram or *dikenga* are never fixed. The forms and meanings attached to the forms are ever-changing. *Dikenga* contains the hidden codes, languages, and secret technologies of the past, the signs of the present, and the extrapolations and speculations of the future. Artists create maps that audiences or participants can use to read the embedded information. In physical and virtual realities, the cosmogram has the ability to learn from the people who use it. The cosmogram, as a mechanism for aesthetic response, positions the observer of an event here within the moment of now as an interactive part of creation. It

is a design that triggers the aesthetic experience in its practitioners and in the audiences that are immersed in their works. Within this domain is the aesthetic response as improvisation through call-and-response participation, repetition, and the deliberate fracture or disruption of typical rhythms or patterns to create new arrangements.

NOTES

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