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UNIFYING THE COSMIC CARBON CYCLE: A MULTI-SCALE APPROACH TO INTERSTELLAR NANOSTRUCTURES

A.Z. Tychengulova[1*]

[1] *Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan*

*Corresponding Author: a.tychengulova@gmail.com

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Abstract. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and their derivative nanostructures serve as the fundamental organic inventory of the universe. Far from static, these species undergo a complex evolutionary pathway transitioning from isolated gas-phase molecules to hybrid three-dimensional architectures, such as hydrogenated amorphous carbon and fullerenes. This mini-review reflects recent breakthroughs across observational, laboratory, and theoretical astrochemistry. With the advent of the James Webb Space Telescope, we can now resolve the fine spatial and spectral structures of photodissociation regions and distant star-forming galaxies ($z \sim 1$–2), tracking specific topological defects in carbon skeletons. Parallel to these observational milestones, laboratory action spectroscopy utilizing cryogenic ion traps has definitively linked the C_{60}^{+} cation to diffuse interstellar bands and revealed ultrafast radiative cooling mechanisms via recurrent fluorescence. On the theoretical front, we highlight the critical shift from harmonic models to anharmonic cascade emission and the deployment of *ab initio* metadynamics to simulate fullerene assembly. Finally, we explore how machine learning and neural network potentials are breaking computational bottlenecks, enabling on-the-fly kinetic modeling of amorphous dust growth.

Keywords: Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), Astrochemistry, James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), Interstellar medium (ISM), Photodissociation regions (PDRs), Cosmic dust evolution, Fullerenes, Laboratory spectroscopy, Machine learning potentials.

1. INTRODUCTION

Rather than merely serving as passive tracers of astrophysical environments, carbon nanostructures actively govern the thermodynamic and chemical balance of the interstellar medium (ISM) [1, 2, 3]. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) dominate the photoelectric heating of neutral gas: upon absorbing energetic ultraviolet (UV) photons, they eject suprathermal electrons whose subsequent thermalization dictates the cooling rates of molecular clouds, ultimately regulating galactic star formation [4, 5, 6]. Furthermore, due to their low ionization potentials and high electron affinities, these macromolecules act as primary charge donors and acceptors, mediating the ionization equilibrium in dense media [7, 8]. Crucially, carbon dust surfaces provide the necessary catalytic substrate for molecular hydrogen (H_2) recombination, absorbing the excess bond energy while shielding fragile newly formed molecules from ambient UV fields [7, 8, 9].

The original Léger and Puget hypothesis modeled the carriers of aromatic infrared bands (AIBs) as idealized, planar gas-phase species [10, 11]. However, an influx of high-resolution spectroscopic data has forced a substantial revision of this framework [12, 13, 14]. Contemporary models invoke hybrid, heterogeneous ensembles that include hetero-substituted compounds (PANHs, PAPHs), defective lattices, and functionalized macromolecules [15, 16]. In extreme radiation environments such as photodissociation regions (PDRs), selective photodissociation destroys smaller, fragile species while leaving behind ultra-large $(N_C > 50 - 100)$ and thermodynamically resilient architectures in a survival mechanism formally recognized as the "grandPAH" concept [12]. Simultaneously, the persistent detection of broad emission continua and aliphatic features at 3.4–7.3μm has driven the adoption

of 3D amorphous network models, notably HAC [17, 18, 19, 20] and mixed aromatic/aliphatic organic nanoparticles (MAON) [21, 22, 23]. These frameworks depict highly defective, disorganized $3D$ structures where small aromatic domains are randomly linked by UV-labile aliphatic bridges [16, 24, 25].

A major paradigm shift occurred in 2010 with the detection of intense infrared emission from buckminsterfullerene (C_{60}) in the planetary nebula $Tc1$ [26]. This discovery provided compelling evidence that amorphous solid bodies can serve as direct precursors to closed-cage carbon frameworks [27, 28]. We now understand that cosmic dust formation undergoes a strict thermodynamic bifurcation, heavily dependent on the local C/O ratio and metallicity [29, 30]. The chemical buildup is a tug-of-war between "bottom-up" catalytic assembly and "top-down" photochemical degradation of larger parent bodies [31, 32]. Laboratory plasma simulations reveal that while high hydrogen partial pressures stabilize classic $2D$ planar aromatic sheets, the presence of oxygen acts as a potent steric trigger [33, 34]. Even without incorporating into the final lattice, oxygen inhibits the formation of stable six-membered rings, thereby promoting pentagon integration and forcing the carbon network to curl into $3D$ fullerenes and nano-onions [35, 36]. Consequently, the emission profiles we observe across the universe capture a dynamic carbon cycle, constantly balancing between $2D$ planar configurations and highly defective curved surfaces [29, 37, 38].

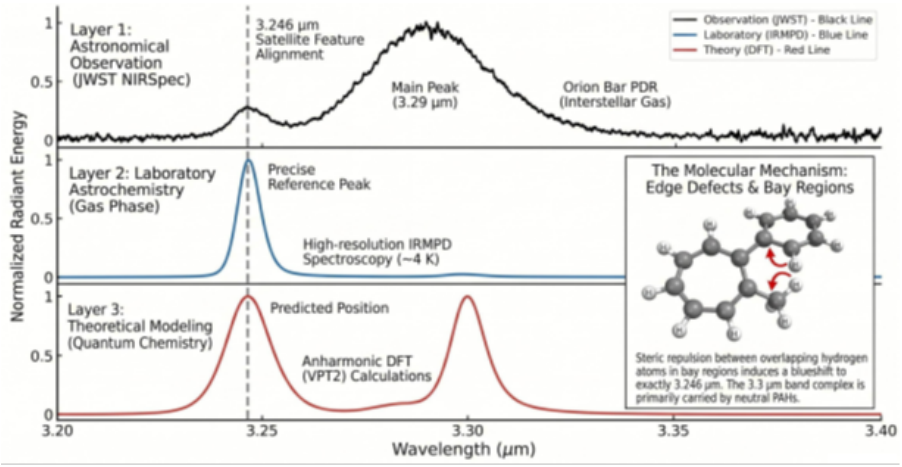


Figure 1 – Multi-layer spectral alignment of the $3.3\mu m$ PAH band complex and its $3.246\mu m$ satellite feature. The inset demonstrates the molecular mechanism where steric repulsion between overlapping hydrogen atoms in the bay regions of edge-defective neutral PAHs drives the precise blueshift to exactly $3.246\mu m$. Original infographic compiled by the author. The theoretical anharmonic $(VPT2)$ reference data are adapted from [47] and laboratory spectra as well as the JWST observational spectra are adapted from [7] focusing on $3.3\mu m$ feature.

2. Key Scientific Advances

2.1. Observational Foundations: PAH Dynamics from Local PDRs to Cosmological Scales

The commissioning of the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) has fundamentally transformed our observational approach to *PAHs*, pushing the field past qualitative morphological classifications into the realm of precision molecular topology [39, 40]. By leveraging the unprecedented spatial and spectral resolution of the NIRSpec and MIRI instruments, recent surveys of prototypical *PDRs* like the Orion Bar have resolved the fine structure of the 3.3 μm stretching band [41, 42]. Far from a simple Gaussian profile, this feature exhibits a pronounced blue wing and a distinct satellite peak at

3.246 μm [43, 44]. Theoretical models confirm that these subtle spectral signatures arise directly from steric repulsion between hydrogen atoms nestled in the "bay regions" of edge-defective PAHs [43, 45, 46]. This remarkable empirical and computational convergence is clearly mapped in Figure 1., which demonstrates the precise alignment of the 3.246 μm satellite feature across astronomical observations, laboratory action spectroscopy, and quantum chemical simulations.

Similarly, the asymmetric blue wing of the 6.2 μm stretching band long considered a definitive marker for nitrogen-substituted PANHs is now elegantly explained by the presence of trio-H structural defects on PAH cations, removing the strict necessity for heteroatom inclusion [47, 48]. Spatially resolved emission maps across PDRs offer compelling empirical validation for the "grandPAH" hypothesis [12]. As one moves toward the irradiating stellar source, the harsh ultraviolet environment selectively obliterates smaller, fragile PAHs and strips away aliphatic side chains. Consequently, the surviving emission originates almost exclusively from population of ultra-large ($N_C > 50$–100), highly ionized, and thermodynamically resilient macromolecules [12] as illustrated in Figure 2.

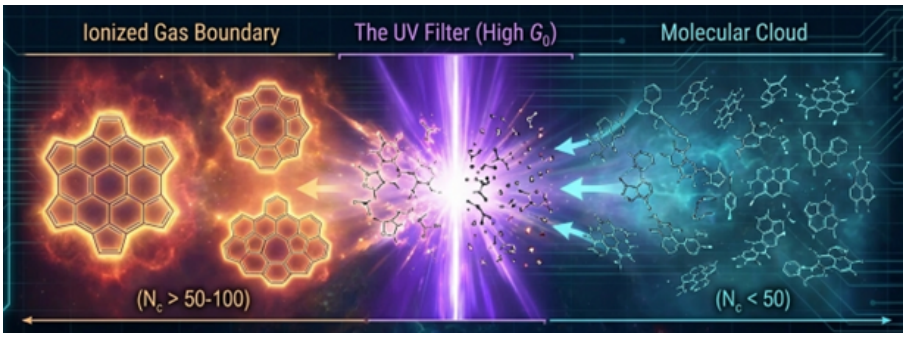


Figure 2 – Spatial architecture of the grandPAH hypothesis across a prototypical photodissociation region (PDR). Original infographic compiled by the author.

To quantitatively decode these physical environments, astronomers rely on calibrated infrared band ratios. The 11.3 μm / 7.7 μm ratio serves as a robust ionization proxy; transitioning a PAH to a cationic state amplifies the stretching dipole moments (at 6.2 μm and 7.7 μm) by an order of magnitude, while leaving the out-of-plane bending modes (11.3 μm) largely unperturbed. Concurrently, the 11.3 μm / 3.3 μm ratio acts as a sensitive molecular size (N_C) chronometer, dictated by the heat capacity and subsequent energy cascade of the UV-pumped molecule [12]. Moreover, JWST has recently extended local diagnostic frameworks to cosmological scales. Observations using the MIRI Low Resolution Spectrometer (LRS) have successfully detected PAH emission in luminous infrared galaxies (LIRGs) at redshifts of $z \sim 1$–2 [4, 49]. The 3.3 μm band luminosity has proven to be a reliable tracer of dust-obscured star formation rates (SFR), adhering to a strict linear correlation:

$$\log(L_{3.3}) = 1.07 \cdot \log(L_{\mathrm{IR}}) - 3.4 \tag{1}$$

Perhaps the most striking cosmological finding is that the mean 11.3 μm/3.3 μm ratio in these early-universe galaxies is approximately three times higher than that observed in local LIRGs [50]. This stark contrast unequivocally points to a fundamental shift in the dust size distribution at high redshifts, heavily skewed toward larger PAH grains, likely driven by enhanced coagulation rates within denser, colder gas reservoirs [4, 50]. Parallel investigations have mapped the severe survival limits of carbon nanostructures within the extreme environments of active galactic nuclei (AGN) [4, 51, 52]. The fierce X-ray radiation emanating from accretion disks systematically destroys smaller and ionized PAHs, severely suppressing the 3.3, 6.2, and 7.7 μm emission bands within the central parsecs of Seyfert galaxies [52, 53, 54, 55]. As a result, the infrared spectra of AGN-dominated systems are

sculpted entirely by an anomalous, heavily shielded population of large, neutral PAHs [56]. This selective destruction demands rigorous spectral decomposition when attempting to utilize PAHs as universal SFR indicators in active galaxies [56, 57].

2.2. Laboratory Astrochemistry: From Action Spectroscopy to Prebiotic Ice Synthesis

For decades, the interpretation of astronomical spectra relied heavily on matrix isolation techniques. While foundational, isolating molecules in cryogenic argon or neon lattices inherently corrupts intrinsic vibrational signatures via unpredictable matrix shifts and symmetry distortions [58, 59]. To bypass these solid-state artifacts, modern laboratory astrochemistry has pivoted to gas-phase "action spectroscopy," an approach that faithfully replicates the pristine vacuum of the interstellar medium [60, 61, 62]. Utilizing infrared multiple photon dissociation (IRMPD) coupled with free-electron lasers like FELIX, researchers can now track *in situ* molecular growth [60]. A prime example is the bottom-up synthesis of nitrogen-substituted $PAHs(PANHs)$ inside cryogenic ion traps. By exposing trapped pyridine cations (CH_5N^+) to acetylene (C_2H_2) at 150 K, experiments successfully mapped the stepwise polymerization leading to the endoskeletal quinolizinium core [63].

Perhaps the most historic spectroscopic triumph of the last decade involved identifying the elusive carriers of the diffuse interstellar bands $(DIBs)$. Solving this century-old enigma required cooling target ions near absolute zero without perturbing their electronic structures. Messenger spectroscopy inside superfluid helium nanodroplets $(T < 1"K")$ provided the exact methodology needed, delivering unequivocal proof that the buckminsterfullerene cation is responsible for at least two intense near-infrared DIBs at 9577 Å and 9632 Å [64, 65].

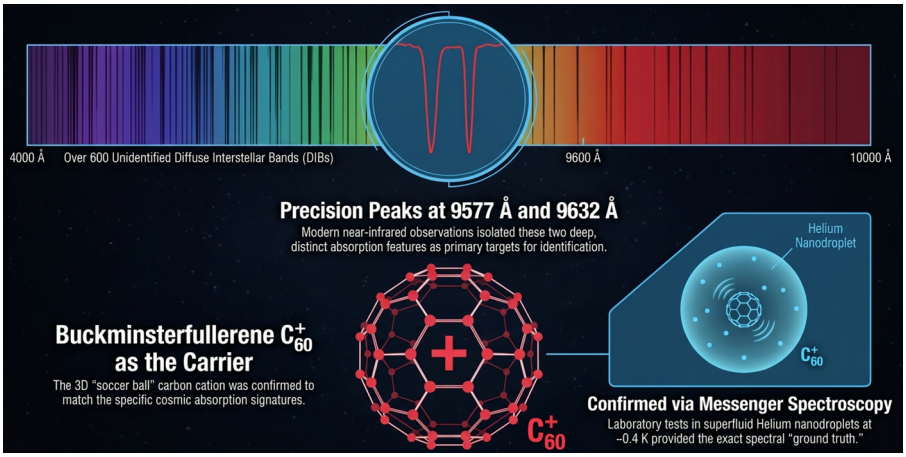


Figure 3 – Experimental identification of the buckminsterfullerene C_{60}^+ cation as a DIB carrier. Original infographic compiled by the author.

Simultaneously, the survival dynamics of PAH cations in harsh UV environments were fundamentally rewritten by experiments conducted in cryogenic electrostatic storage rings, such as the Double ElectroStatic Ion Ring Experiment (DESIREE, 13 K, $\approx 1 \times 10^{-14}$ mbar) [66, 67]. By monitoring the delayed unimolecular decay of circulating ions, physicists confirmed the existence of ultrafast recurrent fluorescence (RF), occasionally termed Poincaré fluorescence [67]. As systematically diagrammed in Figure 4., fast radiative cooling governs the stabilization of energized species, allowing highly excited PAH cations to undergo inverse internal conversion (IIC) from their vibrational ground state $(S_0^{v>0})$ into low-lying electronic excited states S_1, subsequently emitting optical or UV photons [66]. Incorporating a functional cyano group into the aromatic ring drastically lowers the energy threshold, accelerating the RF cooling rate beyond 400 s^{-1}. This exceptional photostability perfectly

explains the anomalous radio-astronomical detection of intact cyanonaphthalenes within the frigid dark core of TMC-1 [66, 68].

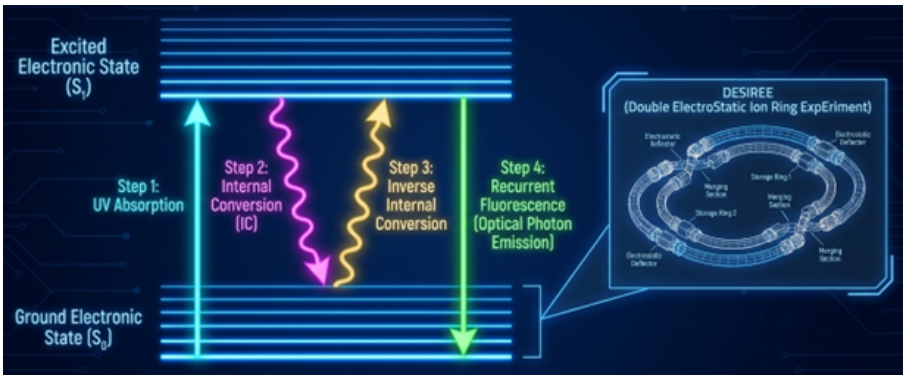


Figure 4 – Intramolecular energy cascade of recurrent fluorescence (RF) as a PAH survival mechanism. The Jablonski diagram charts the four-step cooling pathway: UV absorption, internal conversion (IC), inverse internal conversion, and subsequent optical photon emission. The inset illustrates the DESIREE storage ring layout used to observe these long-lived decay dynamics in ultra-high vacuum conditions free of collisional quenching. Original infographic compiled by the author.

Replicating the dust-forming zones of Asymptotic Giant Branch (AGB) stars requires sophisticated plasma jet reactors (COSmIC) and chambers with controlled thermal gradients (Stardust) [69]. Studies utilizing these interstellar dust analogues (IDAs) have uncovered a strict chemical bifurcation dictated by the local carbon-to-oxygen ratio. Under highly carbon-rich conditions ($C/O > 1$), molecular assembly overwhelmingly favors flat, $2D$ planar aromatic sheets [37]. Conversely, lowering the ratio to 1.1 forces oxygen to act as a steric controller; even without incorporating into the final macromolecular lattice, oxygen impedes the formation of stable hexamers. This forces the integration of pentagonal rings and aliphatic bridges, violently curling the carbon network into 3D fullerenes and highly defective mixed aromatic/aliphatic organic nanoparticles (MAONs) [37]. Providing a competing "top-down" molecular source, experiments have also demonstrated that atomic hydrogen bombardment induces graphene etching on SiC cores, actively stripping away free PAH molecules into the gas phase [37].

Finally, at 10 K, dust grains acquire thick ice mantles (H_2O, CO, CO_2, CH_3OH) that function as formidable catalytic nanoreactors. Vacuum UV irradiation ($h\nu \leq 10.2$ eV) of these ices triggers non-thermal photochemidesorption alongside the Desorption-Induced Electronic Transitions (DIET) mechanism [70, 71]. Critically, the stepwise photochemical dehydrogenation of frozen methanol yields highly reactive formaldehyde, triggering a cascade of radical-driven organic synthesis [72, 73]:

$$CH_3OH \xrightarrow{h\nu} H_2CO + 2H^{\bullet} \tag{2}$$

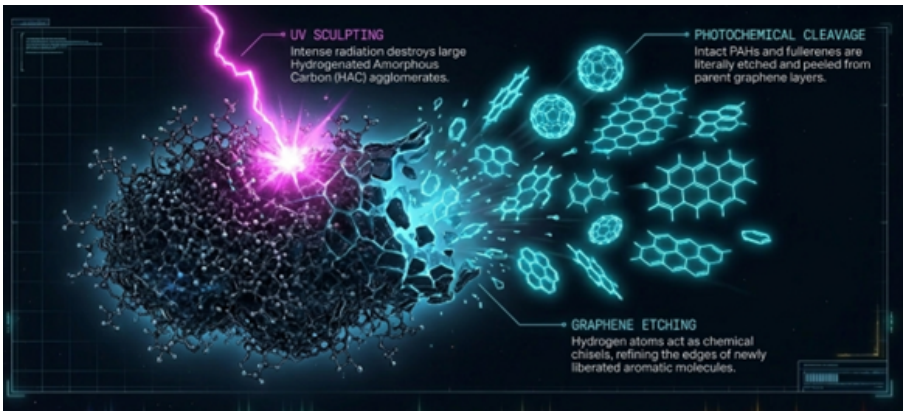
Simultaneously, this radiation induces the cleavage of molecular bonds, generating a high concentration of reactive intermediates, such as the hydroxymethyl ($\cdot CH_2OH$), methoxy ($\cdot OCH_3$), and hydroxyl ($\cdot OH$) radicals. The subsequent recombination of these radicals within the catalytic ice matrix ultimately yields a diverse inventory of complex organic molecules (COMs).

High-performance chromatographic analysis of the refractory residues remaining after ice sublimation has consistently confirmed the in situ generation of complex prebiotic inventories [74, 75]. These include racemic mixtures of up to 16 distinct amino acids (e.g., glycine, serine), ribose sugars, uracil, and hexamethylenetetramine (HMT) proving definitively that the fundamental chemical

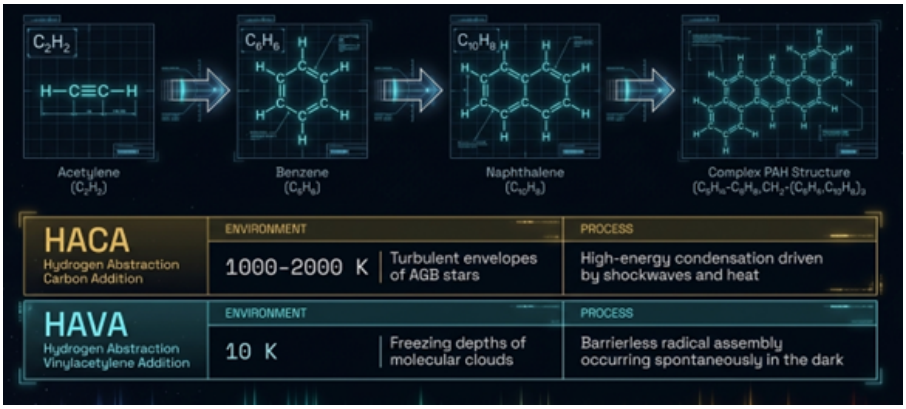
building blocks of life are forged in the deep interstellar medium long before their delivery to protoplanetary disks [74, 75].

2.3. Theoretical Advancements in Astrochemistry and Molecular Dynamics

To decode the unprecedented data streams flowing from JWST and ALMA, theoretical astrophysics has decisively abandoned rudimentary harmonic approximations in favor of rigorous anharmonic modeling and machine learning integration [76, 77]. Historically tethered to modest basis sets, the field now mandates extended frameworks incorporating polarization functions (e.g., cc-pVTZ) to accurately capture the dynamic charge redistribution inherent to stretching modes [44, 47]. Furthermore, because the photophysics of vacuum-isolated PAHs is strictly governed by anharmonic cascade cooling, theorists have widely implemented second-order vibrational perturbation theory (VPT2) [78]. By computing quartic force fields (QFF) via explicitly correlated wavefunctions (F12-TZ-cCR), these advanced models successfully reproduce the critical red-shifting and asymmetric broadening of emission lines triggered by thermal relaxation [79].



(a) Panel A



(b) Panel B

Figure 5 – Theoretical models of complementary chemical pathways in cosmic carbon evolution. Panel A (Left): Computational pathways for bottom-up PAH synthesis. Panel B (Right): Conceptual mechanics of top-down aromatization under intense stellar radiation fields. Original infographic compiled by the author.

Quantum topological analysis has definitively proven that structural anomalies at the molecular periphery drive the most perplexing spectral signatures [47]. Extensive simulations of highly defective isomers reveal that steric repulsion between hydrogen atoms nestled within "bay regions," coupled with trio-H configurations, violently blue-shifts the short-wavelength modes to 6.15 μm and

generates the distinct 3.246 μm satellite band recently observed in the Orion Bar [14, 62]. Crucially, this topological framework seamlessly explains the asymmetric blue wing of the 6.2 μm feature utilizing purely hydrocarbon cations, effectively negating the historical absolute necessity for nitrogen-substituted PANHs [44].

A pivotal theoretical advancement in molecular dynamics for astrochemistry is the application of ab initio metadynamics to overcome the severe timescale limitations of simulating low-temperature carbon evolution. In standard molecular dynamics, cold carbon nanostructures easily become kinetically trapped in deep local free-energy minima, making the observation of slow structural rearrangements computationally prohibitive. Metadynamics resolves this by introducing a history-dependent bias potential that continuously deposits artificial "penalty hills"– typically repulsive Gaussian potentials – along selected collective variables. This mechanism dynamically fills the underlying free-energy wells, physically forcing the system to cross high activation barriers without revisiting previously sampled atomic configurations. For PAH science, this accelerated exploration of the potential energy surface is transformative; it enables the efficient simulation of rare kinetic events, such as the spontaneous topological self-assembly of 2D carbon networks into 3D fullerene-like nanoparticles, capturing structural transitions that would otherwise require millions of years to unfold in the cold interstellar medium.

Simulating the high-energy "bottom-up" assembly of 3D dust grains from chaotic gas-phase pools requires pushing molecular dynamics past traditional thermodynamic barriers [7]. Because standard molecular dynamics leaves cold carbon systems kinetically trapped in deep free-energy minima, observing slow structural transitions is normally computationally prohibitive. Ab initio metadynamics (BOMD+MTD) resolves this timescale limitation by injecting a history-dependent bias constructed as a sum of repulsive Gaussian potentials or artificial "penalty hills" into the collective variable space. This mechanism dynamically fills the underlying free-energy wells, forcing the system to escape local minima and cross high activation barriers. Computational experiments conducted at 400 K demonstrate that this accelerated exploration allows flat, 2D polycyclic networks to spontaneously reorganize into low-symmetry 3D fullerene-like spheres, utilizing integrated pentagons and heptagons as essential curvature-inducing defects [7]. This kinetic balance between structural growth and degradation is theoretically and conceptually mapped in Figure 5, which contrasts the multi-regime pathways of bottom-up molecular assembly (Panel A) against the radiation-driven mechanisms of top-down macromolecular erosion (Panel B) within interstellar environments.

At the solid-state interface, hybrid QM/MM schemes have completely redefined our understanding of catalytic ice mantles [80]. Modeling the surface adsorption of *trans*-glycine and highly polar radicals onto water clusters reveals a massive reconfiguration of hydrogen bond networks (1.46–2.53 Å) [80]. This interaction yields staggering binding energies ($B.E.$): $B.E.(\textit{trans}\text{–glycine}) \approx$ 11670 K, $B.E.(\mathrm{COOH}^{\bullet}) > 10000$ K [80, 81]. Such extreme surface fixation completely paralyzes radical diffusion, imposing severe kinetic bottlenecks on classical Langmuir-Hinshelwood surface reactions. Conversely, quantum models probing the limits of structural resilience have uncovered an immense Ionization Tolerance Limit (ITL) for closed carbon cages; the fullerene can endure macroscopic charging up to C_{60}^{26+} under intense X-ray irradiation before ultimately succumbing to Coulomb explosion [82].

Finally, the integration of machine learning (ML) is systematically eradicating the computational bottleneck inherent to quantum mechanics [83]. Random Forest algorithms, trained on Morgan fingerprints derived from over 14,000 PAH structures, can now predict infrared responses with microsecond latency [84]. Perhaps the most profound theoretical breakthrough involves modeling the on-the-fly kinetic growth of hydrogenated amorphous carbon (α–C) using neural network interatomic poten-

tials (MLPs) [85, 86]. To cure the physical "shortsightedness" of standard MLPs which typically utilize a restrictive 5–8 Å cutoff radius, developers are deploying Message-Passing Neural Networks (MPNNs) that successfully capture long-range π-electron delocalization across the macromolecule [87]. Complementing these neural architectures, modern graph theory provides a remarkably robust analytical invariant: the total number of perfect matchings (Kekulé structures) within the modified planar graphs of hydrogenated fullerenes (e.g., $C_{60}H_2$) maintains a strict negative correlation with quantum thermodynamic energy, permitting the instantaneous topological screening of millions of candidate isomers [88].

3. Critical Analysis of Current Gaps: Kinetic Paradoxes and Spectroscopic Dark Matter

Despite the recent triumphs in high-resolution infrared astronomy and computational quantum chemistry, the evolutionary paradigm of PAHs confronts severe kinetic and spectroscopic inconsistencies. Transitioning this field from a phenomenological framework to a rigorous predictive science requires resolving four fundamental paradoxes.

3.1. The Cold Core Paradox and the Collapse of HACA

Historically, infrared astronomy suffered from a critical limitation: AIBs trace the vibrational modes of entire structural classes rather than individual molecular species [12, 13]. Radio astronomy recently shattered this barrier. By deploying spectral matched filtering algorithms on Green Bank Telescope data (the GOTHAM survey), astronomers successfully mapped rotational transitions of specific polar macromolecules such as 1-cyanonaphthalene, indene, and the four-ring 1-cyanopyrene ($C_{16}H_9CN$) deep within the frigid molecular cloud TMC-1 [62]. However, the observed column densities of these species at temperatures near 10 K wildly exceed the predictions generated by classical high-temperature astrochemical networks. The standard "bottom-up" Hydrogen Abstraction Carbon Addition (HACA) mechanism is thermodynamically paralyzed in such cold environments [89]. This glaring discrepancy forces a paradigm shift toward barrierless, radical-driven pathways, such as Hydrogen Abstraction Vinylacetylene Addition (HAVA), to explain the synthesis of complex rings in dark clouds [90].

3.2. Ice Mantles as Kinetic Traps

Deep within dense clouds, carbonaceous dust grains accrete thick ice mantles primarily composed of H_2O, CO, and NH_3, transforming into catalytic nanoreactors [91]. A major theoretical void exists in accurately modeling the binding energies (B.E.) of polar intermediates at this solid-state interface. Advanced QM/MM simulations demonstrate that the formation of dense hydrogen-bond networks radically alters molecular conformations and violently elevates binding energies [7]. For highly polar species, such as the hydroxymethyl ($\cdot CH_2OH$) radical, surface fixation becomes extreme:

$$\text{B.E.}(\text{COOH}^{\bullet}) \approx 8000\,\text{K to } 11000\,\text{K} \tag{3}$$

This profound immobilization completely paralyzes thermal surface diffusion, fatally crippling classical Langmuir-Hinshelwood catalytic models. Consequently, returning intact macromolecules to the gas phase bypasses thermal desorption entirely, necessitating non-thermal triggers such as heavy-ion cosmic ray bombardment [92].

Unlike thermal processes governed by the cold bulk temperature of the ice, heavy cosmic ray ions overcome massive thermodynamic bottlenecks through direct energy transfer. As these highly

energetic particles traverse the icy dust mantles, their high electronic energy loss deposits massive amounts of energy locally along their trajectory. This interaction creates ionization tracks and localized "thermal spikes" that instantaneously exceed the surface fixation binding energies. Such extreme, non-thermal energy deposition disrupts the local hydrogen-bond networks, simultaneously triggering complex radiolysis within the ice and driving the nonthermal desorption of intact macromolecules back into the gas phase without fragmentation.

3.3. DIBs, ERE, and Spectroscopic "Dark Matter"

While cryogenic messenger spectroscopy brilliantly secured the C_{60}^+ cation as the definitive carrier of the 9577 Å and 9632 Å diffuse interstellar bands (DIBs), the molecular identities behind over 600 optical and 60 near-infrared DIBs remain elusive [93, 94]. Hypotheses invoking specific ultra-large PAH cations face an acute deficit of isolated gas-phase laboratory data. The spectroscopic puzzle is further complicated by "C_2-DIBs" bands exhibiting unresolved rotational branches that imply carrier molecules of vastly different masses [95]. Intrinsically linked to this "dark matter" problem is the Extended Red Emission (ERE), a broad photoluminescent continuum spanning 500 nm–900 nm. Candidates ranging from oxygen-functionalized PAHs (OPAHs) to carbon nanodots have been proposed, yet a rigorous energy-conversion mechanism seamlessly linking UV photon absorption to this red luminescence remains conspicuously absent [96].

3.4. Survival Thresholds in These Extreme Environments

The extreme environments of Seyfert galaxies and quasars shatter standard observational calibrations. The fierce X-ray radiation and shockwaves emanating from supermassive black hole accretion disks systematically annihilate small and ionized PAHs, severely suppressing the 3.3 μm, 6.2 μm, and 7.7 μm emission features [53]. Consequently, the infrared spectra of AGN-dominated systems are sculpted entirely by an anomalous, heavily shielded population of ultra-large ($N_C > 300 - 400$), predominantly neutral PAHs [97]. How these neutral macromolecules evade catastrophic Coulomb explosions at distances of 10–500 from the nucleus remains fiercely debated, with dense molecular tori frequently invoked as the likely shielding mechanism. Ultimately, this selective destruction renders the uncorrected use of PAH luminosities as universal star formation rate (SFR) indicators highly perilous in active galaxies, demanding rigorous spectral decomposition [53, 98].

4. FUTURE FRONTIERS: TOWARD PREDICTIVE MULTI-SCALE FRAMEWORKS

Resolving the lingering kinetic and spectroscopic inconsistencies within astrochemistry demands transitioning from isolated quantum models to predictive, multi-scale frameworks. The next decade will be defined by the tight integration of machine learning (ML), ultra-sensitive radio astronomy, and cryogenic surface physics.

4.1. On-the-Fly Machine Learning and Topological Screening

Overcoming the $\mathcal{O}(N^3)$ computational bottleneck inherent to Density Functional Theory (DFT) relies heavily on deploying MLPs. Modeling the kinetic growth of highly disordered phases, such as hydrogenated amorphous carbon (α–C) and MAONs, on-the-fly requires bypassing the physical shortsightedness of standard models, which typically utilize restrictive 5 Å–8 Å cutoff radii. MPNNs resolve this limitation by successfully capturing long-range π-electron delocalization across extensive macromolecular networks [87].

Furthermore, graph theory drastically accelerates thermodynamic screening: the total number of

Kekulé structures within modified planar graphs of hydrogenated fullerenes (e.g., $C_{60}H_2$) maintains a strict negative correlation with actual quantum thermodynamic energy. This mathematical invariant permits the instantaneous topological filtering of millions of structural isomers without executing resource-intensive *ab initio* calculations [88].

4.2. Multi-Wavelength Synergy: Cross-Correlating ALMA and JWST

Shattering the profound spectral degeneracy of AIBs demands cross-correlating mid-infrared vibrational data with sub-millimeter rotational spectroscopy (ALMA, GBT). The recent success of spectral matched filtering within the GOTHAM survey which definitively identified polar macromolecules like 1-cyanopyrene inside the frigid TMC-1 cloud paves the way for true single-molecule tomography.

Superimposing JWST infrared continuum maps onto ALMA kinematic maps of specific cyano-PAHs will definitively resolve the lingering "grandPAH" versus "multi-PAH" debate. Simultaneously, this multi-wavelength synergy provides the only observational avenue to validate barrierless, radical-driven growth mechanisms, such as HAVA operating near 10 K.

4.3. Quantum Astrochemistry of Cryogenic Ice Nanoreactors

Precision modeling of interfacial catalysis across the dust-ice boundary constitutes the third strategic frontier. Advancing hybrid QM/MM schemes is imperative for accurately predicting the staggering binding energies of polar radicals trapped on and ice mantles. Future computational frameworks must accurately calculate non-thermal desorption cross-sections triggered by heavy-ion cosmic rays, operating alongside UV-driven DIET.

Mapping these radical-driven photochemical cascades will finally close the gap in understanding the deep-space synthesis of prebiotic inventories, ranging from racemic amino acids to HMT. Furthermore, quantifying the exact contribution of ultra-large gas-phase macromolecules (e.g., ovalene) to the surface catalysis of molecular hydrogen remains critical for accurately modeling the cooling rates of dense photodissociation regions.

5. CONCLUSION

Over the past decades, the cosmic carbon paradigm has evolved dramatically from the idealized Léger and Puget hypothesis of isolated, planar PAHs to a comprehensive, continuous evolutionary cycle. We now recognize that two-dimensional aromatic sheets, highly defective 3D networks (HAC, MAON), and closed-cage fullerenes exist in a dynamic thermodynamic equilibrium dictated by radiation fields, metallicity, and coagulation kinetics.

This grand evolutionary narrative is comprehensively synthesized in the concluding diagram on Figure 6, which maps the entire cosmic journey of carbonaceous matter spanning stardust injection from AGB stars, competitive bottom-up and top-down processing tracks, molecular freeze-out onto cryogenic ice mantles, and the subsequent radical-driven synthesis of life's building blocks delivered directly to young planetary systems.

The synchronized leaps in observational and laboratory astrophysics have cemented this unified framework. JWST surveys, notably the ERS PDRs4All program, have conclusively mapped the topological markers of edge defects proving that steric interactions drive the 3.3 μm blue wing and the 6.2 μm asymmetry, thereby eliminating the absolute necessity for nitrogen-substituted PANHs. Cosmologically, these frameworks have established rigorous PAH-based SFR calibrations in highly obscured, high-redshift ($z \sim 1$–2) environments, while revealing that severe X-ray destruction in AGN aggressively shifts the surviving molecular distribution toward ultra-large, neutral species.

Simultaneously, cryogenic action spectroscopy has resolved century-old enigmas, securing the

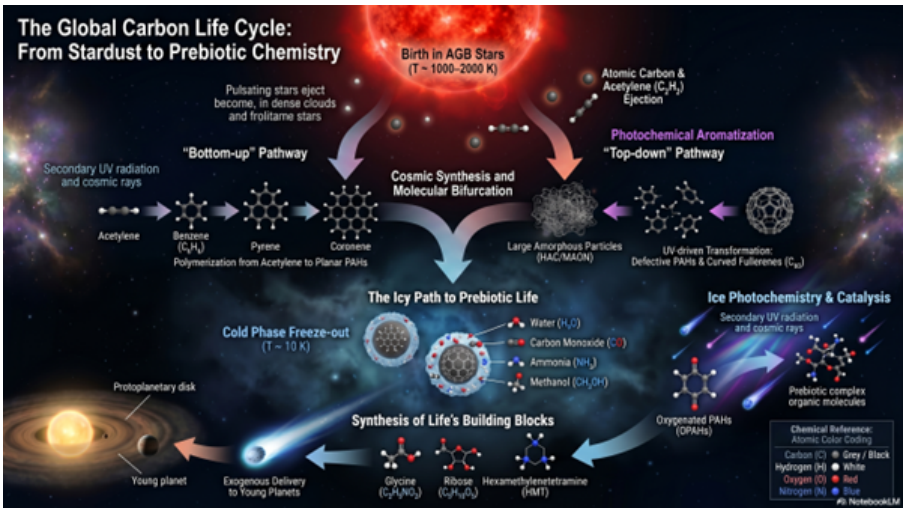


Figure 6 – Comprehensive scheme of the global cosmic carbon lifecycle from stardust production to prebiotic chemistry. Original infographic developed by the author; visualization is based on the author's initial framework and rendered utilizing the Nano Banana Pro AI tool.

cation as a definitive DIB carrier and exposing the ultrafast radiative cooling of functionalized PAHs via recurrent fluorescence. Theoretical modeling has matched this pace, shifting from rigid harmonic approximations to fully anharmonic cascade emission models and utilizing *ab initio* metadynamics to simulate bottom-up fullerene assembly.

Moving forward, deciphering the remaining hundreds of unassigned DIBs, untangling prebiotic ice catalysis, and mapping extreme AGN survival thresholds depends entirely on interdisciplinary synthesis. Fusing multi-wavelength spectroscopy with machine-learning-accelerated quantum dynamics will definitively elevate carbon nanostructures from passive spectroscopic tracers to the primary thermodynamic architects of the baryonic universe.

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Information about authors

Aliya Tychengulova *– Postdoctoral Researcher at Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Physics Department, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: : a.tychengulova@gmail.com.*