

THE “ROBOT VODOO POWER” THESIS: AFROFUTURISM AND ANTI-ANTI-ESSENTIALISM FROM SUN RA TO KOOL KEITH

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In 1999 Alondra Nelson, then a graduate student in American studies at New York University, launched an online community dedicated to the study of what might be best described to the uninitiated as black science fiction. Nelson named the forum the “AfroFuturism” listserv after a term coined by Mark Dery in his set of interviews about black artists whose works displayed a uniquely African-American take on futuristic narratives of scientific and technological progress (Dery 1993). As Nelson explains, Dery and his interviewees—scholars Tricia Rose and Greg Tate and novelist Samuel Delany:

claimed that these works simultaneously referenced a past of abduction, displacement and alien-nation, and inspired technical and creative innovations in the work of such artists as Lee “Scratch” Perry, George Clinton and Sun Ra. Science fiction was a recurring motif in the music of these artists, they argued, because it was an apt metaphor for black life and history” (Nelson 2007).

Since the beginnings of the listserv, its contributors have commented on countless aspects of Afrofuturist culture and art, debated its aims and methods, and otherwise shaped the definition of Afrofuturism to the extent that it has become a recognizable field of scholarly inquiry and artistic production.¹ Later in

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1999 Nelson organized a conference on the subject, "AfroFuturism | Forum: a critical dialogue on the future of black cultural production," at NYU and in 2002 a special issue of *Social Text* highlighted the subject featuring recent Afrofuturist poetry, prose, visual arts, and scholarship.

While the moniker "Afrofuturism" and the study thereof are relatively new phenomena, we can trace a long legacy of Afrofuturist cultural production. Scholars of Afrofuturism have recognized elements of the project in the work of novelist Ralph Ellison and bandleader Sun Ra as early as the 1950s (Eshun 1998; Weheliye 2003; Yaszek 2005; Zuberi 2004). This vein of artistic production continued through the 1970s with the prose and stage works of Ishmael Reed and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and the disco-funk of George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic up through the 1980s with the street art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the raps of the Ultramagnetic MCs. Today, the most notable examples of Afrofuturist activity continue to be found in the world of hip hop, where artists like Cee-Lo, Del tha Funkee Homosapien, and Kool Keith—formerly of the Ultramagnetic MCs—have laid claim to the supersonic identities, interplanetary alter egos, and robotic surrealities of the Afrofuturist legacy.

Much more than straightforward science fiction, however, the epistemes that accompany these identities reflect an oppositionality and an historical critique that seeks to undermine the logic of linear progress that buttresses Western universalism, rationalism, empiricism, logocentrism, and their standard-bearer: white supremacy. Lisa Yaszek offers a concise yet comprehensive summary of this critique in the introduction to her article "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*": "As an intellectual aesthetic movement concerned with the relations of science, technology, and race, Afrofuturism appropriates the narrative techniques of science fiction to put a black face on the future. In doing so, it combats those whitewashed visions of tomorrow generated by a global 'futures industry' that equates blackness with the failure of progress and technological catastrophe" (2005, 297). In short, as the Afrofuturist scholar Alexander Weheliye puts it, this black science fiction ideology reflects "a posthumanism not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity" (2002, 30).

On the 1970 live album *It's After the End of the World*, composer and keyboardist Sun Ra gives us a taste of this posthumanism, taking his audience on a musical voyage through his trademark black sci-fi world-view. On Ra's piece "Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)," vocalist June Tyson and alto saxophonist Danny Davis ask: "If you are not a reality, whose myth are you? If you are not a myth, whose reality are you?" before

1. Although the online forum is titled "AfroFuturism," the common usage is now "Afrofuturism."

launching into space on Ra’s Moog-powered rocket. Indeed, throughout his performing career Ra challenged received knowledge and presumptive truths through his steadfast claim that he was born on Saturn. But far from a purely fiction-driven enterprise, Ra’s material critique becomes apparent as Davis continues, explaining matter-of-factly: “I don’t expect to be a citizen of this planet, it takes *too long*.” As I will argue, the seemingly paradoxical concept of “Myth-Science” is the key to understanding Ra’s fantastic but liberating Afrofuturist philosophy. Moreover, the term’s ambivalent unity is at the core of the larger Afrofuturist project.

Since the term “Afrofuturism” first appeared, scholars have seized upon the idea as a way to critique the reified distance between racialized fictions of *black magic* and *white science*—often in satirical and even playful ways. Yet, the very premise of Afrofuturism relies on the normalized disparity between blackness and the cybernetic technological future—a binary that is reflected in the racially coded phrase “digital divide.” As Nelson explains: “Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere. . . . Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (2002, 1). Thus, the danger with the Afrofuturist strategy is that it can quickly turn into a reification of black inferiority through simple contrast with supposed “white” technologies.

As a partial corrective for this potential pitfall of the Afrofuturist project, I will propose a theoretical framework for Afrofuturism premised on Paul Gilroy’s notion of “anti-anti-essentialism,” which first appeared in the pages of *Black Music Research Journal* in 1991. Central to this model is the idea manifest in Nelson’s explication of Afrofuturism that the idea of a “race-free future” smacks of a white (male) future. As Dery asks: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?” (1993, 738). In order to expose this false utopia the *Afrofuturist* project also focuses on the *past* through its tactical recovery of black soul.

At the core of this balancing act is an understanding that the concepts of soul and authenticity are constructions that play on tropes of voodoo magic—a supposed retention from the “dark continent.” These themes are nowhere more evident than in the spectacle of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century musical forms that stereotyped, amplified, and ultimately capitalized on tropes of black superstition (as with the Jim Crow character of blackface minstrelsy) and eroticized black primitivism (as with Josephine

Baker's banana costume). But, although the idea of musical "soul"—and the related sexualized term "funk"—can play to the essentialist stereotypes of white supremacy in the United States and abroad, it has also proven a powerful tool for promoting black solidarity. The Afrofuturist strategy therefore highlights the magical qualities of black authenticity by articulating it to the equally fantastic *anti*-authenticity of white science fiction and playing with the resulting ironies. In short, this is what Sun Ra parenthetically describes as "The Myth-Science Approach" in the subtitle to his piece "Myth Versus Reality."

Promoting neither the ethnic nationalism of essentialist thought nor the free-floating identities of post-structuralism, I aim to show that Afrofuturism's third way offers a critique of both positions by erasing the rationalized distance between the two seemingly irreconcilable poles and therefore fundamentally undermining the terms of debate. To capture the implications of this collapsed binary I am using a line from Kool Keith's tune "Earth People" wherein the rapper's Jupiter-born alter ego conjures the notion of "robot voodoo power"—a formulation echoing Ra's "Myth-Science"—in which Keith collapses tropes of white science and black magic one onto the other (Kool Keith 1996). Where the stereotyped vision of Afro-Caribbean voodoo stands in as a signifier of blackness, the robot stands as a similarly stable symbol of whiteness. As Theo Cateforis explains in a section from a recent article on the whiteness of Devo titled "Robotic Bodies, White Bodies": "the robot is precisely that type of loaded signifier that opens out onto a much larger cultural window" (2004, 566). To be sure, both voodoo and robots are real—but to the extent that they stand in as entrenched symbols of race, their meanings are wholly fantastic. As I will argue, Kool Keith consolidates these loaded signifiers of whiteness and blackness in a manner consistent with the most ingenious forms of Afrofuturist cultural critique. I offer this "Robot Voodoo Power" thesis, not as a stand-in for Afrofuturism but as an explicit attempt to keep open the dialectical play implicit in the most successful of Afrofuturist statements. As I will argue, it is the racialized tension between future and past, science and myth, *robots* and *voodoo*, that gives Afrofuturism its critical *power*.

My aims in this study are fourfold. First, I outline a working definition of Afrofuturism by establishing at some length the historical and theoretical underpinnings of this cultural field. Second, I tease out the continuities between Nelson's "Afrofuturism" and Gilroy's "anti-anti-essentialism" in a detailed explanation of the "Robot Voodoo Power" thesis. Following from this background, I trace the musical and philosophical trajectory of Sun Ra's concept of "Myth-Science" through George Clinton's "P-Funk" to Kool Keith's "Robot Voodoo Power" to support this thesis (see Fig. 1). If Afrofuturism is most prominent in music, I argue, it is because a number of

Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c. Three musical Afrofuturists: Sun Ra (photo courtesy Aes-Nihil/Transparency), George Clinton, and Kool Keith.



its artists have continually highlighted the mythic qualities of both historical tropes of magic and futuristic narratives of science through the seemingly paradoxical figure of the soulful spaceman. I conclude the study by assessing the value of the Afrofuturist project in terms of its political efficacy as both an artistic expression and a field of scholarly inquiry. As the diverse but not divergent contents of the Afrofuturism special issue of *Social Text* indicate, the difference between Afrofuturist “art” and “scholarship” is often difficult to discern.

From Souls to Hypersouls

In 1903, when W. E. B. Du Bois first laid out his foundational concept of “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the author was breaking new ground by making a gesture to the subtle but deeply meaningful ways that “black” American identity is experienced through its relationship to “white” Americans. Deeply rooted in Hegelian dialectics, Du Bois’s work examined a fissure within the Enlightenment concept of human subjectivity as it related to African Americans. As a residual effect of abduction, chattel slavery, and continued inequality, Du Bois explained, black identities were forced to forever navigate the white fantasies inscribed upon them.

The first and most visceral description of double consciousness comes only three paragraphs into the study as Du Bois writes: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (1903, 38). Not fifty years earlier, black bodies were denied the very designation of “human” in much of the United States, and that designation was tenuous at best in the rest of the country. By the turn of the century, little progress had been made

in correcting the violent inequities of slavery and its memory remained as a sort of residue still bound to the overwritten black body. Double consciousness was a direct cause of this disjuncture between the promise of equality and the reality of American racism. As such, the central question to Du Bois's work was how to humanize a people so recently deemed subhuman—specifically three-fifths human in one infamously legalistic figuration. Notably, Du Bois saw music as the most potent way for African Americans to express their humanity—their *soul*—and take their place among equals. Music, argued Du Bois, was the “greatest gift of the Negro people” to their country and the best answer to the question of unfulfilled equality (186).

Fifty years after Du Bois's seminal work, Ralph Ellison (1952) wrote *Invisible Man*, the story of a black man struggling to be seen for who he is, rather than as a figment of a white national imaginary. In the novel, the unnamed protagonist's struggle for human subjectivity in American society reaches an impasse. His quest for humanness is subsequently rerouted in the surreal and fantastic prologue/denouement of the novel wherein Ellison's protagonist cuts himself off from the rest of the world—from human history—and fashions for himself a *new* subjectivity.² He encloses himself in a subterranean space beneath the streets of New York City and blasts his invisible body with the electrified intensity of artificial light and the phonographically amplified and multiplied sound of Louis Armstrong's voice surging forth from five stereos.

As Alexander Weheliye argues in his Afrofuturist study “‘I Am I Be’: The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity” (2003), although Armstrong's voice is a powerful signifier of the black body and its supposed innate musicality, this new subjectivity is borne not of a primordial racial determinism but rather articulated through the electro-technological mediation and amplification of the human voice's magic. The black subjectivity that Ellison envisions is thoroughly ultramodern yet somehow still rooted in the ineffable, the soul. Weheliye describes this electro-mediatization of soul as “hypersoul”—a concept that resonates deeply with “Myth-Science” and that I argue is foundational to the study of Afrofuturism. As Weheliye describes in “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music”: “Even though numerous cultural discourses have done their best to authenticate and naturalize the soul of black popular music, the musical practices themselves frequently defy these authenticating mechanisms by embracing new technologies, hybridities” (2002, 30). Hypersoul thus *mediates*—in two divergent senses—the authenticating discourses of black soul. That is, paradoxically, it augments soul through electronic media

2. I refer here to the “prologue/denouement” since the narrative of the novel begins from the perspective of a flashback and comes to an end in a rearrival at that flashpoint.

just as it attenuates the logic of authenticity and thereby undermines the constructed meaning of soul.

The “hybridities” of hypersoul, Weheliye adds, underscore the fluid nature of this hyper-black subjectivity. In using the hip hop group De La Soul’s phrase “I Am I Be” from the album *Buhloone Mind State*, Weheliye foregrounds this fluidity as a simultaneously static subjectivity (“I Am”) and dynamic instability of being in the world (“I Be”). Notably, the proliferation of alter egos in hip hop plays upon this dynamic subjectivity. In one exemplary case, the prolific Kool Keith changes identities on each consecutive album. Once “Dr. Octagon,” then “Matthew,” “Dr. Doom,” and “Black Elvis,” Keith simultaneously draws upon the signifying power of stable identities and subverts those identities by highlighting their caricature status. In doing so, he critiques the idea of identity as only “I Am.” As Afrofuturist scholar Kodwo Eshun explains in his prosaic examination of Afrofuturism *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*: “the self no longer amputates itself down to a single part but instead asserts that I is a crowd, that the human is a population of processes. . . . What used to be called alter-egos are now multi-egos, a crowd of synthetic subjects” (1998, 27). Similarly, Weheliye describes how this hyper-mediated and replicated “surplus of signification” provides the “Subject of Afro-modernity” with its aesthetic and critical power (2003, 111).

In her introduction to the Afrofuturism special issue in *Social Text*, Alondra Nelson writes that over the past century African-American musicians have continually retooled this subjectivity. Not a powerful *new* “tactic for negotiating forms of oppression” but a worldview wrought of double consciousness that “has long been the experience of African diasporic people” (2002, 3). From Sun Ra’s astronomical and astrological subjectivity, through George Clinton’s Dr. Funkenstein and his cloned “specially designed Afonauts,” to Kool Keith’s “Black Elvis Lost in Space” character, Afrofuturists have inscribed onto their bodies alternative identities that eschew the idea of universal humanity at the center of Western Enlightenment thought. As Etienne Balibar explains in his “Racism as Universalism,” the Western concept of universalism “compensates for the ‘excesses’ of racism” (1994, 198). In effect, he argues that the universal ideal of Western humanism is a rationalized cover-up of an irrational system of racialized hierarchies that inform post-Enlightenment thinking on every level. For the Afrofuturists, this universal humanity that was so long denied black Americans has proven itself a conception so thoroughly encoded as white that it is best left disregarded, bypassed—no longer a dream deferred, but a dream discarded.

This Afrofuturist subjectivity is then a tactical, contingent, and embodied identity in that it recognizes the constructed nature of both the myth of the subhuman and the myth of the superhuman. Out of the primitive fanta-

sies constructed about black bodies and the cybernetic fantasies of science fiction, the Afrofuturists fashion an identity that is an inherent critique of contemporary society. By collapsing the past and the future onto the white supremacist present, these Afrofuturists simultaneously assert their new subjecthood and levy their dissent from the existing order.

The “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis

What I have argued up until now is largely in line with what scholars of Afrofuturism—particularly those involved with the AfroFuturism listserv—have recognized in this technophilic project of alternative subject/identity. Yet, in representing Afrofuturism in the preceding pages I have made a concerted effort to balance the tension between fantasies of both “the past” and “the future.” As the moniker “Afrofuturism” implies, the scholarly focus on this phenomenon has tended towards the future, the technological. Indeed, much of Afrofuturism’s humor and playfulness derives its power from the irony of the visual image of African Americans engaging in futuristic activities that have too often been coded as white in American media culture. This is where the subject of Afrofuturism gets a bit tricky.

The ironic power of Afrofuturism is nowhere more evident than in the *Saturday Night Live* character of “Astronaut Jones” played by Tracy Morgan. The comic premise of these sketches—that show the black astronaut stumbling about until his attention is focused by a sexualized space alien—is that blacks do not belong in space, if for no other reason than they are not yet fully civilized. Indeed, the premise of Afrofuturism relies on the normalized disparity between the black body and the cybernetic technological future. The project gets its power by transgressing the boundaries of this mediatized binary. Yet, the danger with this strategy is that it can quickly turn from a critical commentary into a re-stabilization of black inferiority through simple contrast rather than continually highlighting the historical constructedness of both the myths about blackness and the myths about whiteness. As a partial corrective for this potential pitfall of the Afrofuturist project, I would like to propose a theoretical framework that keeps a critical eye on the ideological underpinnings of the rational, empirical, and scientific as well as the irrational, unexplainable, and magical.

Following from Paul Gilroy’s discussion of the unsatisfactory nature of the two critical positions most commonly taken with regard to black identity—the essentialist and anti-essentialist arguments—I would like to propose that Afrofuturism reflects a strategic version of what Gilroy first refers to as “anti-antiessentialism” in his article “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a ‘Changing’ Same” (1991, 123–128) and later as “anti-anti-essentialism” in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and*

Double Consciousness (1993, 96–110). Through playful engagement with the primitivist tropes of voodoo or black magic and their ironic juxtaposition to science fiction as a sort of white magic, Afrofuturism strikes blows to both the black nativist stance (read: essentialist) and the white poststructuralist argument (read: anti-essentialist).

As Gilroy sees it, essentialist arguments are of questionable political efficacy, but because of continued inequality it is not yet time for the free-floating identities of postmodernists. He writes: “the unashamedly hybrid character of these black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal” (1993, 99). Gilroy’s anti-anti-essentialism thus critiques black nationalism as an outmoded ideology and denounces post-structuralism as a white idealist project while recovering the idea that blackness has real material meaning as a cultural category. As W. E. B. Du Bois argued in his 1897 “The Conservation of Races”: “We believe it the duty of the Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility” ([1897] 1997, 237). I suggest that the strategic anti-anti-essentialism of Afrofuturism is a critical project with the mission of laying the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism. This, in brief, is the “Robot Voodoo Power” thesis—and this is where Afrofuturism’s third way becomes apparent.

Although Gilroy does not comment directly on “Afrofuturism,” his work anticipated the field of inquiry through its deep engagement with the manner in which technologies confound discourses of black authenticity—especially in music. In his 1991 article “Sounds Authentic” Gilroy writes specifically of “the opportunity to use music as a model that can break the deadlock between the two unsatisfactory positions that have dominated recent discussion of black cultural politics” (124). Updating Amiri Baraka’s idea of the “changing same,” he employs the historical fact of technological innovation in black music—from country to urban blues, from jazz to fusion, and from turntable-based to digitally-produced hip hop—to argue against binary formulations (123–133).³ His choice of the double negative term “anti-anti-essentialism” to describe this position also reflects the playfulness of the Afrofuturists

3. Gilroy describes this update of Jones’s central argument that is laid out in *Blues People* and further developed in *Black Music* as follows: “I believe it is possible to approach the music as a *changing* rather than unchanging same. Today, this involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions that suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the postcontemporary world” (1991, 126).

in its recognition that it is in fact the rigid binary between the essentialist and anti-essentialist positions that is the real joke. Indeed, it is this double rhetorical move and its side-stepping of double consciousness in favor of a third way that makes Afrofuturism's anti-anti-essentialism so ingenious and potent. And, like Weheliye's dynamic reading of Afrofuturism, Gilroy's anti-anti-essentialism stresses the hybridities and synchronisms of "I Am I Be." Indeed, Gilroy's sentiments about "folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal" echo those of De La Soul's *Buhlooni Mind State*—an album that begins with the repeated mantra of "it might blow up [i.e. become wildly popular] but it won't go pop [i.e. betray itself]" (1993).

Perhaps the most explicit of Gilroy's linkages with the Afrofuturist project come in his discussion of Parliament-Funkadelic's utopian potentialities from his first book: *'There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack'* (1987). Closely echoing Ra's concept of Myth-Science, he describes how P-Funk's futuristic visions held a potential through which "The destructive capacity of America's technological rationality would be held in check by mystic, natural forces contained within the pyramids of ancient Egypt, a durable symbol of black pride and creativity" (1987, 180). In the following section, I support this continuity between Afrofuturism and anti-antiessentialism—this "Robot Voodoo Power" thesis—through a discussion of the music and philosophies of three musicians that represent the best of the Afrofuturist tradition. Furthermore, I argue that it is the seamless embodiment of Afrofuturist hybridity/simultaneity in the performative musicality of these three artists that render their philosophical statements so powerful.

From "Myth-Science" to "Robot Voodoo Power"

On the 1972 album *It's After the End of the World*, Sun Ra takes his audience on a musical voyage through an epistemic framework that reflects a powerfully evocative vision in which past and future, fact and fiction are collapsed upon one another.⁴ Implicit in Ra's equating of "reality" and "science" in their counterpoint to "myth" on the piece "Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)" is a questioning of rationality and even history. For him, the history writers are complicit in the subjugation of African Americans and the perpetuation of Euro-American racism. Indeed, Ra's view of historians resonates with Othman Sullivan's notoriously witty statement about anthropologists: "I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger" (quoted in Kelley 1997, 16). As Ra commented in a 1980 documentary entitled *A Joyful Noise*: "I'm not a part of history, I'm more a part of mystery."

4. I refer to Ra's "episteme" throughout this discussion to highlight the dynamic nature of his knowledge-making rather than the ontological or metaphysical implications of his being or human subjectivity.

For Ra, this mystery is part of a highly complex understanding of the world through contingency and positionality. He explains his dialectics from an iconic position on Washington D.C.’s Pennsylvania Avenue later in the documentary: “You can’t have anything without a comparison. I’m sitting in front of the White House looking across the street and I don’t see the black house. . . . See, you can’t have anything without its parallel and its opposite. This is something the people of Earth are unaware of.” Throughout his oeuvre, Ra portrays a world that is infinitely more complex—and mystical—than the rationally narrativized past of facts in chronology. Yet, his episteme is not grounded in magic, for in his view myth cannot function without its “parallel and its opposite”: reality (science).⁵ It is simply the idea that the past can be explained solely in terms of reality with which Ra finds fault.

Ra first employed the term “Myth-Science” in the mid-1950s to describe his musical collective, a rather traditional jazz orchestra in terms of instrumentation, that he dubbed the Myth-Science Arkestra. From his earliest performances with the Arkestra, Ra’s music featured progressive blues and jazz harmonies coupled with quasi-African grooves in expansive arrangements with titles like “Saturn” and “Ancient Aiethopia” (1958). By the 1960s, with albums such as *When the Sun Comes Out* (1963) Ra added space-centered chants, freely and wildly improvised lines, and odd timbres to his already eclectic compositional language. Through the 1960s and 1970s the instrumentation of his ensemble expanded to include traditional West African hand drums, shakers, and bells in addition to hyperfuturistic electronic instruments such as the Wurlitzer, MiniMoog, and electric violin. In this way, Ra’s balanced attention to tradition and technology (myth and science, past and future) has a way of undermining the internal logics of reified musical genres. Skipping from boogie-woogie riffs, to overblown saxophone multiphonics, to electrified sine waves, Ra fashions a sonic world that mirrors his politics through its destabilization of racialized musical meanings. Ra’s musical universe thus embodies his “Myth-Science” episteme. Indeed, his stage persona also reflected this seeming ambivalence through his donning of what is best described as Pharaonic space garb, consisting of brightly colored dashikis, Egyptian headdresses, and antennae space helmets (see Fig. 2).

As the bandleader and his collective’s names imply, Ra and the Arkestra drew heavily upon a mythologized vision of a Judeo-Egyptian past in which the tropes of exodus and rescue are recontextualized in an interplanetary future. Born Herman Poole Blount and nicknamed “Sonny” from early bandstand experiences, he legally changed his name to Le Sony’r Ra in 1952, dropping his inherited “slave name.” After the change, the composer and

5. It is worth comment here that Ra uses “parallel” and “opposite” as synonyms since his understanding of opposites is so dialectical and mutually constitutive.

Figure 2. Sun Ra's Afrofuturist garb.



bandleader maintained that he was born on Saturn (Pekar, 2002, 7; Szwed 1997, 29).⁶ Ra explains: "I left everything to be me, 'cause I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white, not like Americans . . . black people, they back there in the past, a past that somebody manufactured for 'em. It's not their past, it's not their history" (Eshun 1998, 154–155). Ra's "Myth-Science Approach" to history thus draws upon the dialectical tension between a "manufactured" black past and an equally overwritten white future. Just as Ra's life and music reflect a desire to reshape his past—and that of African Americans—his project also promotes a constant reimagining of the future by questioning the structures of supposed U.S. equality that yield realities that are hardly egalitarian. His shaping of a mythic past located in African civilization is part of a larger Afrofuturist mode of history-making that disarticulates Africa from the totalizing narratives of oppression that threaten to represent blackness as a burden alone. Of these narratives Ra explains in *A Joyful Noise*: "that's his-story, you haven't heard my story."

In the second section of the piece "Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)," entitled "Angelic Proclamation," Danny Davis says politely to the gathered audience: "We want to tell you about my home planet, Saturn" (1973). He continues the "proclamation," quickly shifting from spoken language to a free solo on alto sax that winds through metallic sheets of overblown multiphonics—groaning and screaming timbres that stand in

6. Ra is also quoted in Szwed's exhaustive biography as backdating his transformation to a childhood abduction experience.

stark contrast to the cordial exposition of his extraterrestrial origins. After a battery of riotous percussion effects gradually join in the mayhem, and then abruptly subside, Davis continues: “You think you are human. Suppose you’ve made a mistake (as humans always do) and you’re an angel instead. But you shouldn’t make errors because I came to tell you: you are now citizens of the greater uni-verse. *I don’t expect to be a citizen of this planet, it takes too long.* So, I hereby proclaim you citizens of my greater uni-verse” [my emphasis]. As Davis finishes his introduction Ra enters with a free solo on MiniMoog—the oscillator-based futuristic keyboard instrument *par excellence*. Beginning with gently intertwining portamento sine waves, the solo quickly grows frenetic as the clean lines grow distorted emulating a spaceship’s warm-up and eventual launch. Hollywood film studios had been using sine wave and oscillator instruments such as the theremin and ondes martenot throughout the 1940s and 1950s to portray UFOs and extraterrestrial encounters, but no one before Ra used Robert Moog’s widely influential synthesizer in such a wildly inventive manner. Notably, today the instrument has come to stand as something of an enduring symbol of the easy compatibility—if not interdependence—of soul and technology for both the disco and hip hop generations.

The piece “Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)” thus begins by helping the audience to question its reality, then offering them an alternative subjectivity, and finally launching the collection of new “uni-versal” citizens into space on Ra’s musical craft. In his 1974 feature-length film *Space Is the Place*, Ra offers a dramatized version of this basic narrative at the heart of his larger Afrofuturist project. In a book of the same name Ra biographer John Szwed writes accurately of *Space Is the Place* as: “part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic” (1997, 330). While the black exploitation film ambience, barely adequate budget, and committee written screenplay (including a handful of unnecessary sexist subplots) detract from the central liberating theme of the film, *Space Is the Place* nonetheless delivers on a number of Ra’s political aims.

In one of the most poignant scenes of the film, Ra materializes in an Oakland, California, youth center and describes his project to a group of highly dubious teenagers. Media scholar Nabeel Zuberi describes the scene at length in his article “The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: *Space Is the Place*, Sun Ra and Afrofuturism”:

we suddenly see Ra from a more objective point of view. He announces himself as an ambassador from the Intergalactic Council of Outer Space. Faced with some youthful skepticism about his authenticity and disparaging comments that he looks like an old hippy, Ra poses the rhetorical question, “How do you know I’m real?” The youths say “Yeah” inquisitively. Ra continues, “I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were, you’d have some

status among the nations of the world." Close ups of several of the youngsters show that his words have been absorbed. (2004, 88–89)

The central component of Ra's holistic Afrofuturist episteme is evident in the very material critique that he directs against U.S. (and global) concepts of citizenship. By noting that on Earth citizenship "takes too long" and challenging the Oakland youths to interrogate their place in an inequitable U.S. society, Ra again expresses his disdain for the hypocrisy of white universalism.

Ra's poem "Freedom from Freedom" (2005, 177) is another pointed encapsulation of his take on hollow liberal rhetoric, including the lines: "Freedom from the decree of freedom / From the liberty / Of the land of destruction / . . . / What price freedom that despairs? / What glory freedom that destroys?" Similarly, in another scene from the documentary film *A Joyful Noise*, Ra stands at the base of a twenty-foot tall Egyptian sphinx in the University of Pennsylvania's Natural History Museum. Here Ra echoes the distrust of liberal rhetoric in "Freedom from Freedom": "I myself am rising up above what *they* call liberty and what *they* call equality—and whatever man thinks is the greatest thing. I have to rise above that. So, I have to judge a tree by the fruit. I don't like what I see and I don't want to be a part of it." Despite his distrust of the next great ideas of Western progress and his seeming predilection for the mythical, magical, and mystical, here we get a glimpse of Ra the materialist.

If liberty, equality, and universalism are the solid foundations—the roots, trunk, and branches—of our democracy, then why should the fruit that it produces—racism and brutal inequity—be so strange and bitter?⁷ Perhaps, his remarkably comprehensive and consistent cultural critique is more pragmatic than his literally outlandish behavior would indicate. Ra explains further: "We hold this myth to be potential. They hold their truths to be self-evident. Our myth is not self-evident because it is a mystery" (1980). For Ra, Enlightenment rationality, Western progress, and white supremacy are inseparable. They reflect only one narrow vision of the world and therefore could not possibly capture any real truth.

If Sun Ra established the core tenet of anti-anti-essentialist collapsed binaries in musical Afrofuturism, then George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic continued and amplified that futuristic tradition. Like the Arkestra, Parliament saw a direct linkage between their futuristic "mothership" and the ancient "secrets of the pyramids." On the "Prelude" to their 1976 album *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein* Parliament lays out its own myth-science approach as the concept album's protagonist, Dr. Funkenstein (one of Clinton's many alter egos), welcomes the listener into his lab:

7. Here, I am of course referencing Billie Holiday's signature song "Strange Fruit." Although my intent here is to highlight the intertextuality of the two statements, the metaphors of both are unfortunately historically inseparable in the context of American racism.

Once a funk upon a time, in the days of the funkapus, the concept of specially designed Afronauts capable of funkatizing galaxies was first laid on man-child but was later repossessed and placed among the secrets of the pyramids until a more positive attitude towards this most sacred phenomenon—clone the funk—could be acquired. There in these terrestrial projects it would wait, along with its coinhabitants of kings and pharaohs like sleeping beauties with a kiss that would release them to multiply.

The collapse of mythic past and future is self-evident here, with the update of the classic fairy tale anacrusis preparing the listener for a story of “sleeping beauties” and “secrets of the pyramids” side by side with “afonauts” and cloning. Indeed, the album’s narrative draws heavily on the Frankenstein story and the trope of the mad scientist—who is also somehow magical—to locate a past truth in ancient Pharaonic Egypt that was “repossessed” for protection from the negativity of encroaching white civilization.

In drawing on the mad scientist archetype, the album also echoes Amiri Baraka’s play *A Black Mass* (1969), a work based on Nation of Islam creation stories in which the black mad scientist Yacub breathes life into an evil white race. The basic story as first told by NOI founder Wallace Fard Muhammad or as reinterpreted by Jones was almost certainly known to George Clinton as it indeed was to the Chicago-based Ra (Szwed 1997, 132; Baraka 1999).⁸ Notably, however, in their takes on this black myth-science both Ra and Parliament purge the story of its wholesale demonization of the white race. As Zuberi writes of Ra’s use of this NOI creation myth: “Though he didn’t subscribe to its cosmology . . . these [and other] texts made their way into Ra’s mythical lexicography” (2004, 80). Similarly, rather than emphasizing a Manichean battle between good blacks and evil whites as in the original myth or in Jones’s controversial Black Arts Movement work, Parliament’s version of the black mad scientist is a more conciliatory figure—and perhaps most important, a more playful one.

On the title track of the 1975 album *Chocolate City*, Clinton slyly expresses his dissent from the unfulfilled promises and structural racism of our liberal democracy. The track begins hopefully, echoing Ra’s thoughts from *A Joyful Noise*: “What’s happening CC [Chocolate City]? / They still call it the White House but that’s a temporary condition, too. / Can you dig it, CC?” Later on the track Clinton continues: “We didn’t get our forty acres and a mule but we did get you, CC. / Gainin’ on ya. / Movin’ in and around ya. / God bless CC and its vanilla suburbs.” And on the 1976 album *Mothership Connection* Clinton begrudgingly but jokingly gives a degree of credit to

8. For a description of Ra’s exposure to NOI ideology see Szwed (1997). Ra set Baraka’s play to music in 1965 at the Black Arts Repertory Theater School, but Baraka notes that Ra was engaged only marginally in black nationalist movements, writing: “the Black Arts experience added a more openly Black nationalist edge to Ra’s actually scientific philosophical musings on the Universe” (1999).

other funk musicians, both black and white, musing on the tune "P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)": "Hey I was diggin' on y'all's funk for a while. / Sounds like it got a three on it though, to me. / Then I was down south and I heard some funk with some main ingredients like Doobie Brothers, Blue Magic, David Bowie. / It was cool, but can you imagine Doobie in your funk? Ho!"

As with Ra, the articulation of past and future myths as well as the inherent critique of the liberal rationality of the present are essential to Parliament's episteme. Indeed, Clinton uses Ra's language of "citizens of the universe" on *Mothership Connection* (1976), bypassing the historically restricted citizenship of planet Earth. In addition, the narratives of abduction and exodus inform Clinton's Afrofuturism as body snatchers appear and we hear choruses of "swing down sweet chariot, stop and let me ride." The inspiration for the concept of "mothership" on the album was likely also inspired by black Islamic teachings that held that a select group of black people are in fact superhuman and will be saved from Earth by a "mothership" as the white race perishes in flames.

Opting out of this divisive ideology, however, Clinton's Parliament again adopts a symbol of black separatism while undermining its most divisive aspects through playful articulation to the decidedly anti-civilized imagery of the character "Sir Lollipop Man," the outrageous stage shows featuring space costumes, and a giant UFO mothership (behind Clinton in Fig. 1), as well as the commonly diapered vocalist/guitarist Garry Shider. Through their staging, costumes, narratives of "extraterrestrial brothers, dealers of funky music," and "terrestrial projects," Parliament develops characters that Kodwo Eshun fittingly describes as "Spacepimps" (1998, 139). By reconfiguring and redeploying ethnocentric markers in ironic ways, Clinton balanced his critique of white supremacy with a healthy suspicion of black nationalism. As Ra's formulation of the word "Arkestra" combines the primordial mythic vessel with the iconicity of European high art music, Clinton's "Parliament-Funkadelic" collapses the central symbol of Western democracy onto a signifier of drug-laced black soul. Clinton, like Ra before him, seeks a symbolic escape from the politics of the ossified dualities embodied in these terms.

It is on *Mothership Connection* that Parliament first introduces their Afrofuturistic concept of P-Funk—a concept that resonates with Weheliye's "hypersoul." While the funk idea captures the musical idea of black soul, P-Funk—derived from the Parliament-Funkadelic moniker—amplifies, electrifies, and futurizes that soul. As Eshun describes from the opposite/parallel (as Ra would have it) perspective: "P-Funk personifies the nonhuman force of media" (1998, 138). P-Funk is therefore an update of Ra's Myth-Science—a sort of hyper-mediatized techno-soul.

In a calm, reassuring, and measured voice, Clinton introduces the listener to P-Funk on the tune "P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)":

Good evening. Do not attempt to adjust your radio. There is nothing wrong. We have taken control as to bring you this special show. We will return it to you as soon as you are grooving. Welcome to station W-E-F-U-N-K, better known as We Funk or deeper still the Mothership Connection. Home of the extra-terrestrial brothers, dealers of funky music—P-Funk, uncut funk, the bomb. Coming to you directly from the Mothership. Top of the chocolate milky way. Five hundred thousand kilowatts of P-Funk power. So kick back, dig, while we do it to you in your eardrums. Oh, me? I’m know as Lollipop Man. Alias “the long haired sucker.” (1976)

As the cool, low-level background groove builds to a climax, Lollipop Man introduces his “motto” which is suddenly and emphatically sung in a chorus of: “Make my funk the P-Funk.” The now heavy groove continues as Bootsy Collins’s signature “space bass”—a star-shaped electric bass played through a Mu-Tron III envelope filter (see Fig. 3)—emerges, percolating up in blips and growls from the broader musical texture pro-

Figure 3. Bootsy Collins with cheetah skin suit and hyperfunky “space bass.” Courtesy of Bass Player magazine. Original image © Berry Behrendt.



vided by Bernie Worrell's keyboards and Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley's "horny horns."

In his study of the role of the vocoder effect in R&B, Weheliye notes that such technologies "that render the human voice robotic" are in fact quite compatible with our ingrained notions of soulfulness (2002, 22). Similarly, the processor through which Bootsy's bass tones move not only modulates the frequencies of the original sound waves, but also somehow amplifies the funk in his countermelodic bass lines. Gilroy has indicated some misgivings about the effects of such electronic mediation and digital technologies on soulfulness, but his primary concerns regard the potential for these technologies to take the place of human musical proficiency (1998). Rather than displacing or attenuating the soul of Bootsy's musicianship, as we might postulate a technological middleman would, the little futuristic blinking knobbed device catapults the musical soul to another level. The undeniable funkiness of Bootsy's Mu-Tron—like Jimi Hendrix's wah pedal and Zapp's vocoder—underscores this unexpected synergy of soul and science that we might fittingly describe as "hyperfunk."

As former members of James Brown's band Collins, Parker, and Wesley were as well schooled as anyone in soul and funk, but their work on the 1970s Parliament-Funkadelic albums created an entirely new sound. While the duo of Parker and Wesley provided the horn arrangements in much the same punchy and syncopated style as they had while performing with the JB's, the pairing with Collins's now virtuostically spaced-out style and Worrell's complement of synthesized keyboard sounds gave Parliament a uniquely hyper-funky sound. The "five hundred thousand kilowatts" that Clinton describes in "P. Funk" *juice* the funk and give it its hyper-technologized sensibility. Just as Ellison's invisible man multiplied Louis Armstrong's soul five times over on phonographs, Parliament produces its P-Funk by hyper-amplifying, cloning, and otherwise electronically replicating the funk. In this way Parliament's music and space-age stage personae aesthetically embodied the legacy of Afrofuturist thought for the disco era. Furthermore, their profoundly successful engagement with technology and technological discourses of progress helped to destabilize the fallacious dualism of white technology and black soul.

Kool Keith, a founding member of the early hip hop group Ultramagnetic MCs, is an increasingly influential Afrofuturist artist today who embodies the dialectics of Sun Ra and George Clinton. It is his cyber-incantation of "robot voodoo power" that best represents the Afrofuturist lineage of Ra's Myth-Science and Parliament's P-Funk. On the 1997 *Dr. Octagon* album the eponymous protagonist (Keith) raps of his return to Earth and to the past from the year 3000. He describes his time-traveling medical space expedi-

tion over a Casio retro-synth beat with turntable scratches by DJ Q-Bert on the tune “Earth People”:

First patient, pull out the skull remove the cancer.
 Breaking his back, chisel necks for the answer.
 Supersonic, bionic, *robot voodoo power*.
 Equator ex, my chance to flex skills on Ampex.

Although Dr. Octagon was “born on Jupiter”—one planet closer to Earth than Sun Ra—and uses a fax machine for transportation instead of an ark or mothership, he shares the Afrofuturist dismissal of Earth as a galactic backwater unable to imagine the beyond through its rational ideology. In describing his fantastic voyage he responds preemptively, knowing the doubts that earthlings harbor, rapping: “You may not believe livin’ on the Earth planet.”

At the same time, however, the power of Keith’s Afrofuturist episteme is its insistence on the ridiculousness of the myths that U.S. media have constructed about the future. His mention of a ukulele in the same breath as astronauts makes sense in the context of the album as it highlights the 1950s sci-fi craze that accompanied a simultaneous Hawaiian craze in the United States. Like Tracy Morgan’s image of a black astronaut crooning with a guitar under his arm and holding a highball, Kool Keith pokes fun at fifties-era whiteness just as he critiques the dearth of representations of black people in space. Similarly, the robotic (white) female voice that begins the tune by announcing, “paging Dr. Octagon. Code blue in sector nineteen” is taken right from film and television conventions of ironically soothing sci-fi voices that announce imminent destruction (e.g., “this ship will self-destruct in ten seconds”). While his aesthetic of oversaturation and ironic juxtaposition comes off as nearly indecipherable, the logic of his pastiche is striking. His “robot voodoo power” collapses futuristic white myths upon primitivistic black ones in order to critique both stereotyped media images.

Unlike Fredric Jameson’s now-famous description of postmodernism as pastiche emptied of its critical power—or “blank parody” (1983)—Keith’s postmodernism is marked as oppositional despite its seeming inanity and playfulness. Indeed, his critique extends not just to the white anti-authentic but to the black hyper-authentic. On his 1999 concept album *Black Elvis/Lost in Space*, Keith swims in disembodied racial signifiers but maintains a coherent position against simplistic racial formulations. As the title implies, Keith is bringing racial fantasies full circle in donning the alter ego of “Black Elvis” (see Fig. 1). Here his character is of course a black man acting like a white man acting like a black man. But he is not just another impersonator

without a cause, but an artist who knows something about the histories of authenticity, appropriation, and race in American popular music.

On the "Intro" to the album Keith questions a hardcore, hyper-masculine B-Boy too indulged in his fictional "keepin' it real" poses. He asks: "Why are you looking hard with a hood on and Timberland boots . . . ? Why are you making those mean faces in your videos with the fish lens effect . . . ? Why are you smirking up your face making obnoxious facial scenes, like I supposed to be scared?" With regard to Keith's consistent criticism of commercialized gangsta ("Trad") rap personae, Eshun writes: "Kool Keith replaces HipHop's Trad voice armour with a highly strung hauteur, an extreme sarcasm pointed with malicious precision at Trad HipHop's sanctified stupidities, an extreme aversion to its familiar fixations" (1998, 39). Just as Sun Ra's statement that "I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white," Keith rejects monolithic conceptions of blackness and whiteness while retaining an irreducibly complex black (op)positionality.⁹ Most important, Keith's brilliant full-circle formulation of Black Elvis echoes the double negative of Gilroy's anti-anti-essentialism. The figure of Black Elvis simultaneously critiques a reified essential black masculinity while maintaining that an anti-essentialist argument runs the risk of freeing Elvis's appropriation—and white appropriation at large—from criticism.

Although Keith does not look to Pharaonic Egypt to locate his mysticism as with Ra and Parliament, he does share a position in the inner city "terrestrial projects" with George Clinton's P-Funk. On a track replete with the electronic wah effects and female background singers of 1970s black exploitation films, Black Elvis (Keith) raps: "(Chorus: Supergalactic lover.) / Comin' from the projects on the hill. / (Chorus: Supergalactic lover.) / In my monkey-green ragtop Seville." The funky "spacepimp" sexuality of "Supergalactic Lover" stands in direct contrast with "Rockets on the Battlefield," a prior track on which Keith performs the asexual techno-banter of a sci-fi space captain: "raising levels Jim . . . moving levers up at seven decimal eight." That both are media constructions seem all too obvious to Keith.

In the opening tableau of the *Doctor Octagon* concept album (1996), the doctor clad in "white suit and stethoscope" admits he is "just a man" to a sultry sounding female nurse. The scene soon reveals itself as a mock-pornography skit as the good doctor confesses that he has "needs"—and the skit degenerates from there. While decidedly "off color" and potentially offensive, the skit is telling in its use of the doctor character as a man whose professional life has garnered him a capacity for superhuman emotional distance—a capacity that inevitably fails. Despite its crass humor, however,

9. For a succinct critique of monolithic conceptions of black culture see Kelley, "Looking for the Real Nigga" (1997, 17–19).

the skit does real political work in its recognition that as a society we invest in the idea that certain positions of power are somehow superhuman. The simple image of “white suit and stethoscope” and mention of “professional ethics” bring into focus the caricature of a man in power who must nonetheless suppress his sexuality for the sake of his profession—a man who must be “above it all.”

On “Blue Flowers,” the hit track from the album, Keith’s producer Dan “The Automator” Nakamura provides an ingenious beat featuring an incessant loop of the main theme from Béla Bartók’s 1938 violin concerto over a bass-heavy hip hop drum track before shifting into a virtuosic scratch solo by DJ Q-Bert. Keith enters with the lines:

Dr. Octagon paramedic fetus of the East
With priests I’m from the Church of the Operating Room
With the strike support scalpels since the Holocaust
I do indeed in greed explore meet the patients
Back to brooms with the nurse with the voodoo curse

On “Blue Flowers” Keith explores his character, the cut-rate and decidedly creepy “orthopedic gynecologist,” in more depth. The character’s subtle hints at necrophilial intent on the track are reinforced on the tune’s video, which also echoes Keith’s penchant for floating signifiers. We catch brief glimpses of autopsy footage and Aztec petroglyphs, World War II archival film and medieval Christian artworks, circuitry, and skeletons as they whiz by in a barrage of fuzzy succession, while individual white letters fall like snow in the foreground.

Especially notable is a somewhat extended camera shot that anticipates Keith’s work on *Black Elvis* in which a character in blackface (either Q-Bert or Keith himself) emerges in sunglasses and backwards cap grinning ear to ear. The seemingly disparate visual elements of the video suddenly snap into focus as Keith rehistoricizes himself in a complex lineage of “black” entertainers through this pastiche aesthetic. Sonically, the foregrounding of the fluid but foreboding Bartók violin theme on the track reminds us of the doctor’s corrupted medical ethics as a sort of orchestral beauty gone awry—a signifier of untouchable high art brought down into the debased world of low brow street music. Similarly, on a later skit between tracks we hear an advertisement for the “Offices of Dr. Octagon” where Pachelbel’s ubiquitous Canon in D major provides the soundtrack for the doctor’s list of questionable—and certainly unethical—specialty surgeries.

It is the surplus of signification in Keith’s work that gives his cultural critique such power. As the number of sounds and images reaches a critical mass, the logic that maintains the stability of these polarized media signifiers buckles under the weight of their supposed meanings. Remarkably,

these sound bites and screen shots are simultaneously exposed as simplistic stand-ins for real engagement and rebuilt into a liberating way out of the dualistic bind. In short, this Afrofuturist destabilization has a hyper-signified message—it clears the way to an ambivalent unity. The anachronistic simultaneity of robots and voodoo, rockets and ukeleles, Bartók and Q-Bert, and of course the brilliantly stupid “space doo-doo pistols” provides Keith with the metaphors for challenging myths of past and future. The tension produced by collapsing the fantasies/fallacies of black superstition and white science fiction one onto the other creates a powerful weapon with which to reflect the deformed irrationality of these visions back onto the rationalized “universalist” society that created them. Thus, Keith’s construction of “robot voodoo power” seems a fitting encapsulation of his Afrofuturist cultural critique and a succinct representation of the potential inherent in the larger Afrofuturist project.

Conclusions: The Tree and the Fruit

Does the fact that Sun Ra opted out of humanity in the mid-1950s just as the civil rights movement was gaining steam in the United States cast him as a race traitor? Do Parliament’s overindulgent “Spacepimps” undermine the project of racial equality? Can Keith’s “Black Elvis” be considered anything more than a postmodern joke? In short, are Myth-Science, P-Funk, and Robot Voodoo Power signs of resignation and hopeless fantasy or “real” answers that have meaning in the material world—a world that cannot seem to escape the perpetuation of racism?

I would like to assert that they do have real political efficacy because they problematize the rigid binary of blackness/whiteness and the matrix of binaries that are inscribed upon this central set. Remarkably, Afrofuturism performs this destabilization from a staunchly oppositional position that is decidedly black because it is rooted in the historical reality of white universalist racism and continuously works against that history. While Du Bois advises African Americans to maintain their race identity until the United States meets them on their terms, the Afrofuturists diversify blackness while recuperating Du Bois’s steadfastness. As Sun Ra explained in *Joyful Noise*: “I have to judge a tree by the fruit. I don’t like what I see and I don’t want to be a part of it.” The materialist foundations of this seemingly idealist project are nowhere more evident.

I would argue that the broadly defined Afrofuturist project takes its lead from this position. Although Afrofuturism draws on tropes of exodus and seems to promote an escape from reality, it instead does very real social and cultural work. Afrofuturism is itself a mode of meaning-making and historical production that navigates, counters, and ultimately transcends the

history of African-American oppression while retaining a critical blackness. While Afrofuturist dialectics recognize myths and collapse ossified binaries into dynamic unities, the episteme is grounded in its material opposition to white racist universalism. By stepping outside of the white liberal tradition and rewriting blackness in all its complexity, Afrofuturism offers a novel form of revolution that is rooted in a long history of black opposition.

Indeed, the Afrofuturist project speaks to a very broad group of people and a broad range of material issues. The AfroFuturism listserv itself has over three hundred members and the music, literature, art, drama, and sports that are discussed in that forum reach countless millions. The recent success of Gnarls Barkley—the critically acclaimed collaboration of Cee-Lo and Danger Mouse—is indicative of Afrofuturism’s continued popular appeal. On the track “Transformer,” Cee-Lo speaks from the perspective of a “microchip off the old block,” an identity-shifting robot who echoes De La Soul’s “I Am I Be,” rapping: “I’m just being myself / Plus I gotta be me too / Silly of me to think that / I couldn’t bring myself to be you” (2006). Reporting on an August 2006 concert in New York’s Central Park, Billboard.com’s Michael Ayers wrote of the group: “What seemingly was a one-off side project has turned into mega-success, and will probably carry them right into Grammy nods galore. But on this night, the Gnarls camp was in good spirits and celebrating a newly confirmed platinum award for 1 million U.S. shipments of its debut, ‘St. Elsewhere.’ Part of the Gnarls Barkley shtick is their playful identity, where they never really assume themselves, but instead riff on past popular culture entities” (2006).

Notably, this “shtick” is in fact part of a larger movement that employs the past to envision new futures. Yet whether critics or fans conceive of Afrofuturist culture as such seems beside the point. By engaging people in an active appreciation of such fantastic visions, Afrofuturism primes the mind and body to both imagine and live in a world apart from that depicted in the rationalized histories of Western civilization. Perhaps just as importantly, the visibility of Afrofuturism in the African American artistic canon should offer some sense of the power of this project. Thoughtful authors such as Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka, and Ishmael Reed, brilliant artists such as Basquiat, Fatimah Tuggar, and the increased scholarly attention to street art, in addition to the countless musicians that are most visible in the field all attest to Afrofuturism’s political and material power.

It is no mistake that the Afrofuturist critique makes its case most poignantly in the realm of the arts, for aesthetic creation bypasses the strictures of rhetorical logic in favor of an embodied position. For the literary and cultural theorist Fred Moten the experience of double consciousness is intimately tied to the bifurcations and ruptures of Enlightenment thought and its central mind/body binary. As he argues in his *In the Break: The Aes-*

thetics of the Black Radical Tradition (2003), black artistic performance holds the potential of expressing an imminent critique of Western rationality and its systems of meaning from an embodied position. Afrofuturism is in this regard a decidedly materialist rather than idealist project. Indeed, the “break” that he speaks of is first and foremost a recognition of the rupture between language and the speech act that provides a site of opposition—a place where counter-meanings can be constructed and (white) rationality can be critiqued. Moten writes: “This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence” (2003, 7).

Moten uses Frederick Douglass’s reminiscence about his Aunt Hester’s scream upon being beaten by her white slave master as a nexus upon which to focus his examination of the multiple valences of the break. Here, the central bifurcation that he highlights is actually a sutured rupture between the human and commodity. It is a mended break embodied in Aunt Hester’s screaming voice and her corollary in Marx’s figure of the “speaking commodity” of which Marx writes: “Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness . . . it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” ([1867] 1990, 163). Marx continues in a later passage: “If commodities could speak they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it” (176). Moten’s point, of course, is that Marx has one thing wrong here. Commodities *do* speak. Aunt Hester’s scream proves it. That Marx’s humanized commodity figure does not make sense reveals the fundamental flaw of the Enlightenment project. By the rules of Western subjectivity she/it should not exist, but we know she/it does exist because of the horribly embodied scream—and moreover because she/it does think, because she/it does dance, because she/it does make love.

Further citing Marx, Moten argues for the performativity of the scream that: “It is a passion wherein ‘the senses have . . . become theoreticians in their immediate practice.’ The commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign” (2003, 11–12). Here Moten brilliantly illustrates that Marx’s speaking commodity and the Hegelian master/slave dialectic are much more than metaphorical tools, they embody the historically violent realities of Western systems of signification. In short, he illustrates the centrality of slavery to Enlighten-

ment universalism and lays bare the processes by which the mind/body split was accomplished through the subjugation of the black body. Here we see that the anomaly of the speaking commodity is a “theoretician in immediate practice” (Marx quoted in Moten, 2003, 11–12). Thus, Moten argues that the black radical aesthetic has become the critical—the artistic has become the scholarly—through its very existence and resistance. Indeed, he challenges the formal strictures of (white) scholarly discourse by delivering his argument in *In the Break* as a sort of poetic internal dialogue rather than in the pseudo-objective style of conventional scholarly writing.

It is this disjuncture or “break”—the glaring anomaly of material racism at the heart of ideal universalism—that is seized upon by Afrofuturist critiques of Western rationalism and its white supremacy. Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Kool Keith embody their critique through the sights, sounds, and movements of their interplanetary presences and therefore move past the written rhetoric that has upheld the fallacies of liberty and equality—“rising up above what *they* call liberty and what *they* call equality” as Sun Ra put it (*Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise* 1980). Their very voices are an immanent critique of the Western hegemony of signification. In times such as these when the words “democracy” and “freedom” ring empty—when they are *broken* from their emancipatory potential by self-interested military industrialists and when declarations of “humanitarian crises” are based more on considerations of race, class, and power than the universal value of human life, it seems that we might look for alternatives to this ancient and now co-opted rhetoric. Cast by slaveholders and forged in the fires of colonialism this ossified ideology no longer *moves* people.

By contrast Sun Ra, Clinton, and Keith also avoid the essentializing pitfalls of ethnic nationalism while recovering its emotional and embodied assets. These Afrofuturists do not subscribe to the narratives of scientific progress that forecast an end to ethnic nationalisms and racial strife nor do they see the current vision of a race-free future as a place they wish to live. But they are no more interested in a return to an idyllic, primordial, and racially pure motherland. Surely, no place will ever, nor has ever, existed. Instead, through their art Ra, Clinton, Keith, and a host of others involved in Afrofuturist and anti-anti-essentialist projects are working toward a place and time in which this polarized vision no longer makes any sense. And in a typically playful manner, they are all the while laughing at the very thought of such simplistically dualistic human notions. The Afrofuturist strategy thus carves out a new emancipatory potential—a fantastic but ethical anti-anti-essentialist third way—by recovering the hope of the future and the solidarity of the past.

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Du concept de « Myth-Science » au « Robot Voodoo Power » : L'héritage afro-futuriste et anti-anti-essentialiste de Sun Ra

J. Griffith Rollefson

Traduit de l'anglais (États-Unis) par Erwan Jégouzo

Avec *It's After the End of the World*, album live paru en 1972, le claviériste, compositeur et chef d'orchestre Sun Ra emporte son public terrestre dans une odyssée musicale, déployant sa vision personnelle, post-humaniste, d'un monde de science-fiction noir. Dans « Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach) », morceau composé par Ra, la vocaliste June Tyson et le saxophoniste Danny Davis demandent aux êtres humains qui les écoutent : « Si vous n'êtes pas réels, à quel mythe appartenez-vous ? Si vous n'êtes pas un mythe, de quelle réalité faites-vous partie ?¹ », avant de décoller vers l'espace à bord d'une fusée propulsée par le moog de Ra. Tout au long de sa carrière, Ra ne cessa jamais d'affirmer qu'il était né sur Saturne, comme un défi lancé aux idées toutes faites et aux vérités considérées comme acquises. Loin d'être pure fiction, la dimension critique de l'entreprise de Ra est évidente sur cet enregistrement effectué au cours des Festivals de Donaueschingen et Berlin en 1970.

Davis continue, prosaïque : « Je ne compte pas devenir un citoyen de cette planète : cela prend trop de temps. » Comme je le développe ici, le concept apparemment paradoxal de « Myth-Science » est la clé de la compréhension de la philosophie afro-futuriste de Ra, à la fois fantastique et objectivement émancipatrice. De plus, l'ambivalente unité du terme est au cœur disloqué du plus large projet d'Afro-futurisme. La « Myth-Science » est ainsi un mantra et une machine toujours vivante, qui n'a cessé de se métamorphoser et de se téléporter dans d'autres âmes bien après que Ra a quitté ce monde.

Depuis que le terme « Afro-futurisme » a fait son apparition, les chercheurs s'en sont saisi comme un moyen de critiquer la distance réifiée entre les fictions éminemment connotées de *magie noire* et de *science blanche*, souvent sur un mode satirique et même ludique. Pourtant, au principe même de l'Afro-futurisme se trouve la distance normalisée entre identité noire et futur technologique cybernétique, dichotomie que reflète l'expression « fracture numérique ». Comme l'explique Alondra Nelson : « Les prévisions utopiques (pour certains) d'un futur sans race, d'une part, et d'autre part, le constat d'une fracture numérique dystopique dominant les discours sur l'identité noire et la technologie dans la sphère publique. [...] L'identité noire se construit toujours en opposition à des phases de progrès technologiques². » De fait, ce qui fragilise la stratégie afro-futuriste, c'est le fait qu'elle puisse très rapidement être réduite à une réification de l'infériorité noire par simple contraste avec la technologie supposément « blanche ».

Pour répondre à cette critique possible du projet afro-futuriste, je propose un cadre théorique fondé sur la notion d'« anti-anti-essentialisme » que Paul Gilroy a formulé en 1991, dans un article publié par le *Black Music Research Journal*. Essentiel est ici un argument mis en avant par Nelson dans son analyse de l'Afro-futurisme : ce à quoi ressemble un « futur sans race », c'est à un futur blanc (et masculin)³. Pour dénoncer cette fausse utopie, le projet afro-futuriste se concentre alors sur le passé, en reprenant tactiquement à son compte la notion d'âme noire.

S'il est important de considérer que les concepts d'âme et d'authenticité sont des constructions jouant sur les tropes de la magie vaudou – secret supposé du « continent noir » –, et bien que l'idée d'une « âme » musicale puisse conforter les stéréotypes essentialistes du racisme blanc, aux États-Unis comme ailleurs, il faut rappeler qu'il s'est agi là d'un excellent outil de promotion de la solidarité noire. La stratégie afro-futuriste souligne les qualités magiques de l'authenticité noire en l'articulant avec la tout aussi

fantastique *anti*-authenticité de la science-fiction blanche, jouant avec les paradoxes en découlant. C'est là « l'approche mytho-scientifique » de Sun Ra.

En ne mettant en avant ni le rationalisme ethnique de la pensée essentialiste, ni les identités fluctuantes du poststructuralisme, mon but est de montrer que l'Afro-futurisme est une troisième voie qui propose une critique des deux positions, effaçant la distance rationalisée entre deux pôles *a priori* irréconciliables et, de fait, sapant fondamentalement les termes du débat. Pour saisir les implications de la remise en question de ce dualisme, citons une formule de Kool Keith dans sa chanson « Earth People », où l'alter ego jupitérien du rappeur en appelle au « Robot Voodoo Power » (« pouvoir robot vaudou »), notion qui fait écho à la « Myth-Science » de Ra, et disloque les tropes de la science blanche et de la magie noire en les confrontant l'une avec l'autre⁴. Là où la vision stéréotypée du vaudou afro-caribéen se pose en signifiant de l'identité noire, le robot est le symbole tout aussi stable de l'identité blanche. Comme l'explique Theo Cateforis dans une section d'un article sur le groupe de musique électronique Devo intitulé « Robotic Bodies, White Bodies » : « [...] le robot est précisément le type de signifiant chargé qui ouvre une fenêtre culturelle bien plus large⁵ ». Le vaudou et les robots existent certainement, mais, dans la mesure où ils se posent en symboles établis de la race, leur sens est absolument fantastique. Kool Keith combine ces signifiants chargés des identités blanche et noire avec les formes les plus ingénieuses de la critique culturelle afro-futuriste. Je propose cette thèse du « Robot Voodoo Power » non pas comme un substitut à l'Afro-futurisme, mais comme une tentative explicite de maintenir la vivacité du jeu dialectique implicite dans les affirmations les plus fortes de l'Afro-futurisme. Comme je vais l'expliquer, ce sont les implications sur le plan racial des tensions entre passé et futur, science et mythe, robot et vaudou, qui donnent à l'Afro-futurisme son pouvoir critique.

La thèse du « Robot Voodoo Power »

À la suite de Paul Gilroy, qui a discuté la nature insatisfaisante des deux positions critiques les plus souvent en jeu en ce qui concerne l'identité noire – les arguments essentialiste et anti-essentialiste – je proposerais de considérer l'Afro-futurisme comme une version stratégique de ce que Gilroy appelle « *anti-antiessentialism* » dans son article « Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing' Same⁶ » et plus tard « *anti-anti-essentialism* » dans *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*⁷. À travers un engagement ludique avec les tropes primitivistes du vaudou ou de la magie noire, et leur juxtaposition ironique avec la science-fiction comme une espèce de magie blanche, l'Afro-futurisme remet en question la perspective nativiste noire (comprenez : essentialiste) et l'argument poststructuraliste blanc (comprenez : anti-essentialiste).

Selon Gilroy, les arguments essentialistes sont d'une efficacité politique contestable, mais dans la mesure où l'inégalité perdure, le temps des identités fluctuantes des postmodernistes n'est pas encore arrivé. « Le caractère ouvertement hybride de ces cultures atlantiques noires réfute ainsi toute interprétation simpliste (essentialiste ou anti-essentialiste) du rapport entre identité et non-identité raciale, authenticité traditionnelle et trahison populaire⁸. » L'anti-anti-essentialisme de Gilroy est donc une critique du nationalisme noir, considéré comme une idéologie obsolète, et une réfutation du post-structuralisme, vu comme un projet idéaliste blanc, ce tout en rétablissant l'idée que l'identité noire possède une véritable signification matérielle en tant que catégorie culturelle. Comme l'argumente W. E. B. Du Bois dans son texte de 1897 « La Conservation des races » : « Nous pensons qu'il est du devoir des Américains de descendance nègre, en tant que corps, de maintenir leur identité de race jusqu'à l'accomplissement de la mission du peuple et que l'idéal de la fraternité humaine soit devenu une possibilité pratique⁹. » Comme l'expriment les concerts de Sun Ra en 1970 en Allemagne, cet idéal n'a pas encore été rendu possible : « cela prend trop de temps. » Je suggère que l'anti-anti-essentialisme stratégique de l'Afro-futurisme est un projet critique visant à poser les fondations d'une humanité qui ne soit pas liée aux idéaux de l'universalisme des Lumières « blanches » et de sa citoyenneté discriminante. Voilà ce qu'est, en résumé, la thèse du « Robot Voodoo Power » – et comment devient visible la troisième voie de l'Afro-futurisme.

1 Nous avons pris le parti de traduire, même imparfaitement, les textes et paroles de chansons citées par l'auteur dans la mesure où c'est bien à leur sens qu'il s'intéresse. Pour les paroles originales, voir la version anglaise du texte, pp. 96-105 de ce volume (N.d.t.).

2 Alondra Nelson, « Introduction: Future Texts », in *Social Text*, vol. 20, n. 2, 2002. Notre traduction. Ici comme dans la suite du texte, nous avons choisi de traduire la notion de « blackness », essentielle dans la discussion proposée par l'auteur, par « identité noire », et, parallèlement, de rendre « whiteness » par « identité blanche » (N.d.t.).

3 Cf. Mark Dery, « Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose », in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 94, n. 4, 1993, p. 273.

4 Voir l'album de Kool Keith/Dr. Octagon, *Dr. Octagon*, Bulk/Mo Wax, 1996.

5 Theo Cateforis, « Performing the Avant-Garde Groove: Devo and the Whiteness of the New Wave », in *American Music*, vol. 22, n. 4, 2004, p. 566. Notre traduction.

6 Paul Gilroy, « Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing' Same », in *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 11, n. 2, automne 1991, pp. 123-128. Notre traduction.

7 Publié aux États-Unis en 1993; paru une première fois en Français en 2003 aux éditions Kargo dans une traduction de Jean-Philippe Henquel; puis réédité dans une nouvelle traduction de Charlotte Nordman sous le titre *L'Atlantique noir. Modernité et double conscience*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2010. C'est à cette version que nous nous référons ici (N.d.t.).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

9 W.E.B. Du Bois, « The Conservation of Races », in David W. Blight et Robert Gooding-Williams (dir.), *The Souls of Black Folk*, Boston, Bedford Book, 1997, p. 237. Notre traduction.

Bien que Gilroy ne fasse pas directement allusion à l'Afro-futurisme, il a anticipé sur ce champ dans son étude approfondie de la manière dont les technologies contrarient le discours de l'authenticité noire – en particulier dans la musique. Dans *L'Atlantique noir*, Gilroy évoque précisément « l'occasion d'utiliser la musique comme un modèle qui permettrait de sortir enfin de l'impasse dans laquelle nous enferme l'alternative des deux positions insatisfaisantes qui dominent aujourd'hui le débat sur la politique culturelle noire¹⁰. » En prolongeant l'idée du « Même changeant » d'Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones, il prend l'exemple historique de l'innovation technologique dans la musique noire – de la country au blues, du jazz à la fusion, et du scratch à la production assistée par ordinateur dans le hip hop – pour contester les formulations binaires¹¹. Son choix de décrire cette position par la double négation « anti-anti-essentialisme » reflète également l'esprit ludique des Afro-futuristes, soulignant que la véritable farce est cette dichotomie même, entre positions essentialiste et anti-essentialiste. C'est ce double mouvement rhétorique, la double conscience qui l'accompagne et ouvre une nouvelle voie, qui rend l'anti-anti-essentialisme de l'Afro-futurisme si ingénieux et puissant.

Peut-être les affinités les plus claires entre Gilroy et l'Afro-futurisme se font-elles jour dans son analyse de l'utopie de Parliament-Funkadelic dans son premier livre, « *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* ». Faisant étroitement écho au concept de « Myth-Science » de Ra, il explique comment les visions futuristiques de Parliament-Funkadelic offrent un potentiel prometteur, grâce auquel « la capacité destructive de la rationalité technologique de l'Amérique serait tenue en échec par les forces mystiques et naturelles contenues dans les pyramides de l'Égypte ancienne, symbole durable de la fierté et de la créativité noire¹². » Je me propose de retracer l'héritage de Sun Ra et la continuité entre Afro-futurisme et anti-anti-essentialisme – cette thèse du « Robot Voodoo Power » –, de Ra jusqu'à Kool Keith en passant par Parliament-Funkadelic.

La « Myth-Science » de Sun Ra

On peut comprendre à partir de *It's After the End of the World* le cadre de pensée de Sun Ra. L'équivalence qu'il pose entre « réalité » et « science » en regard du « mythe » dans le morceau « Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach) » est une remise en cause implicite de la rationalité et de l'histoire mêmes. Pour lui, ceux qui écrivent l'histoire sont complices de l'assujettissement des Afro-Américains et de la perpétuation du racisme euro-américain. De fait, la conception que se fait Ra des historiens rappelle la célèbre déclaration d'Othman Sullivan sur les anthropologues : « Je pense que toute cette anthropologie n'est qu'une autre façon de me traiter de nègre¹³. » Ra remarquait, dans le documentaire de 1980 *A Joyful Noise* : « Je ne fais pas partie de l'histoire, je fais plutôt partie de son mystère¹⁴. »

Pour Ra, ce mystère renvoie à une compréhension complexe du monde à travers la contingence de sa situation. Plus loin dans ce même documentaire, il explique sa dialectique depuis un lieu symbolique, Pennsylvania Avenue, à Washington : « Tout peut se comparer. Je suis assis devant la Maison Blanche, je regarde de l'autre côté de la rue, et je ne vois pas la Maison Noire... Vous voyez, vous ne pouvez pas avoir une chose sans son parallèle ni son opposé. C'est un fait dont les habitants de la Terre n'ont pas conscience. » À travers son œuvre, Ra dépeint un monde infiniment plus complexe – et mystique – qu'un arrangement chronologique, narratif et rationnel de faits passés. Pourtant, son épistémè ne se fonde pas sur la magie, le mythe ne pouvant fonctionner de son point de vue « sans son parallèle ni son opposé » : la réalité (ou la science)¹⁵. C'est simplement l'idée que le passé puisse être expliqué uniquement en termes de réalité que Ra dénonce.

Ra a employé le terme de « Myth-Science » pour la première fois au milieu des années 1950 pour décrire son collectif musical, un orchestre de jazz plutôt traditionnel, qu'il surnomma le « Myth-Science Arkestra ». La musique de Ra dans ses premières représentations avec l'Arkestra était un mélange d'harmonies jazz et de blues progressif couplé avec des grooves quasi-africains dans des arrangements exubérants, que l'on trouve dans des titres comme « Saturn » et « Ancient Aiethopia » (1958). Au cours des années 1960, avec des albums comme *When the Sun Comes Out* (1963), Ra ajouta à son langage musical déjà éclectique des chants évoquant l'espace, des paroles librement et sauvagement improvisées et des timbres étranges. L'instrumentation de

10
Op. cit., p. 148.

11
Voici en quels termes Gilroy développe cette reprise de l'argument de Amiri Baraka / LeRoi Jones : « [...] je crois possible de définir la musique comme un Même changeant plutôt qu'immuable. Aujourd'hui, cela passe par la tâche difficile de tenter d'appréhender la reproduction des traditions culturelles non pas dans la transmission non problématique d'une essence figée, mais dans les ruptures et les interruptions qui suggèrent que l'invocation de la tradition peut elle-même constituer une réponse distincte, bien qu'indirecte, au flux déstabilisant du monde post-contemporain. » In *L'Atlantique noir*, op. cit., p. 150.

12
Paul Gilroy, « *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* » ; *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Londres, Hutchinson, 1987, p. 180. Notre traduction.

13
Cité in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1997, p. 16. Notre traduction.

14
Robert Mugge, *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, production Rhapsody Films, 1980, 60 min.

15
Il est intéressant de remarquer que Ra emploie ici les termes de « parallèle » et « opposé » comme synonymes, tant sa conception des oppositions est dialectique et se constitue mutuellement.

son ensemble s'élargit au cours des années 1960 et 1970 pour inclure des percussions traditionnelles d'Afrique de l'Ouest – tambourins, shakers et cloches – en plus des instruments électroniques hyperfuturistes comme le Wurlitzer, le MiniMoog et le violon électrique. De cette manière, l'attention égale que porte Ra à la tradition et à la technologie (au mythe et à la science, au passé et au futur) permet de saper la logique interne de genres musicaux réifiés. Passant de riffs de boogie-woogie à des overblows de saxophone et des ondes électroifiées, Ra façonne un monde de sons qui déstabilise les significations musicales racialisées, reflétant sa vision politique. L'univers musical de Ra incarne la « Myth-Science » comme épistémè. Qui plus est, son personnage de scène exprime cette ambivalence à travers son costume, que l'on peut décrire comme une tenue de pharaon de l'espace, comprenant une tunique dashiki aux couleurs vives, une coiffe égyptienne et un casque spatial à antennes.

Comme l'indiquent le nom du groupe et de son leader, Ra and the Arkestra s'inspirait d'une vision mythologisée du passé judéo-égyptien, recontextualisant les tropes de l'exode et de la rédemption dans un futur interplanétaire. L'approche « mytho-scientifique » de l'histoire proposée par Ra s'appuie sur la tension dialectique entre un passé noir « manufacturé » et un futur blanc tout aussi surécrit. De même que la vie et la musique de Ra reflètent un désir de reconstruire son passé – et celui des Africains Américains – son projet met en avant une constante réimagination du futur, et remet en question les structures universalistes occidentales de l'« égalité », qui charrient des réalités qui en sont bien éloignées. Sa conception d'un passé mythique situé dans la civilisation africaine fait partie intégrante d'un mode d'écriture de l'histoire plus large, propre à l'Afro-futurisme, qui met l'Afrique à l'écart de récits d'oppression totalisants qui représentent l'identité noire comme un fardeau. Ra évoque ainsi ces récits dans *A Joyful Noise* : « c'est leur histoire (*his-story*) ; vous n'avez pas entendu la mienne. »

Dans la deuxième partie du morceau « Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach) », intitulée « Angelic Proclamation », Danny Davis annonce poliment au public : « Nous voudrions vous parler de notre planète, Saturne. » Le rythme de sa « proclamation » est rapide, passant du langage parlé à un solo improvisé de sax alto – des grognements et des cris en contradiction totale avec l'exposition chaleureuse de ses origines extraterrestres. Un vacarme de percussions rejoint progressivement ce chaos puis cesse brutalement, avant que Davis ne continue : « Vous pensez être des humains. Supposons que vous vous soyez trompés (comme le font tous les humains) et qu'en fait vous soyez des anges. Mais vous ne devriez pas vous tromper car je suis venu vous dire : vous êtes maintenant des citoyens du grand uni-vers. *Je ne compte pas être un citoyen de cette planète : cela prend trop de temps. [...] Je vous proclame donc citoyens de mon plus grand uni-vers.* » [C'est moi qui souligne].

Au terme de l'introduction de Davis, Ra fait son entrée avec un solo improvisé au MiniMoog, synthétiseur à oscillateurs qui est l'instrument futuriste par excellence. Sonnant au début comme un léger entrelacement d'ondes sonores en portamento, le solo prend rapidement un rythme frénétique, les lignes mélodiques se déformant de plus en plus, jusqu'à évoquer la mise en route d'un vaisseau spatial avant son lancement. Dans les années 1940 et 1950, les studios d'Hollywood avaient eu recours à des instruments à ondulations ou oscillateurs comme le Theremin et les Ondes Martenot pour illustrer musicalement OVNI et rencontres extraterrestres, mais personne avant Ra n'avait utilisé le célèbre synthétiseur de Robert Moog d'une façon aussi libre et inventive. L'instrument en est venu aujourd'hui à symboliser la compatibilité évidente, pour ne pas dire l'interdépendance de l'âme et de la technologie aussi bien pour les générations du disco que du hip hop.

Le morceau « Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach) » commence donc par inviter le public à remettre en question sa réalité, avant de lui offrir une subjectivité alternative, et enfin de libérer ce groupe de nouveaux citoyens uni-versels dans l'espace, à bord du vaisseau musical de Ra. Dans son long-métrage de 1974, *Space is the Place*, Ra offre une version dramatisée de ce récit initial, qui est au cœur du plus large projet afro-futuriste. Dans l'une des scènes clés du film, Ra se matérialise à Oakland, en Californie, et décrit son projet à un groupe d'adolescents particulièrement dubitatifs. Nabeel Zuberi décrit la scène en détail dans son article « The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: Space is the Place, Sun Ra and Afrofuturism » :

[...] nous voyons soudain Ra d'un point de vue plus objectif. Il se présente comme un ambassadeur du Conseil Intergalactique de l'Espace Sidéral. Devant faire face à un certain scepticisme de la part des jeunes quant à son authenticité, et à des commentaires désobligeants sur son air de vieux hippie, Ra pose cette question rhétorique : « Comment savez-vous que je suis réel ? » Les jeunes répondent « Ouais ? » avec une certaine curiosité. Ra reprend : « Je ne suis pas réel. Je suis juste comme vous. Vous n'existez pas dans cette société. Si c'était le cas, votre peuple n'aurait pas à réclamer l'égalité des droits. Vous n'êtes pas réels. Sinon, vous auriez un statut parmi les nations de ce monde. » Des gros plans sur plusieurs visages confirment que ses paroles ont fait leur effet¹⁶.

L'élément central de l'épistémè holistique afro-futuriste de Ra est clair dans les critiques concrètes qu'il dirige contre le concept de citoyenneté américain (et son acception générale). En notant que sur Terre la citoyenneté « prend trop de temps » et en poussant les jeunes d'Oakland à interroger leur place dans une société inégalitaire, Ra exprime une fois de plus son mépris pour l'hypocrisie de l'universalisme blanc.

Dans son poème « Freedom from Freedom », Ra formule autrement son opinion sur l'inconsistance de la rhétorique libérale :

Se libérer du décret de liberté / De la liberté / Des terres de la destruction [...] Combien vaut la liberté qui désespère ? / Quelle gloire apporte la liberté qui détruit¹⁷?

De la même manière, dans une autre scène du documentaire *A Joyful Noise*, Ra se tient au pied du sphinx de six mètres de haut du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de l'Université de Pennsylvanie. Ses propos font écho à la méfiance envers la rhétorique libérale dont est empreinte « Freedom from Freedom » : « Je m'élève moi-même au-dessus de ce qu'eux appellent liberté et égalité – peu importe ce que l'homme pense être le plus important. Je dois m'élever au-dessus de cela. Je ne peux juger l'arbre que par son fruit. Je n'aime pas ce que je vois et je ne veux pas en faire partie. » Malgré sa défiance vis-à-vis des grandes idées du progrès occidental et sa prédilection apparente pour le mythe, la magie et la mystique, voilà un aperçu de Ra le matérialiste.

Si la liberté, l'égalité et l'universalisme sont les fondations solides – les racines, le tronc et les branches – de notre démocratie, alors pourquoi le fruit qu'il produit – le racisme et une inéquité brutale – est-il aussi étrange et amer¹⁸? Peut-être que cette critique culturelle remarquablement complète et cohérente est-elle plus pragmatique que l'attitude littéralement « folklorique » de Ra ne pourrait l'indiquer. « Nous pensons que ce mythe est puissant. Ils pensent que leurs vérités sont évidentes. Notre mythe n'est pas évident parce que c'est un mystère », ajoute-t-il dans *A Joyful Noise*. Pour Ra, la rationalité des Lumières, le progrès occidental et la domination blanche sont indissociables. Ils ne font qu'illustrer une vision du monde biaisée, et seraient incapables de rendre compte de quelque vérité ou réalité que ce soit.

George Clinton, Parliament Funkadelic, « P-Funk » et « hypersoul »

Si Sun Ra a établi le principe central de la dislocation anti-anti-essentialiste des dualismes dans l'Afro-futurisme musical, George Clinton et Parliament-Funkadelic ont pris le relais de cette tradition futuriste en l'amplifiant. Tout comme l'Arkestra, Parliament a vu un lien direct entre leur « vaisseau-mère » futuriste et les antiques « secrets des pyramides ». Sur l'album de 1976 *The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein*, Parliament expose sa propre « approche mytho-scientifique », par le biais du protagoniste de l'album, Dr. Funkenstein (l'un des nombreux alter egos de Clinton), qui accueille ainsi l'auditeur dans son laboratoire :

Il était une funk, à l'époque du Funkapus, le concept des Afronautes spécialement élaboré pour funkiser les galaxies fut envoyé pour la première fois sur l'humanité, mais fut repris et enfermé parmi les secrets des pyramides en attendant qu'une attitude plus positive envers ce phénomène sacré – cloner le funk – prenne forme. Là, dans ces cités terrestres, il attendrait, aux côtés des rois et des pharaons, comme une belle au bois dormant attendant un baiser pour se libérer et se multiplier [...]

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Nabeel Zuberi, « The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk : Space is the Place, Sun Ra, and Afrofuturism », in *Off the Planet : Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 88-89. Notre traduction.

17

Sun Ra, « Freedom From Freedom », in James L. Wolf et Hartmut Geerken (dir.), *The Immeasurable Equation : The Collected Poetry and Prose*, Nordstedt, Books on Demand / Waitawhile, 2005, p. 177. Notre traduction.

18

Je fais bien sûr ici référence à la chanson de Billie Holiday « Strange Fruit » : « Here is a strange and bitter crop... » Mon intention est ici de souligner la relation d'intertextualité, mais ces métaphores sont malheureusement historiquement inséparables du contexte raciste américain.

Pour une description du rapport de Ra à l'idéologie de la N.O.I., lire John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, New York, Pantheon, 1997, p. 132. Ra mit en musique la pièce de Baraka en 1965 au Black Arts Repertory Theater School, mais comme Baraka a pu le faire remarquer, Ra n'était engagé que marginalement dans les mouvements nationalistes noirs : « [...] l'expérience des Black Arts ajouta un tranchant plus ouvertement nationaliste noir aux méditations de Ra sur l'Univers, alors plutôt scientifiques et philosophiques. » Cf. pochette de l'album de Amiri Baraka & Sun Ra and the Myth-Science Arkestra, *A Black Mass* (1966), Sun Boy Records, 1999, réédition.

Nabeel Zuberi, *art. cit.*, p. 80. Notre traduction.

Voir Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Londres, Quartet, 1998, p. 138.

« Ark » signifie « arche », renvoyant ainsi à l'Arche de Noé (N.d.e.).

L'amalgame du passé mythique et du futur est évident ici, avec la parodie de l'anacrouse classique du conte de fée préparant l'auditeur à une histoire de « belle au bois dormant » et de « secrets des pyramides », auquel sont associés des « Afronautes » et le clonage. De fait, le récit de l'album s'appuie essentiellement sur l'histoire de Frankenstein et le trope du savant fou – qui a aussi quelque chose d'un magicien – pour situer dans l'Égypte des pharaons une ancienne vérité, « reprise » pour être protégée de la négativité de l'invasion par la civilisation blanche.

En invoquant l'archétype du savant fou, l'album fait aussi écho à la pièce d'Amiri Baraka, *A Black Mass*, une œuvre basée sur les récits fondateurs de la Nation of Islam dans lesquels le savant fou noir Yacub insuffle la vie dans une race blanche malveillante. La trame générale imaginée par le fondateur de la NOI, Wallace Fard Muhammad, était certainement connue par George Clinton comme elle l'était par Sun Ra¹⁹. Il faut cependant noter que Ra comme Parliament, dans leur approche de cette « Myth-Science » noire, expurgent le récit de sa diabolisation de la race blanche dans son ensemble. Zuberi remarque justement, à propos de l'utilisation de Ra du mythe biblique de NOI : « Même s'il n'adhère pas à leur cosmologie [...] ces textes [et d'autres] se sont intégrés au vocabulaire mythologique de Ra²⁰. De la même manière, plutôt que de mettre l'accent sur un combat manichéen entre les « bons » Noirs et les « méchants » Blancs comme dans le mythe original, la version de Parliament du savant fou noir est une figure plus conciliante et, plus important peut-être, plus ludique.

Sur la chanson titre de l'album de 1975 *Chocolate City*, Clinton exprime d'un air entendu son mécontentement vis-à-vis de la démocratie libérale américaine, ses promesses non tenues et son racisme structurel. Le début du morceau sonne plein d'espoir, en écho aux réflexions de Ra dans *A Joyful Noise* : « Que se passe-t-il, CC [Chocolate City] ? Ils l'appellent encore la Maison Blanche mais ce n'est que temporaire. Tu piges, CC ? » Plus loin dans le morceau, Clinton reprend : « On n'a pas eu nos quarante acres et une mule, mais on t'a eu, CC. On te rattrape. On arrive et on t'encercler. Que Dieu bénisse CC et sa banlieue à la vanille. » Et dans l'album de 1976 *Mothership Connection*, Clinton donne à contrecœur, sur le ton de la plaisanterie, un certain crédit aux autres musiciens funk, aussi bien noirs que blancs, sur le titre « P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up) » : « Hey, ça fait un moment que j'écoute ce que vous faites, les gars. Mais pour moi ça vaut pas plus d'un 3. Je suis descendu dans le Sud et j'ai entendu du funk avec les Doobie Brothers, Blue Magic, David Bowie comme ingrédients. C'était cool, mais vous imaginez Doobie dans votre funk ? Oh ! »

Comme chez Ra, l'articulation des mythes du passé et du futur ainsi que la critique constante de la rationalité libérale du présent sont essentielles dans l'épistémè de Parliament. Dans *Mothership Connection*, Clinton emprunte à Ra le terme de « citoyen de l'univers » pour dépasser la citoyenneté historiquement restreinte de la planète Terre. Qui plus est, des récits d'enlèvement et d'exode viennent enrichir l'Afro-futurisme de Clinton ; il est question de possessions par des extraterrestres, et des refrains comme « descends, ô char, arrête-toi et emporte-moi. » En ce qui concerne le concept de « Mothership », Clinton s'était probablement inspiré des enseignements islamiques noirs selon lesquels un groupe d'élus du peuple noir, en fait surhumains, seraient sauvés de la Terre par un « vaisseau-mère » tandis que la race blanche périrait dans les flammes.

Le Parliament de Clinton se distingue cependant de cette idéologie nationaliste en sapant les aspects les plus conflictuels des symboles du séparatisme noir qu'il adopte, par l'articulation humoristique de l'imagerie résolument anti-civilisée du personnage de « Sir Lollipop Man », et des jeux de scène outranciers comprenant tenues spatiales et vaisseau-mère géant. À travers leurs mises en scène, leurs costumes, leurs histoires de « frères extraterrestres dealers de musique funk » et de « projets terrestres », Parliament développe des personnages que Kodwo Eshun décrit avec beaucoup d'à-propos comme des « *spacepimps*²¹ » – des macs de l'espace. En reconfigurant et en redéployant les marqueurs ethniques par des moyens ironiques, Clinton équilibre sa critique de la domination blanche par un scepticisme bienvenue à l'égard du nationalisme noir. Si dans la terminologie de Ra l'« Arkestra » combine le vaisseau primordial mythique²² avec l'iconicité du grand art musical européen, le « Parliament-Funkadelic » de Clinton résulte d'un choc entre le symbole central de

la démocratie occidentale et un signifiant de l'âme noire intoxiquée. Clinton, comme Ra avant lui, cherche une échappatoire symbolique à la politique des dualités ossifiées ancrées dans ces termes.

C'est dans *Mothership Connection* que Parliament introduit pour la première fois le concept afro-futuriste du « P-Funk » – concept auquel fait écho le terme d'« hypersoul » proposé par Alexander Weheliye²³. Tandis que le mot de « funk » capture l'idée musicale d'âme noire, le « P-Funk » (abréviation de Parliament-Funkadelic) amplifie, électronise et futurise cette âme, cette « soul ». « P-Funk » est ainsi une mise à jour du concept de « Myth-Science » de Ra – une sorte de techno-soul hyper-médiatisée. D'une voix calme, rassurante et mesurée, rappelant celle d'un évangéliste de radio, Clinton présente le « P-Funk » à l'auditeur sur le titre « P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up) » :

Bonsoir. N'essayez pas de régler votre radio. Tout va bien. Nous avons pris le contrôle pour vous présenter cette émission spéciale. Nous vous le rendrons dès que vous groovez. Bienvenue à la radio W-E-F-U-N-K, plus connue sous le nom de We Funk, The Mothership Connection pour les intimes. Patrie des frères extraterrestres, dealers de musique funky – P-Funk, funk à fond, de la bombe. En direct depuis le Vaisseau-mère. Du haut de la Voie Lactée au chocolat. Cinq cent mille kilowatts de puissance P-Funk [...]

D'abord en fond sonore, cool et retenu, le groove monte en intensité jusqu'au refrain : « *Make my funk the P-Funk !* » Un groove maintenant soutenu s'installe tandis qu'émerge le son de la « basse de l'espace », véritable signature de Bootsy Collins – une basse électrique en forme d'étoile jouée avec un filtre Mu-Tron III –, dont les blips et les grognements se mêlent à la large texture musicale fournie par les claviers de Bernie Worrell et les cuivres luxuriants de Maceo Parker et Fred Wesley.

Le processeur Mu-Tron à travers lequel passent les notes jouées par Bootsy ne module pas seulement les fréquences des ondes originales, il amplifie également, en quelque sorte, le funk de ses lignes de basse contre-mélodiques. Plutôt que de déplacer ou d'atténuer l'âme musicale de Bootsy comme on l'attendrait d'un intermédiaire technologique, le petit appareil futuriste à bouton clignotant la catapulte à un autre niveau. La « funkitude » indéniable du Mu-Tron de Bootsy – comme la pédale wah-wah de Jimi Hendrix et le vocoder de Zapp – souligne une synergie inattendue entre âme et science, que l'on pourrait qualifier d'« *hyperfunk* ».

Collins, Parker et Wesley, tous des anciens membres du groupe de James Brown, ont été à bonne école en matière de soul et de funk, mais leur travail sur les albums des années 1970 de Parliament-Funkadelic produit un son complètement neuf. Tandis que les arrangements de cuivre proposés par le duo Parker/Wesley gardent le style percutant et syncopé caractéristique de leur jeu avec les JB's, leur association avec le style de Collins, sur une orbite virtuose, et avec les claviers synthétiseurs de Worrell donne à Parliament un son unique hyper-funky. Les « cinq cent mille kilowatts » que Clinton décrit dans « P. Funk » expriment le suc du funk, et assoient sa sensibilité hyper-technologisée. Parliament, autant par sa musique que par ses représentations spatiales, a ainsi pris en charge esthétiquement l'héritage de la pensée afro-futuriste à l'âge du disco. En outre, leur approche particulièrement efficace de la technologie et des discours sur le progrès ont contribué à déstabiliser le dualisme fallacieux entre technologie blanche et âme noire.

Kool Keith et ses avatars : Dr. Octagon, Black Elvis

Kool Keith, membre fondateur d'un des groupes pionniers du hip hop, Ultramagnetic MCs, est un artiste afro-futuriste dont l'influence ne cesse de grandir aujourd'hui, et qui prolonge la dialectique de Sun Ra et de George Clinton. Sa cyber-incantation du « Robot Voodoo Power » montre bien comment il se situe dans la lignée afro-futuriste de la « Myth-Science » de Ra et du « P-Funk » de Parliament. Sur l'album de 1997 *Dr. Octagon*, le personnage éponyme (Keith) rappe son retour sur Terre et son voyage dans le passé, depuis l'an 3000. Sur le titre « Earth People », il raconte son expédition spatio-médicale à travers le temps sur un beat rétro-synthétique Casio, accompagné par les scratches de DJ Q-Bert :

Premier patient, retire le crâne, ôte le cancer
 En lui cassant le dos, cisaille le cou, trouve la réponse
 Supersonique, bionique, pouvoir robot vaudou
 Équateur ex, ma chance de tester mes réflexes sur Ampex
 Potentiomètres de puissance et jauge de chauffage antigel
 Octogone, oxygène, toxiques aluminium
 Encore un moyen de te cracher des cellules de sang au visage
 Réagir avec quatre bombes et six missiles
 Armé de sept chargeurs de pistolets de l'espace doo-doo
 Vous n'allez pas vouloir vivre sur la planète Terre
 Ma peau est verte et argentée, crâne chauve l'air mauvais
 Les astronautes m'ont senti passer comme un ukulélé
 Mise en place des roquettes, niveaux prioritaires
 Tout est calme. Mêmes données, même système,
 (Contrôlé par Gammalyte)
 Peuple de la Terre : New York et Californie
 Peuple de la Terre : je suis né sur Jupiter [...]

Bien que Dr. Octagon soit né sur une planète plus proche de la Terre que Sun Ra – et qu'il utilise une machine à fax pour voyager au lieu d'une arche ou d'un vaisseau-mère – tous deux se retrouvent dans le rejet afro-futuriste de la Terre, vue comme une source galactique tarie, incapable de forcer son imagination au-delà de son idéologie rationnelle.

Dans un même temps, l'épistémé afro-futuriste de Keith montre sa puissance en insistant sur le ridicule des mythes futuristes que les médias américains ont construit. La mention d'un ukulélé et d'astronautes dans un même souffle fait sens dans l'album car il renvoie à la concomitance de la vogue de la science-fiction et de l'engouement pour Hawaï dans les États-Unis des années 1950. Tout comme Astronaut Jones, personnage de cosmonaute noir joué par l'humoriste Tracy Morgan dans le *Saturday Night Live*, chante comme un crooner avec une guitare sous le bras et un whisky à la main, Kool Keith se moque de l'identité blanche typique des *fifties* et critique la rareté des représentations de Noirs dans l'espace. De même, la voix de femme (blanche) robotique qui commence la chanson en annonçant « Appel au Dr. Octagon. Code bleu dans le secteur dix-neuf » reprend directement la convention cinématographique et télévisuelle de la voix suave annonçant ironiquement une destruction imminente (par exemple, « ce vaisseau va s'auto-détruire dans dix secondes »). Tandis que cette esthétique de sur-saturation et de juxtaposition ironique est quasi-indéchiffrable, la logique de son pastiche est imparable. Ce « pouvoir robot vaudou » renvoie dos à dos les mythes futuristes blancs et les mythes primitivistes noirs, critiquant les stéréotypes des deux images médiatiques.

Contrairement à la définition désormais célèbre du postmodernisme comme pastiche vidé de pouvoir critique telle que l'a posée Fredric Jameson – « une parodie vide, blanche²⁴ » –, le postmodernisme de Keith est empreint de contestation, malgré son apparente inanité et son caractère ludique. En effet, sa critique ne se limite pas à l'anti-authenticité blanche mais touche aussi l'hyper-authenticité noire. Dans son album-concept de 1999, *Black Elvis/Lost in Space*, Keith nage au milieu de signifiants raciaux désincarnés tout en restant cohérent dans son rejet des formulations raciales simplistes. Comme l'indique le titre, Keith reboucle les fantasmes raciaux sur eux-mêmes en enfilant le costume d'un « Elvis noir ». Son personnage est ici bien sûr *un homme noir imitant un Blanc qui imite les Noirs*. Cependant il n'est pas un simulateur de plus, sans cause à défendre, mais bien un artiste qui en sait long sur l'histoire des notions d'authenticité, d'appropriation et de race dans la musique populaire américaine. Mieux encore, la formulation brillante de l'« Elvis noir » fait écho à la double négation de l'anti-anti-essentialisme de Gilroy. Cette figure permet une critique de la masculinité noire réifiée, tout en maintenant qu'un argument simplement anti-essentialiste présente le risque de dédouaner le geste d'appropriation d'Elvis – et l'appropriation blanche en général – de toute critique.

Si Keith ne se tourne pas vers l'Égypte pharaonique pour situer son mysticisme comme Ra et Parliament, il se place, avec Georges Clinton et son « P-Funk », dans

les « cités terrestres » des quartiers défavorisés. Sur un titre bourré d'effets wah-wah et de voix d'accompagnement féminines rappelant les films de blaxpoitation des années 1970, Black Elvis/Keith rappe : « (Refrain : *Supergalactic lover*) Venant des cités sur la colline / (Refrain) / Dans ma Seville décapotable vert singe ». La sexualité funky façon « mac de l'espace » du « Supergalactic Lover » (« amant supergalactique ») contraste complètement avec « *Rockets on the Battlefield* », morceau précédent dans lequel Keith emprunte le registre technique asexué d'un commandant (blanc) de vaisseau de science-fiction : « montée des niveaux, Jim... déplacement des leviers à sept virgule huit. » Qu'il s'agisse dans les deux cas de constructions médiatiques semble plus qu'évident pour Keith.

Dans l'ouverture du concept album *Dr. Octagon*, le docteur, « en costume blanc et stéthoscope », avoue qu'il « [n'est] qu'un homme » à une infirmière à la voix attirante. La scène se révèle rapidement une parodie de film pornographique, la situation dégénérant quand le bon docteur confesse ses « pulsions ». Tout en étant délibérément « incolore » et potentiellement choquant, ce sketch est intéressant dans sa mise en scène du personnage du docteur comme un homme qui s'est doté dans sa vie professionnelle d'une distance émotionnelle surhumaine, capacité qui s'effondre inévitablement. Malgré son humour vulgaire, cette saynète a une véritable portée politique, et souligne comment à l'intérieur de notre société, nous entretenons l'idée selon laquelle certaines positions de pouvoir sont, d'une certaine façon, surhumaines. La simple image du costume blanc et du stéthoscope, ainsi que « l'éthique professionnelle » évoquée par Keith, brossent la caricature d'un homme puissant qui doit néanmoins abolir sa sexualité au nom de sa profession – un homme qui doit être « au-dessus de tout ».

Sur « *Blue Flowers* », le titre phare de l'album, le producteur Dan « The Automator » Nakamura installe un rythme ingénieux, qui intègre une boucle incessante tirée d'un concerto pour violon de Béla Bartók de 1938. La première moitié du thème, lyrique mais étrange, flotte au-dessus d'un rythme lourd de batterie hip hop avant de se transformer en un solo de scratch virtuose de DJ Q-Bert. Keith entre en scène avec ces paroles :

*Dr. Octagon foetus de l'Est paramédical
Avec des prêtres je viens de l'Église de la Salle d'Opération
Avec la force de frappe des scalpels depuis l'Holocauste
J'ausculte les patients vraiment avec gourmandise
Retour aux balais avec l'infirmière et la malédiction vaudou [...]
Je suis prêt, en costume blanc et stéthoscope [...]*

Dans « *Blue Flowers* », Keith explore toutes les facettes de son personnage décidément lugubre de « gynécologue orthopédique » de seconde zone. Les indices subtils des penchants nécrophiles du personnage sont renforcés dans le clip de la chanson, qui atteste également de l'intérêt que porte Keith à des signifiants flottants : on y saisit de brefs extraits d'autopsie et des bribes de pétroglyphes aztèques, des archives de la Seconde Guerre Mondiale aussi bien que de l'iconographie chrétienne médiévale, des circuits imprimés et des squelettes s'échappant d'une confusion de lettres blanches tombant comme de la neige au premier plan.

Il est particulièrement intéressant de noter un moment de la vidéo qui annonce le travail de Keith sur *Black Elvis*, où l'on voit le visage d'un personnage *blackface*²⁵ (Q-Bert ou Keith lui-même) surgir en lunettes de soleil et casquette à l'envers avec un large rictus. Les éléments visuels apparemment disparates de la vidéo prennent soudain tout leur sens, alors que Keith entreprend de se réhistoriciser lui-même, se situant dans la tradition d'hommes de spectacle « noirs » à travers son pastiche esthétique. Du point de vue sonore, la prééminence donnée dans le morceau au violon fluide mais inquiétant de Bartók nous rappelle l'éthique médicale corrompue du docteur, comme une sorte de beauté orchestrale décadente – le signifiant d'un grand art intouchable rabaissé au niveau des musiques urbaines.

C'est en travaillant ce surplus de signification que Keith donne autant de force à son analyse culturelle. Alors que l'accumulation des sons et des images atteint une masse

Le terme de *blackface* renvoie à un type de spectacle donné par des comédiens et des chanteurs blancs, interprétant, le visage enduit de noir, des histoires et des morceaux de musique appartenant aux répertoires des cultures populaires noires. (N.d.e.).

critique, la logique censée maintenir leur stabilité de signifiants polarisés cède sous le poids de leurs significations supposées. D'une manière remarquable, ces fragments sonores et ces plans apparaissent comme les substituts simplistes à un engagement réel, et dans un même temps ils sont reconfigurés et libérés de leur carcan dualiste. En résumé, le message que porte la déstabilisation afro-futuriste est sursignifié, pour ouvrir la voie à une unité ambivalente. La simultanéité anachronique des robots et du vaudou, des fusées et des ukulélés, de Bartók et de Q-Bert, et bien sûr des « pistolets de l'espace doo-doo » aussi brillants que stupides, offrent à Keith toutes les métaphores pour questionner les mythes du passé et du futur. La tension produite en rabattant les fantasmes et les sophismes de la superstition noire et de la science-fiction blanche les uns sur les autres crée une arme puissante, permettant de renvoyer l'irrationalité déformée de ces visions à la société rationnelle « universaliste » qui les a créées. Ainsi, le « pouvoir robot vaudou » construit par Keith apparaît comme une encapsulation pertinente de sa critique culturelle afro-futuriste, et représente avec concision le potentiel inhérent au projet afro-futuriste dans son ensemble.

L'arbre et le fruit

Est-ce que le fait que Sun Ra se soit retiré de l'humanité au milieu des années 1950, juste au moment où le Mouvement des droits civiques prenait de l'ampleur aux États-Unis, le condamne comme un traître à sa race ? Les « macs de l'espace » complaisants de Parliament minent-ils le projet d'égalité raciale ? L'« Elvis noir » de Keith peut-il être considéré comme autre chose qu'une blague postmoderne ? En résumé, les concepts et idées derrière les termes de « Myth-Science », « P-Funk », et « Robot Voodoo Power » sont-ils des signes de résignation et des fantaisies désespérées, ou bien de « vraies » réponses qui font sens dans le monde matériel – un monde qui ne semble pas pouvoir échapper à la perpétuation du racisme et de l'inégalité ?

Je voudrais affirmer qu'ils ont une réelle efficacité politique parce qu'ils problématisent le clivage des identités noire/blanche, et la matrice des dualismes qui sont inscrits sur cette configuration centrale. Il faut souligner comment l'Afro-futurisme réalise cette déstabilisation depuis une situation de claire opposition, point de vue résolument noir dans la mesure où il trouve ses racines dans la réalité historique du racisme blanc, et qu'il travaille de manière continue contre cette histoire. Du Bois conseillait aux Afro-Américains de maintenir leur identité propre jusqu'à ce que les États-Unis se rendent à leurs conditions ; les Afro-futuristes proposent des identités noires diverses, tout en reprenant la fermeté de Du Bois. Comme l'a expliqué Sun Ra : « Je ne peux juger l'arbre que par son fruit. Je n'aime pas ce que je vois et je ne veux pas en faire partie. » Les fondations matérialistes de ce projet apparemment idéaliste ne sont nulle part plus évidentes.

C'est me semble-t-il depuis cette position que le projet afro-futuriste dans son acception la plus large prend sa dynamique. Bien qu'il s'appuie sur les tropes de l'exode et semble prôner une fuite hors de la réalité, il effectue au contraire un travail social et culturel très réel. L'Afro-futurisme est en lui-même un mode de fabrication du sens et de production historique qui traverse, contredit et en fin de compte transcende l'histoire de l'oppression des Afro-Américains sans renier une identité noire critique. Tandis que la dialectique afro-futuriste reconnaît la force des mythes et renverse les dichotomies figées pour en faire des unités dynamiques, son épistémè est fondée dans son opposition matérielle à l'universalisme blanc raciste. En s'écartant de la tradition libérale blanche et en récrivant l'identité noire dans toute sa complexité, l'Afro-futurisme propose une forme inédite de révolution, qui prolonge une longue histoire de la contestation noire.

En effet, le projet afro-futuriste s'adresse à très large public, et traite d'un grand nombre de problèmes tout à fait concrets. En incitant chacun à considérer de manière active des visions aussi fantastiques, l'Afro-futurisme engage l'esprit autant que le corps à imaginer et à vivre dans un monde autre que celui que l'on trouve dans les histoires rationalisées de la civilisation occidentale. Peut-être, de manière tout aussi importante, l'influence visible de l'Afro-futurisme dans l'art afro-américain permet-elle de saisir le pouvoir de ce projet. Des écrivains aussi réfléchis que Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka, Samuel Delany, Ishmael Reed et Octavia Butler, des artistes brillants comme Jean-Michel

Basquiat, Fatimah Tuggar ou Renée Cox, en plus des innombrables musiciens particulièrement visibles dans ce domaine attestent du pouvoir politique et matériel de l'Afro-futurisme.

On ne peut manquer de constater que la dimension critique de l'Afro-futurisme est mise en valeur de manière singulièrement sensible dans le champ des arts, la création esthétique étant à même de se départir des restrictions de la logique rhétorique en incarnant un positionnement. Pour le théoricien de la littérature Fred Moten, l'expérience de la double conscience est intimement liée aux antinomies et aux ruptures dans la pensée des Lumières et à son dualisme central corps/esprit. Comme il l'explique dans *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, la performance artistique noire porte en elle le potentiel d'expression d'une critique immanente de la rationalité occidentale et de son système de signification depuis une position incarnée. L'Afro-futurisme est à cet égard un projet résolument matérialiste plutôt qu'idéaliste. En effet, le « break », la rupture que Moten évoque est d'abord et avant tout une reconnaissance de la disjonction entre le langage et la parole, qui ouvre un espace oppositionnel – un lieu où des contre-significations peuvent être construites et la rationalité (blanche) critiquée. Selon Moten, « cette remise en cause du projet linguistique des Lumières est d'une importance fondamentale en ce qu'elle permet un réarrangement du rapport entre les notions de liberté humaine et d'essence humaine. »²⁶ En résumé, il explique que l'esclavage est au centre de l'universalisme des Lumières, et met au jour comment la division entre le corps et l'esprit a été littéralement accomplie par l'assujettissement du corps noir. Moten avance ainsi l'idée que l'esthétique noire radicale a pris un rôle critique – tandis que l'art trouvait sa dimension spéculative – du fait de sa propre existence, et de sa résistance même.

C'est de cette disjonction, de cette rupture – l'anomalie aveuglante du racisme effectif au cœur de l'universalisme idéal – que l'Afro-futurisme tire avantage, dans sa critique du rationalisme occidental et du racisme blanc. Sun Ra, George Clinton et Kool Keith donnent corps à leur critique dans les visions, les sons et les mouvements de leurs entités interplanétaires et de là, dépassent l'écriture rhétorique qui cautionnait les sophismes de la liberté et de l'égalité – « au-dessus de ce qu'eux appellent liberté et égalité », pour reprendre les mots de Ra. Leurs voix mêmes sont une critique immanente de l'hégémonie occidentale sur les significations. Dans des périodes où les mots « démocratie » et « liberté » sont vidés de leur sens – lorsqu'ils sont coupés de leur potentiel émancipatoire par des industries militaires motivées par leurs seuls intérêts, et que l'on déclare des « urgences humanitaires » d'après des considérations de race, de classe et de pouvoir, davantage que sur la valeur universelle de la vie humaine, il est important de chercher des alternatives à une rhétorique séculaire, aujourd'hui tenue pour acquise. Établie par des esclavagistes et forgée dans les flammes de la colonisation, cette idéologie sclérosée ne mobilise plus personne.

À l'inverse, Ra, Clinton et Keith savent éviter les écueils essentialistes du nationalisme ethnique tout en récupérant ses valeurs émotionnelles et incarnées. Ces Afro-futuristes ne souscrivent pas aux récits post-raciaux du progrès scientifique, pas plus qu'ils ne considèrent la vision actuelle d'un futur sans race comme un endroit où ils voudraient vivre. Mais ils ne s'intéressent pas pour autant à un retour vers une mère patrie idyllique, primordiale et racialement pure. Tout au contraire, Ra, Clinton, Keith et bien d'autres tenants de l'Afro-futurisme et de l'anti-anti-essentialisme travaillent à rendre possible un espace et un temps où cette vision polarisée serait dénuée de sens. Et d'une manière tout à fait ludique, ils se moquent dans un même temps de l'existence de notions humaines si naïvement dualistes. La stratégie afro-futuriste dessine une nouvelle possibilité d'émancipation – une troisième voie anti-anti-essentialiste, fantastique mais éthique – reprenant confiance dans l'avenir, et solidaire du passé.

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on cardboard (240 × 300 cm)
courtesy of the artist

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crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 285 cm)
courtesy of the artist & Mary Mary, Glasgow

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lettre de Mireille Rias, écrite en 2010, racontant à sa fille Lili Reynaud Dewar ses souvenirs du concert de Sun Ra and his Arkestra à la Fondation Maeght / approximate English translation of a letter from Mireille Rias to her daughter Lili Reynaud Dewar, written in 2010, telling her recollections of Sun Ra and his Arkestra's performance at the Fondation Maeght, which she attended then

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documentation du concert de Sun Ra and his Arkestra aux Nuits de la Fondation Maeght, 1970. En 1971, le label français Shandar a édité en deux volumes l'enregistrement de cette soirée sous le titre *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght* (SR 10.001 & SR 10.003) / Sun Ra and his Arkestra performing at Les Nuits de la Fondation Maeght, in 1970. The recording of this concert was released in France by Shandar in 1971, in two volumes titled *Nuits de la Fondation Maeght* (SR 10.001 & SR 10.003)
photographies de / all photographs by Philippe Gras

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Interpretation Drawing (Language of the Gods), 2010
crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 280 cm)
collection Chiara & Steven Rosenblum, Paris

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Mireille Rias's recalling of Sun Ra and his Arkestra's performance at Les Nuits de la Fondation Maeght, 2010
vêtu d'un costume créé par Mathieu Bernard, Mireille Rias écoute pour la première fois l'enregistrement du concert de Sun Ra auquel elle avait assisté à la Fondation Maeght. Cette séance d'écoute, dans l'Oberlichtsaal de la Kunsthalle de Bâle, est filmée par Lili Reynaud Dewar / dressed in Mathieu Bernard's costumes, Mireille Rias listens for the first time to the recording of the 1970 concert at the Fondation Maeght. Set in the Oberlichtsaal of Kunsthalle Basel, this listening session is videotaped by Lili Reynaud Dewar
photographies de / production stills by Charles Duprat
courtesy of the artist & Kunsthalle Basel

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Interpretation Recalling, 2010
bois, miroirs, sound system appartenant à Sam Supasonic, projection vidéo / wood, mirrors, Sam Supasonic's sound system, video projection (760 × 760 × 340 cm; chaque miroir / each mirror: 340 × 191 × 150 cm; vidéo: 1h10 min)
vues de l'installation à la Kunsthalle de Bâle; au centre de l'installation, une projection vidéo montre Mireille Rias lisant la lettre reproduite en p. 3, puis écoutant l'enregistrement du concert de Sun Ra à la Fondation Maeght. Ce même enregistrement est diffusé dans la salle d'exposition, l'Oberlichtsaal de la Kunsthalle / views of the installation at Kunsthalle Basel. At its center is a video projection showing Mireille Rias reading the letter reproduced page 3 of this book,

and then listening to the recording of the concert at the Fondation Maeght—which is played at the same time in the exhibition room, the Oberlichtsaal
photographies de / photographs by Stefan Altenburger
courtesy of the artist, Kunsthalle Basel & Mary Mary, Glasgow

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Interpretation Recalling, 2010
détail de l'installation. Ce sound system diffusant la musique de Sun Ra dans l'exposition a été mis à disposition par son concepteur, Sam Supasonic, DJ dub/reggae/ragga/dancehall, qui l'utilise en temps normal dans les soirées qu'il organise à Bâle / installation detail. This sound system was borrowed to Sam Supasonic, a dub/reggae/ragga/dancehall DJ, who designed by himself this device for parties he's organising in Basel. The sound system played Sun Ra's music from the Nuits de la Fondation Maeght in the exhibition room
photographie de / photograph by Stefan Altenburger
courtesy of the artist, Kunsthalle Basel & Mary Mary, Glasgow

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Interpretation Drawing (What America Should Consider), 2010
crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 270 cm)
courtesy of the artist & Mary Mary, Glasgow

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documentation de la performance *Interpretation*, présentée dans le cadre du cycle d'événements *Let Us Compare Mythologies*, neuvième acte du programme *Morality*, organisé au Witte de With en 2010. Les *Interpretation Drawings* faisaient partie de l'exposition collective *Of Facts and Fables*, septième acte de ce même programme / views of the performance *Interpretation*, presented during the performance program *Act IX—Let Us Compare Mythologies*, part of Witte de With's *Morality* project (2009-2010). *Interpretation Drawings* were also exhibited in the group show *Act VII—Of Facts and Fables*, as part of the project. Mary Knox lit à voix haute les textes de Sun Ra figurant sur les *Interpretation Drawings* / Mary Knox reads aloud Sun Ra's texts, from Reynaud Dewar's *Interpretation Drawings*
photographies de / photographs by Bob Goedewaagen
courtesy of the artist & Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam

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documentation de la performance *Interpretation*, à la Fondation Calder, réalisée dans le cadre de la quatrième édition de la biennale Performa, dédiée aux arts visuels et à la performance, 2011 / views of the performance *Interpretation*, in the framework of Performa 11, fourth visual art performance biennial, at Calder Foundation, in 2011
Mary Knox lit à voix haute les textes de Sun Ra, accompagnée par Hendrik Hegray à l'orgue et aux machines, et par Lili Reynaud Dewar jouant les disques de la collection « La Grande Oreille » – qui rassemble des 33 tours qu'on aurait pu acquérir auprès du magasin de disques éponyme à La Rochelle, entre 1975 et 1979, sur les conseils du disquaire Daniel Reynaud. Cette collection « parachronique » de 50 disques a fait l'objet d'une édition limitée pour la revue *May* en 2010 / Mary Knox reads aloud Sun Ra's texts, while Hendrik Hegray plays his machines and the organ, and Lili Reynaud Dewar plays records from the collection "La Grande Oreille" ("The Great Ear")—a gathering of LPs that could have been acquired between 1975 and 1979 in the record shop of the same name in La Rochelle, following the recommendations of its owner, Daniel Reynaud. This "parachronic" collection

of 50 records has been released as a limited edition for the Paris-based journal *May* in 2010.
photographies de / photographs by Elizabeth Proitsis
courtesy of the artist & Performa, New York

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documentation de la performance *Interpretation*, à 1m³, 2010 / views of the performance *Interpretation*, at 1m³, 2010
accompagnée par Hendrik Hegray à l'orgue et aux machines, et par Lili Reynaud Dewar jouant les disques de la collection « La Grande Oreille », Mary Knox lit à voix haute les textes de Sun Ra, activant dans l'artist-run space 1m³ les *Interpretation Drawings* exposés auparavant à la Kunsthalle de Bâle / while Hendrik Hegray plays his machines and the organ, and Lili Reynaud Dewar plays records from the collection "La Grande Oreille," Mary Knox reads aloud Sun Ra's texts, activating inside the artist-run space 1m³ the *Interpretation Drawings* that were previously exhibited at Kunsthalle Basel
photographies de / photographs by Guillaume Pilet
courtesy of the artist & 1m³, Lausanne

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Interpretation Drawing (Little I's I love You), 2010
crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 300 cm)
vue de l'installation à 1m³ / view of the installation at 1m³; photographie de / photograph by Adrien Missika
courtesy of the artist, 1m³, Lausanne, & Mary Mary, Glasgow

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courtesy of the artist & 1m³, Lausanne

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crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 280 cm)
vue de l'installation à 1m³ / view of the installation at 1m³; photographie de / photograph by Adrien Missika
collection 1m³, Lausanne

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le texte de J. Griffith Rollefson est une version modifiée d'un article paru dans le *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 28, n. 1, printemps 2008, pp. 83-101; numéro spécial « Becoming: Blackness and the Musical Imagination », sous la direction de Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr (Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2008). Le texte est reproduit avec l'aimable autorisation de l'éditeur / J. Griffith Rollefson's text is a reedited version of an article first published in *Black Music Research Journal*. Used with permission of the University of Illinois Press. See the original: Rollefson, J. Griffith, "The 'Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis: Afrofuturism and Anti-Anti-Essentialism from Sun Ra to Kool Keith," *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 28, n. 1, Spring 2008, Special Issue: *Becoming: Blackness and the Musical Imagination*, ed. by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.: 83-109

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Interpretation Drawing (I Don't Give a Hoot), 2010
crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 270 cm)
collection Chiara & Steven Rosenblum, Paris

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Interpretation Drawing (There Are Two Ethiopias), 2010
crayon de couleur sur carton / colour pencil
on cardboard (240 × 310 cm)
courtesy of the artist and Mary Mary, Glasgow

colophon

Lili Reynaud Dewar *Interpretation*

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de performances / this book has been
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following her suite of exhibitions
and performances:

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18/04-06/06/2010
commissariat / curated by:
Adam Szymczyk; assisté de / with
the assistance of: Roos Gortzak

Interpretation
1m³, Lausanne
09-31/07/2010
commissariat / curated by:
Tiphane Blanc & Josef Hannibal

Interpretation Drawings
présentés dans l'exposition
collective / exhibited in the group
exhibition *Morality—Act VII: Of Facts
and Fables*
Witte de With, Rotterdam
13/05-10/10/2010

commissariat / curated
by: Juan A. Gaitán &
Nicolaus Schafhausen;
assistés de / with the assistance of:
Amira Gad

Interpretation
performance présentée dans le cadre
de / performance presented in
the framework of *Morality—Act IX:
Let Us Compare Mythologies*
Witte de With, Rotterdam
18-20/06/2010
commissariat / curated by:
Renske Janssen & Dorothea
Jendricke

Interpretation
performance présentée dans le cadre
de / performance presented in
the framework of *Performa 11*
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04-05/11/2011
commissariat / curated by:
Victoria Brooks

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

GUTHRIE P. RAMSEY JR.

This issue of *Black Music Research Journal* represents an important benchmark in the history of this publication. Since its inaugural issue in 1980, BMRJ has featured articles that treated the philosophy, aesthetics, history, and criticism of black music. Much of the scholarship in the early days of the journal could assume that readers would take the term "black music" at face value, so to speak, and that the qualities defining it could certainly be understood as a "commonsense" notion. Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* (1971) had mapped the parameters of the field in the previous decade, and her first-of-its-kind journal *The Black Perspective in Music* provided the space for chapter-and-verse conversations of intellectual exploration and institution building. When BMRJ appeared, it pushed further into territories of the black musical imagination and moved the field to a higher intellectual plane. In the early days of black music scholarship, there was an often unspoken imperative that the music under consideration was worthy of serious study, a necessity seemingly unfettered by a burden to question the "black" half of the equation. That was then.

Today, as the BMRJ moves toward its third decade of existence, the field is experiencing a seismic wave; the intellectual terrain is shifting along the discipline's fault lines. As a result of an unprecedented interest in black music of all kinds, we are experiencing a burst of scholarly energies from all academic quarters. This surge is not new. When Samuel A. Floyd Jr. initiated the journal—and I would argue, the field of contemporary black music research as we know it today—it was an eclectic project. All manner of interested people worked to build the field: music educators, composers, arts administrators, musicologists, ethnomusicologists, theorists, folklorists, performers, and many others. Since its birth, however, black music research has become more narrowly the province of academics with a practice of cultural criticism born of contemporary theory. The scene has changed.

In his history of American music, Charles Hamm wrote that "the most

characteristic and dynamic music to emerge from American culture over the past two centuries invariably resulted from interaction among musicians of several different cultural, racial, national, and ethnic backgrounds" (1983, 655). Indeed, scores of musicians have self-consciously crossed these real and imagined boundaries of lived experience to whet their insatiable thirst for enticing and sometimes forbidden musical materials. The idea of "difference" provides power to many of these acts of homage, inspiration, love, and theft. Beyond its role in the creation of music, it can also impact the interpretation of the musical work. It seems that difference imbues music with signifying qualities, charms that allow it to express something tangible to listeners, especially to those who are keenly aware that some kind of "boundary" has been crossed.

In a brilliant essay, Ruth Solie reminds us that power is central and is precisely what is at stake in debates about difference and the cultural politics of interpretation. She writes: "Whether the issue is gender, sexuality, race, social class, or a complex combination of these and other factors, interpretive controversies swirl around the legitimacy of labeling groups 'different' from one another and, conversely, the legitimacy of claims of 'difference'; those same groups may make for their own purposes—for instance, to assert authority and control over their history or the interpretation of their own texts" (Solie 1993, 2).

Since the nineteenth century, the field of African-American music studies has seen many debates over cultural difference, particularly about the extent to which we should be invested in its claims of cultural authenticity. At the center of this discourse has been the relevance of historical Africa in the creation and interpretation of this music. From spirituals to jazz to hip-hop, the relationship (or lack thereof) that these genres have to historical African musical practices continues to stir controversy, providing the field with new grist for the mill seemingly each decade, galloping through the pages of academia despite its "dead horse" status. Indeed, since the late nineteenth century, writers, musicians, artists, and activists continue to find in "Africa" contested truths, a constructed past, a dynamic present, and a utopian future.

The blackness question in music has centered on the degree to which African sensibilities can be reasonably said to exist in cultural forms in the Americas and Caribbean. On the one hand, there are those who believe that the evidence is obvious. "Retentions" or "survivals" as they have been called, exist and unite the African diaspora culturally and spiritually. Views from this camp are anything but unified—they represent a range of thought from the most crudely essentialist and reductive to the most thoroughly researched, provocative, and theoretically sophisticated. On the other hand, some believe that the common sense notion of "black music" is so fraught

with ideologies and myths from its origins in outmoded nineteenth-century racialism that the term does not reflect its multicultural, syncretic character.

Let us consider two influential works from each of these intellectual camps: Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* (1995) and Ronald Radano's *Lying Up a Nation* (2003). It is probably not entirely fair to ask these ambitious, highly nuanced studies to be representative of any singular intellectual position, but what I wish to do here is to tease out and compare each of their basic premises about African retentions and survivals in African-American music. What we will see is that the debate is really about other issues: cultural identity, cultural ownership, the contested nature of origins, and the importance of visible evidence.

Floyd provides a theoretical framework for analyzing black music that draws on the fields of history and postmodern literary theory. From history, he draws the centrality of the slave culture's ring shout as providing African-American music history an ur-sound template. For Floyd, the sounds and conceptual qualities of the ring shout were passed along historically through oral and written culture—the shouts, cries, hollers, improvisation impulse, calls and responses, hand-clapping, dancing, etc.—developed into modern forms such as blues, jazz, and gospel; they ultimately became musical tropes embedded in art music.

Floyd interprets the relationship of the music's African past to a modern American present; he views the connections between Africa's rituals and American slave's shouts through the "spy-glass" of esoteric black literary theory. He wants to show how

African survivals exist not merely in the sense that African-American music has the same characteristics as its African counterparts, but also that the musical tendencies, the mythological beliefs and assumptions, and the interpretive strategies of African Americans are the same as those that underlie the music of the African homeland, that these tendencies and beliefs continue to exist as African cultural memory, and that they continue to inform the elaboration of African-American music. (1995, 5)

Floyd's summary represents a precious view about the relationship between Africa and African-American cultural production from writers such as anthropologist Melville Herskovits to art music composer Olly Wilson to ethnomusicologist Portia Maultsby, among other writers.

Radano begs to differ. He writes that the term "retentions" misleads, that it cannot "explain the phenomenal complexities of performative experience across the history of America. It cannot do so because it is an abstraction based on the extraction of a hypothesized African purity that had been recast within North American racial discourse" (2003, 10). Working against

the idea of what he calls “cultural absolutes and authenticities” (39) and following the insights of 1990s black cultural studies, Radano argues for a more malleable blackness, a less historically stable idea of black music, and a theoretical profile in African-American musicology that interrogates any “simplistic determinations of culture” (49).

All told, Radano proposes “in no uncertain terms to challenge . . . those strategies of containment that uphold the racial binaries informing the interpretation of black music. It goes against the grain of a pervasive, yet remarkably underanalyzed assumption that correlates an enduring black musical presence with the myth of a consistent and stable socio-racial position of ‘blackness’” (3). Again, I do not want to position Floyd and Radano in direct opposition; Radano, in fact, barely mentions Floyd’s work. But these books represent—and brilliantly so—disagreements that are fundamental to the past, present, and future of black music research. Exploring the gap between these views will help us address the crucial questions of cultural identity, ownership, and the nature of African-American music. Rather than favor one side of this debate, I think a better approach would be to ask of these competing theories of African-American music: what cultural work are these ideas doing, especially as this work concerns the interpretive activities of black music research?

I place Floyd’s proposition in a legacy of writing that can be traced back to what we know as the beginnings of the African-American literary tradition in the Anglophone world. Indeed, the idea of “becoming African” predates any of the modern forms of the notion, and it has always been, I might add, difficult cultural and social work. The idea of being an “African” is entirely a product of a violent encounter in which chattel slavery flattened out ethnic and cultural differences in the service of making the social practice of human commodity an efficient one. As James Sidbury has recently argued, the idea that black peoples on the continent formed “a unified cultural and/or ‘racial’ unit” (2007, 6) was a European invention that flourished between 1650 and 1750 as plantation slavery and its cultures shaped race ideology, trade economies, and social practices on both sides of the Atlantic. As a necessary function of the dehumanizing act of race-based enslavement and as a casualty of the growth of Enlightenment notions of human progress, the new “Africans” were relegated to positions outside of progress, outside of humanity.

But, as Sidbury reports, early acts of literary resistance from black writers such as Phyllis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho turned Africa into inspiration—as a conscious symbol of unity and black pride. In their influential writings they developed “a language of African identity” (Sidbury 2007, 18) and wrote against the empire, using the master’s tools, themes, tropes, and even religion to do so. Wheatley and Sancho, and the black writers

that followed used literature to create a discursive space for the making of the "African" subject, indeed, to facilitate the heroic journey from "thing to human being," in the Anglophone world (22–23). This construction of African identity occurred not only in letters but also among all manner of black people who founded "a wide range of churches, schools, and fraternal organizations during the decades surrounding 1800, and many included the term 'African' within their titles" (Sidbury 2007, 7). As intellectuals who understood full well the diversity of black people, Wheatley and Sancho wrote into existence a black kinship based on shared common interests and suffering and not necessarily on mystical blood ties. Thus we see that the pressure to become African was exerted from two sides: as a result of structural racism and as an act of self-fashioning toward socio-political uplift.

It is fascinating to consider the extensive cultural ramifications of these dual notions of Africa on America's cultural history. According to art critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera, in order for us to understand these new cultural forms, we must think first about the language we use in our descriptions. Rejecting terms such as "impact" and "influence," he would rather we speak of an African "presence" because it seems, on the conceptual and ideological level, to capture not a cultural encounter from the outside in, but one that depicts an Atlantic culture that would not exist in its modern form without the new Africa. Mosquera draws on provocative food metaphors from Fernando Ortiz, a writer on Cuban culture, who "proposed the felicitous paradigm of *ajiaco*, a rich stew or soup of different ingredients cooked until it makes a broth of synthesis. . . . The hybridized African proves to be the key to many of America's cultural expressions, not a intertextuality but as a constitutive presence; not as inspiring element, and not even as something added, but as a Promethean ingredient in the formation of the new culture" (Mosquera 1996, 226). Thus, more than a survival or retention, the African presence should be recognized as something more: for Mosquera and many others, it continued to perform on this side of the Atlantic its proclivity for "flexibility, appropriation, and transformation" (227).

What about the relationship between cultural identity and this African presence? How does it correlate to what Radano (2003, 3) called "the myth of a consistent and stable socio-racial position of 'blackness'"? Once the African identity that was invented on both sides of the racial power struggle became a social reality, how was it experienced, used, transformed through the years? Cultural critic Stuart Hall writes that "[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (2000, 23). Thus, whatever the African presence is, it is clear that it will be on the move and constantly adapting to structures

of inequality and pressed into the service of those who are identified as black.

This play of which Hall speaks resulted in two kinds of cultural identities. The first is a collective one based on what people believe are common historical experiences that provide "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (2000, 22). The other cultural identity is one marked by a sense of "becoming," indeed, as divergence from the larger cultural identity of African-ness, especially in the context of the Caribbean identity that was Hall's present subject. Cultural identities are, thus, dynamic cultural processes and the identities that developed and are ultimately informed by lived experiences and perspectives. These views constitute "reality as perceived, conceptualized, and evaluated by individuals who are stigmatized and discriminated against because they are designated as 'Negroes' or 'Blacks'" (Drake 1987, 1). Far from representing a narrow frame, these perspectives are cross-pollinated with multiple identities, social positions, and experiences. Far from being monolithic, cultural identity always takes into account "that social class, nationality, ethnicity, tribal affiliation, and/or religious orientation all make the experience different from person to person" (Drake 1987, 1).

What we have learned from the Africanisms theme in jazz criticism, a discourse implicated in the larger, more historic notion of the "new Africa" birthed from conquest, is that the survivals idea is about cultural positioning, imagining, and less about truth. It has been about the agency and identities of the analysts as much as it is about the musicians who participated in a received heritage of musicking that was the source of creativity and a point of musical reference. Interestingly, throughout the historiography of jazz criticism, once Africa is claimed as "the birthplace" or the origin of the music, few accounts made the observation a structural component of the analysis of specific works or even of musicians for that matter. And just as pre-colonial notions of Africa in the New World worked at opposite purposes, either to prove a kinship of humanity or inhumanity, as it were, there were also many different kinds of cultural work achieved through Africanisms.

It is, perhaps, best to accept and embrace this flexibility and sense of play as part and parcel of the black musical aesthetic. Not as an expression of (or search for) an "essence" or truth, but as an act of agency on behalf of analysts and the musical works they explain. As Stuart Hall put it aptly: "The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother is always-already 'after the break.' It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" (2000, 23). This engagement with a cultural

past does not reduce it to “a mere trick of the imagination,” but as a function of the very real material, social, and symbolic effects of history’s unfolding (2000, 24).

Of course, accepting this sense of play in history-making may be seen by some as flying in the face of standard (read Western) views of history, especially in its professionalized forms. As the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, however, the “what happened” and “the what is said to have happened” does not represent a strict dichotomy (1995, 2). All versions of the past are wanting, but positivist histories are singular in their exclusive claims of truth. “Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. They necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct. Within that viewpoint, history becomes one among many types of narratives with no particular distinction except for its pretense of truth” (Trouillot 1995, 6). But the positivism, as Trouillot illustrates, dominates the Western sense of history, which sees the role of the historian as one who reveals the past as “truth” and is predicated on “the assumption that history requires a linear and cumulative sense of time that allows the observer to isolate the past as a distinct entity” (7). Are other conceptions of histories, other imaginings of blackness possible?

I dedicate this issue of *Black Music Research Journal* to Samuel A. Floyd Jr., who created an intellectual space in which I, myself, the writers represented here, and many others could not simply reproduce past efforts but are able to explore and test the limits of this field. His vision for what we could “become” as a scholarly community resonates throughout these pieces. The articles collected here—the inaugural volume published by our new partner, the University of Illinois Press—bring together some fresh and exciting ideas that will surely make a difference. They range adventurously and audaciously over time and place, race and space, pop and art, histories and identities, method and topic. This is not your father’s black music research. We have attempted to push the traditional boundaries of the field into areas that would have seemed implausible when this scholarly specialty emerged in the 1970s. When taken together, these articles propose new ways to move beyond simple binaries of difference even as they chart the course for new musical explorations.

Charles Carson begins the adventure by bringing into high relief issues surrounding a somewhat controversial (for some) development in popular music: smooth jazz. However, he moves beyond the politics of taste that has typically greeted these grooves. Instead, Carson delves into the production values, industry maneuvers, and issues of class animating the music’s creation and reception. What we learn is that typical critiques of smooth jazz’s “whitewashed” pedigree are reductive and cloud its complex devel-

opment. J. Lester Feder's powerful study of the music and cultural politics of pianist/composer John Powell shows how the musician and lawmaker united political rhetoric, the law, and musical practice to champion his white supremacist notion of racial difference. Feder's work expands the purview of black music research to include the contemplation of what Toni Morrison called "American Africanism" as it might exist in the work of musicians from any ethnic background. "As a disabling virus . . . Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and mediations on ethics and accountability" (Morrison 1992, 7). Indeed, Feder shows how Powell, in a most American way, "played in the dark."

Daniel Kreiss discusses how both Sun Ra and the Black Panthers used technologies to assert their desires for new kinds of "consciousness" than the ones readily available to them as black citizens in American society. These social, cultural, and political experiments in resistance, as Kreiss makes plainly clear, demonstrate how the idea of black consciousness, a historically specific idea, was as varied and contested as the population it sought to champion. J. Griffith Rollefson treats the ideas of Afrofuturism and anti-anti-essentialism, two recent theoretical interventions from the field of cultural studies. His work at once theorizes the past, present, and future of black cultural expressions by demonstrating with concrete examples how Stuart Hall's play of history and cultural identities look and sound in musical practice. Together, Kreiss and Rollefson follow Sun Ra's lead and offer adventuresome arguments that beckon black music research quite literally into space—beyond the geographies of the field's accepted frontier. They take seriously how black historical actors negotiated, in creative ways, history, power, and culture.

Back on earth, Samuel Floyd's and Horace Maxile's brief essays articulate suggestions for the fields of musicology and music theory when they treat the black subject. As a scholar, Floyd is always "becoming," as he is here by suggesting narrative metaphors from American music that might help us write a better black music history, one that would necessarily consider the totality of "America" to include the circum-Caribbean. Maxile, too, seeks a disciplinary intervention. He combines aspects of Floyd's Call-Response theory with theorist V. Kofi Agawu's theory of musical semiotics to uncover the notion of expressivity in the music of black art music composer Frederick Tillis. His close reading unites culture, expressivity, and topical significance in an analysis model that draws on social knowledge of "vernacular" African-American music. Maxile's ideas promise to take interpretive strategies of black art music into the mainstream of theory discourse, closing the

gap that currently and quite stubbornly still exists between critical work on black composers and that of their white counterparts.

Along with the contributors, I wish to express my gratitude to Gavin Steingo, John Meyers, and Ian MacMillen, all graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania, and who served expertly as assistant editors of this issue. Their critical eyes and inquiring intellects made this a better volume. Jennifer Ryan, another Penn graduate student, compiled the bibliographies, which provide a thorough, although certainly not complete, overview of scholarship in the field in recent years. While omissions are inevitable in lists of this nature, we hope that readers will find it a useful map of the publication patterns in the field.

I also wish to thank my colleagues Ellie Hisama and George Lewis for their support in bringing this issue to readers. Christopher Wilkinson's and Laura Haefner's expertise, encouragement, and efficiency facilitated my efforts at every turn, for which I am grateful to both. Art historian Kellie Jones always inspires and teaches me many new things as we continue our uptown conversation.

To Samuel A. Floyd Jr., you continue to inspire all of us who work in the field of black music research to embrace becoming, in the same spirit as our ancestors who became black subjects, changed the world, and expanded our imaginations.

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