AGAINST RACE

Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line

PAUL GILROY

THE BELKNAP PRESS OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts 2000
codes in the same moral and political world that encompasses the righteous sufferings of the Jews and the industrialized genocide that attended the implementation of racial-hygiene. In addition, these stories can now be part of making the "strategic" universalism toward which my argument has been moving. They promote an understanding of the vital links between racism and fascism that should be seen as part of contemporary political conflict rather than as relics which express the essential, unchanging meaning of Nazism.

No doubt the life of the less civilised peoples of the world, the savages and barbarians, is more wild, rough and cruel than ours is on the whole, but the difference between us and them does not lie altogether in this . . . savage and barbarous tribes often more or less fairly represent stages of culture through which our ancestors passed long ago, and their customs and laws often explain to us in ways we should otherwise have hardly guessed, the sense and reason of our own.

—E. B. Tylor

If we now ask whether the human species can be considered a good or a bad race (it can be called a race only when one thinks of it as a species of rational beings on earth, compared to those rational beings on other planets, sprung as a multitude of creatures from one demurage), then I must confess that there is not much to boast about. Nevertheless, anyone who considers human behaviour not only in ancient history, but also in recent history will often be tempted to coincide with Timon's misanthropic judgment, but far more often and more to the point, he will coincide with Momus, and find foolishness rather than evil the most striking characteristic of our species. But, since foolishness combined with traces of evil . . . cannot be ignored in the moral physiognomy of our species, it is
obvious that... everyone in our race finds it advisable to be on his guard... This behaviour betrays the tendency of our species to be evil-minded toward one another.

—KANT

My exploration of belonging and its multiple ecologies, particularly the racial ontology of sovereign territory and the cultivation of bounded, "encamped" national cultures, has been necessarily concerned with the symbolic organization of space, place, and political community. Kant, who did so much to endow this scholarly domain with intellectual coherence, spoke for a whole new addition of modern raciological reflection organized between the disciplinary axes of anthropology and geography when, in some infelicitous "epidermalizing" phrases, he matched the physical and social characteristics of the people he called "Negroes" to the climatic conditions in which European voyagers pursuing the "merry dance of death and trade" had first discovered them:

The superabundance of the iron particles, which are present in all human blood, and which are precipitated in the reticular substance through evaporation of the acids of phosphorus (which make all Negroes stink) cause the blackness that shines through the superficial skin... The oil of the skin which weakens the nutrient mucus that is requisite for hair growth, has permitted hardly even the production of a woolly covering for the head. Besides all this, damp heat promotes strong growth in animals in general; in short, the Negro is produced, well suited to his climate; that is strong, fleshy, supple, but in the midst of the bountiful provision of his motherland lazy, soft and dawdling.1

The massive relocation of populations involved in the globalization of commerce, the enslavement of Africans, and the conquest of the New World disrupted the natural patterns so beloved of this enlightened mechanical materialism. As they did so, the forces of nature gave way to those of history. But for Kant, writing in the last quarter of the eighteenth cen-

tury, geography remained fundamental. It provided the basis on which human history could unfold:

Which came first, history or geography? The latter is the foundation of the former, because occurrences have to refer to something. History is in never relenting process, but things change as well and result at times in a totally different geography. Geography is therefore the substratum.2

Later raciological theories followed the precepts of the Darwinian revolution and proceeded from altogether different premises far more in tune with high modernism's fascination with time and temporality. Darwin's own work had been facilitated by the conception of time he discovered in the work of the geologist Sir Charles Lyell. Transformed by the very substance of the earth, time itself could now provide the medium for comparing populations and comprehending and expressing their differences. Races were not merely to be distinguished on the basis of their various climatic origins and adaptive environmental differences; they were to be ranked in a hierarchy deriving from their relative positions on the temporal evolutionary ladder. Bernard McGrane has summed up this shift:

Beyond Europe was henceforth before Europe. Nineteenth-century anthropology, from this perspective, existed then as the axis whereby differences residing in geographical space were turned and turned until they became differences residing in developmental, historical time, i.e., the axis whereby the simultaneity of geographical space was transformed into the successive linearity of evolutionary time.3

McGrane's argument is powerful, though a little too neat when applied to the transformations of raciology in the imperial period. We need to remember not only that Gobineau produced his Essay on the Inequity of Human Races without the benefit of Darwin's insights but that the most inhumanly brutal and sustained raciology emerged, not from speculative anthropological theory, but amid the practice of racial terror as a form of political administration in Europe's colonial empires.4 Imperial power ensured that the theater of history was no longer to be confined to the temperate zone.

Gobineau's influential inquiries into the historical chemistry that governed the laws of decay, the problem of decadence, and the perils of inter-
mixture linked his anxieties over the racial order and the limited duration of human civilization to a new argument that would become a staple in all succeeding versions of fascist ideology. His theory constituted the primal politics of “race” beyond the grasp of governmental superficialities and located it between the elemental poles of degeneration and regeneration. The destruction entailed by the overriding theoretical and political commitment to regenerate amounted to the instantiation of a new time in which the newly purified nation could once more become itself. Although this revolution has sometimes been identified with the institution of a transformed relationship with divine power, the extraterrestrial authority on which it depends is by no means always Christian in character.

Yearning to be free, that is, to be free of “race” and racism, has provided enduring foundations for the resolutely utopian aspirations to which a racially coded world gave rise among the subordinated, immerse, and colonized. The breakdown of Christian theodicy which had already been transformed by the enduring potency of African spirituality should also be recognized as a significant part of our investigation into the social bases of black authoritarianism. Black Christianity was certainly future-oriented, but its sense of the future was bounded by its eschatology. Its utopia was not of this sorrowful world and required the supercession of modern, that is, of racialized and racializing, time. The worlding of that utopia, particularly by Marcus Garvey and other diaspora advocates of organized African fundamentalism, necessitated the inauguration of a new era of national development in which, as we have seen, the example of fascist political cultures was powerfully attractive. Common enthusiasm for ritual, pomp, and sacralization of the political sphere led Garvey repeatedly to claim kinship with Hitler and Mussolini and to describe himself as their inspiration.

The Nation of Islam’s anti-Christian eschatology provides one relevant example of a far larger pattern whereby fascist ideology has also been deeply connected to a range of occult beliefs that associate racialized accounts of human origins and evolution with cyclical and catastrophic theories of time. In these schemes, which have a lengthy pedigree in African-American letters, divine power can be mirrored and amplified by powerful technologies that quietly contradict the archeic and organic models of family, kinship, and community that are also in play. Under the leadership of both Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan, the Nation of Islam ( NOI) linked the biblical account of Ezekiel’s vision of a destructive wheel to contemporary reports of UFOs. In the movement’s key text, Message to the Blackman in America, first published in 1965, Elijah Muhammad conjured up an image of the end of the world. It was seen not only in terms of the high technological achievements exemplified at that point in the “space race” with the Russians, but through the weapons of mass destruction, which recalled the explosions that had brought the 1939–1945 war to its conclusion:

The present wheel shaped plane known as the Mother of Planes, is one-half mile by one mile and is the largest mechanical man-made object in the sky. It is a small human planet made for the purpose of destroying the present world of the enemies of Allah. The cost to build such a plane is staggering! The finest brains were used to build it. It is capable of staying in outer space six to twelve months at a time without coming into the earth’s gravity. It carried fifteen hundred bombing planes with most deadliest explosives—the type used in bringing up mountains on the earth. The very same method is to be used in the destruction of the world.

... The small circular-made planes called flying saucers, which are so much talked of being seen, could be from this Mother Plane. This is only one of the things in store for the white man’s evil world.

This terrifying vision, in which the earth to which blacks have been unjustly bound is destroyed as they move skyward toward a better, heavenly home, recalls nothing so much as the apocalyptic and equally racialized predictions offered by comparably eccentric occult figures like Helena Blavatsky and Carl Jung, who still remain largely unacknowledged as influences on the development of the NOI and its theology. These racial visionaries respectively glimpsed the military destruction of entire cities and the earth-shattering carnage of the 1914–1918 war. Blavatsky’s work may well have found its way into the consciousness of the young Elijah Poole (Muhammad) through the mystic influence of Sun Ra, the great musician and student of esoterica who had been his contemporary in Chicago and who had, like him, refused to be drafted into the U.S. army during World War Two. Blavatsky’s teachings had a significant impact on American society during the late nineteenth century. She was widely read in African-American communities and contributed much to the arcane
Elements taken from her theories of "race" still circulate in the more conspiratorial contemporary accounts of the agency of extraterrestrials in human history.

For the NOI, the historic appearance of these powerful spacecraft communicates more than the liberation involved in departure from this morally compromised planet. It portends the last days of earth and presages the "new rulership" of blacks over mankind. It signals not the end of racial divisions but rather their deeper entrenchment in a new theocratic order. When he took the helm of the NOI, Farrakhan positioned himself substantially beyond Elijah Muhammad's prophecy by claiming to have traveled in a UFO.  

He reported that in September 1985 he made a flight from Mexico City to Washington, D.C., by these means and that during the trip he was reunited with Elijah Muhammad, who had died ten years earlier.

It is interesting that Farrakhan's memory of these events disappeared immediately afterward but was fortuitously restored to him two days later by a divinely inspired earthquake. This experience of being unable to account for one's time appears in many accounts of contact with extraterrestrials, UFOs, and other manifestations of alien intelligence. The fact of its persistent recurrence suggests that it might be usefully interpreted as a symptom of the way that these disturbing encounters demand adjustments to understanding where the present ends and the future commences.

Many writers have identified problems arising from the ways twentieth-century fascist movements organized their temporal sensibilities: how they manifested struggles over the proper relation between past and future, tradition and modernity, and how they inadvertently expressed the inability of different social groups to live simultaneously in the same undifferentiated present. Roger Griffin has made these movements' concern with national rebirth a vivid and essential part of his valuable generic definition of fascism. He argues, derive from the religious notions that share many of the same eschatological sensibilities.

Somewhere behind Griffin we might usefully locate the figure of the philosopher Ernst Bloch. He struggled in an especially hostile environment with the idea that comprehending the positive cultural dynamics involved in the Nazi movement meant reading its romantic and mystical anticapitalism not as a nihilistic but rather as a utopian phenomenon that had been appropriated from unlikely sources. According to him, the joyful irrationalism of the Hitlerites and similar groups had to be understood—much like Levinas had diagnosed it in his attempts to link Nazism with the pleasures of being in the body—as a symptom of abiding fulfillment. This perspective implied a bitter indictment of the failures of the anti-fascist democratic cultures, which afforded their adherents no fantastic imaginings of comparable power. Applying Bloch's insights to more recent manifestations of the desire for unanimous solidarity, rigid natural hierarchy, and authoritarian kinship that have appeared in the history of the black Atlantic should not involve the morally indefensible task of sifting its revolutionary conservatism for a few redemptive fragments that could excuse its bad political choices as effects of oppression or subalternity. We need to understand the appeal of armored utopia and the association between that response and long histories of terror and suffering. As Griffin's generic definition of fascism suggests, this understanding must take the idea of racial rebirth that marks out new time as its point of departure.

We have seen that the authoritarian and proto-fascist formations of twentieth-century black political culture have often been animated by an intense desire to recover the lost glories of the African past. The desire to restore that departed greatness has not always been matched by an equivalent enthusiasm to remedy the plight of Africa in the present. But the idea of an unsullied and original African civilization has sometimes given life to a complex archaism so powerful that it can oppose capitalism while remaining utterly alien to democracy. Romantic and sentimental distaste for the racial capitalism that, at an earlier point, had made blacks themselves into commodities, is a profound factor that influences the moral conditions in which black political cultures take shape. However, it has not al-
ways led easily into sustained criticism of market mechanisms themselves.
On the contrary, black economic development along capitalist lines has
been repeatedly identified as a substantial component in the uplift of the
race as a whole and as the key to its transition to authentic national status
in a world of modern nation-states. Even commerce can become a sign
that the new era is under way.

These conflicts over the morality that will regulate communal recon-
struction are minor aspects of another battle in “race” politics over what
counts as authentic civilization. Is it to be genuine, sustainable mutuality
that can only be practiced on a limited scale? Or restless development that
opens a doorway to the perils of ultramodern, hi-tech barbarity? Terms
like “savage” and “barbarian” that have cropped up in this discussion of ex-
tremity and misanthropic humanism are still traded to and fro as pejoratives.
The racial economy in which they circulate reveals enduring connections between moral, cultural, and temporal characteristics. Their
continuing power, like the temporal disturbances associated with the revolu-
tionary, authoritarian, and fascistic movements we have encountered,
means that we cannot evade a concluding engagement with the racial poli-
tics of temporality. This politics must be seen, as it were, from two sides:
where it has been invoked by white supremacism as a principle of exclusion
and social discipline and where it has been broken by raciology’s victims as
a means of resistance and affirmation. This difficult exercise is also neces-
sary because my own desire to see the end of raciology means that I, too,
have invoked the unknowable future against the unforgiving present. In
doing this, I urge a fundamental change of mood upon what used to be
called “antiracism.” It has been asked in an explicitly utopian spirit to ter-
minate its ambivalent relationship to the idea of “race” in the interest of a
heterocultural, postanthropological, and cosmopolitan yet-to-come.

Becoming oriented toward the idea of a cosmopolitan future, even as it
recesses, involves a variety of political work around racial discourse and ra-
cial division that is very different from what has been practiced in recent
periods. In the past, these activities were dominated by the need to counter
nationalistic and strongly cultural forms of racism. Bolstered by raciology,
this exclusionary pattern denied blacks the possibility of belonging and
forced us instead to demonstrate continually a substantial historical pres-
ence in the life of the modern national communities to which racial slavery
had initially obliged us to belong. We had to show how “race” could be ar-
ticated together with other dimensions of power and to demonstrate the
formative force of imperial and colonial relations in shaping metropolitan
social life. There is no room to be complacent, for we can easily slip back
toward this old agenda. However, this book’s conclusion begins with the
idea that a critical theory of raciology is now in a position to make a differ-
cent inventory of political tasks around “race” and to undertake them in a
new spirit. Corrective or compensatory inclusion in modernity should no
longer supply the dominant theme.

The temporal adjustment that warrants this sharp turn away from Af-
rican antiquity and toward our planet’s future is a difficult and delicate af-
fair, especially if we recognize the possibility that the contested colonial
and imperial past has not entirely released its grip upon us. I suggest that,
in moving into a new stage of reflection and aspiration that tallies with our
novel circumstances as we leave the century of the color line behind, we
need self-consciously to become more future-oriented. We need to look
toward the future and to find political languages in which it can be dis-
cussed. There is absolutely no question of choosing now to try and forget
what it took so long to remember, or of simply setting the past and its
traumas aside. The recognition of past sufferings and their projection in
public sites of memory and commemoration provide an important ethi-
cal alternative to the pursuit of financial compensation within the juridical
and fiscal orders of discrete nation-states. Changes in communication and
informatics mean that the past’s claims are qualitatively different now. For
good or ill, they are weaker than they were, and the ebbing away of the
brutal colonial relations that gave such a distinctive meaning to “race” is
dRAINING them further. This historic transformation is another aspect of
the contemporary crisis of raciology that was sketched at the start of this
eSSay. It is one more compelling sign that “race” is not what it was. And
yet, unsettled claims deriving from past injustices are still alive, as, for ex-
ample, where the remnants of the Herero people seek economic redress for
the genocide wrought upon them by General Von Trotha and his associ-
ates, or the surviving descendants of the Nazis’ slave laborers launch court-
room battles for reparation against the multinational companies that they
were compelled to serve on pain of death.\textsuperscript{12}

Making raciology appear anachronistic—placing it squarely in the
past—now requires careful judgment as to what histories of our
heterocultural present and our cosmopolitan future should entail. This
work may be best undertaken in the indiscreetly anti-Marxist spirit established by that prototypical black-European Frantz Fanon in the closing pages of his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks*. There, in the first flush of his youthful enthusiasm for existentialism, he turned the full force of a still innocent anger equally against colonial white supremacy and what we now recognize as its black nationalist shadows. Writing as though he were struggling to reassure himself as much as to direct the thoughts of the readers who had managed to complete his book's exacting course, he produced these memorable sentences: "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny ... I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined ... The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions."¹³

Fanon presented this imaginative surcease of history as the self-conscious initiation of a cycle of freedom for black populations still dwelling in the after-shock of slavery, their founding trauma. For his peers—modern blacks who were in but never comfortably of the color-coded West—claiming a more authentic Being than the racialized order of modernity had allowed necessitated accepting but also turning away from the past. Whether it was read primarily as heroic, noble, wise, and regal or abject, brutalized, de-humanized, and enchained, their transnational and intercultural history had now to be set aside. Its claims upon the present had been rendered illegitimate by the demands of autonomy and self-possession. What Fanon called the "disalienation of humanity," in particular its liberation from the division by means of "race" and the repudiation of white supremacy that must precede it, required this decisive change of orientation. The ethical and political adjustments it involved could not proceed without a change in the consciousness of time and significant adjustments to the threshold of contemporaneity.

Having at last buried the primitive status that tied the Negro to both inhumanity and prehistory, blacks must be able to be secure, even if not exactly comfortable, in the present. According to Fanon, the capacity to address the future, both as politically abstract and as personally concrete, was a precondition for health and healing, for recovery from the alienating and corrupting antisociality of "race." His words provide the framework within which I want to draw together the closing strands of this book. I have approached the contemporary questions of racial science, multiculturalism, absolutism, and nano-politics in a utopian spirit with the communicative model provided by diaspora interculture in mind. Before I enlist the raceless future in the service of my own willfully dislocated argument, I am bound to acknowledge the history of black appeals to the future and must now look toward the vernacular formations where these themes constantly cross one another.

Music and musicians have generated especially important resources that have facilitated the difficult procedures of temporal readjustment. It is important to acknowledge their tradition of longing for a temporality that fosters the capacity to see the individual life-course as well as the synchronized movement of contingent life-worlds. That tradition has repeatedly announced secularized faith in the fact that a change is gonna come. This aspiration can be understood best as an even more demanding version of Fanon's already formidable appeal. Taking it seriously today means understanding that extraterrestriality, futurology, and fictions of techno-science have been articulated in the everyday rhythms and forms of what might be termed "the mainstream" of black vernacular expression. It must also reckon with the appeals that black artists, musicians, critics, and writers have made to the future—particularly in historical circumstances where any future had been made hard for them to imagine. This enterprise affords a belated means to confront the fact that by making necessity absolute, denying the future and the right to be future-oriented became an integral part of the way white supremacism functioned during and after the slave system.

The usurpation of the future by blacks involved them in struggles to throw off the shackles of the primitive and to win the right to address the future. This idiom did not come easily to political cultures dominated by the hermeneutics of memory. Black Christianity had been rooted in the belief that the only habitable future lay in another, better world beyond this valley of dry bones. That heavenly future was the negation and redemption of present suffering. Concern with the future was equally remote from those possessing the more readily secularized, vindicationist outlooks. Their futures were limited by and oriented toward the idea of re-dress and the possibility of a reconciliation with the technological and educational possibilities that had been denied by racial hierarchy. The nationalist polymath Martin Delany provides a good example here. His visionary project of futuristic black economic and political development involved the construction of a sublime technological feat, a huge railway

---

¹³ "..."
right across the African continent. This compelling vision of resourcefulness, progress, and racial uplift was crucial in establishing the "national position" of African Americans, but it involved barely more than just catching up with what whites had already accomplished in other parts of the world. Delany's dream of modernizing Africa and providing the economic and technological infrastructure necessary to overthrow slavery in the same grand gesture exemplifies this double bind:

[The railway] terminating on the Atlantic ocean West; ... would make the GREAT THOROUGHFARE for all trade with the East Indies and Eastern Coast of Africa, and the Continent of America. All the world would pass through Africa on this railroad, which would yield a revenue infinitely greater than any other investment in the world.14

Notwithstanding the hi-tech apocalypse taught to Delany's followers by Elijah Muhammad, schemes of this sort have been very few and far between. The militant vindicationist nationalism in which both men stand has been characteristically preoccupied with the need to prove and establish the properly historical character of blackness as part of important campaigns to bring Africa and its subject peoples fully into the racially exclusive modern History to which Hegel had given such enduring and lucid expression. We should note that in the same writings on the philosophy of history that had consigned Africa to a condition of permanent historylessness, Hegel identified America as the land of the future, a special place where the burden of world history would reveal itself, "the land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe."15 Remembering that provocative teleological sequence should compound our caution. It prompts us to ask how much contemporary reflection on the problems created by concern about the boundaries of self and community is really a consequence of the globalization of the American popular cultures that currently define so much of our anxious, postcatastrophic modernity.

We are dealing, as we saw in Chapters 5 and 7, with a formation in which harsh racial codes have enjoyed a special constitutive role. To put it another way, much of this interest in disseminated black cultures—signs of blackness—may derive ultimately from the frustration of advertisers with the obvious limitations of an eternal consumer present and their ambition to deliver us into the tense states represented by the shoppers' conditional and the material future-perfect. The more skeptical, less commercially minded perspective ventured here requires us to question all time-frames, time-lines, and time-scales. It asks, in particular, that we try to be alert to the politics of temporalization and closely tuned in to the ebbs and flows, the eddies and currents, that have energized the protean black cultural creativity that has excited and provoked this essay. It might also suggest that we should not overintegrate the phenomena we want to investigate lest we underplay their contradictory and uneven character or minimize their restless, shifting qualities.

To comprehend the history of blackness's appeals to the future and how that history might contribute to the cultural dynamism and moral confidence of a cosmopolitan and hospitable Europe, we need to appreciate the different resonances and articulations regarding the future that have been voiced in various—emergent, dominant, and residual—phases of the process of dissent from raciology. Science, the master cipher of a future with boundless promise, has not always been an ally of the political movements involved in disaggregating modern race-thinking. Some disenchantment with science and an appreciation of the fine lines that rational raciology drew between its respectable and its pseudo varieties have been essential parts of the critique of modernity offered by the history of the black Atlantic. Distinguished African-American scientists like Benjamin Banneker and Lewis Henry Latimer have been iconized to facilitate the celebration of their achievements during black history month, but the life of complex twentieth-century personalities like Ernest Everett Just, the marine biologist who fled Howard University for Europe and was himself briefly interned by the Nazis, remains little known.16 All these figures must currently take second place behind popular "afrocentric" assertions that the great discoveries of Western science and technology were known to ancient Africa, stolen from their ancient sources, and then assigned by white supremacist historians to the Greeks.

This position usefully interrogates the racial politics of scientific prestige and raises the issue of how European Hellenomania impacted upon
the history of science, but it effectively closes off the possibility of any specific or critical engagement with science as a practice. It makes the conspiracies that covered up the theft into a principal issue. This counternarrative of progress is accompanied by a degree of temporal disturbance. It says in effect: "We were ahead of you on the ascending escalator of civilization until you displaced us by illegitimate means." These depressing cycles contribute to the climate in which authoritarian and antiliberal passions can take command of the political imagination. The well-known story of the Dogon people's unexpected and surprising knowledge of the star Sirius B, drawn—we should remember—entirely from the colonial ethnography of Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, has been deployed by "Africa-centered" writers not only to disrupt and confound the old polarization primitive/modern, but also to demonstrate a compensatory superiority of Africans and African scientific knowledge. Meanwhile, Africa itself is shut out of the contemporary technological revolution.

Discrepancies between the different levels in the hierarchy of racialized cultures have often been identified as processes of temporal disjunction. Richard Wright expressed this point when he posed a fundamental question bearing upon the self-consciousness of black intellectuals and answered it thus:

My point of view is a Western one, but a Western one that conflicts at several vital points with the present, dominant outlook of the West. Am I ahead or behind the West? My personal judgment is that I'm ahead. And I do not say that boastfully, such a judgment is implied by the very nature of the Western values that I hold dear. 17

Putting aside the issue of how the supposed hypermodernity of twentieth-century black music might have contributed to the believability of Wright's assertion, addressing the implications of his standpoint takes us a long way from the exulting in black exotica or kitsch that has sometimes accompanied fascination with the African-American musical avant-garde in places where the stakes of race politics are not as high as they are in the United States. Today, what matters more than whether blacks were then ahead or behind is the degree to which those dissenting sentiments were out of step with the strict, military tempo of the cold war world. Reading Wright against the grain, I would contend that being out of step in precisely this way provided some critical and analytical opportunities and that its value needs to be recalled now that so many people are prepared to fall eagerly into line with the different tempo of a planetarized market capitalism that has been consolidated over the debris of the iron curtain.

To be against racism, against white supremacy, was once to be bonded to the future. This no longer seems to be the case. Wright's words also underline that we can listen profitably to the futurology evident in black popular cultures and interpret their comments on science and technology as having some bearing upon ethical and even political matters. Another note of caution must be sounded as soon as this interpretative problem is introduced. Claims about the complex integrity of everyday life, like the moral and the conceptual problems that arise from well-intentioned critics' finding political consciousness either everywhere or nowhere, are qualified here by the serious obligation to approach the fashionable workings and doings of modern black culture un fashionably. This means seeing them as fallout from a social movement—a liberation movement—if not as an even more direct part of that movement itself. We must identify the various political moments of this vernacular futurology and recognize that even as it fades out, the movement that produced them has created a degree of temporal disturbance. This has been registered self-consciously in the notion of a compound diaspora identity where time, historicity, and historicality have been doubly politicized: first by resistance to white supremacy and then by the uncomfortable acceptance that we are no longer what we once were and cannot rewind the tapes of our complex cultural life to a single knowable point of origin. As shown in Chapter 3, this difficult alternative yields a nonreversible diaspora that can be understood as web, multiplicity, and communicative network. It requires a change of scale in the way that both history and tradition are to be conceptualized.

The deliberately oracular, ethically charged, but still playful works of complex futuristic figures like Sun Ra and George Clinton have recently begun to draw favorable attention. Greg Tate has performed the invaluable service of connecting some of Clinton's work directly to the visual imagination of Leni Riefenstahl by soliciting the information that her photographs of the Nuba had inspired him. 18 It is especially important that we do not see the activities of these prominent techno-tricksters as the sole manifestations of a subtradition that survives exclusively in the ludic
We must always remember that Wright, like Fanon, wrote as a prototypical black European. When he typed those words, he was looking back anxiously over his shoulder toward the idiosyncratic racial conflicts in his land of origin. His decision to be ahead rather than behind the rest of the West can still help to make intelligible the more deliberately opaque activities of figures like Ra, Clinton, and Slim Gaillard, another eccentric musician whose hip interplanetary talking in tongues has been rather neglected. Wright’s words might also help to unlock some of the puzzles presented by “Answers in Progress,” Amiri Baraka’s memorable short story that describes the visit of blue aliens to this planet in pursuit of Art Blakey records. Wright's choice of merely territorial exile as the first step toward his nonracial utopia might shed interesting light on the creative thinking that Duke Ellington revealed in “Ballet of the Flying Saucers” and, even more interestingly, in his brief 1957 essay “The Race for Space.” There, Ellington claimed membership in the American national community, and in the icy cold war climate that would eventually crush Wright, Fanon, and so many of their peers, he argued not only that America’s modern jazz culture was a “good barometer” of its unique modern freedoms, but that the country’s inability to match the technological achievements of its Russian rivals was a result of the latching effect of race-consciousness on American creativity and American hope:

It seems to me that the problem of America’s inability so far to go ahead of or at least keep abreast of Russia in the race for space can be traced directly to this racial problem which has been given top priority not only throughout the country but by Washington itself. They’re spending so much time trying to figure whether the potential Negro vote is worth making the South mad by opening white schools to Negro kids, by dropping the color bar in restaurants, railroad and bus stations, in white collar jobs and in political appointments that those in charge of the missile and nuclear programs don’t know which way to go.  

The assumption of linear or evolutionary time and tidy telological sequences in which progress is defined and evaluated by the tasks involved in eliminating racism has had profound consequences for black artists. In different ways all these examples deployed the hypermodernity of extraterrestrial activity (by humans and others) as a means to conduct an en-
coded interrogation of the dubious territorial ethics associated with white supremacy and its outmoded racial partiality. All except Elijah Muhammad and his legions agreed that race-thinking belongs in and to the past.

This is a good point to recall that American television’s first interracial kiss was between William Shatner and Nichelle Nichols, more normally found working together on the bridge of Gene Roddenbury’s Stellar Enterprise. In her autobiography, Nichols described what happened after that historic episode was screened: “We received one of the largest batches of fan mail ever, all of it positive, with many addressed to me from girls wondering how it felt to kiss Captain Kirk, and many to him from guys wondering the same thing about me.” Though they had been forced by aliens into this unnatural embrace, the image of these nonlovers focused the widely shared sense of race consciousness as earthbound and anachronistic. It endorsed the inevitable conclusion: because race consciousness is so manifestly arcane, its victims and others who perceive the open secret of its residual status must be closer to advanced interplanetary travelers than they are to its deluded earthly practitioners. This is why Baraka’s space travelers wanted the hippest jazz music and why, more recently, something as dangerously “old-timey” as Slim Whitman’s white-bread country music could still prove fatal to the mean-spirited alien invaders in Tim Burton’s film Mars Attacks. There is a clear implication that Burton’s postmodern Martians are as comfortable with hip-hop and its profane offshoots as are the rest of the inhabitants of this decadent planet.

The universal currency of black culture was also emphasized by Space Jam, the popular 1997 children’s movie in which Michael Jordan was kidnapped and enslaved by ruthless but incompetent aliens looking to provide an ever-more-exciting program of entertainment in their pan-galactic theme park. In that film Jordan was superhumanly athletic but also diminished in size so that he could function easily in the same world as the Warner Brothers’ “Looney Tunes” cartoon characters who were his fellow slaves and buddies. Though the Jordan character was clearly not a child, he enters a child’s world in an interesting way—as a toy—thereby fulfilling both the advertising agency’s desire to draw in younger and younger consumers and the enduring racial codes that allow a black hero to be both more and slightly less than a man without ever acquiring the stable adult humanity that demands recognition.

Each of these examples merits extended consideration for the way that it shrugs off the label “primitive” and suggests the backwardness and the tragic, self-defeating absurdity of America’s racial order. However, there is something else at work here. These images of science, space, and inter-planetary contact also reveal important break points in the apprehension and comprehension of power by African Americans. They convey the gradual realization that black freedom struggles inside and outside colonial space had acquired geopolitical, planetary significance. The cold war setting of Wright’s observations is especially significant for bringing home this point. The power of the American government could no longer be adequately understood as merely a national phenomenon. The 1939–1945 war, the Berlin blockade, and the worldwide activities of the CIA and other covert agencies had shown that Uncle Sam was more ambitious than that. These were the conditions in which the issue of “race” gradually became central to debates over the ethical fitness of American democracy as it moved toward a mature imperial phase. Black vernacular culture came to appreciate this painfully through the deaths of so many leaders of the Bandung generation who had distinguished and endangered themselves by making the global points we now take for granted.

The optimistic cold war commentaries on race and space which, like Ellington’s, still aspire to conscripting science into the service of democracy, have a character quite different from that of later material in which techno-science is judged to be entirely complicit with the order of white supremacy. The later pattern turns away from a disproportionate concern with the future to address a desperate present in which extreme contrasts between rich and poor underscore the depth of racial divisions and their power to corrupt America’s democratic promise. At this point, the future has arrived. That well-known Star Trek fan Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was among the first to voice an important argument that would be repeated many times in the years following his death:

Today the exploration of space is engaging not only our enthusiasm but our patriotism. Developing it as a global race we have intensified its inherent drama and brought its adventure into every living room, nursery, shop and office. No such fervor or exaltation attends the war on poverty. There is impatience with its problems, indifference towards its progress and hostility towards its errors.
Without denying the value of scientific endeavor, there is a striking absurdity in committing billions to reach the moon where no people live, while only a fraction of that amount is appropriated to service the densely populated slums. If these strange views persist, in a few years we can be assured that when we set a man on the moon, with an adequate telescope he will be able to see the slums on earth with their intensified congestion, decay and turbulence. On what scale of values is this a program of progress?22

There is a pronounced contrast between Wright's and Ellington's attempts to press the future into the service of black liberation and King's sense, only a few years later, that the gap between social and technological achievements was now so deep that it called the very idea of social and economic progress into question. Understanding the difference between these positions can contribute to the construction of a lineage for the discourses of futurology and extraterrestriality that are once again at the core of vernacular cultural practices. This genealogy will also require us to confront the translocal glamour and attractiveness of African-American culture, as well as the appearance of representative modern icons and timely indicative pursuits: exemplary bodies, characteristic musics, and typical sports. These prized attributes communicate an acceleration of the present and the enhancing of its pleasures. They have featured in the industrialization and eventual globalization of communicative and entertainment media. Nichelle Nichols has explained that King was very clear about the significance of her presence on the bridge of the Enterprise for African-American freedom struggles:

I turned . . . and found myself gazing upon the face of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was stunned . . . The man introduced us. Imagine my surprise when the first words Dr. King uttered were, "Yes, I am that fan, and I wanted to tell you how important your role is." He began speaking of how he and his children watched Star Trek faithfully and how much they adored Uhura.23

On the planetary stage, America's stubborn and parochial commitment to the idea of racial hierarchy made its democratic pretensions begin to appear absurd. Its racial order could only be contradicted by the emergent world of placeless consumer culture, where aspects of the blackness it reviled were increasingly revered as a timely supplement to some enhanced marketing opportunities. This was not the familiar situation in which an appetite for black cultures is completely divorced from an equivalent enthusiasm for the black people who produce them. I would suggest that the moment in which the cold war began to give way to what has succeeded it can be marked by the way that racially representative African-American people effectively became the strange, hyperhuman hybrid of ultramodern and ultraprimitive that their distinctive culture had long signaled in Europe. As they traveled further and further away from their culture's New World wellsprings, they increasingly personified some of its most appealing attributes to an adoring, translocal public. Their bodies communicated health, vitality, strength, and an absolutely racialized power capable of reconciling the primitive with the modern, the postcontemporary.

This project is now a virtual operation that can proceed without its agents' having to leave their dwelling places. To put it another way, the development of vernacular futurology has been connected to the realization that the old blackness—too narrowly understood—as American abjection must yield to a new awareness of blackness as a prestigious sign, in particular as a signifier of bodily health and fitness, of human, indeed superhuman, vitality, grace, and animal potency. This provides the horizon against which the primal scenes of privatized postmodernity are staged.

The codes of the cultural complex we call infotainment have negotiated and encompassed the aesthetico-political forces deriving from cultural technologies pioneered under European fascism. To comprehend the seductive force of these images of mankind and its orderly technoscientific future, we have to reconstruct the confluence of these two dream worlds of mass culture where they play upon and solicit identification with superhuman black bodies, male and female. These representational systems combined and mutated into a single phantasmagoria far more powerful than anything that Fanon had first glimpsed in the 1940s and 1950s under bright enamel signs marked with the legendary, chilling words "Sho good eatin'" and struggled to name in those sections of Black Skin, White Masks where—thinking of Jesse Owens and Joe Louis—he discussed the processes whereby the active physicality of the Negro symbolizes not nature but the biological.

The most obvious political consequences of this shift saw spectacle, ritual, and aesthetically textured political drama not only being served up
on an unprecedented global scale but also being articulated deliberately as a means to promote the forms of solidarity, interconnection, and unquestioning unanimity that characterize the impossible ideal of homogenous nationality in a world of encamped nation-states. The celebrated sequence of superhuman black physicality that descends from Jack Johnson and Owens through Louis and Muhammad Ali to Michael Jordan and even Mike Tyson must also be appreciated as an integral part of this substantial cultural change. Their contested corporeality supplied a decisive element in understanding how the techniques and technologies of selfhood, identity, and solidarity born from nationalism and refined by the governmental and episcopal regimes of Nazism have been recycled almost unrecognized in the visual workings of contemporary commerce. They now supply the everyday substance of selling sportswear, shoes, and other commodities. They provide an attractive human counterpoint to the anonymity of the corporate logo which promotes precisely those forms of solidarity that Nazi emblems first sought to impose upon a disorderly world.

It is the athletic perfection of the black male body that specifies the future here. These dynamic postmodern values reduce the experience of sporting activity to the ideal of being a winner. They are far removed from the ancient notions of honor, beauty, discipline, and competition previously associated with sport. The distance between them was sharply illustrated in the concluding game of the 1998 World Cup tournament in France when Ronaldo, at that time the most expensive and therefore apparently the best soccer player on the planet, was supposedly coerced into participating in the final, decisive contest after suffering an epileptic seizure. The Brazilian team's commercial sponsorship by the Nike Corporation, to which his iconic presence was deemed central, required him in sickness as in health to assume his place in front of the cameras. For that descendant of slaves, the future suddenly began to look a lot like the past.

In numerous ways, the assertion of radical alterity by blacks and the associated invocation of forces beyond this world have become integral to a post-traditional critique of the raciology and racism to which Riefenstahl's work is such a subtle and endowing monument. Barred from ordinary humanity and offered the equally unsatisfactory roles of semi-deity, janitor, or pet, artists seek, like Sun Ra, another mode of recognition in the most alien identity they can imagine. The momentum they acquire in moving from the infrhuman to the superhuman finally carries them beyond the human altogether. You will believe a man can fly. That critique is still lived and enjoyed as both counterculture and counterpower, formulated at the junction point—the crossroads—of diaspora dwelling and diaspora estrangement.

BLACK NO MORE

These uncomfortable issues provided the promising setting for the first "science fiction" novel penned by a black Atlantic writer. This was George Schuyler's "Black No More," a satirical commentary on the age of the Harlem Renaissance first published in 1931. There are no space aliens or space travel in his futuristic novella. Instead, his story concerns the effects on America of the invention of a machine for turning black people into whites. As one might anticipate, the electrical and chemical technologies to accomplish this shocking transformation have been brought back to the United States from Germany by the machine's devious and cosmopolitan inventor, Dr. Junius Crookman. It is especially significant for our ethical purposes that the protagonist's first major action after undergoing his change of race is to enlist in the ranks of a vicious white supremacist organization, the Knights of Nordica. Once again, science, technology, and progress expand the field of immorality. They multiply available opportunities for doing the wrong thing. Schuyler, a political conservative who was actively anti-communist, argues misanthropically that blacks and whites are absolutely alike in their moral incapacies. His imaginary future offers no respite from that eternal cycle, only its intensification.

The tropes of extraterrestriality have recently reappeared in the era of globalization, cultures and economic relations where blackness has acquired the premium I have described. This time, however, these tropes are not associated with the idea of scientific or any other variety of progress. They have been manifested in a less positive incarnation as a potent element in the articulation of what could be called a "New Age fundamentalism" with disturbing patterns of authoritarian irrationalism. Needless to say, this cipher of chronic powerlessness is not a mixture that defers to the supposedly unbreachable boundaries of color and phenotype.

In the 1970s, what we can call the liberationist invocations of African archaism and techno-scientific modernity were held in an unstable but
useful equilibrium. The music, the discourse, and the visual culture of groups like Earth, Wind and Fire presented it clearly. Strange as it seems, they strove to be both nationalist and internationalist. The tension between those two commitments was resolved into a universalistic appeal to spirituality on the one hand and to shared human characteristics on the other. The latter, symbolized above all by the endlessly differing but always similar patterning of the human face, was unexpectedly but happily revealed through explicit contrast with the extraterrestrial. The music framed these possibilities by creating spaces of pleasure and discovery. The years between Billy Preston's clavinet extravaganza "Outta Space" and Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock" saw dance floors filled not just by Clinton's well-known work but by innumerable Star Wars spin-offs and ephemeral requests for ET to phone home.

Twenty years later, mainstream American culture seems to have discovered the value of this insight, but as far as black culture is concerned, the delicate balance of the 1970s and early 1980s has now been lost. Some degree of antimodern sentiment is an understandable element in the invented traditions of a community constituted from the awareness that progress and catastrophe could not be separated in its own recent history, but both sides of the equation of identity—black archaism and black hypermodernity—appear to have got out of control. The quest for an uncontaminated space, outside the workings of a compromised and undemocratic system, from which critical commentary could be conducted and more fruitful developmental possibilities identified has been all but abandoned. People no longer play with the possibility of departure from this planet in the same spirit with which their predecessors had entertained the idea of return to Africa. Africa was a more welcoming place in the period of anticolonial wars than it appears to be today, locked as it is in postcolonial privation. The slaves' traditional desire to escape has had to be qualified. Flight is now either an internal journey or a trip to the marketplace. Today's overdisciplined enthusiasts for African antiquity seek to enlist the other-worldly powers held by space travelers or others armed with extraterrestrial insight for more mystical and more profane purposes. The aliens represent not hope and escape but basic human frustration at the growing power of the earthly governments with which they are in league and everyday rage against the transnational Illuminati who are even now plotting the subordination of racially divided humanity.

In the earlier period, the Nation of Islam theology involving spaceships was safely satirized by George Clinton and his crew of well-dressed clones. Today authoritarian irrationalism can be said to have triumphed over the subversive carnivalization to which Dr. Franklinstein had subjected it. From the Stephen Lawrence inquiry in London to the streets of Jasper, Texas, the humorless, military style of stern, uniformed black men confirms the unsavory lineage of their political outlook. Their discipline is applauded by spectators as if it could be separated from their other photogenic attributes. We must ask how that glamorous, earthly militarism can readily co-exist with their enthusiastic interest in aliens, spaceships, and redemption engineered from above. There is one small clue to this in the way that science is presented in their teachings. In this subculture, science has consistently escaped criticism thanks to its capacity to negate the image of the stupid, ignorant, childish "Negro." There is a trace of this failing in the tale of the rebel scientist Yacub, who is credited by the Nation of Islam with the unnatural invention of the white devil race. He was damned not for the varieties of science he practiced but for their illegitimate inspiration and their catastrophic outcome. On another level, his activities, though evil, might be thought of as confirming the enterprise and genius of his race as a whole. In this version of the Frankenstein story, Yacub was to be derided for his disobedience, his hubris, and his failure to conform to the demands of piety and intergenerational authority, not for the pathological immorality of his scientific compulsions. The growth of the NOI, its offshoots, and the power of its fellow travelers still involves the circulation of these futuristic stories, which are not peripheral to the appeal of their tough program for racial regeneration. Its current popularity is only one sign that today, democratic black politics is faced by a resurgence of occultism. The archaic, tradition-inventing inclinations of revolutionary conservatism are being modified, updated, and partly replaced by heavy doses of an irrationalist techno-scientific fantasy that communicates new depths of black powerlessness and immiseration. The gnostic work of Richard King is close to the pinnacle of these depressing developments:

Blackness, the universal solvent of all, was seen as the one reality from which life's loom spun. All colors, all vibratory energies were but a shade of black. Black was the color of the night sky, primeval ocean, outer space, birthplace and womb of the planets, stars and
galaxies of the universe; black holes were found at the center of our own galaxy and countless other galaxies. Black was the color of carbon, the key atom found in all living matter. Carbon atoms linked together to form black melanin, the first chemical that could capture light and reproduce itself. The chemical key to life and the brain itself was found to be centered around black neuromelanin. Inner vision, intuition, creative genius, and spiritual illumination were all found to depend upon the pineal gland blood; born chemical messengers that controlled skin color and opened the hidden door to the darkness of the collective unconscious mind, allowing the ancient priest-scientists to visualize knowledge from the mind’s timeless collective unconscious memory-banks.24

In seeking to understand how this resurgence has been possible and in order to clarify its authoritarian character, I was drawn via advertisements in the NOI’s newspaper Final Call to the book Beheld a Pale Horse, produced and published in 1991 by the milita theoretician William Cooper.25 Cooper is an Oklahoman who claims “Cherokee blood.” He accentuates the “constitutional” character of his political crusade for truth and introduces the fact that he has a Chinese wife in order to prove that white supremacy is not part of his system of belief. Cooper appears to have won a substantial black readership on the basis of these strategies. His book’s opening chapter is entitled “Silent Weapons for Quiet Wars.” This, he tells us, is the name of an important secret document purportedly discovered in a government photocopier purchased at a surplus sale. The same phrase has already been borrowed by the uniformed hip-hop group Killarmy, a militaristic offshoot of the Wu Tang Clan, who employed it in turn as the title for their 1997 CD.

Cooper has set down an elaborate conspiracy theory that encompasses the Kennedy assassination, the doings of the secret world government, the coming ice age, and a variety of other covert activities associated with the Illuminati’s declaration of war upon the people of America. His elaborate and irrefutable explanations mine old seams of the American “paranoid style.” If it has been noticed at all, his book has been noted so far mainly because it includes a reprint of large parts of the text of the notorious anti-Semitic pamphlet Protocols of the Elders of Zion. In Cooper’s text, the chapter containing those excerpts is prefaced by a note from the author warning his readers that “any reference to ‘Jews’ should be replaced by the word ‘Illuminati’ and the word ‘goyim’ should be replaced with the word ‘cattle’.” Less noteworthy has been the fact that the book’s lurid cover styles Cooper as “the world’s leading expert on UFOs.” He seems undecided whether the aliens are a real threat or whether the Illuminati have manufactured them as a means to force humanity into the unwanted unification that follows from answering their alien power with earth’s best military resources.

An elaborate conspiracy in which aliens and spaceships figure prominently as adjuncts to cosmopolitan power and as proof of governmental perfidy is an essential part of the lingua franca which bonds the Nation of Islam and its fringe culture to the outlook and actions of the authoritarian and fraternal organizations that speak in the name of militarized whiteness. Phantasmic fraternal bonding across the color line is not only a result of the way that some ultranationalist groups strategically play “race” down. Cooper’s “multiculturalism” suggests that antiblack racism may have actually become significantly less important in their ideological makeup, falling behind anti-elitist, antigovernment concerns in which blacks, too, can be allowed a measure of victimage—for example, as childlike targets of the government-run trade in hard drugs or as victims of the HIV that was introduced into their communities as part of a genocidal scheme to rid the planet of the black race.

Black and white representatives of this fundamentalism may disagree on the iconic status of General Colin Powell, who appears to be a key player in the constitution of the New World Order, but they converge more deeply in the value they place upon fraternity, violence, and war. While the Illuminati are prepared mockingly to allow women into their armies, the older martial culture that opposes their illicit ambitions allows real men to bond with one another in a primal love that can only grow where women have been excluded. This militaristic repertoire knows no color or culture lines.

Members of Khalid Muhammad’s Military Fruit of Islam demonstrated their armed strength in the aftermath of James Byrd’s brutal murder in Jasper, Texas. Gathered just a few feet away from the white Klansmen who had come to the town on a similar political errand, men who share the same anxieties about “race” purity and degeneration, and who might in other circumstances actually be allies, they made the politi-
The implications of their antipolitical stance plain when they resolved a familiar list of grievances into the ancient demands for money and sovereign territory. The possibility that political rights could be part of resolving these racialized conflicts was explicitly repudiated. As their commander, General Omar Al-Tariq, explained:

There will never be peace in this country until the black man is separated and given land of his own. I am not interested in civil rights. We want reparations, and to go to our own land. And if you do not realize this, there will come a time when we, the black man, will take the lives of Caucasian men, women and babies. We will kill you, all of you. You will see the black man explode and we are close to that—the day is upon you.26

From this quote we can see that the question of actual elite contact and technological collaboration with aliens is an important but ultimately secondary issue. Far more significant is the way that governmental secrecy around UFOs emerges as an extremely potent signifier for the general duplicit y and corruption of a wholly illegitimate-political order. Cooper began the dangerous trail that led him toward the workings of the secret world government while serving in Vietnam, where the presence of UFOs and their reported participation in the combat seemed to have been a regular event. His persistent invocation of his status as a war veteran proves more than his patriotic credentials. It establishes the depth of the betrayal being perpetrated by the U.S. government and provides another, bigger clue as to the power of color-blind irrationalism and militarism. The imaginary threat represented by aliens, their menacing technologies, and their secret collaboration with duplicitous governments have become a means to generate and legitimize paramilitary responses. Extraterrestrials place human life in jeopardy. The only fitting answer to their awesome power is war. The alien menace is above all an opportunity to instigate the martial rules that can re-educate all political processes and replace them with a natural hierarchy. This would be modified in practice only by a belligerent fraternal respect.

While living unhappily in California, Adorno wrote a celebrated and contentious essay entitled “Stars Down to Earth.” It commented bitterly on the horoscope column then being published in the Los Angeles Times. His contrary observations on the relationship between other-worldliness and the development of authoritarian irrationalism have become once again interesting in the contemporary context. Though Adorno denied that his small study of the column could be generalized, he tried to identify the varieties of disenchantment and opacity that foster the need to believe that the sublime power of the stars and planets guides all human agency. He names the hypostatization of science, the desperate desire to break the constricting spell of what exists, and the yearning to find a short-cut out of the gloom into something better, something beyond this world. We have seen that all these tendencies are alive in the contemporary obsession with aliens, spaceships, and government conspiracies. They, too, operate best in what he called a climate of “disillusioned agnosticism.” Here, no less than in his essay on the astrology column, facts, albeit shrouded from sight by the secret actions of government, are the principal, inescapable issue.

If it seems that this chapter has been in danger of becoming mesmerized by marginalia, Adorno’s comments demonstrate the obligation to address overground, everyday versions of the same occult themes: “institutionalized, objectified, and, to a large extent, socialized.” These themes have been articulated most clearly and obviously in successful movies like Independence Day and Men in Black, where the un-narratives of heterosexual coupling and familial reconstruction have been momentarily displaced by other urgent concerns. The bourgeois family is now apparently lost in space and there is, I suppose, some small measure of progress involved in the world’s being sold an alternative image of planetary salvation wrought not by Buck Rogers or Dan Dare but through the irresistible American stereotypes incarnated in Jeff Goldblum’s cerebral intelligence and Will Smith’s adolescent physicality. But corporate multiculturalism has its limits. Though the mechanisms of the connection remain unclear, the proliferation of films in which men bond transethnically in the face of the greater dangers represented by aliens, invasions, comets, and threatened planetary conquests does affirm something of the radical powerlessness produced by a chronic inability to reduce the salience of racial divisions in social, economic, and cultural life. This trend is itself open to being read as an outcome of the dismal shifts that have nourished the growth of militarism and ethnic absolutism.

There is, however, another, more hopeful way for those who dwell in the shadow of fascist modernism to interpret the way Hollywood has recently placed these extraterrestrial motifs in the foreground. Product
placement considerations aside, it is impossible to overlook the fact that this crop of movies expresses real and widespread hunger for a world that is undivided by the petty differences we retain and inflate by calling them racial. These films seek to celebrate how the desire to retain those outmoded principles of differentiation recedes when it confronts more substantive varieties of otherness and forms of life that are truly other-worldly. In this, the global dream-factory seems at last to have caught up with the best content of more mainstream currents of black political thought. Our challenge should now be to bring even more powerful visions of planetary humanity from the future into the present and to reconnect them with democratic and cosmopolitan traditions that have been all but expunged from today's black political imaginary.
NOTES TO PAGES 122-125

81. Ibid., p. 213.

9. “THIRD STONE FROM THE SUN”

12. The Ford plant in Cologne stayed open throughout World War II, manufacturing trucks with East European slave labor. Inmates from Buchenwald were purchased to work on the assembly line. See also Neil Gregor, Daimler-Benz in the Third Reich (Yale University Press, 1998).

18. “I went out and got some books by this German chick Leni Riefenstahl, Last of the Nuba and People of Kay [sic]. There’s one motherfucker in one picture looks just like me.” Greg Tate, Flyboy in the Butter Milk (Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 34.
19. This essay is discussed at length by Graham Taylor in his Ph.D. dissertation, “Brutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington and Anthony Braxton” (Dept. of American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham, 1997). This thesis has been published under the same title in revised form by Duke University Press in 1999, with the author listed as Graham Lock.
22. Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? (Harper and Row, 1967), p. 86.