BLUTOPIA

Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of SUN RA, DUKE ELLINGTON, and ANTHONY BRAXTON

GRAHAM LOCK

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for Val Wilmer and

Victor Schonfield,

guiding lights,

generous spirits

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"Where there is no vision

the People Perish."

—James Hampton

Introduction: Blutopia

It's the remembering song. There's so much to remember. There's so much wanting, and there's so much sorrow, and there's so much waiting for the sorrow to end. My people, all they want is a place where they can be people, a place where they can stand up and be part of that place, just being natural to the place without worrying someone may be coming along to take that place away from them.

There's pride in it, too. The man singing it, the man playing it, he makes a place. For as long as the song is played, *that's* the place he's been looking for.

—*Sidney Bechet* [1]

[Black American] music is produced by, and bears witness to, one of the most obscene adventures in the history of mankind. It is a music which creates, as what we call History cannot sum up the courage to do, the response to that absolutely universal question: *Who am I? What am I doing here?* . . .

So much for that European vanity: which imagines that with the single word, *history*, it controls the *past*, defines the *present*: and, therefore, cannot but suppose that the *future* will prove to be as willing to be brought into captivity as the slaves they imagine themselves to have discovered, as the *nigger* they had no choice but to invent.

—*James Baldwin* [2]

You really have to struggle, to fight. For example, they want you to accept that Africa has been a dark continent, that there was no civilization. This makes your body die. But then you start to read and you discover how people put history wrong. For me this meant a very important process of learning. Your art becomes your evolution. It tells you that there is something else, another reality: the immaterial. This opens up certain things, and might lead to the fact that the breath of your poetic visions becomes more beautiful.

The exploration of history is a spiritual process, in order to be able to judge one's self.

—*Cecil Taylor*[3]

The three quotations above point to the main themes I will be exploring in this book: music as an alternative form of history, music as the gateway to "another reality," and the self-representation of African American musicians in relation to the "invented nigger" of racial stereotyping. Sidney Bechet's eloquent testimony to the power of African American music identifies the presence of two major impulses: a utopian impulse, evident in the creation of imagined places (Promised Lands), and the impulse to remember, to bear witness, which James Baldwin relates to the particular history of slavery and its aftermath in the United States. These impulses might be, and sometimes have been, regarded as antipathetic: the utopian associated with space, the future, the sacred, and the spirituals, the remembering with time, the past, the secular, and the blues. What I hope to show in studying the work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton is that these impulses can fuse, forming a crossroads in the creative consciousness where visions of the future and revisions of the past become part of the same process, a "politics of transfiguration,"[4] in which accepted notions of language, history, the real, and the possible are thrown open to question and found wanting.

The word I use to situate these visions and revisions is Blutopia. "Blutopia" is the title of a brief instrumental composition by Duke Ellington, which he performed at his orchestra's Carnegie Hall concert in December 1944.[5] Musically unexceptional, it does not seem to

have featured in his subsequent repertoire and warrants only a passing mention in his autobiography. When I first saw the Carnegie Hall recording, I read "Blutopia" as signaling a utopia tinged with the blues, an African American visionary future stained with memories.[6] In this reading of the word, it is the refusal to forget its history that distinguishes Blutopia from other utopian futures. And if that history, largely shaped by the "obscene adventure" of slavery, has made the vision of a better future that much more necessary as an aid to survival, its particular horrors also must have made such a vision harder to sustain, requiring an optimism-against-the-odds (and a means of expressing it) that might be regarded as impossible or even insane.

Cue Sun Ra, no stranger to accusations of insanity, who cheerfully embraced the impossible—declaring in the 1960s that it attracted him because "everything possible has been done and the world didn't change"[7]—and spent the rest of his life traveling the spaceways, "from planet to planet," not only promoting but enacting a vision of future utopia. Cue Anthony Braxton, with his plans for a music played by a hundred orchestras linked by satellite, for a music played by orchestras on different planets, in different galaxies—projects that, as Mark Sinker has shrewdly noted, "make political and philosophical demands just by the instrumentation."[8] And cue Duke Ellington, who hailed the *New World A-Comin'*, which he envisioned as "a place in the distant future where there would be no war, no greed, no categorisation, no nonbelievers, where love was unconditional, and no pronoun was good enough for God."[9] If Ellington, unlike Ra and Braxton, has not been deemed mad, it is probably because his utopianism was largely channeled through conventional religious forms, most extensively in the three Sacred Concerts of his final years, examples of an African American Christian tradition of affirmative music that can be traced back to the slaves' spirituals. These spirituals represent one of the guiding forces in black culture, not least because their detailed evocations of heaven are among the earliest documented examples of African Americans creating, in music and song, Bechet's "place where they can be people . . . where they can stand up and be part of that place"; a line such as "I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven" (from the spiritual "All God's Chillun Got Wings") denotes a sense of *belonging* no less than a sense of freedom. But whereas Ellington compositions like "Heaven" and "Almighty God," from the *Second Sacred Concert*,[10] adhere to and reiterate the basic tenets of a Christian mythology voiced in the spirituals, the musics of the non-Christian Braxton and the anti-Christian Ra

transform the celestial landscapes that the slaves imagined into new utopias that realize other, more personal belief systems. This may explain why the utopian impulse is addressed more urgently in Ra's and Braxton's musics than in Ellington's. They have to create anew what he has only to reaffirm. Their envisioned futures are provisional; his is guaranteed by God.

Certainly, it is the impulse to bear witness that seems the stronger force in Ellington's music. The subtitle to *Black, Brown and Beige*, his most ambitious work, was "A tone parallel to the history of the American Negro," a phrase that could stand as an epigraph to his entire oeuvre. John Edward Hasse reports that Ellington's personal library contained 800 books on black history, a clear indication of his interest in the subject.[11] Ellington broached the idea of composing a history of black America as early as 1930, and it remained a central theme in his work, a thread that ran through extended projects such as *Jump for Joy, Black, Brown and Beige, The Deep South Suite*, and *My People*, as well as through many of the shorter pieces for which he is better-known—"Black and Tan Fantasy," "Harlem Air Shaft," Ko-Ko."[12] His pride in black history brought him into conflict both with prevailing white versions of that history—for him Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey were heroes[13]—and, more particularly, with the kinds of racial stereotyping that attended media images of black life and often framed black performance. His well-known dislike of artistic categorization can probably be read, at least in part, as an attempt to evade the racial stereotyping that was frequently implicit in such categorization and that generally had the effect (and presumably the intention) of restricting the fields of activity in which African American artists were "permitted" to function.[14]

In his angry rejection of such critical presuppositions, Ellington can be compared to Anthony Braxton, whose trenchant attacks on jazz journalism also form part of a wider critique of the racial stereotyping and misdocumentation that he considers endemic to Western society and that he attributes to white attempts to portray slavery, "the raping of Africa," as "not a negative act towards a civilized people."[15] Like Ellington, Braxton sees accepted definitions of jazz as constrictive and implicitly racist; like Ellington, he refuses to confine his work to these "sanctioned zones" and instead aims for the stars—as in his ideas for "a music to heal deserts . . . a music that can help to prevent earthquakes . . . music as a practical tool to help create planets,"[16] a "breath of poetic visions" that makes the critics' obsession with questions such as "But is it jazz?" and "Does it swing?" seem grotesquely small-minded.

Sun Ra, who not only aimed for but claimed to come from the stars, was less concerned with history per se than with expounding an alternative *mythic past* to that proposed in the Christian spirituals. Yet his assertions of alien-ness can perhaps be read as a deliberate riposte to the history of white American refusal to treat black Americans as human beings; and his reinvention of himself, as Herman Blount became Le Sony'r Ra, has much in common with the transformative process that many African Americans underwent in moving from slavery to freedom, an experience that entailed not only a change in status but virtually a whole new way of being. In throwing off what he called a "manufactured past," Sun Ra was able to embrace the future of the "alter-destiny," thus demonstrating on a personal level the mental emancipation that he felt was necessary for all African Americans.

In the musics of all three artists there is a sense that the utopian impulse cannot be fully realized until the truths of the "remembering song" are acknowledged by black and white alike. The distortions found in white versions of black history need to be revised. Braxton in particular explicitly states that Western value systems, too, will need to change, that more attention must be given to that other reality which Cecil Taylor calls "the immaterial," if a better future is to be had. The occasional apocalyptic scenarios that Braxton and Sun Ra evoke in their work warn that failure to effect this change will result not in utopia but in likely global catastrophe. What is at stake in this music, for these twentieth-century musicians no less than for the slaves, are issues of life, death, and the fate of the human race. "My Lord, what a mornin' / When the stars begin to fall."[17]

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I should explain that this book has been shaped by the context in which it was written. That is, the text is closely based on the doctoral thesis that I wrote as a student in the School of American and Canadian Studies at Nottingham University from 1993 to 1997. Since jazz is still relatively uncharted territory academically, at least in the context of American Studies, there were few models for the approach I adopted, which was to draw at times on biography, cultural theory, musicology, and social history while trying to focus primarily on what the musicians themselves have said about the music.[18]

This last aim was not as straightforward as it might sound. While Ra, Ellington, and Braxton are unusual in that they have each produced

a substantial body of written and/or spoken commentary on their work, much of this material is problematic for one reason or another. What, for example, are we to make of Sun Ra's repeated claims that he was "not of this planet"? Or Anthony Braxton's insistence on titling his compositions with diagrams and pictures rather than words? I began with the assumption that these were expressions of personal systems of metaphysics that should be treated with respect, however strange they initially seem. One of the main goals I set myself in this book was to outline these systems and to trace their possible sources. Nevertheless, my subjects proved slippery metaphysicians, as questioning of language as they were of history, often decrying it as a powerful weapon that was employed to the detriment of black people and black creativity.[19] As a result, they each tend to use language in specific, self-conscious modes: Ra given to wittily subversive wordplay, Ellington to extreme circumspection, Braxton to generating neologisms and compound phraseology in a bid to rise above what he has termed the "mono-dimensional" language of jazz criticism. One consequence is that their words—written and spoken—can take on an elusive, equivocal quality; it becomes difficult to gauge how "serious" they are being, whether they "mean" what they say or if it is a put-on. Such use of ambivalence is a traditional feature of African American culture, where strategies of signifying, tricksterism, mimicry, parody, masking, encoding, and other forms of indirection have long been popular.[20] And necessary, too. As Paul Gilroy notes:

> Created under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the complementary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque, means. This politics exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words, even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth.[21]

Certainly, Ra, Ellington, and Braxton are cagey self-presenters, and I daresay it would be possible to construct a thesis that simply traced the various forms of indirection at play in their words and music (and an element of playfulness is often present). However, while I have pointed on occasion to specific instances of signifying or trickster tactics, this was not the kind of book I wanted to write, one that I feared might

end up imposing a reductive formalism on the music.[22] (Signifyin(g), in particular, to use the word in its Gatesian guise, seems to have become the postmodern equivalent of "natural rhythm," in that all African American musicians are now presumed to have it in their music—and those who do not are deemed in some way "inauthentic.")[23]

The genesis of the book I have written can possibly be traced to my initial meeting with Sun Ra in 1983, when for much of our interview I simply had no idea what he was talking about. At the time I attributed this incomprehension more to his "weirdness" than to my ignorance, a common response I imagine when you don't know that you don't know. Two factors changed my mind. One was a series of interviews I conducted with Anthony Braxton in 1985, when I began to realize just how much I didn't know about African American music. The second was simply listening to, and thinking about, Sun Ra's music, to which I found myself increasingly drawn. The more I learned about Ra, the more implausible seemed the insinuations of his detractors that he was a clown, a con man, or a maniac. Such dismissive epithets had no explanation for the beauty of his music, for his ability to maintain and motivate a band for thirty years, for his unswerving commitment to a singular vision that brought neither financial reward nor critical acclaim. When he died in 1993 and the obituarists trotted out the same dismissive epithets, trying to understand that singular vision assumed a new urgency, even became a personal responsibility, given my dual involvement as a jazz writer and a fan of Ra's music.

My feelings about the work of Braxton and Ellington have followed a similar course: attraction to the music, dismay at its representation in the media, determination to better understand what it meant to its creators. What, for them, was their music *about*? This became the central question that I wished to address.

I should emphasize that *explication* has been my primary goal here. I was not interested in trying to fit my subjects into a theoretical paradigm nor in offering a critical analysis of what they had to say. I realize some readers may find this noninterventionist policy exasperating at times, and there are certainly occasions when I could have taken a more critical stance toward this or that statement or piece of music. That I have chosen not to follow such a course reflects both my priorities—I wanted to *make sense of*, not *argue with*—and the customary limits of available time and space. In particular, Anthony Braxton's *Tri-axium Writings*,[24] a unique endeavor in African American music philosophy, deserves a more detailed and extensive engagement than I have been

able to provide here, where my chief focus has been on the relatively small section of his work that is concerned with a critical discussion of jazz journalism. I had better make clear that in sketching in the philosophical background to this critique, I have compressed many of Braxton's arguments to the point of oversimplification, often omitting the qualifications and provisos of his original text. As a result, several of his statements about Western society and civilization appear to be rather more sweeping than is actually the case. However, even when Braxton's initial assertions might be construed as controversial or provocative, I have generally let them pass unchallenged for the reasons that I just mentioned; I have neither the space nor the inclination to be disputatious. While I do not necessarily endorse everything that Braxton says, and would probably rephrase many of his arguments were I putting them myself, I can think of no substantive point he makes with which I strongly disagree. Therefore, I see no point in picking an argument for the sake of it or simply to assert a spurious "objectivity." There is already a long and ignoble tradition of white commentators being only too ready to sit in judgment on the works and viewpoints of black musicians. This book will, I hope, be seen as a contribution to the dismantling of that tradition and the implicit racial arrogance that it so often has embodied.

Let me be clear on this point. In tracing examples of racial stereotyping in a variety of reviews and articles (which I do throughout the book, and especially in chapter 5), I am not suggesting that individual writers were being deliberately racist or knowingly Eurocentric. As Braxton argues in *Tri-axium Writings*, racial stereotypes and Eurocentric attitudes permeate the fabric of Western culture; they are symptoms of a malaise that affects us all and shapes our thinking, often despite our best intentions. Nor am I suggesting that critics are obliged to like a piece of music simply because it challenges stereotypical definitions of jazz. What I am saying is that the terms of this critical discourse need to change; the preconceptions, the expectations, the projected desires that have framed and distorted white perceptions of black music should be interrogated and all extraneous baggage dumped. This is as true for academic writers as it is for journalists. Attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to refigure contemporary jazz in terms of postmodernist practice seem to me no less of an imposition than attempts in the 1920s and 1930s to inscribe the jazz of that era as a form of primitivism. As Ingrid Monson has pointed out, theoretical constructs derived

from Western philosophy may not be the most useful tools for gaining insight into the workings of African American music.[25]

Which tools are the most useful remains a moot point. As someone who currently has a foot in both academia and journalism, I have tried in *Blutopia* to draw on the particular strengths of each discipline. Of course, there is always a danger that those attempting to bridge such gaps will find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place. Indeed, if Krin Gabbard is right in his alarmingly bleak forecast of a future in which scholars and journalists become warring camps, set on producing two mutually exclusive forms of jazz discourse, then the kind of book I have tried to write here will soon be a virtual impossibility.[26] Still, I take heart from Sun Ra's line on the impossible, and from the Braxton/Ellington line on resisting categorization. And if their music does create a place where, to echo Bechet, people can be people, then that is the place where I hope *Blutopia* will find its home.

Part I Sun Ra: *A Starward Eye*

"Who heard great 'Jordan roll'?

Whose starward eye

Saw chariot 'swing low'?"

—James Weldon Johnson,

"O Black and Unknown Bards"

1 Astro Black: Mythic Future, Mythic Past

But if you would tell me who I am, at least take the trouble

to discover what I have been.

—*Ralph Ellison* [1]

In April 1993 the American magazine *Jazz Times* appeared on the newsstands with a front cover headline that read: "Sun Ra: Visionary or Con Artist?" If the question was, as John Corbett later claimed, "insulting and ignorant," it was not entirely unprovoked. As Corbett himself wryly noted: "Of course, anyone claiming to be from the planet Saturn will be the subject of continuing ridicule no matter how irrefutably out of this world and truly prophetic their music is." [2]

Indeed, the insensitivity of the *Jazz Times* headline was soon eclipsed by that shown in some of the obituaries that followed Sun Ra's death on 30 May 1993. In the *Daily Mail*, Benny Green referred to Sun Ra's "galactic gobbledegook," portrayed him as "wearing a short interplanetary Noddy bonnet," and complained: "The trouble has always been to know where to draw a firm line between the tomfoolery of an entertaining charlatan and the sincere missionary beliefs of a considerable musical pioneer." [3] In the *Independent*, Steve Voce, while also acknowledging Sun Ra's "serious contribution to the music," nevertheless poked fun at his clothes and his philosophy, describing him as a "nutter" who "had only one joke." [4] These remarks may have been exceptionally facile, yet their disbelieving tone was certainly not unprecedented in commentary on Sun Ra. Allan Chase has pointed out that "naivete, cynicism, facetiousness, inconsistency, and insanity" have all been put forward to explain what he calls Sun Ra's "differentness." [5] Even writers

sympathetic to Ra have tended to dwell on his singularity, perhaps not surprisingly given his claim that "I am not of this planet. I am another order of being. I can tell you things you won't believe."[6]

It is clear from the above quotations that the controversy about Sun Ra has not been primarily musicological. Though critics have differed in their degrees of appreciation, few have had any problem relating his music to the African American creative tradition. Robert Campbell, for example, reported that in the 1980s a typical Sun Ra concert "contained Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington charts, freakouts, standards, blues for piano and organ, slices of R&B, you name it," and back in the 1970s Val Wilmer similarly noted that Ra's music "can range from swing to neo-bop to free collective improvisation, all in a single night."[7] What provoked the accusations of chicanery and/or madness was the "galactic gobbledegook," or what I will call the "Astro Black Mythology," that filtered through the music, alluded to in song titles and lyrics, poems and interviews, and a pervasive influence as well on the design of his record jackets and many aspects of his onstage performances, not least the colorful attire worn by Sun Ra and his band, the Arkestra, which Wilmer has described as deriving from "midway between Africa and the realms of science fiction."[8]

("Astro Black Mythology" is a phrase from Ra's poem/song lyric "Astro Black."[9] In this chapter I use it to refer to what I see as possibly the axis of the Ra cosmology, that is, the creation of an alternative mythic future and mythic past for African Americans. In this context, "Astro Black Mythology" is an appropriate shorthand term for two reasons: it emphasizes Sun Ra's conscious creation of a mythology, and it conveniently encapsulates the two dominant facets of that mythology, the Astro of the outer space future, and the Black of the ancient Egyptian past.)

In an earlier discussion of this Ra mythology, I suggested that it should be looked at as "part of a black historical continuum that reaches back through the blues and slavery to an Egyptian civilization that began 5,000 years ago."[10] My aim in this chapter is to further explore that contention by looking in particular at the two principal components of Ra's Astro Black Mythology: ancient Egypt and outer space. I should stress that I am by no means attempting to explicate Sun Ra's entire philosophy, which would require at least a book to itself.[11] Nevertheless, as I hope will become clear, ancient Egypt and outer space were significant, perhaps core, factors in Sun Ra's mythology, and the fact that he linked them provides us with a key to

better understanding what that mythology was about. At the least, I believe I can show that some of the apparently more eccentric and "insane" elements of Sun Ra's works were grounded in a particular cultural context and that a useful way of beginning to make sense of his work is to look more closely at its relationship to certain aspects of African American history.

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Sun Ra's concern with ancient Egypt can be approached by means of both its immediate musical context and the broader African American intellectual context. Norman Weinstein has shown that an interest in Africa, including Egypt, has been a feature of African American music since the early years of the twentieth century, and Frank Kofsky has documented a specific upsurge of African references in the American jazz of the 1950s, a phenomenon he attributes to "the growth of nationalist feelings among black musicians," and one undoubtedly fueled by the number of African nations that achieved independence from European colonial powers during this period.[12] Insofar as Sun Ra was involved in nationalist activities in Chicago in the 1950s,[13] when he also formed the Arkestra, and his composition titles at the time included "Africa," "Nubia," and "Aiethopia" [*sic*], he can be seen as a participant in the growth of these feelings among African American musicians. And insofar as this interest in Africa affected the actual sound of the music, Sun Ra can be counted among the leading participants. The Arkestra began to use two or three drummers, and Ra encouraged all the band members to play miscellaneous percussion instruments. According to Wilmer: "This emphasis on percussion, combined with chants set up by the musicians, was the first sign of *conscious* Africanisms to appear in the music since Dizzie [*sic*] Gillespie's Afro-Cuban period."[14] And Chase, writing with reference to Ra's increasing use of "exotic" Latin dance rhythms in the late 1950s, points to both the direct African element in the composition titles and the more circuitous African influences in the rhythms. "Sun Ra's titles enhanced the association of these rhythms with the exotic, and with Egypt and Africa in particular: 'Tiny Pyramids,' 'Nubia,' 'Africa,' 'Watusa,' 'Ancient Aeithopia' [*sic*], 'Kingdom of Thunder,' 'Paradise.' The rhythms used were more Caribbean than strictly African, but those Caribbean rhythms derived largely from African (and Iberian) sources."[15]

If an LP like 1959's *The Nubians of Plutonia* (originally titled *The Lady with*

the Golden Stockings) or the 1958 track "Aiethopia" perhaps demonstrated some of the more imaginative uses of such "Africanisms" at the time,[16] what really set Sun Ra apart from his other Africa-inspired contemporaries was a deep fascination with Egypt, particularly ancient Egypt, that continued to play a major part in his work for the next three decades. This fascination was evident not only in his choice of name (Ra being the ancient Egyptian sun god), but also in many composition and record titles ("Ahnknaton" [*sic*], "Pyramids," "Sunset on the Nile," *I, Pharaoh*), in the occasional renaming of his Saturn record label as Thoth (after the ibis-headed Egyptian moon god), and in the use of Egyptian hieroglyphics and motifs both on record jackets and on stage sets and costumes.[17]

That Sun Ra's references to ancient Egypt were intended, at least in part, to rekindle awareness of black achievement and black history is suggested by a lyric such as "When the black man ruled this land / Pharaoh was sitting on his throne / I hope you understand."[18] This impression was confirmed by my interviews with Arkestra members Marshall Allen and Tyrone Hill in 1990:

> The importance of ancient Egypt's *blackness* is attested to by current Arkestra members. Altoist Marshall Allen answers my queries with "Well, there are a lot of ancient Egyptians in America." You mean black people? "That's right. People from all over Africa are there. You gotta have some kind of identity." And trombonist Tyrone Hill (ex-MFSB) states it even more plainly: "Knowing about ancient Egypt makes me feel better as a person, 'cause those were black people. Our race don't know very much about ourselves. In America, education and the mass media tell you black people got nothing to offer, but we've done many beautiful things. Sun Ra made me aware of this."[19]

Hill's remarks point to Sun Ra's use of ancient Egypt as part of an attempt to revise the history of black people as represented by the white cultural and academic establishments. If the political critique implicit in this attempt differentiated Ra from the more general cultural nationalism espoused by his fellow musicians in the 1950s,[20] it also placed him within an existing African American intellectual tradition.

A small number of African American writers, including W. E. B. DuBois, had previously broached the topic of ancient Egyptian civilization,[21] but it was only in 1954, with the publication of George G. M. James's *Stolen Legacy*, that prevailing white academic ideas about ancient

civilization were comprehensively challenged. James's book, whose full original title was *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians*, claimed not only that Greece, supposedly the cradle of Western civilization, had "stolen" much of its religious, philosophical, and scientific thinking from Egypt, but also it took for granted that the ancient Egyptians had been black Africans, a fact long denied by many white historians.[22] James's book had a considerable impact in African American circles, but it was largely ignored by mainstream academics until its theses were developed some thirty years later by Martin Bernal in his *Black Athena*.[23] Ironically, Bernal points out that James's ideas had been common currency before the eighteenth century, but that "*after the rise of black slavery and racism, European thinkers were concerned to keep black Africans as far as possible from European civilization.*"[24] DuBois too had made this point, noting that "it is one of the astonishing results of the written history of Africa that almost unanimously in the nineteenth century Egypt was not regarded as a part of Africa." He concluded: "There can be but one adequate explanation of this vagary of nineteenth-century science: it was due to the slave trade and Negro slavery. It was due to the fact that the rise and support of capitalism called for rationalization based upon degrading and discrediting of the Negroid peoples."[25] (As Tyrone Hill's comments above make clear, such "discrediting" has remained a major part of American mainstream culture, and Sun Ra's invocations of ancient Egypt were intended to counter this negative view of black history.)

It seems that Sun Ra had embarked on his study of ancient Egypt before *Stolen Legacy* was published, and it is certain that he was using the name Ra by 1952.[26] He confirmed to both Chase and me (in 1990) that he had read *Stolen Legacy*, but unfortunately he did not say when.[27] It is curious that on one of his earliest releases, the 1957 LP *Jazz by Sun Ra* (later reissued as *Sun Song*), he actually dedicates a track not to the Egyptians but to the ancient Greeks! "CALL FOR ALL DEMONS . . . *In ancient Greece the word* DEMON *meant living spirit.* The Grecians were not an ignorant people, they had both culture and wisdom. This song is my tribute to them."[28] It seems unlikely that Sun Ra would have written this, at least without mentioning that the Greeks' "culture and wisdom" were probably derived from the Egyptians, had he already read *Stolen Legacy*.

Later recordings and pronouncements by Ra, however, reveal some interesting parallels with James's account of ancient Egypt. For example, James noted the significance of the notion of discipline in

what he called the "Egyptian Mystery System";[29] Sun Ra wrote a series of numbered compositions under that general rubric ("Discipline 15," "Discipline 27-11," "Discipline 99," etc.), and he often stressed the importance of discipline in both music and life.[30] James also explored the Egyptians' belief in a heliocentric universe and the central importance of the sun god in their cosmology, topics frequently alluded to by Sun Ra in titles such as "The Sun Myth," "Sun Song," *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Secrets of the Sun, When Sun Comes Out*, as well as in his use onstage of sun-shaped instruments and symbols.[31] In our 1990 interview, Sun Ra complained bitterly about the destruction of sun iconography in Egypt and South America by Christians who, he said, "were trying to put this planet in darkness." He decried it as "a planned strategy to get rid of what they called sun-worship; but it wasn't sun-worship, it was the truth."[32]

This hostility toward Christianity, coupled with a concern for the social situation of African Americans in the 1950s, is possibly the most significant of the similarities between Sun Ra's work and that of James. James, like Ra, was hoping to effect a revision of black history that would not only see the world accord African Americans new respect but would also "mean a most important change in the mentality of Black people: a change from an inferiority complex, to the realization and consciousness of their equality with all the other great peoples of the world who have built great civilizations."[33] James argued that some of the later Roman emperors had championed Christianity as a means to suppress the Egyptian Mystery teachings: "In keeping with the plan of Emperors Theodosius and Justinian to exterminate and forever suppress the Culture System of the African continents the Christian church established its missionary enterprise to fight against what it has called paganism. Consequently missionaries and educators have gone to the mission field with a superiority complex, born of miseducation and disrespect. . . ."[34] As a corrective, James proposed his "New Philosophy of African Redemption," a reeducation program that would enlighten the world "as to the real truth about the place of the African continent in the history of civilization,"[35] one that would produce a change of belief and behavior in the black population: "*It really signifies a mental emancipation, in which the Black people will be liberated from the chain of traditional falsehood*, which for centuries has incarcerated them in the prison of inferiority complex and world humiliation and insult."[36]

One immediate form of action that James advocated was "a per-

petual protest" against the Christian church's misrepresentations of black culture and black history.[37] He seems to have had in mind what he calls "missionary policy" regarding contemporary depictions of African society, but for Sun Ra it was the Christian church's role in African American society that caused more concern. Wilmer has summarized Ra's early rejection of the Christian church: "At home, in the South . . . he evoked parental wrath when he turned his back on the church, but he detested the palliative effects of religion and the way it led to the resigned acceptance of the status quo by the people around him. Later, in Chicago, he attempted to show the Black urban proletariat ways of improving their situation. 'I felt that the Black people of America needed an awakening,' he said."[38]

Certainly in the 1950s Ra issued pamphlets in Chicago that offered reinterpretations of parts of the Bible, which he insisted was not the Good Book but the Code Book, its real truths suppressed by orthodox Christianity but still available to those who had the key to unlocking its secrets.[39] A vital component of this decoding operation was the process that Sun Ra called "doing the equations," a form of play on the structure and meaning of words that could also involve numerology.[40] It was a process that he demonstrated when he taught briefly at the University of California at Berkeley in 1971: "A typical class (according to Paul Sanoian, one of his students) found Sun Ra writing Biblical quotes on the board and then 'permutating' them—re-writing and transforming their letters and syntax—into new equations of meaning. His lecture subjects included . . . a radical reinterpretation of the Bible in light of Egyptology."[41] While this process might be adduced by some as evidence of Sun Ra's "insanity," it might also have its roots in African American folk beliefs, in the use of what a character in Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological study *Mules and Men* calls "by-words": " 'They all got a hidden meaning' just' like de Bible. Everybody can't understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained. They's born wid they feet under the moon. Some folks is born wid they feet on de sun and they kin seek out de inside meanin' of words.' "[42] Sun Ra could certainly be said to have had his feet on the sun! Note, too, the apparently commonplace belief that the Bible is full of "hidden meanin.' " The importance to Ra of finding "de inside meanin' of words" is underlined by his brief poem, "To the Peoples of Earth," which reads:

> Proper evaluation of words and letters
> In their phonetic and associated sense