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Callaloo, Volume 35, Number 4, Fall 2012, pp. 1103-1122 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/cal.2013.0025

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SPACE, THAT BOTTOMLESS PIT
Planetary Exile and Metaphors of Belonging in American Afrofuturist Cinema

by Ramzi Fawaz

> Outer space is not based upon highness. Space is not only high, it's low. It's the bottomless pit. There's no end to it.
>
> —*Sun Ra,* Space is the Place

> Where are you from? You look like you might be from the South—no way I'm going back there . . . Sometimes I feel I have been taken for a slave up here, you know they have 'em. White slaves. Arabs, like a whole 'nother world up there, whole 'nother planet.
>
> —*Bernice,* The Brother from Another Planet

> What makes you think they're gonna care about a bunch of lifers who found God at the ass-end of space?
>
> —*Ellen Ripley,* Alien[3]

What are the conditions under which the meanings attached to the idea of "going *up*" might become confused with those attached to the process of "going *down*"? How do notions of upward mobility become associated with physical orientations to the sky, to the stars, to the reaches of outer space? What might it mean to find oneself at the bottom—economically, socially, physically—just at the moment one appears to be traveling up, up, and away? Does it involve the process of crashing down from on high, or might highness itself be a "bottomless pit"? These are the kinds of questions that trouble racial narratives of planetary exile, stories that are a frequent concern of American Afrofuturist cinema in its attempts to address "'African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture' . . . to explore how people of color negotiate life in a technology intensive world" (Mark Dery qtd. in Yaszek 42). Doubly indebted to Marcus Garvey's "back to Africa" movement in the early-twentieth century, and the colonial vision of national expansion into space promulgated by American *astrofuturism*, the tale of planetary exile narrates the possibilities that lie in the willful relocation of African Americans (and often their diasporic counterparts) to outer space.[1] Such a journey is often depicted as the search for another planet on which to produce a culture free of the racism, genocidal mania, and hierarchical economic systems advanced by Eurocentrism and Western imperialism.

This article tracks the evolution of the trope of planetary exile in a series of Afrofuturist and science fiction films that bookend the rise of Black Nationalism and a US Third World Left in the early 1970s and the neoconservative backlash against the legacy of Civil Rights and the welfare state in the early 1990s (Young 3–5). I argue that the racially motivated flight to outerspace worked to resignify the meanings attached to diasporic identity by articulating the "blackness" of space to Black and African American cultural identity; in turn, outerspace itself was reframed as a generative discursive ground for producing previously unimaginable alliances between a variety of subjects who shared the experience of abjection and social exile on the basis of cultural or biological difference. To engage such a project, Afrofuturist films reinterpreted the relationship between humanity and the cosmos outside the limits of imperial technological progress, depicting diaspora as an act of collective agency and world-making, rather than the enforced migration of colonial expansion.

Despite encompassing a wide variety of cinematic projects that generatively speak to the narrative of planetary exile, three films stand as unique markers of the evolution of this trope in the latter half of the twentieth century. In Sun Ra's magisterial utopian vision, *Space is the Place* (1974), John Sayles's urban exploration *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984), and David Fincher's prophetic future-gothic *Alien³* (1992), we see three highly divergent, yet remarkably linked, Afrofuturist projects that consider what kinds of bodies and objects might be oriented towards one another when planetary exile becomes a common goal amongst unlikely allies coded abject or Other by their race, gender, class, sexuality, or ability. Across the creative span between *Space is the Place* in 1974 and *Alien³* in the early 1990s, I explore how the trope of planetary exile evolved from its original grounding in an ideology of racial uplift, to a collective embrace of cultural abjection and an abandonment of the very idea of "uplift" as such.[2]

As a body of intellectual and creative thought, and a heterogeneous aesthetic mode, Afrofuturism has offered a uniquely African American perspective on what Kodwo Eshun calls "the futures industry," that combination of scientific, economic, and cultural knowledge-bases about the evolving technological future of the human race that "more often than not, conflate blackness with catastrophe" (Yaszek 48). In *Space is the Place*, *The Brother from Another Planet*, and *Alien³* outerspace is visualized as a cultural stage upon which the drama of Earth's racial hierarchies is played out in a struggle to define the future of human life beyond the blue planet; in turn, the blackness of space itself is reread as an affinity to both *racially* coded blackness and a more general openness to the polyvalency of cultural meanings that might attach to bodies read as abject or undesirable on Earth. In outerspace, the signifiers of Earth's racially divided social life are ever-present. All three films take on the troubled racial histories of such cultural and political institutions as slavery, the segregated space and rocket industries, the prison industrial complex, and the modern metropolis, ghettoized by a history of racist zoning laws and housing practices. Projecting these institutions onto an outerspace which is, as Sun Ra claims, both "high" and "low," a directionless void, these narratives of planetary exile explore how space itself might be liberated from the cultural imaginary constructed out of a white project of space exploration, and repurposed as a disorienting locus of meanings where up and down, top and bottom, North and South, black and white, the past and the future are all productively thrown into confusion.

The notion that traveling up to outerspace might actually produce a form of "bottom" status, an expulsion from the very trajectory of upward mobility, is central to an Afrofuturist vision that sees self-imposed exile from the dominant planetary order as an affirmation of what Kathryn Bond Stockton has called "bottom values," life-ways that negate or refuse a hegemonic vision of upwardly mobile, white colonial expansion (Stockton 72). By interrogating the cultural sign of blackness and its multiple associations with social degradation, backwardness, and disorientation, Afrofuturist cinema engages in a project of resignification that both imbues the abjection of blackness with desirability and exploits the network of meanings that allow blackness to overlap with such similarly abject signs as "queer" and "woman."[3] In so doing, these films theorize the discursive articulations necessary to produce political alliances and solidarity between African Americans, diasporic subjects, women, and queers, among others, that exceeded the limited imaginary of a masculinist Civil Rights discourse and a narrowly defined identity politics.

I begin my analysis by looking at the extra-planetary projects of Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* and *The Brother from Another Planet*, films that depict the arrival of an African American (or similarly racially coded) space traveler to Earth, who, whether intending to or not, forces those around him to reconsider their relationship to a larger racial community and to the institutions within which they are bound to perform their circumscribed cultural identities. In Sun Ra's post-national utopian vision of a musically harmonic planet upon which the Black race can resettle away from Earth, we see a fully realized world-making project that inaugurates a new era of Afrofuturist thought in the 1970s. For Sun Ra, the Earth must embrace an "altered destiny" that not only demands permanent institutional change, but that might require the complete abandonment of Earth as the only viable solution to the racial ills that beset the human race. Conversely, in *The Brother from Another Planet*, we see a reverse narrative of exile, where Earth itself is the planet to which a runaway slave from another world escapes to avoid the bounty hunters who have come to take him home. Mute, but possessing telepathic capabilities, the brother from another planet finds himself navigating the streets of New York, making a home in Harlem, and interacting with New York's working immigrants and minorities whose daily lives are delimited by a complex set of social rules that reenact the racial and economic divisions of slavery but in subtler, bureaucratic forms.

After charting out the projects of these two complimentary visions, I turn towards David Fincher's *Alien*^{3}, in which Ellen Ripley, America's longest lived science fiction heroine, finds herself trapped on a post-apocalyptic prison planet, Fiori 161. There, the twenty-five inmates of an abandoned work facility have willfully remained to live out their days as celibate monks at the "ass-end" of space. Lead by Dillon, an African American religious advisor, the motley crew of ex-murderers and rapists unexpectedly find common cause with Ripley, producing an alliance against the alien and the corporate powers that seek to capitalize on its extraordinary killing abilities. Made abject in every possible sense of the term—not the least as the social and cultural detritus of a corporately owned Earth—the inhabitants of Fiori 161 choose death before assimilation into the homogenizing geopolitical establishment of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, the natural resources firm to which they are indentured for life. In *Alien*^{3}, the signs of black, queer, and woman that were often assiduously policed in Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* and *The Brother from Another Planet* literally and figuratively implode. In this third installment of the *Alien* series, Ripley finds

herself unwittingly impregnated by the alien she has long sought to destroy, the abject monstrosity that simultaneously represents the exiled racial Other of modernity as well as the powers of the global capital that relies on such an Other to maintain its world order.

"Altered Destinies"

> Jimmy Fey: Why are black men, generally on, say, the bottom of the totem pole on this planet?
> Sun Ra: They're on the bottom because they're in an inverted position; they ought to be on top.
>
> —*Space is the Place*

Practically no mention is made of the film *Space is the Place* in any major study of American science fiction cinema or African American film history, and to this day it remains a rather obscure cult anomaly in most mainstream film circles.[4] Filmed in 1972 and released two years later in a heavily edited version, *Space is the Place* was an effort to record in narrative form the "afro-black mythology" of Jazz musician Sun Ra and his Intergalactic Arkestra. Few artists have attempted to synthesize the literary genre of science fiction into musical form, yet Sun Ra succeeded in doing so by developing a musical style and rhythm that actively constructed a futuristic narrative of racial uplift as a central part of the harmonic arrangements he produced (Youngquist 335–36). Ironically, this future-oriented vision of what Sun Ra called Earth's "altered destiny" was fueled by a commitment to recycling and repurposing the figures and stories of ancient Egyptian myths, drawing strength not from a nostalgic Nubian or Afrocentric past but rather from a network of visual signifiers that invert traditional European hierarchies of power. In both his musical performances and filmic roles, Ra often appeared as an ancient god dressed in Egyptian drag accompanied by tributaries, members of his Arkestra clothed in the garb of such mythical figures as Anubis, Isis, and Osiris. In this way, Sun Ra playfully performed the identity of a pharaoh or Sun God while disrupting the hierarchies associated with top-down models of political rule, constructing himself not as a monarch, but a messenger or prophet who seeks to galvanize permanent structural change with the help of those at the bottom of the social order.

A visually arresting mixture of narrative and performance, *Space is the Place* tells the story of Sun Ra's return to Earth after traveling the cosmos with his Intergalactic Arkestra for nearly half a century. Having found a "harmonically suitable" planet, he travels back to Earth to tell the world of his discovery and return to this new planet with all the members of the Black race in tow. Set against the backdrop of a cosmic game that Ra plays with his arch-nemesis, a malevolent black figure called the Overseer, *Space is the Place* follows the exploits of Ra over the course of a week in which he appears to various black communities in Oakland, California, sharing his prophetic vision of a life beyond the racist, capitalist exploitation of planet Earth. The denouement of his trip occurs when Sun Ra puts on a concert where he and his Arkestra express their world-making vision in musical form. Following an attempted assassination at the performance, Ra magically heals the black youth who were injured while trying to protect him and, one by one, teleports

all of the African Americans in the film to his spacecraft, where they leave the doomed planet Earth in the hopes of producing a "great tomorrow." In the wake of Ra's prophetic visit, the planet explodes in a ball of flame, splintering into fragments that spin outward into the darkness of space.

Sun Ra's "altered destiny" points to a post-national and post-capitalist world order, where work or labor is understood as a *cultural* activity, rather than employment by a bureaucratic institution. Sun Ra understands the uplift of the Black race to be a world-building project that everyone involved labors to accomplish by producing cultural expression in the form of music. When Ra sets up an "Outerspace Employment Agency" called "Infinity Inc." hundreds of unemployed Oakland residents rush to his offices in hopes of procuring a paid job. The film shows three of these hopefuls with Ra for work, as he and his staff run an employment booth out of an abandoned storefront. All three—a NASA engineer, a homeless wino, and a seductive woman intent on "making it" with Ra—are sorely disappointed to find out that space is *not* the place for a regular salary. The first visitor, a white NASA engineer, begs Ra to give him a job on his spaceship so that he can make enough money to support his wife and seven children, lest they be ignominiously forced to "go on welfare." The engineer's predicament is presented as a rather hilarious circumstance that reverses the demonized image of the relentlessly childbearing African American welfare queen. Against this stereotype, the scene suggests that the very performance of the American Dream (marriage, children, a government job, patriotic anticommunism) by putatively white citizens is what produces the nation's most debased subjects. Besides the problem of the man's skin color, Ra explains "We don't really have salaries in our mission. We creators never receive anything for our work."

The man suggests that he might still be able to learn Ra's methods and Ra promptly lists what those methods are: "Multiplicity, adjustment, readjustment, synthesis, isotope, teleportation, transmolecularization . . . intergalactic realm of eternal black darkness, white darkness, infinity incorporated." Hearing such profoundly confusing words, the man rushes out of Ra's office, flustered and embarrassed. His training as a NASA employee has clearly not prepared him to encounter an interpretation of space travel that does not coincide with traditional mechanics of rocket science. The methods Ra lists are a repurposing of scientific terminology to describe cultural work: the work of multiplying meaning; adjusting and readjusting sounds, ideas, and histories; synthesizing varied cultural forms; and perhaps even discovering new "isotopes" that would exist in a world where the Black race lived apart from "white darkness" by embracing the "intergalactic realm of black darkness" that is outerspace. Where slavery supported a system of indefinite, unpaid labor harnessed to the capitalist production machine, Sun Ra envisions a post-wage world where labor is not understood as unpaid servitude, but a transcendent calling that does away with the wage system and its class hierarchies altogether.

Ra's alternate mythology of the cosmos sees outerspace as a generative void where new meanings can be made to replace the colonial frame through which the space race has consistently been understood as a "battle for the stars." Similarly, Ra sees the reaches of space as providing a location where damaging historical trajectories can be rerouted towards culture-building futures. In the brief images we receive of Sun Ra in outerspace, the cosmos is richly rendered in hues of dark blue, a vibrant tableau of possibilities. The planet Ra has prepared for his people is a lush jungle world where alien plant-life grows

bells for buds and noise-blowing horns for leaves. The indigenous flora has evolved, Ra states, to mediate the sounds of Black culture. As we see Ra interact with the sentient plant creatures of the landscape, he explains, "The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth, sound of guns, frustration, and strife. We work on other side of time—teleport the whole planet here, through music."

Ironically, this vision of a vivacious, Edenic world prepared for the arrival of a new emancipated Black racial collective is largely outside of the major action of the film, which centers on Sun Ra's exploits in Oakland, California, where he lands to find recruits to join in building his Black utopia. In the film, Oakland stands at a cultural crossroads, both presented as a city with small pockets of social resistance still evident from the waning civil rights movement, but also ravaged by the urban decline of the 1970s. African Americans appear in a variety of social types: the self-satisfied homeless wino, the abusive Madame who exploits the bodies of black and Latino women for profit, and the middle-class corporate lackey who has sold his soul to the record industry. At the same time, figures of white bureaucracy appear in the guise of two NASA physicists who have been charged with the task of learning Ra's secrets of interplanetary travel and preventing him from imparting his political message at the concert scheduled near the end of his visit to Earth. They listen in on Ra's phone conversations, follow his every move, and attempt to divine where he derives his extraordinary powers for space travel. Kodwo Eshun's description of the alliance between science fiction and capitalism aptly explains the motivation behind NASA's interest in Ra: "The alliance between cybernetic futurism and 'New Economy' theories argues that information is a direct generator of economic value. Information about the future therefore circulates as an increasingly important commodity" (Eshun 290). Unable to understand any cultural or social vision of space that is not attached to business interests or nationalist projects to command the space frontier, the NASA spies, much like the engineer who visited Ra's employment office, are dumbfounded by his prophesies and decide that the best course of action is to assassinate him. With this in mind, the film suggests that the downtrodden African American figures that dot the landscape of Sun Ra's Oakland are constructed by institutions like NASA as those who are socially unfit for space-travel. They compose a technological underclass who will be left behind to deal with the environmental devastation that remains in the wake of capitalism's ravenous hunger for global resources.

Throughout the film, Sun Ra seeks to address and ameliorate the social degradation of all these figures. When Jimmy Fey, the local radio jockey and secret henchmen of the Overseer, conducts an interview with Ra as he drives through the streets of downtown Oakland, he asks, "Why are you talking to ghetto blacks? Why shouldn't you be talking, for instance, to white nuclear physicists?" Sun Ra responds, "My kingdom is the kingdom of darkness and blackness and none can enter except those who are of the black spirit. Physicists are fed upon the food of discipline and precision and research. The black man in this country has been fed upon the food of freedom and liberty." For Sun Ra, split subjectivity, or Du Bois's notion of racial "double consciousness," is the distinct experience of all people who have been "fed upon the food of freedom and liberty," yet are paradoxically left outside the story of civilizational progress told by space age astrofuturists. Sun Ra's ultimate goal is to produce a world where the double consciousness of the "black spirit" is collapsed or reintegrated so that blackness, as both a racial marker and a metaphor for

the open-ended future of humanity's encounter with the stars, no longer contradicts one's identity as a liberated member of human society. According to this logic, the validation of a fully integrated racial self consequently results in black social visibility. When Sun Ra visits a local black youth empowerment center to recruit followers to his utopian mission, he explains to them that the central tenet of white hegemony is the effective production of blacks as socially invisible. Interestingly, Sun Ra does not appear to be intent on making black people visible to whites, but rather to one another, ultimately abandoning the white race to a doomed Earth.

In one of the film's most compelling scenes, Sun Ra appears with two of his tributaries at a black youth center, where a group of teenagers are gathered, spending the day singing, playing pool, and gossiping. The center is clearly part of a political awareness organization as the walls are covered in photographs and drawings of famous African American political figures, among them Angela Davis, Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. Dramatically materializing out of thin air, Ra greets the youth gathered before him and attempts to pitch his world vision to the politically minded teenagers. Unsurprisingly, they are initially skeptical of his claims, their idealism having been tamed by the social and political failures of the 1960s counterculture. When they ask him how they should know whether he is real or not, Ra claims that in fact, "I'm *not* real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, your people would have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as the reality, I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are, myths." For Ra, to be identified as a myth is to be depoliticized or rendered an imaginary, rather than a tangible, political subject worthy of rights and recognition. By visually materializing before them dressed *like a myth*, outfitted in a shimmering gold cloak and Egyptian head-gear, Ra reverses this logic through a transformation of myth into physical reality. That is, he literally performs the "altered destiny" he seeks to produce as a musician and a storyteller as way of bringing it into material existence. When one of the youth asks Ra if "there [are] any whitey's up there" in space, he responds, "They're walking there today. They take frequent trips to the moon. I notice none of you have been invited." An invitation to "the moon" is exactly what Ra provides in the form of his outerspace utopia. The youth ultimately accept Ra's offer in order to take a voyage that may allow them to invent a future unfettered by the chains of a modernity that forever makes them invisible to one another and to the world. As Sun Ra grandly proclaims, "Everything you desire upon this planet and never have received, will be yours in outerspace."

Where Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* seeks a vision of racial uplift through a communal escape to the stars, John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet* imagines what Earth might look like to an exile from outerspace. Furiously traveling to Earth in an escape pod, the eponymous brother of the film's title lands on New York's Ellis Island where, disoriented and injured, he spends the night telepathically listening to the voices of immigrants past. Making his way to Harlem, the brother becomes the on-again off-again ward of a ragtag cadre of African American men, a circle of friends whose favorite bar serves as a meeting place and a rest stop for the brother during his adventures in New York City. In the course of the film, the brother meets a host of characters with different ethno-racial backgrounds—including Bernice, the white, single mother with whom he boards and whose mixed-race

son he develops a telepathic bond with—working odd jobs fixing mechanical devices for white store owners, and absorbing the cultural environment in which a combination of racial and ethnic communities live in close, but uneasy association. The immigrant voices that flood the brother's mind at the beginning of the film become embodied in the second and third-generation descendants of immigrants who inhabit the bustling New York metropolis. By virtue of his entry into their diverse communities, the brother literally lives up to his name, becoming a cultural sibling to those he comes in contact with.

In *The Brother from Another Planet*, the concept of the "planet" or "world" becomes synonymous with human consciousness. People of different cultures are seen as inhabiting "different planets" or being from whole "'nother worlds" that seemingly cannot be visited by others. A sense of racial anomie or alienation pervades nearly every scene of the film where difference seems to occlude the possibility of clear communication between or across cultures. Throughout the entire film, we see countless scenarios where people speak at cross-purposes with one another or simply misunderstand what others are trying to express. In a particularly amusing scene, two white physicists accidentally stumble into Harlem and end up throwing back a few beers at the bar where the brother usually goes to relax at the end of the day. Feeling unusually friendly, the two talk at the brother for what seems like hours, explaining how much they admire certain black sportsmen and trying to give the impression of racial tolerance. As they prepare to leave, they thank the brother for a great conversation. Surprised by the ease of cross-racial exchange, one of the men jubilantly exclaims, "Communication, that's what it's all about!" Of course, the brother hasn't spoken a single word; rather than attempt to learn more about their bar mate, the two simply project their life experiences onto him, leaving with a self-congratulatory sense of their own racial open-mindedness. The physicists notwithstanding, the very ease with which a variety of people communicate with the mute brother speaks to his own ability to comfortably fit into many social situations across cultural barriers.

The brother, then, rarely functions as a pure alien Other since he can readily assimilate into the various communities of color and class depicted in the film. His gift is the ability to communicate with others through empathetic experience, rather than linguistic address that often results in misunderstanding and an inability to translate across cultures. Mute throughout the film, the brother does not attempt to interact with others based on any supposed social rules and seems to hold no racial bias, with the exception that he exhibits a natural antipathy to police and other law officials. Rather, he is interested in human interaction in all its forms and often unwittingly produces situations where people feel compelled to share with him their deepest thoughts and emotions. In turn, those with whom he builds friendships protect his identity from the outerspace bounty hunters who come to Earth intent on recapturing him. The brother's alien status is equated not with literally coming from another planet, but from being from another cultural "world." He is more akin to an illegal alien immigrant or a diasporic subject than an alien from outerspace.

The brother, however, is also specifically linked to Black history by virtue of his runaway slave status. At one point in the story, the brother takes Bernice's son Earl to visit a museum exhibition of images from the Underground Railroad. Staring at a picture of a runaway slave being chased by hounds, the brother points to the image, then back at himself, then finally to the stars. Earl understands that the brother is similarly a runaway from outerspace. In this exchange the brother equates the downward mobility of slavery

(and implicitly the backward movement of historical past) with the future-oriented direction of the stars. "Up there" literally becomes a picture of what was once "down South" at one point in American history. Though the brother comes down from space to land on Earth, he always uses his upturned thumb to explain to others where he comes from—to some of his newfound friends, however, his gesture suggests that he comes from uptown New York, to others that he is from the North (or a migrant *to* the North). Others read him as an immigrant from farther down South, from Haiti or Puerto Rico. Each of the explanations given for his origins is a projection of the speaker's own history onto the seemingly blank slate of the brother's identity. Bernice, the one white woman in Harlem who'll take any boarder if it means having some social company, assumes that the brother hails from the same geographical location she abandoned to come to New York years ago. She reads in him the Southern culture she has tried to erase from her own past. As Ed Guerrero suggests, "the Brother's construction is multivalent, as an alien from outer space, a runaway slave, and a West Indian immigrant" (Guerrero 48). More importantly, that multivalency allows the brother to see the complex interrelationships that exist between the varied "other planets" different people inhabit as potential grounds for alliances across differences that are effaced by the social norms that police the boundaries between race, class, and gender.

The social troubles that face many of the characters—including immigration officers, overzealous police, racially motivated violence, and drug addiction—are all experienced by the brother who becomes a kind of cipher for the myriad racial Others of the narrative. Through these trials and tribulations, the brother comes to understand that the one central experience these figures share is constant surveillance and policing by racist government institutions. The dangerous encounter with corrupt law enforcement is an experience that the brother clearly shares with his Harlem companions: early on in the film, he recognizes the first police officer he sees as a threat and runs away as fast as he can despite having committed no intentional crime. Similarly, the bounty hunters who pursue the brother quickly assume the role of immigration officers in order to scare others into telling them where the escaped brother can be found. Because of their shared antipathy towards such police figures, the community does everything in its power to thwart the plans of the officers; it is through their collective refusal to turn the brother in that we see that every character, regardless of their racial background, does in fact live in the same cultural "world." What binds the disparate members of the Harlem community together is their enslavement to a system of social, political, and economic hierarchies that not only relegate them to the "bottom of the totem pole," but also render their lives as precarious, always under the threat of having to return to the even worse environments from which they have struggled to escape.

Unlike Sun Ra's project to uplift the Black race, the brother from another planet has no distinct utopian mission but is intent on mapping out the larger dimensions of race relations in the modern American metropolis, relations that often lead one down to Earth rather than to the stars. The brother's exploits do not lead to a final separation of the races, but rather shed light on how those races are *already* made separate through a series of social and economic divisions that produce "whole 'nother planets" within the very space of the city. In this sense, *The Brother from Another Planet* can be understood as a late cultural expression of the discourse of the "internal colony," which was deployed by US Third World Leftists to describe the experience of a racialized underclass whose members

are "residents of the United States without being fully enfranchised citizens of the nation" (Young 157). As Bernice points out, despite having escaped the horrors of her childhood in the South, it is "up here" as a working-class woman in New York that she feels most like a slave to the social order. Part of the film's mappings of social space and the meanings attached to particular locations is accomplished through the brother's explorations of subway systems and his visit to the top of a skyscraper near the film's conclusion. Geographically representing two opposing directions attached to forms of social and economic mobility, these two spaces become physical metonyms for the binaries of North/South and Uptown/Downtown that map onto distinctly racialized histories of urban life.

In the film's longest narrative sequence, the brother finds the dead body of a junkie in an abandoned park. Simultaneously distressed and intrigued by the sight, the brother takes the remaining drugs in the boy's pocket and ingests it. For one night, he experiences a delirious ride through the underworld of Harlem, where drug dealers, prostitutes and pimps, and the homeless walk the streets under the cover of darkness. Days later, the brother catches sight of a young man he knows to be a former friend of the dead boy and follows him to discover where he procures his drugs. Connecting the dots from user, to distributor, to owner, the brother finds himself traveling downtown and then to the top of a skyscraper where the offices of a computer software company house the leader of a drug ring. Ed Guerrero explains, "Thus the film constructs a casual chain of exploitations . . . tracking the line of profit . . . to the ultimate dope dealer, a white corporate businessman directing the drug traffic from his plush office suite atop a Manhattan skyscraper" (47). In this "chain of exploitations," the lines between up and down not only blur, but dissolve. The debasement of the junkie at the hands of the white dope dealer simultaneously make the world of the upper class synonymous with the dark underworld that the brother experiences the night of his own drug induced journey. Uptown Harlem and downtown Manhattan no longer seem so far apart, connected not only by a top-down system of exploitation but also by equal-opportunity debasements forced upon people by the exigencies of the free market. Trying to explain the lucrative nature of his operation to the brother, the drug dealer exasperatedly says, "Your people just don't get the big picture." Black people, the man suggests, cannot understand the ramifications of a nationwide money making venture, lying as they do at the bottom of the economic ladder; the brother, however, understands the big picture all too well, having meticulously charted the set of socio-economic relations that allow a system of racial exploitation to continue under the guise of a free market venture.

At the film's conclusion, the brother leaves the skyscraper in which he visits, and presumably kills, the white drug dealer, only to be captured by the bounty hunters that have stalked him for weeks. In a last ditch attempt at escape, the brother flees from the pair until he reaches a vacant parking lot with nowhere left to run. Suddenly, as the bounty hunters arrive, a group of black figures materialize behind the brother, all of whom have appeared at some point in the film as janitors, maids, street vendors, or municipal service workers. We are led to believe that these are successful escapees who have gathered together on Earth to protect and initiate other runaways. Unable to face the band of freed slaves alone, the bounty hunters disappear, perhaps teleported back to their home planet. When the brother goes up to one of his rescuers, he excitedly points his thumb up to the stars to elicit a response of shared origin; contrary to his expectations, the man points his

thumb down, suggesting that he comes from the underground. One shot later, we see the brother riding the A-train back to Harlem. What is one to make of this disorientating set of inversions? Does the man encourage the brother to embrace the bottom values of the economically depressed Harlem? Does he suggest that his status remains low as a badly paid worker for the city, or that he was never a resident of outerspace in the first place but a common ally to those of his race? Perhaps he is disavowing the enslaved past that kept him unwillingly tied to the "up there" of outerspace. The film does not offer any definitive answer to this gesture, but in the final scene, as the brother rests his hands against the chain-link fence of a Harlem basketball court, he turns to the camera and smiles, suggesting that going uptown to Harlem may be the best way of truly "going up" in the world.

Where Sun Ra imagines a cosmos open for cultural re-appropriation, *The Brother from Another Planet* offers a humbler, and perhaps more pessimistic, image of other worlds where the history of race hierarchy and slavery are played out with minor differences from our own. What is up in the cosmos is still portrayed as down, or backward, in a historical trajectory that purports to reflect the onward march of a civilized, free-market modernity. Modernity, these films claim, is simply a term that describes a sanitized yet similarly malevolent vision of unequal social structures that mirror the exigencies of American slavery in contemporary social relations. In fact, contrary to Sun Ra's critique of a white-washed outerspace, *The Brother from Another Planet* argues that if human beings accomplished expansion into space, black people *would* in fact make up its largest population, likely forced to work as the unpaid labor that supports white colonization of the cosmos.

Dark Memories

You've been in my life so long, I can't remember anything else.
—*Ripley, to the Alien,* Alien[3]

Despite their divergent takes on planetary exile, both Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* and *The Brother from Another Planet* embrace a libratory or utopian vision of the need for social change. Between the two films, we see a widening of the scope of social interest, so that Sun Ra's focus on the Black race becomes an investment in minority status more broadly in *The Brother from Another Planet*. In these narratives, race and class are central categories of analysis but gender and sexuality are elided. Men almost exclusively dominate the worlds that Sun Ra and the brother navigate, with women as exploited or overburdened sub-characters who enter the narrative infrequently. One might recall that when Jimmy Fey asks Sun Ra about the state of the black man at the "bottom of the totem pole," Ra responds only to affirm the need to uplift black *men* from their debased position with no corollary acknowledgement of the economic plight of black women. Queerness is similarly smoothed over through the recuperative powers of heterosexuality; the only time that the brother seems truly joyous is when he meets Marlene Davis, a singer with whom he becomes intimate and shares his first sexual experience. When the brother first sees Marlene's image on an advertisement, the film plays out a montage sequence of beautiful,

scantily clad women around the city of New York as though to alert us to the marvelous heterosexual reality that the brother has finally been awakened to.

What is smoothed over in these texts of the 1970s and 1980s, however, becomes the narrative focus of David Fincher's *Alien³*, a film that reads planetary exile as a negative response to the stifling ideology of technological progress that embraces self-imposed cultural abjection before submission to the horrors of assimilation. No longer is there a mission to preserve a Black race or to ameliorate the racial tensions between contentious human populations; rather, *Alien³* offers a vision of a future world where corporate power has effaced difference under the sign of capital, exploiting all forms of life for profit. In *Space is the Place* and *The Brother from Another Planet* the concept of the future denotes an unpredictable time yet-to-come whose telos remains open to a multiplicity of potentials, including the reversal of current power relations and the production of new political worldviews built on anti-racist and egalitarian principals. In *Alien³*, this time-yet-to-come is transformed into a corporate ideology of *futurism*, which seeks to delimit an unpredictable future by organizing its unfolding around heterosexual reproduction, the expansion of capital wealth, and the on-going annexation of human and natural resources. This is the image of the cosmos which Sun Ra prophesied would come about should the "altered destiny" he proposed fail to be pursued. On the bleak planet Fiori 161, there is no hope for racial uplift, only the dangerous embrace of a life-negating downward mobility. So far do the powers of a corporate institution reach in this future, that Earth is no longer even present as a centralized node in the history of race relations. Earth is now merely one stop on a galactic trading route where the detritus of humanity is deposited, planet by planet, to labor at mineral refineries in the bowels of landscapes too desolate for any social community to take root.

Alien³ unfolds a vision of exile in which the meanings attached to blackness become coterminous with those attached to queerness, both literal and figurative signs of cultural abjection that find common ground by virtue of their similar social standing. Crash landing on a prison planet called Fiori 161, Ellen Ripley finds herself the sole woman in residence at a long abandoned penal colony made up of a group of celibate monks, all ex-murderers and rapists who have vowed to will their souls to God in penance for their sins. This lone outpost of debased humanity was once a thriving coal refinery and lead-works where convicts sentenced to life in prison paid their debt to society by working for the Weyland-Yutani Corporation. In the course of the film, it is revealed that an alien spore has made its way from Ripley's abandoned evacuation ship into the compound; as in the previous films, the spore rapidly develops into a giant black monster with a lithe, armored skeletal body equipped to ambush and murder its prey with minimal effort. As the beast kills the inmates one by one, they realize that Weyland-Yutani, which had long since ceased to communicate with its abandoned outpost, is now keen on acquiring a living specimen of the alien. Allying themselves with the one woman who knows the alien better than any living person in the universe, the remaining inmates band together to destroy it before the company arrives to end their days of grim isolation and unleash the alien upon the world. By the narrative's conclusion, Ripley learns of her own impregnation by the alien. When knowledge of the alien gestating within her reaches the corporate network, her body becomes the site upon which the battle between Weyland-Yutani and the abject exiles of Fiori 161 unfolds.

In its frightening opening sequence, *Alien*[3] does the work of grafting blackness and abjection onto the figure of Ripley. The credit sequence opens with images of the blackness of space interrupted by brief scenes from inside the evacuation ship where Ripley and her two companions lie frozen in hypersleep. An alien "face-hugger," one of the spider-like creatures that impregnates other organisms with the alien seed, has infiltrated the ship. Unbeknownst to the sleeping passengers, the face-hugger's acid blood spills, igniting an electrical fire that will cause the ship to crash land on the nearest planet. X-ray images show that the creature has indeed accomplished its purpose on at least one of the passengers. Ripley arrives on Fiori in a moment of literal downward mobility, as her damaged escape pod careens towards the dead planet and violently crash-lands into a black ocean seething with mineral waste. The sole survivor of the original crew, Ripley's body washes up on the shore, appearing as a lifeless mannequin with heavy black ash covering her skin and hundreds of lice infesting her hair. Ripley is then made to enter the scene of narrative action as the image of a black, abject body expelled from the white chrysalis of a serene chryotube, cracked open by the acid taint of alien blood.[5] With the violent deaths of her two crewmates, the young girl Newt and Corporal Hicks, both of whom Ripley had saved from the clutches of the Alien queen in the previous film, Ripley's symbolic ties to the nuclear family, motherhood, and reproduction are obliterated. Physically blackened by her entry into Fiori space, and figuratively queered by the dissolution of her normative social and sexual ties, Ripley's body comes to represent the location where the symbolic and material boundaries between blackness, queerness, and the white heterosexual body come undone.

Initially seen as a dire threat to the social world of Fiori 161, where the all-male religious order of prison inmates have taken a vow of celibacy, Ripley is ultimately accepted into the fraternity when it becomes clear that she too is akin to the inmates as a reject of human society. Along with Ripley herself, the inmates on Fiori have been made "intolerable" outcasts by the machinations of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, the company that built and manages the planet's coal-refinery. In the *Alien* series, Weyland-Yutani Corp, the galaxy's largest interstellar monopoly on natural resources and private military contractor, has struggled to collect a specimen of the alien species for nearly two hundred years.[6] The company's famed slogan, "Building Better Worlds," absorbs the world-making projects of figures like Sun Ra and transforms them into forms of social and cultural engineering, where societies are built from a corporate bureaucracy whose idea of a "better world" involves accumulated capital investment into the indefinite future. Far from embracing Weyland-Yutani's vision of a better world, the inmates of Fiori 161 patiently await the end of it. They have taken on an apocalyptic millenarianism that stems from Christian fundamentalist traditions, a religious calling that led them to choose exile on Fiori when Weyland-Yutani shut the refinery down five years prior to the events of the film. Not only do the inmates refuse to embrace the ideology of the company on ethical grounds, they willfully adopt Fiori 161 as the "end of the line," the place where biological reproduction and fantasies of a better future also come to an end. As an isolated and exclusively homosocial community, the threat of non-reproductive sexual practices hangs palpably in the air. It should come as little surprise then that Ripley and the alien fit perfectly into this apocalyptic vision—the alien is, after all, the harbinger of the end of the world and hence, the end of human reproductive futurism. Ripley suggests that its voracious appetite for

murder and destruction will lead to the wiping out of the entire cosmos if it were to be unleashed; Weyland-Yutani hopes to contain and study the alien for their bio-weapons division, but Ripley knows better.

Blackness, as an abject taint or a sign of bottom values, appears everywhere in the film as the very opposite of the sterile, white, synthetic world of Weyland-Yutani. As a racial signifier, blackness is activated in the form of the African American leader of the inmates, Dillon, who serves as a lay preacher for their collective faith. In the film, we learn that Dillon is the man who convinced his fellow inmates to stay and pursue their apocalyptic theology on Fiori rather than return to Earth with Weyland-Yutani. More than any other character, it is he who pronounces his own willful abjection from the social order of Earth. When Ripley attempts to galvanize his ethical compass on the issue of killing the alien to save the human race, Dillon responds, "That world out there doesn't exist for us. We've got our own little world out here." With a moralizing tone, Ripley replies, "So fuck everybody else." "No, fuck *them*," he snarls back. Dillon's "them" clearly refers to the corporation and the inter-galactic slave-laboring empire they've constructed. There is no longer an Earth to save, Dillon implies, because it no longer supports a human race, but a corporately managed one. It is not so much Dillon's racial status that codes him as abject but his separation from the values of corporate profit. Yet it is this very institution that has *made* Dillon the exiled subject that he is. In the course of the film, he and Ripley must come to terms with the ways in which their own abject status codes them not as *apart* from the corporation, but as internally tainted by it. For Ripley, this taint appears not only as the ghostly memory of working for Weyland-Yutani years before, but as the gestating black body of the alien she carries within her (Speed 128).

Because of the seed she carries, the adult alien that stalks the corridors of Fiori's underground bunker refuses to kill Ripley. At one point she explains to Dillon, "It won't kill me; it won't kill its future." Like the corporation, the alien is invested in its own futurity, in the indefinite reproduction of its resource ravaging species. When Ripley refers to herself as the alien's "future" she tellingly conflates the term future with the ideology of *futurism*, suggesting how the nexus between the alien and the corporation works to efface the possibility of future alternatives to their all-consuming appetites. The alien, however, is not only a material instantiation of the corporation gestating inside of Ripley, but also metaphorically represents that realm of Ripley's psyche that she herself has coded abject, a place she must visit and perhaps open herself up to in order to resist the corporation—after all, it is the acceptance of the abject into the self that theoretically makes possible the destruction of the psyche and the end of futurism. When Ripley decides to go in search of the alien in order to kill it, she claims to know exactly where it hides. Her brief exchange with Andrews, the only non-inmate resident on the planet, reveals Ripley's own understanding of her complex psychic relationship to the monster:

> Andrews: How are you going to know where it is?
> Ripley: It's just down there, in the basement.
> Andrews: This whole place is a basement.
> Ripley: It's a metaphor.

By acknowledging the metaphorical status of the idea of the "basement," Ripley simultaneously activates the twin notions of *de*basement and the uncanny, both of which are attached to the sign of abjection (Stockton 6–7). The metaphor Ripley refers to suggests that the alien resides in the figurative basement of Ripley's psyche, a repressed abjection she has hidden away within the folds of her mind in order to maintain her mental integrity as human. Abandoning this debilitating process of repression, Ripley intends to go down into the dark recesses of that place to face the mirror image of herself in the visage of the alien. In so doing, she voices her relation to the creature she had once so assiduously fought to distinguish herself from. As she intones to the adult alien once she finds him, "Don't be afraid, I'm part of the family." The alien then functions on at least two levels, as the reflection of a corporate power embodied in an efficient killing machine that uses the labor of physical bodies to reproduce itself indefinitely, and as the internalized abject, a physical expression of one's psychic alterity. It is simultaneously that which governs externally through the apparatus of corporate bureaucracy, and that which lodges itself within the brain as a mechanism that regulates one's adherence to the rules of the dominant social order, lest you become the very alien you hate (Gabbard 32–33).

Alien^3 is about the process of *becoming* that very alien and embracing its alterity in order to "fuck *them*." If queerness can be understood as a capacious signifier of that element inside the dominant order that always threatens to undo it from within, then the figuratively black bodies of the inmates of Fiori 161 become queered when they abandon any hope of being reabsorbed into Weyland-Yutani's corporate project and commit themselves and their lives to battling the alien in the deep recesses of the lead-works (Edelman 6). But the inmates do not accept their plight easily. At first they must be convinced of their abject status by Dillon and Ripley, the two figures who represent the hybrid coalition of the signs of black and queer in the film. In a scene reminiscent of Sun Ra's appeals to the black youth of Oakland, Ripley and Dillon remind the inmates of their social invisibility in a world structured by the interests of Weyland-Yutani's capital investments. When the inmates passionately resist the idea of taking on the alien without the aid of the corporation, Ripley disabuses them of their romantic notions that Weyland-Yutani will be their *deus ex machina*:

> They won't kill it. They might kill *you* just for having seen it. But they're not gonna kill *it*. When they first heard about this thing, it was crew expendable. Then they sent in the marines. They were expendable too. What makes you think they're going to care about a bunch of lifers who found God at the ass-end of space? You really think they're going to let you interfere with their plans for this thing? They think . . . we're crud. And they don't give a fuck about one friend of yours that's died. Not one.

Ripley's use of the term "crud" is precisely to the point, in that it describes the caked-on, disposable muck that the inmates appear to be in the eyes of the corporation. The inmates of Fiori 161 are literally blackened, made abject and crud-like, by the conditions in which they live, conditions produced by the very company they initially held their hopes out for salvation. Their original job at the refinery was to produce sheets of lead as protective

coating for barrels of toxic waste. In this ignominious role, they are made to socially contain the waste of Weyland-Yutani's project of "building better worlds."

As Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests, "the presumed physical and moral dirtiness of anal sexuality offends sensibilities in a way not entirely distinct from that dirtiness (physical and moral) that is presumed to attend (black) life on the economic bottom" (68). In the binary logic of sexual domination through which the company is reconstructed, it is the inmates who are "fucked over" by Weyland-Yutani, made dirty by their presumed submission to the top-down power of the corporation. Paradoxically, however, Fiori 161 is a "bottom" neighborhood of blacks, queers, convicts, and rejects that appears at the "top" or "up towards the stars" relative to Earth. *Alien³*'s community of exiles unhinges the metaphor of progress or civilized advancement as physical highness by debasing the utopian vision of interplanetary expansion: the highest point of space exploration, the film suggests, is a repository for the lowest forms of social life in the galaxy, "the ass-end of space" (68–71). Despite their material subjection to Weyland-Yutani's mining operations, Dillon reminds his companions that the only power they should look up to is God himself, an authority even higher than the company. "You're all gonna die," he claims, "This is as good a place as any to take our first steps to heaven. The only question is how you check out. Do you want it on your feet or on your fuckin' knees begging? I aint' much for begging. Nobody ever gave me nothin'. So I say fuck that thing, let's fight it!" Here, Dillon reframes abjection as a bottom value that leads one to the top of a completely different order, a spiritual order where top and bottom, high and low, up and down, implode into one another, the world equalized by God's judgment upon man.

In the famous final scenes of the movie, Dillon sacrifices himself to battle the alien inside the lead-works, keeping it within the mold long enough for Ripley and the inmate Morse to pour molten lead onto the creature. Dillon's decision to remain with the alien suggests his complete abandonment of self to his status as an abject figure, willfully choosing communion with the alien above lackey to the corporation. The two visually black figures of the text end up entangled with one another, inextricably tied by the machinations of an identity-effacing corporation. Similarly, when Ripley and Morse finally kill the beast in the lead-works and are approached by the rescue team who has arrived to surgically remove the alien baby from Ripley's body, she positions herself above the river of molten liquid and throws herself off the ledge. In the final moments of her life, the representatives from Weyland-Yutani implore Ripley to reconsider her actions: "Let us deal with the mutant," they plead, "You still can have a life, *children*!" The lure of reproductive futurism is what the company hopes to use in order to convince Ripley to gift them with the "magnificent specimen" gestating inside her. They do not realize that Ripley, like her companions on Fiori, has given up on the false promise of a futurism that shackles the ever-replicating bodies of its reproductive practice to the labor of the company. As she descends to her fiery death, the alien baby erupts from her chest and Ripley cradles its head to her body, bound in a maternal embrace with the abject black other that is now her own. With this act of self-obliteration, Ripley effaces all the identities that have tied her and the alien to the ideology of reproductive futurism, in so doing, reanimating an unpredictable future where her solipsistic struggle with the alien is no longer the dialectic that defines the unfolding of history. In their self-imposed exile from the world wrought by Weyland-Yutani, Ripley and Dillon no longer experience the double-consciousness produced by a self-splitting

relation to the dominant order. Oriented towards the alien—no longer woman, worker, preacher, or inmate—they are both made whole, while simultaneously destroyed, by their embrace of bottom values.

In *Space is the Place*, *The Brother from Another Planet*, and *Alien^3*, we see three distinct expressions of a critical trope in Afrofuturist and science fiction cinema. Offering historically located visions of planetary exile as an imaginative tool of resistance against dominant cultural and political institutions, these films dramatize the different ways in which global visions can be harnessed to negate the preemptively colonized universe of the futures industry. Though taking alternate lines of flight, all three films share a common ontology in the exiled body that hurtles down to earth, oriented from outerspace to the depths of life at the "bottom of the totem pole." In each of the films, the opening scene presents a vessel containing the lead character careening down to earth (or an analogous location), where they must encounter a world rarely welcoming of their presence. In *The Brother from Another Planet* and *Alien^3*, the vessels that crash down to earth are escape pods whose entry into new territory is violent and disorienting. These scenes alert us to the way in which narratives of planetary exile are ultimately about worldly (dis)orientations, about the directions we take in new terrain and the trajectories that move us to places we never expected to find ourselves. They also open up a space in which to investigate how one might become oriented towards moments of *disorientation*, and what paths we might take in the face of racism, abjection, and exile (Ahmed 566).

If we take Donald Bogle's famous catalog of filmic stereotypes of African Americans as our starting point, we might contest his original formulation by showing how such figures as Sun Ra, the brother, Ripley, and Dillon do not readily fall into any one of his narrative types that include the "Uncle Tom," "The Black Buck," "The Tragic Mulatto," "The Pickaninny," and "The Mammy" (3–18). These former figures might productively be thought of as key examples of a symbolic character I call "the brother (or sister) from another planet," a seeming alien other who is revealed as a mirror image of the self, offering a form of psychic resistance to the very typologies that force identity to become split against itself. The notion of the alien as Other is perhaps the oldest in science fiction narratives of alien encounter and invasion; in the films discussed above, however, the prophetic voices, and willful worldmaking actions, of these characters mark them not simply as Other, but as socially imbedded in the historical communities with whom they share their manifold visions of the future.

Tracing the trope of planetary exile through these three texts necessarily places in relief the history of African American cultural politics in the post-Civil Rights period. Sun Ra's racial world-making project would have been legible to audiences in the mid-1970s as a cultural extension of Black Nationalism into the realm of speculative fiction; even if Ra himself made no claim to such political affiliations, his work circulated in a moment when an anti-integrationist sentiment gained currency in African American political life, echoing Ra's utopian promise of a diasporic community in the stars free of "white darkness." Though appearing only a decade later, *The Brother from Another Planet* clearly marked a period when the residual effects of the Civil Rights era had been wiped away by Reaganism, urban decline, and de facto race and class segregation. The experience of living in one's own "cultural world," illegible to all but those counted among one's ethnoracial community, also describes the adoption of identity politics as the primary form of

political discourse following the demise of a more radical Black Nationalism. Wedded to discreet racial identities, rather than identifying like political interests across difference, the characters presented in the film only take steps towards cross-racial alliances when faced with the threats from immigration officers and racist landlords. By empathizing with the economic plight of those whom he encounters, the brother inadvertently shows the residents of Harlem that the effects of difference—economic displacement, segregation, and political disempowerment—can be alleviated when kinship is extended to all those who share its lived experience.

Finally, the extreme depredations of body and spirit experienced on Fiori 161 chart the failure of Civil Rights and identity politics to create the forms of political solidarity necessary to combat the soul-destroying forces of neo-liberal capital, which "actively obscures" or mystifies continued racial, gendered, and sexual inequality under the seemingly universal standardizing force of the free market (Duggan 3). Locating *Alien*[3] in the neo-liberal milieu of the early 1990s, media scholars and cultural critics have argued that the film can be read as an allegory for the cultural effects of AIDS, linking Weyland-Yutani with global pharmaceutical companies and the abject inmates of Fiori 161 with the diseased bodies of gay men, physically and psychologically dehumanized by the corporation's business transactions. In a 1996 review of the film, John Lynch claimed, "Most effective in the film is the strength of resistance of Ripley and the prisoners who are fighting not just the monster but the corporation that wants it as a weapon. The parallel experience of gay men in America and Britain fighting not just a virus but state indifference and prejudice couldn't be clearer" (Lynch 35).[7] Alternatively, I would suggest that Ripley and Dillon are not so much metaphors for the experience of gay men, as Lynch argues, but rather represent the two populations most neglected by early AIDS research, namely African Americans and women (Treichler 42–126). Through the figures of Ripley and Dillon, the film argues the necessity of acknowledging the shared social interests of African Americans, women, and the LGBT community for their mutual political recognition and survival.

Ironically, narratives of planetary exile often result in an investigation of the very world or worlds that one intends to escape, sometimes even more so than the supposedly utopian place of exile itself. Even as they chart the political transformations of their contemporary moment, all three of the films discussed here look backward at the history of modernity in order to imagine what a future exile from its seemingly unstoppable teleology might hope to produce. Sun Ra's creative vision reaches far back into the cultural mythology of Ancient Egypt; the brother from another planet looks closer to home, turning his vision to the history of American slavery that haunts his own escape from the masters that wish to recapture him; finally, Ripley's expulsion on Fiori 161 conjures the history of the present, a post-industrial wasteland that represents the world as it might look when "technology has left town and turned off the postmodern lights" (Speed 125). As Kodwo Eshun argues of these kinds of creative experiments, "By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates" (Eshun 297). In their orientations, these films also visualize the unexpected alliances across difference that might take shape when old investments are abandoned, and new lines of flight alter the assumed trajectory of history. Following the prescient claims of cultural theorist Sara Ahmed, in these texts:

> We look back, we go behind; we conjure what is missing from the face . . . we have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow, but instead create new textures on the ground . . . which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer . . . or perhaps, becoming dark. (Ahmed, 570, 554)

In the marvelous journeys of Afrofuturist cinema the blackness of space allows us to go astray, to look back at histories of oppression in new ways by looking forward to the unknown future as a place where the social orders that produce systems of unequal power might dissolve in the void. The bottomless pit of space, these texts suggest, is just that: a place with *no* bottom, and *no* top, only an ever-elusive trajectory towards contingency, danger, and perhaps the ecstasy of something altogether other than what is.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

My gratitude goes out to Jim Miller and Anne Showalter for reading early drafts of this essay and providing invaluable insights throughout the writing process.

NOTES

1. De Witt Douglas Kilgore defines astrofuturism as an umbrella term encompassing an array of ideological positions towards space travel that envision space as a frontier of colonial expansion for extending human civilization into the far reaches of the galaxy. Astrofuturism is associated with a white, upper-class vision of space-based utopia that ultimately found a home in the NASA space missions of the 1970s.
2. These texts mark a loosely framed period in which a creative ferment in the literary and cinematic arts produced some of the most radical Afrofuturist and related science fiction narratives in the history of the aesthetic. Alongside a spate of mainstream and independent films including *The Planet of the Apes* cycle, *Born in Flames*, *Enemy Mine*, *Blade Runner*, *The Wiz*, and the first two installments of the *Alien* series, the emergence of a politically minded cadre of racially and sexually diverse science fiction authors—among them Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marge Piercy, and Kim Stanley Robinson—revitalized the genre by appropriating its conventions from the largely US-centered cultural imaginary of the NASA space program. For a critical analysis of Afrofuturism as a cultural movement, see Nelson.
3. Kathryn Bond Stockton refers to this overlapping between culturally abject signs as a "switchpoint," or a discursive "point of connection between two signs (or two rather separate connotative fields) where something from one flows toward (is diverted in the direction of) the other, illuminating it and intensifying it, but also sometimes shifting it or adulterating it" (5). In this article, I am interested in the ways in which migratory exile and psychic abjection become a switchpoint for one another, and in so doing, similarly produce the signs of "black" and "queer" as switchpoints.
4. Neither Vivian Sobchack's structural analysis of SF cinema nor J. P. Telotte's and Christine Cornea's respective cultural histories of the genre discuss Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* in their texts. A rare exception to this oversight is Adilifu Nama's recent monograph, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film*, which offers a reading of the film in relationship to the broader representational politics of American science fiction cinema.
5. Louise Speed sums up Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as follows: "True to its etymology, abjection is the process of throwing away, expelling, or excluding that functions to maintain the boundaries of the symbolic order. If these boundaries fail, or are incompletely constructed, the subject/culture/nation can be threatened by chaos, crisis, breakdown or, in the case of the individual psyche, psychosis" (127). This particular version of the opening sequence is included in the special director's cut of the film available in the *Alien Quadrilogy* DVD collection. The original film includes an abridged edit of this scene.

6. In its name, Weyland-Yutani Corp. reflects the possible alliance of American and Asian ethnic whiteness against the "racially inferior" populations of South America, Africa, and the Indian Subcontinent. These latter areas of the world become analogized to locations like Fiori 161, "backwater" regions relegated to the outer-periphery of corporate empire.
7. On *Alien*^{3}'s resonance with queer and feminist politics around the AIDS crisis, see Taubin; Gibson.

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