

## the changing profession

# The Other Side of Time: Theorizing the Planetary South

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THIS ENTRY INTO SOUTHERN STUDIES SPINS OFF A CERTAIN STRAIN OF BLACK CULTURAL CRITICISM, ESPECIALLY AS IT CONCERNS MY ENGAGEMENT with black speculative text and what I call speculative race theory. The black speculative project—what Alondra Nelson and others roughly twenty years ago were terming *afrofuturism*, an idea that has since gained popularity as a branded aesthetic interest—is driven by literary, visual, musical, and various other intellectual work that evidences a dynamic intersection of race, space, time, and newer technologies. Also prominent in much of this text is a sequence of tropes common to post-*Souls* cultural production, particularly narratives of containment and flight coupled with representations of selected subjectivities as more provisional than guaranteed.<sup>1</sup> Al Green’s tune “Gotta Find a New World” comes to mind as a poignant escapist critique, and Syreeta Wright’s “Black Maybe” serves as a haunting inventory of tense potentialities. In these instances the futurist sentiment is present, but the expected tech might be slightly latent. Many of these anticipations—relatively successful or not—are launched from the south, from a south, or from a southern idea. This set of remarks is as much a black speculative venture as it is a southernist exercise. Or perhaps it is the one in theory because it is in fact the other.

How can I be down? By some casual accounts, downness would denote a southness, which would in turn connote some cultural southernness. A standard compass operates by negotiating magnetic fields. On Earth the compass’s needle is attracted to the planet’s magnetic north, which is to say that the four cardinal directions—including south—are determined in relation to their true northness. And conventional presumptions about the location of southern culture—shot through with binaries—are grounded in map practices that reinforce the classic rose. But watch what happens when we remove the earth’s surface as our sole frame of reference. Chucked into outer space, a handheld compass starts to lose its grip on the planet’s fields, rendering our familiar guides increasingly illegible

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the farther away we push. North and south, as we have lived them, are rewritten as untenable effects, as are up and down. So we require a more reliable directive apparatus. Our spacecraft might instead deploy a stellar compass to specify place. This navigational device, composed of a digital camera and an assembly of gyros whose moving parts detect alterations in axes of rotation, manufactures a virtual grid of celestial bodies—stars positioned as touchpoints to thinking. Gaze at them long enough—these limitless brilliant systems—and we might be inspired to calculate days and years in different ways as well. Put the exosphere far enough behind us, and we might begin to contemplate not pointing or counting at all. From this mobile vantage, the entire earth is occasionally, possibly southern. It is an actually floating signifier.

If the south is an archival technology that facilitates a collection of place-based, time-sensitive cultural matter, then the planetary south is a speculative extension. It is a theoretical mechanism we can plug in via the southernist logic to amplify productivity and to variegated cartography. What we are about to do is take the flat, static map and explode it logistically. Just look at it, fastened down in the horizontal. Now tip it vertically alert. Then rocket the instrument, and flip the metaphor. Southness as an indicator of literal downness is as lost as that clunky magnetic compass and the spring-loaded stopwatch that you used to lug around. And as the south becomes directionally fluid, the meaning of *southern* does as well. Our southernness is made susceptible to all manner of intriguing tugs and random gravity deficits. The planetary south escapes us ahead, beyond dusty motifs, kneejerk imaginaries—the Down, the Deep, the American, the Global, the New, the Dirty—and the usual assortment of contested Dixies. The postterrestrial futurist mode propels us past the perimeter of the fray while assuming an exceptionally more portable text. The ejective urge is not so much about identi-

fying what is wrong with prior approaches as it is about classifying exactly which problems these contemporary souths aim to solve—and then transmuting them. Perhaps, positioned out of reach of the strict definitive, we will generate some radically constructive contentions—orbital, trajectories—even as we troubleshoot. A crew of wily astronauts with weighty southern accents, we cosmocarolinians disrupt the freighted rubrics. You can tell that we are not from here.

Black speculative writers and artists have been throwing code at this and hopping way offworld for a good minute now—what Ron McNair was getting at when he brought his saxophone on board.<sup>2</sup> Typical of black-centered diagrams of the south are viscerally embedded references to transatlantic trafficking, several Great Migrations, and a cache of quality-of-life initiatives tied to dubious emancipation. Social and critical factions of the current afrofuturist movement display a peculiar preoccupation with what I regard as retrofutures—rediscoveries and reclamations of speculative sites whose temporal agents have otherwise expired—employing revisionist historiography and memory play to project evolutions or crises. Octavia Butler—the patron saint of black futurism, who in her fantasy novel *Kindred* shuttles a woman writer's body back and forth through time, between her modern-day California home and a nineteenth-century Maryland plantation inhabited by her enslaved ancestors—jumps us forward in her dystopian *Parable of the Sower*, set in the roaring 2020s, a layering of meta-narratives situated in the notion that “the destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (68). Another heavily namechecked figure, Herman Poole Blount of Alabama, becomes the intergalactic jazz bandleader Sun Ra of Saturn—composer of the album *Space Is the Place* and star of the identically titled film—and proposes to transport black people from Earth to a planet free of frustration and strife (a sort of sector nonbellum)

“either through isotope teleportation, trans-molecularization, or, better still, teleport the whole planet here through music,” reminding us that ultimately “we work on the other side of time” (*Space*). More recently, the prose poet Anthony Joseph, in his *The African Origins of UFOs*, depicts the displacement of a whole island population to a neighboring planet following the thirtieth-century destruction of Trinidad. Antedating his record *I Am Not a Human Being*, the Louisiana rap vet Lil Wayne asserts in “Phone Home,” “We are not the same; I am a Martian.” The Atlanta-hubbed trap crooner Future—a conscripted space cadet—blasts off with a beautiful “astronaut chick” and reproduces *Pluto* from a celebrated booty club.<sup>3</sup> Practically in parallel, the prolific emcee Andre (Dre) Benjamin becomes Andre 3000, an OutKasted ATLien, while the seminal, enigmatic reggae producer Lee “Scratch” Perry finally dubs himself the Jamaican ET. Why the litany of spheres and satellites? This partial manifest exemplifies a series of soundings toward deliberate alienations and aspirational technologies—Black Arks, Motherships, and sundry Cadillac-ticas—strewn across decades. They are vehicular, these antiessentialist articulations alternative to our cataloged souths and southern themes—crucially those characterized to varying extents by raced, gendered, and classed constraints on agency. We transcend the previous idioms through transformative distortion of time signatures and space registration such that Birmingham is to Saturn as New Orleans is to Mars in perpetuity.

The planetary south functions as a hyper-region not unlike the image or icon on a Web page that gets titillated when you hover and select. It is conceptual clickbait engineered to open additional windows, linking you to further graphic elements and information. While this is primarily a speculative model, it intentionally intervenes in region definition and in culture design. Spatiotemporal re-configurations among our souths, including

our positionality relative to and irrespective of the constructed geography of our small planet, are necessary to the continued applicability of southern studies. This southernist template is built with emphasis on the futurity of these many souths and on their schematic dilation over their fixity. Its equipment resets the regular signage along with a space-time continuum or two, inclining our access to efficient portals, to elegant wormholes, to ideas with real progressions. We are now subject to freshly uncertain excursions into the black sometime. Ideally, I offer the planetary south as a useful piece of theory, as a ready module to be circulated, installed, and activated as you wish.

## NOTES

1. See *The Souls of Black Folk* for an explication of the cultural fallout attending the abolishment of slavery in the United States and for Du Bois’s near-prophetic reading of the global race crisis of the twentieth century.

2. The black astronaut and physicist Ronald McNair was a proficient jazz musician. Recognized previously for having played his soprano while in orbit, he entered his final mission aboard the space shuttle *Challenger* with the intention of recording in outer space. McNair was originally from Lake Hill, South Carolina.

3. See “Astronaut Chick” and “Magic (Remix)” on *Pluto*. A large portion of the action on this album is situated on the floor or in the parking lot of the iconic Atlanta nightspot Magic City.

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