

review-essays

Other Planes of There: Critical Notice of Graham Lock's *Blutopia*

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Graham Lock. *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999. xi, 314 pp.

Graham Lock's *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* explores several dimensions of cultural critique in the writings and music of three highly influential musical artists. The book extends Lock's pursuit of related topics in *Forces in Motion: Anthony Braxton and the Meta-Reality of Creative Music* (1988), an engaging and highly informative account of Braxton's career as a composer, instrumentalist, and bandleader. *Forces in Motion* featured extensive interviews with Braxton and the members of his 1985 touring quartet, Marilyn Crispell, Gerry Hemingway, and Mark Dresser, along with Lock's own commentaries and research findings. Lock is also the author of *Chasing the Vibration: Meetings with Creative Musicians* (1994), a collection of interviews with jazz composers and improvisers, and the editor of *Mixtery: A Festschrift for Anthony Braxton* (1995).

Blutopia does not focus its attention on written scores, the sonic dimensions of recordings, or the sonic and social dialogism of live ensemble performances. Lock instead seeks to elucidate some of what Ra, Ellington, and Braxton said and wrote in their books, interviews, liner-notes, poems, and elsewhere about their music and its social and philosophical connotations. When he turns to specific musical examples, Lock is usually in search of particular extramusical and programmatic implications embedded in lyrics, titles, and other linguistic cues. Scholars expecting formal musical analyses may be thrown off by Lock's critical method but they may also be surprised by how far his archival and interview research and his interpretive tools can take readers into the distinctive conceptual worlds of Ra, Ellington, and Braxton.

Three interlocking themes frame the book's six chapters. First, Lock considers how the three artists approached (and in Braxton's case, of course, continues to approach) their own music as an "alternative form of history" (2). As Sun Ra once remarked, "history is only his story, you

haven't heard my story yet" (51). Ra, Ellington, and Braxton all sometimes deployed their compositions, recordings, writings, and interviews to circulate distinctive understandings of the African American past and of its bearing on the present and imagined futures. Lock hopes to uncover and systematize the historical visions these musicians coded into their music and writings. Thus he closely observes selected occasions when his three subjects used their writing and music-making as venues for challenging racist and otherwise constricting histories of African Americans and the broader black world. Second, Lock outlines the musicians' disparate reflections on religious and metaphysical matters: a double goal here is to critique the ethnographically insensitive secularism of much jazz criticism and to explain how, according to each of Lock's subjects, music can serve as a "gateway to 'another reality'" (2). The musicians' various relationships with Christianity and some of its modern competitors, such as the Nation of Islam, also take on considerable importance at certain points in Lock's analyses. Finally, Lock addresses how Ra, Ellington, and Braxton suffered from and responded to a variety of racially inflected aesthetic criteria and stereotypes about African American jazz musicians. The book clearly shows how stereotypical or otherwise restrictive expectations about the terrain explored by jazz musicians—like the expectations captured in canonizing notions about genre boundaries and cultural authenticity—have been in constant need of critical revision. It is, of course, not news that the particular burden of racial romanticism has long haunted the discursive formation of black music. What is somewhat less well known is how the counter-histories and careful self-representations of Ra, Ellington, and Braxton, among others, represented acts of recuperation and reconstruction worthy of careful attention.

Thematic convergence appears in Lock's book through the postulated services of a "blutopian" sociomusical impulse present in some of these musicians' compositions, performances, and recordings. The "blutopian" motif joins together "a utopian promise, evident in the creation of imagined places (Promised Lands)" and "the impulse to remember" and to "bear witness" (2). As a romantic sociomusical ideal, the "blutopian" speaks to a fusion of the prospective and commemorative functions associated with African American sacred idioms and with certain moments in nominally secular, but often strongly spiritual, idioms like soul and jazz. The "blutopian" impulse in sacred and secular music reveals itself, according to Lock, at "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,' in which accepted notions of language, history, the real, and the possible are thrown open to question and found wanting" (2).

Lock's "blutopian" motif connotes an idealistic and mythopoetic critique of the present—and present-day commonplaces about possible futures—forged at the site of recuperative commemoration and utopian hope. Hence he polishes to a fine luster such remarks as the following by Sun Ra: "the impossible attracts me because everything possible has been done and the world didn't change" (26). Lock has borrowed his brilliantly apt neologism from a rarely noted Ellington composition performed at his 1944 Carnegie Hall concert. Although Lock describes himself as committed to no particular theoretical paradigm in *Blutopia*, his interpretations tell otherwise. Readers conversant with black critical theory will quickly recognize that Lock's "blutopian" hermeneutic puts his book into conversation with a particular lineage of sociomusical criticism that extends backwards at least to W. E. B. Du Bois's black nationalist reconstruction of the "sorrow songs" ([1903] 1990) and Amiri Baraka's populist modernist criticism on behalf of the "blues impulse" and the "changing same" (Jones, 1963, 1967). Recent contributions to this tradition in black aesthetic thought include Nathaniel Mackey's poetic reflections on the dialectics of absence, remembrance, and restitutive wholeness (1986, 1993a, 1993b), and Paul Gilroy's theorizations of the Du Boisian "slave sublime" and the corresponding aesthetic contours of the "politics of transfiguration" (1993).

A skeptic might argue that Duke Ellington only occasionally dipped his music in the "blutopian" imaginary and that Braxton's detailed philosophizing about the "affinity dynamics" of "trans-African musics" sometimes bears a rather oblique relation to his rigorously experimental music. The thought and music of Sun Ra, by contrast, speaks to nothing less than a full-body immersion in a shimmering sea of "blutopian" revisionism and otherworldliness. Lock argues that Ra's musings on ancient Egyptian science, outer space, his origins on Saturn, and the relevant activities of angels, archangels, and demons were neither incoherent nor irrelevant, nor were they signs of madness or bohemian charlatanism. The opening chapters of *Blutopia* neatly explicate how the quixotic contours of Ra's Astro Black Mythology were "shaped by a kind of symbiotic dialogue, an intertextual relationship, with the main narrative threads of African American history" (74).

Lock pays special attention to the Egypt-oriented or Nilotic strand of Afrocentrism so prominent in Ra's early work. Such ideas undergirded the transformation of Herman Poole Blount (born in 1914) into Le Sony'r Ra and they similarly motivated many of his song titles, compositions, mystical etymologies (or "wordologies"), and poems. The man friends called Sonny claimed Saturnian nativity by 1952 and his legally adopted name Le

Sony'r Ra (like the informal stage name Sun Ra) grandiosely recalled the ancient Egyptian sun deity Ra not once but twice. Lock finds relevant parallels between Ra's dissident self-invention and other practices of renaming and genealogical revision among African Americans such as the conversion protocols of the Nation of Islam and literary precedents in ex-slave narratives. About the latter, Lock notes with characteristic enthusiasm that "the point at which many slave narratives end—with the act of renaming—is the point at which Sun Ra's new narrative of mythic identity begins: a shift from history to mystery, past to future, time to space" (51). While the new names Le Sony'r Ra and Sun Ra telegraphed a Egypt-oriented genealogy of unrecognized black achievement, a forthrightly "impossible" and utopian vision of the human future also energized Ra's "new narrative of mythic identity."

Ra's Egypt-oriented reconstruction of African Americans' cultural and spiritual heritage rejected the dominant Afro-Baptist worldview he encountered as a precocious child of segregated Birmingham, Alabama. Lock recounts that one of Ra's basic criticisms of Christianity was "that by causing African Americans to identify with the Old Testament stories of the Israelites, it [had] trapped them in a false history and, in doing so, cut them off from their true historical legacy, the black civilization of Egypt, which first gave beauty and culture to the world" (21). The "slave mentality" of Christianity demanded that all Christians identify the ancient Egyptians as pagan oppressors and thereby contributed to what Ra regarded as the fundamental anti-Africanism and internalized racism of African American Christianity. Denigrated by centuries of white and black Christians, the ancient Egyptian heritage of classicism and spiritual insight was one that African Americans needed to consider their own and to take more pride in, Ra maintained. Approached at this level of generality, Ra's revisionist genealogy was hardly unique, though it was a minority position among mid-century African Americans. The intellectual historian Wilson Moses has ably shown how Egyptocentrism, or a primary identification with the classical Nilotic heritage (or at least selected images of it), "has not been the dominant stream in Afrocentrism" (1998:92).

Nevertheless, elements of Egyptology could be found in black nationalist and Afrocentric thought in America in the nineteenth century (in the writings of Frederick Douglass, for example) and earlier. In a sense, then, Ra's revisionist Afrocentrism was more traditionalist than experimentalist. Lock notes some points of overlap and divergence between Ra's revisions of the black past and those of the Chicago-based Nation of Islam. Indeed, some members of Ra's Arkestra speculated that the black Muslims stole ideas from their musical Chicago neighbors. A major point of divergence, however, was that Ra embraced rather than rejected the expressive force of African American sacred and popular music. As Lock tells the story, Ra

would reframe and signify upon popular idioms for the sake of his unique religious ends. "Sun Ra's main aim," Lock summarizes, "appears to have been a massive act of re-vision whereby the Christian vision of a mythic future is transformed and translated into the language and imagery of a futuristic science" (41). The "futuristic science" Lock hints at also bore traces of some very old sciences Ra identified with ancient Egypt and other philosophies of the pre-Christian and non-Christian Mediterranean world.

Ra's "massive act of re-vision" is particularly evident in the Arkestra's collectively sung space chants, a subgenre to which Lock pays considerable attention. These musical chants "constitute the great bulk of [Ra's] vocal material" and present ingenious revisions or evocations of traditional African American spirituals. "Brief, repetitive, and antiphonal," the space chants are "comparable in form to the spirituals, whose themes and references they constantly echo" (34). Although the space chants formally echo traditional spirituals, they turn away from the slow and mournful "sorrow songs" subgenre so beloved by W. E. B. Du Bois and many Negro Renaissance writers and formal composers. As extraterrestrial jubilees, the Arkestra's chants point to Saturn and other interplanetary locales (rather than Zion or Heaven) as sites for eschatological expectation and fulfillment in the space age. Thus, the chant that begins "The space age is here to stay / Ain't no place that you can run away" revises and signifies on the traditional Christian spiritual "No Hiding Place." When the Arkestra members sing the space chants, they sometimes dance in a counter-clockwise circle, thus recalling the ring shout dance closely identified with slave culture. These anti-sorrow songs evoke African American Christian liturgy but also capture Ra's alternative effort to coordinate "the minds of peoples into an intelligent reach for a better world, and an intelligent approach to the living future" (41).

Ra's space chants signified on Christian idioms, Lock stresses, not for the sake of parody or formal intertextual pastiche but in order to dispense dissident prophecies in an accessible and somewhat familiar form. More generally, the music, chants, dance, and multimedia presentations of the Arkestra's "cosmo dramas" were intended to fuel mystical enlightenment and the imaginative anticipation of a world transformed by interstellar travel. The synesthetic spectacle of the live Arkestra performance, we might suggest, bonded the dialogism of verbal intertextuality and the jazz protocols of what Ingrid Monson has called improvisational "intermusicality" to a dialectical negation of the mundane present in an "ecstatic stretch" toward a not yet visible reality (Monson 1995; Mackey 1993a). Ra explicitly represented himself less as an artist or entertainer than as a spiritual messenger, a "member of the angel race," or even a demon, charged with prophetic duties. He intended the extramusical charge of the

Arkestra's thrilling and frequently brilliant performances and recordings to transcend the merely formal characteristics of their avant-garde artistry. Ra's self-representation obviously rubbed against the grain of most jazz criticism and contributed to his outsider status. In particular, some of the most influential white jazz critics and scholars of the 1950s and later worked to publicize and vindicate the astonishing formal complexity of modern jazz by appealing to such established modernist criteria as medium specificity, formal purity, and non-functionality. The Arkestra's multimedia performances and Ra's song titles, space chants, and meta-physical pronouncements refused these criteria. During the course of a famous and long residency at an East Village club in the 1960s, however, Sun Ra and the Arkestra rose to considerable prominence when young leaders of the post-bop avant-garde warmed up to the Arkestra's aesthetic, spiritual, and political implications. As Anthony Braxton explained to Lock in *Forces in Motion*, Ra's "use of open improvisation led to the gains that Coltrane and Cecil Taylor generated, so he's like a bridge figure from the bebop period of the music to the extended forms, in which of course he's also a dominant force" (Lock 1988:154).

Readers familiar with John Szwed's biography *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (1997) will notice similarities between Szwed's and Lock's analyses, as both acknowledge the other's research. Lock's sixty-page overview, of course, does not attempt to match the detailed exposition marking Szwed's dense 400-page work. One of the more remarkable aspects of Szwed's book is its success at weaving together Ra's far-ranging intellectual interests and his fifty-year career as a pianist, bandleader, composer, and renegade recording artist. Regarding Ra's Astro Black Mythology, Lock focuses closely on the musician's "blutopian" revision of black Baptist eschatological imagery and tracks how spirituals, tropes of millennial deliverance, and ex-slave narratives influenced Ra's "sympiotic dialogue . . . with the main threads of African American history." Szwed's much larger canvas affords him the opportunity to explore the full breadth of Ra's religious and intellectual interests beyond the contest between Christianity and Egypt-oriented Afrocentrism and to detail the extent to which "Sonny did not limit himself to Afrocentric canonic thought." "Egypt, [Ra] discovered, had already been connected to the galaxies by Edgar Cayce, Gurdjieff, and others of theosophic bent, following the lead of Pythagoras and the Hermeticists" (Szwed 1997:138). Lock briefly pursued Ra's mystical European lineage in *Forces in Motion* (Lock 1988:295–307), but he moves this inheritance to the background in *Blutopia*. Szwed applauds Lock's ingenious deciphering of the space chant-spirituals connection while *Space is the Place* details further the influences of Gnosticism and Theosophy in Ra's writing and music. In particular, Szwed's exceptionally generous sampling and exegeses of Ra's poetry and

imaginary etymologies move neo-Platonic themes and a unique form of “Afro-Platonism” far closer to the center of Ra’s thought about music as a tool for the spiritual work of remembrance than one finds in *Blutopia*. Brent Edwards has also probed into Ra’s exegetical and recombinatory poetic practices. In contrast to Szwed’s focus on the mathematical and didactic elements, Edwards stresses that Ra’s poetry “is not an espousal of some ‘pure speech’ to be reconstructed through a messianic poetry; instead it is the ‘impossible’ task of spelling something new and different . . . walking the tightrope between sign and speech” (1998:197).

Lock’s “blutopian” paradigm focuses the reader’s attention on the intimate fusion of the ancient and the futuristic, the commemorative and the utopian. By contrast, Szwed’s more biographical approach to Ra’s work suggests that alternate themes seemed to take center stage at different periods of Ra’s career. He argues for a pronounced shift in Ra’s thought after 1959 away from the Afrocentric emphasis on Egypt and the “spiritual past” toward outer space and the “spiritual future” (Szwed 1997:126). Ra’s intellectual shift may have involved the relative and unexpected whitening of the Arkestra’s concert and record-buying audience from the 1960s to the end of his life as well as a conflict between Ra’s sometimes non-racial discourse of otherworldliness and the increasing prominence of separatist variations of black nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. By disarticulating Ra’s black nationalist, Afrocentric, neo-Platonic, and extraterrestrial commitments, Szwed valiantly attempts to measure the shifting valences of these ideas in the light of Ra’s changing professional and historical circumstances. *Space is the Place* also distinguishes itself from Lock’s work by occasionally touching on elements of Ra’s thought that some otherwise friendly readers may find less endearing, whether it’s his Platonic scorn for democratic social organization or his apparent mystical detachment from many practical efforts to ameliorate the material conditions of the poor and disenfranchised. A world-class rebel and fearless experimentalist in some dimensions, Sun Ra the mystic was nevertheless quite conservative in other dimensions.

Duke Ellington’s earliest band recordings appeared in the mid-1920s; Ra’s earliest came thirty years later. Lock positions his chapters on Ellington after those on Ra, one might conjecture, to let after-images of the Sun make a defamiliarizing impression upon Ellington’s better-known and comparatively less exotic work. Ellington revealed no significant investment in the philosophical legacies of the non-Christian ancient world, Egyptian or otherwise, nor did he write books and poems that outlined a mystical “alter-destiny” for mankind. Ellington’s forward-looking music also never ventured into the newly opened vortices of caterwauling “energy music” and electronic experimentation that the Arkestra explored so

uncompromisingly in the 1960s and later. The fruits of Ellington's visionary gestures will not soon be confused with those of Sun Ra. Still, everybody's got a little light under the Sun, and Duke Ellington (Ra's elder by fifteen years) is no exception. Lock makes a strong case for a "blutopian" dimension in Ellington's work in discussing how Ellington brought themes of historical revisionism and prophetic anticipation together in some of his music.

"For a long time, social protest and pride in the Negro have been the most significant themes in what we've done," Ellington told jazz writer Nat Hentoff in the 1960s. "In that music we have been talking for a long time about what it is to be a Negro in this country" (118). Ellington's comment linked his reflexive insistence on black racial pride to the less overt theme of social protest. His popular and concert music generated racial pride and vindication while addressing the particularities of the African American experience with an unmistakable sense of swing, luxurious harmonic texture, and melodic appeal. Lock's pair of Ellington chapters follows the intertwined relationship of pride and protest in selected Ellington works and commentaries, with an emphasis on long-form works of the 1940s and 1950s. He sets the stage for a "blutopian" account of Ellington's art with the play of racial stereotypes and Jazz Age exoticism active in the reception of Ellington's music and stage shows in the 1920s. "There is no evidence," Lock emphasizes, "that Ellington either initiated or was particularly enthusiastic about the 'jungle' label being attached to his music" (82). Ellington's "jungle music" of the Cotton Club era did not reveal cynical Jazz Age opportunism willing to cater to romantic racism nor did it reflect any implicit Garveyist separatism or bold Afrocentrism. Ideologically speaking, Ellington seemed closest to a moderate, non-socialist brand of 1920s New Negro black nationalism. Both then and later, his glamorous expressions of racial pride and his forthright refusals of stereotypy joined hands with liberal idealism about the unfulfilled promise of American egalitarianism. "Ellington's patriotism," Lock concludes, "would become more evident later in his life, but even in the 1920s and 1930s I think it is clear from his music that the focus of his interest was black life in *America*" (105).

The motifs of racial pride, anti-racist protest, and historical revisionism animated a musical New Negro jeremiad, an immanent critique of a racist society unwilling to realize its own liberal ideals. "Ellington's declaration that social protest was best made 'without saying it' explicitly," Lock adds, "was one of his guiding aesthetic principles" (95). Ellington loathed confrontation and he usually delivered his social criticisms softly and with a legendary degree of indirectness. Such traits helped fashion his image as an accessible creative genius in his own day and a highly enigmatic figure for latter-day interpreters. In search of the political Ellington behind the raconteur's mask of sly gentility, Lock pays close attention to *Jump for Joy*; it

“was possibly the most outspoken project [Ellington] was involved in” (95). Ellington was the mastermind behind and sole composer for that progressive “revu-sical” in 1941, although Sid Kuller and Paul Francis Webster penned many of the song lyrics. The collaborative and interracial musical explicitly lampooned the legacy of blackface minstrelsy and offered pointed and humorous critiques of Jim Crow segregation and enduring racial stereotypes on the stage and elsewhere. A local black newspaper rejoiced: “In *Jump for Joy*, Uncle Tom is dead. God rest his bones” (quoted in Hasse 1993:248). Unfortunately, the musical ran for only eleven weeks in Los Angeles. It never hit the road nor did it reach Broadway, much to Ellington’s chagrin.

The glow of the “blutopian” impulse manifests itself most clearly in Lock’s paired analyses of Ellington’s “tonal reconstruction of black history” in two long-form compositions that followed *Jump for Joy*: the much discussed “tone parallel” *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943) and a less well-known and documented composition from the end of the same year, *New World A-Comin’*. Lock suggests that the latter was a close-fitting conceptual successor to *Black, Brown and Beige*, a “utopian coda” to the earlier piece that evoked “the visionary future that Ellington had long planned as the final section of his musical history of the American Negro” (114, 112–13). Several other long-form works of the period are also discussed at a similar thematic level. Lock considers ways in which Ellington’s *Deep South Suite* (1946) was far more critical of the Jim Crow South than some commentators have contended. Moving to the 1950s, Lock also includes an interesting, too brief discussion of Ellington’s long-form musical allegory, *A Drum Is a Woman* (1957). “If *Black, Brown and Beige* had been his musical rewrite of the history of the American Negro,” Lock proposes, *A Drum Is a Woman* was his widely misunderstood and underappreciated “‘parallel’ to the history of American Negro music” (141).

Musicologists and historians have detailed how early jazz critics wielded racially inflected stereotypes about “jungle music” and unself-conscious virtuosity in authentic “hot jazz.” Swing Era jazz critics idealized the purity of so-called “hot jazz” and argued for the superiority of African American jazz improvisers while lambasting the inauthentic character of “symphonic jazz” and the “sweet” jazz identified with white bands. Ellington’s intermittent but increasingly important long-form suites and formal concerts and his refusal of established genre boundaries challenged many expectations about jazz music and its practitioners. Lock notes how critics often associated black music with an ideal of unrepressed emotional immediacy, the “natural” infectiousness of swing rhythms, and unpretentious blues-based improvisational prowess. Despite Ellington’s reputation as the Swing Era’s foremost jazz composer, his long-form works sometimes incurred the wrath of influential jazz critics not simply on the grounds of musical

achievement but on the more basic issue of artistic ambition. Lock highlights John Hammond's infamous critiques of Ellington's scored-through works *Reminiscing in Tempo* (1935) and *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943). Hammond, a prime architect of the Swing Era, was the most influential jazz critic of the 1930s. Lock concludes that Ellington "was offering a more comprehensive appreciation of black creativity—one that did not preclude the intellectual—than that discerned by white critics such as Hammond and [Spike] Hughes, with their focus on the 'free and uninhibited' and 'general 'low-downness' " (126). The protest against a barricade of stereotypical assumptions about authentic jazz and African American music is the theme that most tightly links Lock's Ellington chapters to his consideration of Anthony Braxton, an even more vexing dissident from dominant jazz orthodoxies.

Ellington soared above the exoticism of the Jazz Age and the pseudo-populism of the Swing Era with an elegant New Negro display of uplifting racial pride and black bourgeois refinement. Nevertheless, as Lock notes, the more "highbrow" framers of the interwar Negro Renaissance did not rush to embrace Ellington's innovative and popular music. Lock's brief treatment of early responses to Ellington reiterates a familiar and question-begging conclusion about jazz's dubious status among African American intellectuals in the 1920s. It is worth noting, for example, that a Renaissance spokesman no less "highbrow" and Europeanized than Alain Locke (the Harvard-educated black Rhodes Scholar whom George Schuyler once dubbed the "high priest of the intellectual snobbocracy"), wrote glowingly of Ellington and his formally elaborate "super jazz" on numerous occasions as early as the mid-1930s (Locke [1936] 1968). Locke even wrote to Ellington in the hopes of organizing an alternative concert to correct the limited aesthetic terrain of John Hammond's famous 1938 and 1939 concert surveys of African American musical history, "From Spirituals to Swing." Ellington's disdain for the restrictive implications of the jazz label in the 1930s, his evolving ambitions with longer musical forms, and the series of Carnegie Hall concerts (the "social significance thrusts" Lock focuses on as his "blutopian" musical examples) he presented in the 1940s all spoke to the ideals of Alain Locke and like-minded African American critics and musicians who considered scored-through concert music an idiomatic advance upon popular dance music and what Lock called the "lowest common denominator" approach of the hit parade. Such relationships go unexplored in *Blutopia*.

Most of Ellington's popular recorded output in the 1940s and later, of course, would remain within idiomatic parameters and song structures listeners were more likely to label "popular" or "jazz" than "classical" or "concert music." In contrast to Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other black "highbrows," prominent younger figures of the interwar Negro

Renaissance like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling Brown busily crafted their own “more comprehensive appreciation of black creativity” through nothing less than an unapologetic admiration of “free and uninhibited” black popular musics, including “low-down” jazz and blues (Anderson 2001). For example, none other than Sterling Brown (dubbed the foremost New Negro poet by Alain Locke) emceed Hammond’s second “Spirituals to Swing” concert. It would be mistaken to conclude that Brown agreed across the board with Hammond’s famously all-or-nothing musical judgments. We should bear in mind, however, that Hammond’s Popular Front activism shared significant aesthetic and political commitments with Brown’s influential work. *Blutopia* passes over the non-polarizing convergences and the more ambivalent connections between Hammond’s Swing Era criticism and the anti-bourgeois rhetoric of Brown, Hughes, and other black advocates of folk expression and radical politics in the thirties and later.

Lock outlines how Ellington’s overtly revisionist and visionary work anticipated a desirable future in which racial pride—or any similar non-antagonistic recognition of self or collective worth—would not require the agonistic force of protest and contestation. He quotes a passage from *Music is My Mistress* where Ellington reminisces about the dream behind his *New World A-Comin’*: “I visualized this new world as a place in the distant future where there would be no war, no greed, no categorization, no nonbelievers, where love was unconditional, and no pronoun was good enough for God” (Ellington 1973:183). Lock’s emphasis on middle-period extended works is selective, but readers are not suffering from a shortage of more synoptic Ellington biographies. John Hasse’s fine biography, *Beyond Category*, for example, interprets the full span of Ellington’s work in terms of two careers as an ambitious and prolific composer and an indefatigable jazz bandleader willing to entertain and flatter a worldwide audience over the course of fifty years (Hasse 1993). The two creative imperatives were, of course, indivisible, but Hasse’s interpretive point helps readers keep in mind the full breadth of Ellington’s ambition and accomplishment. Lock leaves to future historians and critics the work of elaborating the “blutopian” dimension of the short-form Ellington music only indirectly related to the fusion of racial pride and social protest. Cut loose from the explicit demands of historical revisionism and social protest, much of Ellington’s most beloved work celebrated the immanent urbane pleasures of the genre-crossing aesthete, the delights of romantic anticipation and reverie, and, as his late suites so elegantly demonstrate, the limitless curiosity and attentiveness of the cosmopolitan world traveler.

It is the more private but no less programmatic Ellington of the 1930s and 1940s—the Ellington of “Prelude to a Kiss” and “Sophisticated Lady” and the Ellington who brought to life Strayhorn’s “Take the ‘A’ Train” and

“Chelsea Bridge”—that many listeners, record-buyers, and musicians habitually return to again and again rather than the explicitly public Ellington of *Black, Brown and Beige*. Perhaps in listening to one of the Ellington orchestra’s exquisite renderings of these short pieces, and other ones like “Caravan” or “In a Sentimental Mood,” one might imagine oneself encountering what Ernst Bloch wrote of the “great artwork,” namely “a dim reflection, a star of anticipation and a song of solace on the way home through the dark” (Bloch 2000:117). In other words, Lock’s approach overlooks how some of Ellington’s less explicitly historical and vindicationist music might also extend an entrancing *promesse du bonheur*. Readers willing to entertain such imaginative frequencies are likely to find additional “blutopian” registers distinct from but adjacent to the more programmatic “social significance thrusts” addressed in *Blutopia*.

Lock opens his discussion of Anthony Braxton by contextualizing a sample of hostile reviews of Braxton’s early double album of solo recordings, *For Alto* (1971). These responses frame Lock’s overview of the fallout of Braxton’s challenging musical pluralism and the model of creativity Mike Heffley has called Braxton’s “ingenious ‘double-agency’ ” (1996:331). Because Braxton unapologetically embraces influences from both “trans-African music” and “trans-European music” (including the challenging particularities of what he has called the “post-Ayler continuum” and the “post-Cage continuum”), his cosmopolitanism has unsettled various assumptions about authenticity, canonicity, and functionality. As a result, few living African American musicians have incurred more critical hostility. Braxton’s frankly utopian efforts to bridge disparate musical worlds and spiritual perspectives have been challenging listeners and players for over thirty years. In earnest conversations with Lock throughout *Forces in Motion*, Braxton details the particularly frustrating accusation of betraying various overdetermined definitions of black music and jazz. *Blutopia* features some piquant quotations from those conversations, such as the following:

“jazz” is the word that’s used to delineate the parameters that African-Americans are allowed to function in, a “sanctioned” zone. . . . But the whole thing is . . . it’s taken for granted that a European or European-American jazz musician has borrowed some aspects of African-American language: why should it be such a big thing that I’ve learned from Europe? I’m a human being, just like Ronnie Scott or Derek Bailey. Why is it so natural for Evan Parker, say, to have an appreciation of Coltrane, but for me to have an appreciation of Stockhausen is somehow out of the natural order of human experience? I see it as racist. (183; Lock 1988:92)

From the beginning, Lock explains, many criticisms of Braxton's work simply refused to grant legitimacy to his universalist aspirations and his ideals of musical heterogeneity and idiomatic multiformity. Jazz critics who suffer from what Braxton has called the "across the tracks syndrome," for example, reiterated the unconscious prejudices of John Hammond and like-minded "hot jazz" partisans. Lock paraphrases Braxton's analysis of how many white critics seemed to look to jazz music—and black music in general—as a non-threatening secular transgression against the demands made on listeners by European and European American art music (especially such Braxton influences as Schoenberg, Stockhausen, and Cage). The school of "mainstream" jazz partisanship is, of course, still in session; its teachers and pupils often react with irritation when musicians challenge the conservative parameters of the "'sanctioned' zone" of jazz with unusual hybrids that reach out to other experimental schools or to idioms of contemporary popular music. African American critics, of course, are hardly immune from demands for a homogeneous jazz tradition linked to particular functional demands. Lock defends Braxton against some explicit criticisms made by Stanley Crouch and Amiri Baraka, but he might have expanded the discussion to include influential anti-avant-gardists like Albert Murray and the late Ralph Ellison. For his part, Braxton has introduced and elaborated the concept of "trans-African functionalism" as a replacement for the ideologically petrified category of "jazz."

Lock's review of some sweepingly negative reactions to Braxton's sonic intellectualism and his supposed inability to swing or play the saxophone correctly might lead readers unfamiliar with Braxton's career to believe that he has only ever been a musical pariah victimized by unrelenting critical disparagement. This is not exactly the case. Many critics and publicists in the 1970s heralded Braxton as a uniquely brilliant young jazz star and a potential systematizer of the dizzying "avant-garde" advances of the music's last decade. In the 1990s, Braxton joined the elite club of jazz composers and improvisers to be tapped for the prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship; his fellow "genius" awardees include, among others, Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Steve Lacy. In a chapter of his important scholarly study on Braxton, Ronald Radano (1993) dissects the vocabulary of positive Braxton reviews from the 1970s. Lock argues in *Blutopia* that Radano's book "seriously misrepresents Braxton's depiction in the jazz press during the mid-1970s" by exaggerating Braxton's popularity among critics (269). It can at least be said that Radano interprets even these high-profile years—when Braxton made a series of relatively popular quartet and quintet recordings as well as widely-publicized albums for the industry giant Arista Records—in a manner that ultimately bolsters Lock's criticisms of centralizing appeals to a homogenizing jazz tradition. Radano's

interpretation clearly emphasizes the counter-productive spectacularization of Braxton in the mid-1970s. The Braxton vogue of that period, he argues, rhetorically “attenuated the radicalism of Braxton’s signifying art” and instead shifted “attention to more superficial matters” adaptable to the star-making machinery of the corporate music world. By channeling attention to “the most diverting characteristics of Braxton’s personality and creativity, they [music publicists] shaped a public image that on the surface celebrated pluralistic excess” but ultimately maintained a homogenizing and “conventional center that reinforced traditional ideas about jazz” (Radano 1993:240). The ironic thrust of Radano’s account is that the jazz-centered terms of the early Braxton vogue helped underwrite critical and popular neglect of Braxton after 1977, despite what proponents generally consider his escalating artistic success in the 1980s. Lock should welcome at least this part of Radano’s account.

Alongside his sketches of selected ideas from Braxton’s three volumes of *Tri-Axium Writings* (1985), Lock appeals to the writing of Nathaniel Mackey for a critical defense of Braxton’s idiomatic multiformity and “reflexive swing.” Lock extends Mackey’s fascinating interpretation of the limping trickster Legba of Fon-Yoruba mythology into a reading of the sonic protocols of black dissent in Braxton’s musical multiformity. The musician’s “reflexive swing” can thus be read as a dialectical negation of “natural swing” and a productive refusal of homogenizing norms of jazz improvisation and composition. The following passage about Legba from Mackey’s *Discrepant Engagement* is of particular relevance to Lock’s “blutopian” reading of Braxton:

The master of polyrhythmicity and heterogeneity, he suffers not from deformity but multiformity, a “defective” capacity in a homogeneous order given over to uniform rule. Legba’s limp is an emblem of heterogeneous wholeness, the image and outcome of a peculiar remediation. *Lame or limping* . . . cuts with a relativizing edge to unveil impairment’s power, as though the syncopated accent were an unsuspected blessing offering anomalous, unpredictable support. Impairment taken to higher ground, remediated, translates damage and disarray into a dance. (Mackey 1993a:244)

The “syncopated accent” of the mythic trickster’s limp literalizes Braxton’s own off-kilter polyrhythmicity and his “blutopian” refusal of any “homogeneous order.” Mackey also associates Legba’s physical deformity with his mediating role at a crossroads between “the world of humans” and “that of the gods” (Mackey 1993:243). The pedestrian deficiency of his limp betrays the overlooked promise of idiomatic multiformity. Legba’s limp in

"the world of humans," Mackey suggests, provides a context for hearing a kind of "phantom limp" in the deliberately "troubled eloquence" or "telling inarticulacy" of much black music, including Braxton's. Impairment can be dialectically "remediated" and translated into anticipatory images of a not yet present, and perhaps impossible, "heterogeneous wholeness." Lock contends that the "acknowledgement of the meta-real" sets the writing of Mackey and Braxton, among others, "apart from the majority of Western commentators on black music" (173).

Lock uses Mackey's dialectical model of black tricksterism to suggest moments of criticality and anticipation in Braxton's deceptively halting and stuttering saxophone. "And if Legba's limp is attributed to his liminal status—his role as a mediator between different realms (with one foot in each)—then perhaps Braxton's swing is shaped by his particular position on several thresholds—tradition and futurity, Africa and Europe, emotion and intellect, real and meta-real (with one foot in each)—by his insistence on the heterogeneity of black creativity" (153). The "reflexive swing" of Braxton's more jazz-related music calls into question the common sense demands for a supposedly "natural" manner of swinging as a defining characteristic of the jazz tradition. Having shown that such influential African American critics as Crouch and Baraka have rejected Braxton's multiformity as "unnatural" for a black musician and excessively European in flavor, Lock nonetheless proceeds with a reductive racial interpretation of Braxton's reception. "Where . . . white listeners seem to want to hear a 'natural' swing," Lock writes, "Mackey offers a context in which we can hear Braxton's playing as *reflexive* swing, a signifying stutter on a view of black creativity that excludes the thinker, the intellectual" (153). Mackey's contrast between a certain expectation for "natural swing" in jazz, on the one hand, and the denaturalizing critical cadences of a more "reflexive swing," on the other hand, is a generative theoretical insight. Lock's empirical claim that white listeners and critics are more single-minded in their demand for the "natural swing" of African American music, however, is much less convincing to this reader. Also problematic is the implication that black listeners are more receptive or culturally sympathetic to Braxton's "reflexive swing" in its functional role as a refusal of white stereotypes about black music and culture.

There are margins and there are "margins within the margins," as Mackey notes. It is regrettable but unsurprising to find many of the finest African American experimental writers and musicians receiving "much less attention and validation than they deserve" from all audiences (Mackey 1993a:18). Musicians and listeners sympathetic to both the "post-Cage continuum" and the "post-Ayler continuum" and to hybrids of these musical languages have been the most receptive to the more experimental

aspects of Braxton's output. That tautology, however, cannot move an analysis very far. As an experimentalist, Braxton does not compromise with popular musical taste, African American or otherwise, and he has long recoiled from racially essentializing versions of a "black aesthetic" and canonizing visions of a "blues aesthetic." He has paid a price for these decisions. "I see only a handful of African-Americans at my concerts—well, Braxton's the so-called White Negro, I'm not a good example," he told Lock in 1985, "but I don't see many at the Art Ensemble concerts. . . . No one wants to say this, but the turn-out of the black community for the music is a sign of real danger" (Lock 1988:277). The shifting tides of audience demographics, popular taste, music education, for-profit marketing, and non-profit programming are all complicated historical matters that musicologists and historians should be energetically pursuing. "What has happened, in my opinion," Braxton suggests in *Forces in Motion*, "is that African-Americans have been profoundly shaped and manipulated by the media, by the Top Ten mentality *and* by a persuasion of [black] nationalism that seeks to establish Europe as the only source of the illness we're dealing with, as if we have had no part in creating the sadness that's taking place in this time period" (ibid.:277–78). Braxton's controversial hypothesis makes this reader long for more multi-dimensional historical and ethnographic analyses that can move beyond the kind of ideological defensiveness *Blutopia* leaves us with. Lock is on firm ground, however, when he describes how Braxton has been placed in the unenviable position of "betraying" the canonizing strictures of African American jazz neoclassicists like Crouch, Murray, and Wynton Marsalis, latter-day exponents of a relatively more avant-gardist black aesthetic like Amiri Baraka (a "blutopian" dialectician if ever one there was), and whites suffering from the condescending folk romanticism or pop aesthetic of the "across the tracks syndrome."

Radano's *New Musical Figurations* details Braxton's efforts in the 1960s and 1970s to dismantle the overdrawn binary between the art music of white experimentalists in Europe and America and African American jazz traditions. In contrast to Radano's musicological emphasis on how Braxton's hybridic "restructuralism" operated in specific recordings and compositions, Lock devotes more pages to the "vibrational" physics and metaphysics of "trans-African music" presented in *The Tri-axium Writings*. Radano's book details Braxton's biography, his early membership in the Chicago-based AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians), his early compositions, recordings, and ensembles, and, as we have seen, Braxton's critical reception in the 1970s. Lock's discussion begins with the last topic and focuses on Braxton's mid-1980s writings and his cycle of *Trillium* operas in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike Radano's book,

Blutopia pays far less attention to Braxton's compositions and his relationship with European traditions of experimentalism and avant-gardist utopianism. Short of reading the full *Tri-axium Writings* (which weigh in at over 1600 pages), readers should consider Lock and Radano's books in tandem along with Mike Heffley's detailed monograph (1996). If Lock's sympathetic adumbration of *The Tri-axium Writings* is accurate, Braxton might be understood as reversing rather than deconstructing black-white polarities in ideologies of music in order to center the mystical and humanizing power of "trans-African music." Braxton may intend to point beyond an initial binary reversal toward a broader and non-essentializing dynamic of world cosmopolitanism, but Lock (*contra* Radano) pays little attention in *Blutopia* to Braxton's interests in European and European American experimental music traditions.

Braxton once explained to Lock about *Tri-axium Writings* that "it was only after reading 500,000 dumb reviews that I found myself thinking, hmmm . . . I disagree with the critics who even *like* my music! So it was like—I don't have any choice, I don't see my viewpoint out there, so here I come! I had to write a book that established my right to have an opinion, and to do that I had to design a philosophical system that would allow me to—from that point—postulate what I wanted to do" (Lock 1988:284). Smoothly harmonizing with Lock's critical sketch of the "blutopian" impulse in African American music, Braxton notes in *Blutopia* that "Tri-axium" has "to do with attempts to gather axium tenets from the past and present—to get to the future" (184). Braxton's critique and correction of jazz criticism may be the thread of *Tri-axium Writings* from which Lock pulls the most. He discusses Braxton's delineation of the "across the tracks syndrome" and an adjacent desire for "black exoticism" captured in the romantic racism of what Braxton terms the "grand trade-off." "In this concept," Braxton writes, "black people are vibrationally viewed as being great tap dancers—natural improvisors, great rhythm, etc., etc., etc.—but not great thinkers, or not capable of contributing to the dynamic wellspring of world information. White people under this viewpoint have come to be viewed as great thinkers, responsible for all of the profound philosophical and technological achievements that humanity has benefited from—but somehow not as 'natural' as those naturally talented black folks" (176).

Lock presents Braxton's negative analyses of these and other themes in jazz criticism together with Braxton's positive vision of the "vibrational" dynamics of "trans-African music." He outlines Braxton's elaboration of the "meta-real" dimensions of music in relation to the musician's sense of the spiritual costs of scientific empiricism, the living legacy of Eurocentric racial ideologies and practices, and the "spectacle diversion syndrome" plaguing the world's overindustrialized societies. The corrective

counter-history of *The Tri-axium Writings* also informs the futuristic prophecies coded into Braxton's cycle of *Trillium* operas in the 1980s and 1990s. The *Trillium* operas, Lock argues, "concretize" certain arguments of the *Tri-axium Writings* "in a series of 'fantasy' scenarios" (196–97). The operas musicalize a fantasy world from where Braxton can engage in utopian critiques of present ethical systems. As "redemption songs" oriented toward possible futures, the operas may also be imagined as echoing the intersecting sacred and social force of the spirituals continuum within African American culture. Lock's account of the *Trillium* scenarios offers new information not present in the Radano and Heffley books, but it is likely to frustrate readers not intimately familiar with the operas. The usually energetic prose style of *Blutopia* slackens (as any prose style would) when reduced to reciting plot summaries. Lock's capsule summaries offer too little sense of how the operas' complex sonic artistry would inform audience members' apprehension of their cultural work as musical "concretizations" of Braxton's hypotheses about culture and history. Frictionless synopses threaten to lose any useful interpretive grip on their objects when the critic turns so decisively away from the notes and aural textures sounded in Braxton's operas.

Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton wrote and spoke of their artistic and critical visions at considerable length. Lock's well-researched and sympathetic account in *Blutopia* offers admirably clear discussions of important issues. Throughout his work as a critic and scholar, Lock has been solicitous of how many musical innovators approach their art in terms of its spiritual and social ramifications. These musicians often eschew the secular and aestheticist codes of musicology, jazz criticism, and many literary-critical theorizations of an African American "blues aesthetic." As I have noted, Lock's treatment of "meta-real" implications, historical revisionism, and future-directed social vision in *Blutopia* stops short of pursuing the implications of these topics for detailed critical analyses of specific scores and recordings. In that particular meeting of the sonic and the social, the conclusions he draws are rather suggestive than conclusive. The unfinished character of the musical analyses in *Blutopia* are perhaps in keeping with the prospective character we have come to expect from aesthetic and social discourses of utopianism. But we can be certain that the prominence and depth of the African American "blutopian" imaginary, in its assorted musical and critical dimensions, continues to call for the interdisciplinary attention of critics, musicologists, and historians. Among those ongoing efforts, *Blutopia* will surely help blaze new trails to sites of the musical and critical imagination located in "other planes of there."

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