

Michelle-Lee White

Aftrotech and Outer Spaces

The advent of electronic media and the information age has had a profound impact on social interaction and cultural identity. We have all found our notions of consciousness, our perceptions of reality, and our daily lives altered and reconstituted by this technological change. Electronic technology, especially digital, seems to have pierced the protective bubble of fixed racial and ethnic identity by making it easy for us to create physically detached screen personas that transcend social realities. Yet in spite of the current cultural climate, which we like to believe has released us from the constraints of identity, the mechanisms of exclusion still persist. I invited a small group of writers, curators, and artists whose work considers the expression of individual, collective, and speculative experiences in contemporary art to reflect on the junction of the “black subject” and technology.

I first began to examine the ways in which black artists reconciled culturally specific subject matter with technology several years ago, during a visit to Renée Stout’s studio, where I saw her assemblage *Traveling Rootstore #2 (Madame Ching Goes High Tech)* (1994–95). Stout’s recurring diviner character Madame Ching—who is never seen, but is referred to in her art—has here traded in her cards, cowries, and bowls for a custom-built laptop, equipped with a keyboard of spells and equations that is surrounded by her magical and medicinal ingredients to summon the spirits and cure the ills of her clientele. Madame Ching has become mobile, and her remedies—depending on the degree of intervention needed—are readily available and almost immediate, like those found on the Internet.

Traveling Rootstore takes contemporary art by black artists to different places by posing a number of new questions: How have black artists used technology to address a cultural heritage that is often believed to be “natural” and vital in expression? When artists blend Western and African-derived subjects and aesthetics, which cultural markers and types from each tradition are preserved? Which ones get uploaded, projected, transported, and transformed? Which are considered Western and which are considered African? And can black artists who work in electronic media escape being reduced to pawns in a debate between magic and machine or roots versus robot?

This forum addresses these incongruous points in the discourse of contemporary African diasporic art, focusing on the contested site of the “black subject”; its intersection with new media; and the transformed relationships among aesthetic traditions, contemporary contexts, and speculative futures.

Michelle-Lee White, Editor at the College Art Association, is also an independent curator and a doctoral candidate in the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan. Her dissertation analyzes the junction of conceptual- and performance-art aesthetics with the Black Art movement in the United States, ca. 1968–75.



Renée Stout. *Traveling Rootstore #2 (Madame Ching Goes High Tech)*, 1994–95. Mixed media. 21½ x 24 x 19¼ in. (51.6 x 57.6 x 46.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist and David Adamson Gallery, Washington, D.C.



Philip Mallory Jones. Frame from *Paradigm Shift*, 1992. Video, 1 minute. Courtesy of the artist.

Philip Mallory Jones. Frame from *Jembe*, 1989. Video, 3 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.



Erika Dalya Muhammad

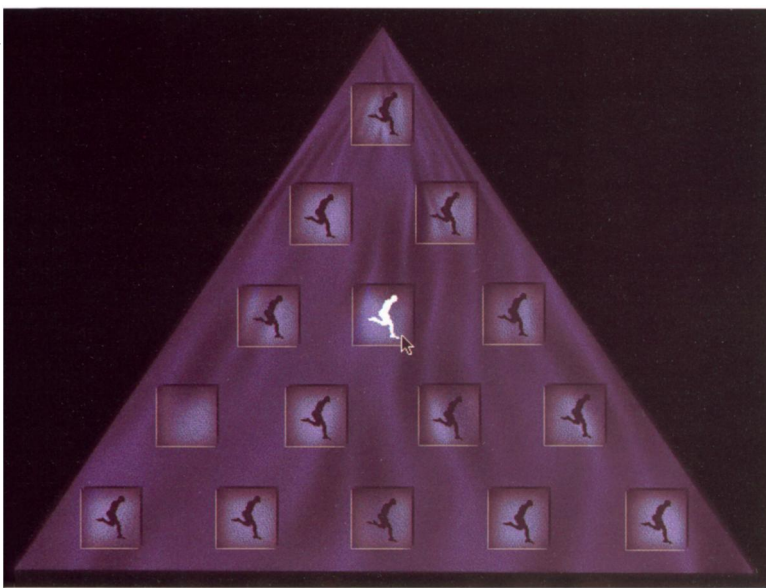
Race in Digital Space: Conceptualizing the Media Project

The exhibition *Race in Digital Space* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, April 27 to July 1, 2001, explored how techno culture informs the social construction of race and ethnicity. Referring to the process of digital transcription, “digital space” is used as a deliberately elastic term to define both old-school and new-school media practices that respond to continual technological innovation. The word “race,” at once positional and relational, reflects a variety of cultural realities. In this country, when we employ the term “race,” we tend to think first of the tired dichotomy of blackness and whiteness—that is our default narrative. We may even embrace or reject race and digital media in the same argument. Yet, we linguistically trip over hyphenated terms of identities such as African- and Asian-; and situational prefixes such as post-, neo-, and re- in our search for fixed meanings. Although the title of this exhibition was gleaned from the conference of which it was a part, the show’s challenge was to contextualize race as a dynamic power system that is further manipulated and complicated by hi-tech devices and evolving historical paradigms.¹

Featuring film, video, CD-ROMs, Net art, community-activist websites, and sonic mixes, the fifty-four artists in *Race and Digital Space* made eighty-two works that employ digital tools to comment not only on digital culture, but also on the chronicling of history, and to anticipate future realities. Much of their work uses programming of their own design, while some work depends on their dexterity with commercial digital applications. The majority is concerned with the effects of new media on the dynamics of cultural hegemony. The exhibition was not conceived within any predetermined configurations that differentiate it from exhibitions of non-tech contemporary art. Still, it uncovers and reestablishes work by artists of color who are constituents of the hi-tech vanguard. Consequently, the exhibition repositions and legitimizes many peoples and processes that have been ignored, unrecognized, and written out of the multimedia and new-media histories.

1. This exhibition was part of an interdisciplinary program of events for “Race in Digital Space: A National Conference on Race and New Media Technologies,” presented by the University of Southern California and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in conjunction with the University of California, Santa Barbara and New York University. For more information go to www.cms.mit.edu/race/exhibition.html.

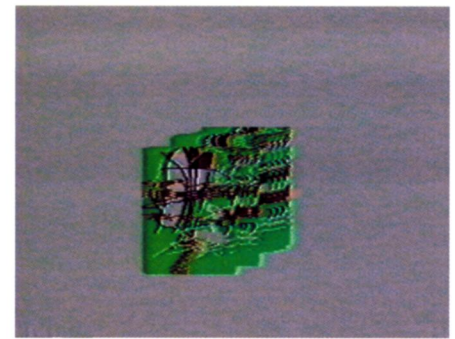
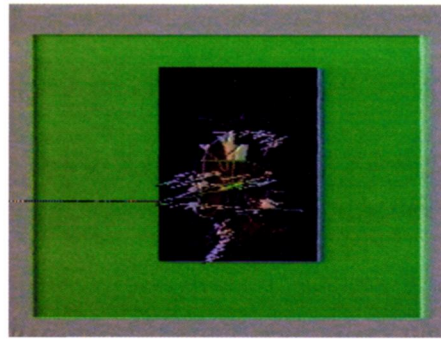
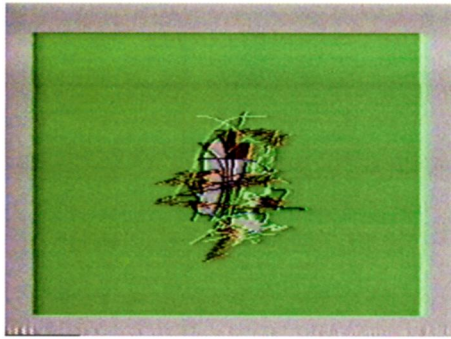
Rico Gatson. Frame from *Flaming Hood*, 2000. DVD, 6 minutes, 57 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.



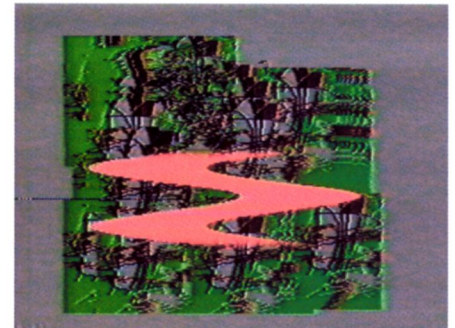
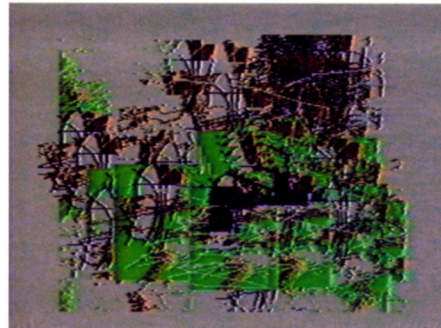
Pamela Jennings. *Solitaire Game Board*, 1996. From the CD-ROM project *Solitaire: dream journal*. Courtesy of the artist. This game face is the main interactive engine that enables users to access the fifteen different interactive screens that make up the entire CD-ROM.



Pamela Jennings. *The Bridge*, 1996. From the CD-ROM project *Solitaire: dream journal*. Courtesy of the artist. An image from one of the interactive screens in the book of melancholy.



Ulysses Jenkins. *Z-GRASS*, ca. 1983. Videotape, Data Max software. Courtesy of the artist. Five stills from the replication sequence of a snap (a sample of an icon image or graphic composition).



These artists of African descent have used new-media tools to address their cultural heritage from a variety of perspectives. Philip Mallory Jones was one of the first black new-media artists to articulate Afrofuturist themes aggressively.² In experimental video works (some dating to the early 1970s), he illuminates a complex global diaspora that originates in Africa but transcends race and ethnicity and that is defined in terms of modes of expression, paradigms of perception, and systems of symbolic communication. *Jembe* (1989) and *Paradigm Shift* (1992) transpose African visual motifs and images to the electronic medium. These impressionistic videos explore the development of codes based on what Jones calls “emotional progressions and an African sensorium,” without dependence on the viewer’s comprehension of a specific language. In lay terms, he is interested in how subliminal information can be conveyed. Jones’ use of morphing, layering, rotoscoping, and computer animation could be described as anthropopathic; his hi-tech surface manipulations of images create symbolic codes that encourage cultural interchange. His digital compositions are thick with ritual and are akin to Rico Gatson’s smelting of Ku Klux Klan iconography in *Flaming Hood* (2000).

The new-media artist Pamela Jennings draws on the theories and processes of African oral literature to provide a narrative foundation in her CD-ROM project *Solitaire: dream journal* (1996). The piece is based on the principle of the game of checkers, visualized through graphic synching and animation. The myriad cultural elements revealed in Jones’ and Jennings’ works are not simply references by which the artists have been inspired, but essential information; they make up the programmatic fiber of their work.

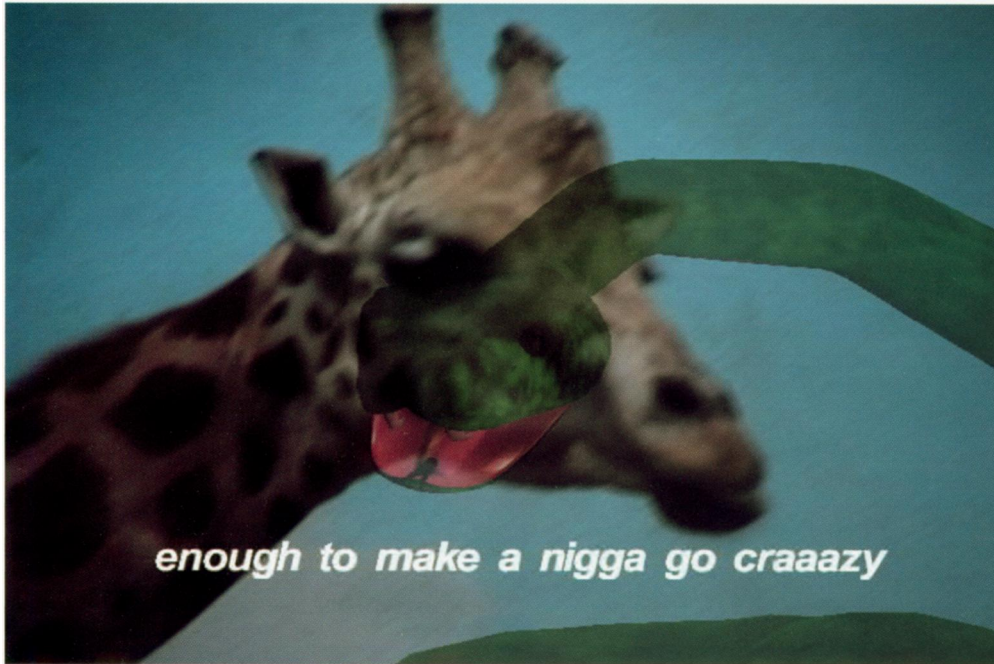
After you understand the “tech,” you have to go further and delve into its aesthetic implications. For example, an early graffiti-inspired, computer-

2. Afrofuturism is a term used among artists, critics, and curators to refer to sci-fi imagery, futurist narratives, and hi-tech innovation in black electro-culture. However, here I am specifically interested in artists who employ digital and electronic tools to create “black aesthetics” that influence theories of race and nation. My interest is in the craft and I have coined the phrase “Black High-Tech Documents” to describe these end products.

generated video composition by Ulysses Jenkins, *Z-GRASS* (ca. 1983), uses a Data Max computer and employs the Z-GRASS paint program to construct cultural commentary on gentrification. In a subtle, effective manipulation of technique, a white graphic icon replicates and assimilates itself over the screen, and then breaks out in a trail of red and causes the blues.

Other pieces in the show borrow from pop music, jazz, hip-hop, and DJ culture. In his video *Nurture* (2000), Art Jones aggressively employs earth-

quake rumbles with DigiEffects software to probe the anthropomorphic trends in hard-core rap music. The composer George Lewis asserts that, however hybrid their sources, the sonic vernaculars of today still draw their primary sustenance from “Africoid” modes of expression that privilege rhythm as a primary channel of communication.³ On the same note, the QuickTime film *Glitch Music* (2000) by Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky—That



Art Jones. *Nurture*, 2001. From the series *Love Songs # 1*, 2001. Digital video, 3 minutes, 59 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Subliminal Kid) and the Pixelvision digital-video short *TILT* (2001) by Beth Coleman and Howard Goldkrand (aka DJ Singe and MC Verb) are attentive to audio resonance in visual imagery.⁴

By creating diversions for the audience, the exhibition seeks to explore the nature of interactivity. As a curator working within new media, I sought to uncover politically potent work that inspires the aesthetic equivalent of multimedia synesthesia—work that is emotional and imaginative and that, through its “tech,” makes the viewer acutely aware of the sensory experiences. To accomplish this without conceptually alienating the audience is the challenge.

I envisioned an exhibition both intellectually rigorous and fun. In addition to making visitors’ digital experiences corporeal, it also demystified the digital in its straightforwardness. Visitors were able to immerse themselves in the works.

Erika Dalya Muhammad, formerly at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the American Museum of the Moving Image, is an independent curator and writer whose work explores cut-and-mix culture. Muhammad organized the exhibition *Race in Digital Space* at MIT’s List Visual Arts Center in Cambridge, Mass. She is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Cinema Studies at New York University.

3. Conversation with George Lewis, March 15, 2001.

4. For more information please link to www.djspooky.com and www.soundlab.org.

But in the meantime we've dumped five hundred thousand tropical Robots down on the Argentine pampas to grow corn. Would you mind telling me how much you pay for a pound of bread?

—Busman, in the play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*

Karel Capek, 1920

It is the Fourth of July, 1997. A six-wheeled robot similar in size and appearance to a microwave oven trundles out onto the surface of the planet Mars. This is a key moment in the Pathfinder Mission, NASA's latest expedition to the red planet. What resonates, however, is that this mechanized device patrolling the far frontier of contemporary technological innovation has been named Sojourner, after Sojourner Truth, a black woman, born a slave in Ulster County, New York in 1797, who became a nationally recognized activist and reformer.

Superimposing the memory of an African American icon on a moment drenched in futurological significance is intriguing. It disrupts the historical exclusion of black people from the technological sphere and the systematic consignment of the African to the domain of the antilogical, the noncerebral, and the body. The name *Sojourner*, written across the metallic frame of the Mars Rover, exposes the hidden histories of black presence in technological and digital space and black contributions to the intellectual formation of the American nation.

Keith Piper
Notes on *The Mechanoid's Bloodline:*
Looking at Robots, Androids,
and Cyborgs

Another reading of this moment uncovers the role of the robot within the futuristic gaze of the science-fiction novel and the growing use of robots in contemporary industry. It reminds us of those imagined futures in which the robot is a dutiful servant and tireless worker, an entity whose physical strength is programmed to carry out the will of its owners. A comparison of the robot body with the body of the slave generates a complex set of readings that affect our celebration of the Mars Rover. They are readings that go back to the genesis of the term *robot* and its operation within Western literary conventions.

The term *robot* first appeared in the play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, by the Czech writer Karel Capek in 1920. Derived from the Czech words *robot*, meaning *drudgery* or *servitude*, and *robotnik*, meaning *peasant* or *serf*, the robot in Capek's narrative is an entity stripped of any purpose other than that of brute labor:

Practically speaking, what is the best kind of worker? . . . It's the one that is cheapest. The one with the fewest needs . . . [Young Rossum] chucked out everything not directly related to work, and in doing that he virtually rejected the human being and created the Robot.

—Domin, in *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*

The robot/slave class in Capek's narrative is physically almost indistinguishable from the dominant human group. It belongs to the category of robot that is known as the *android*—a term derived from the Greek *andros*, meaning *manlike*. A robot such as the six-wheeled *Sojourner* or the metallic being *Robbie* in the movie *Forbidden Planet* (1956) is distinguished from the android

by its otherness—its difference from the human master group is physically explicit. The android seen in movies ranging from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) can effectively pass as a normal member of the human race, but the robot is immediately and visibly marked as a mechanoid, other, servant, or monster.

This explicit physical marking suggests a metaphorical relationship between the robot of science fiction and the black subject. Both are visibly "other" and as such are assigned particular roles within the cultural and economic order. They are imagined in certain discourses to act according to type. And like the Sojourner explorer, they can be assigned grueling tasks in hostile and alien environments. Both possess a physical configuration that is perceived to situate them as either compliant servant or noncompliant monster.

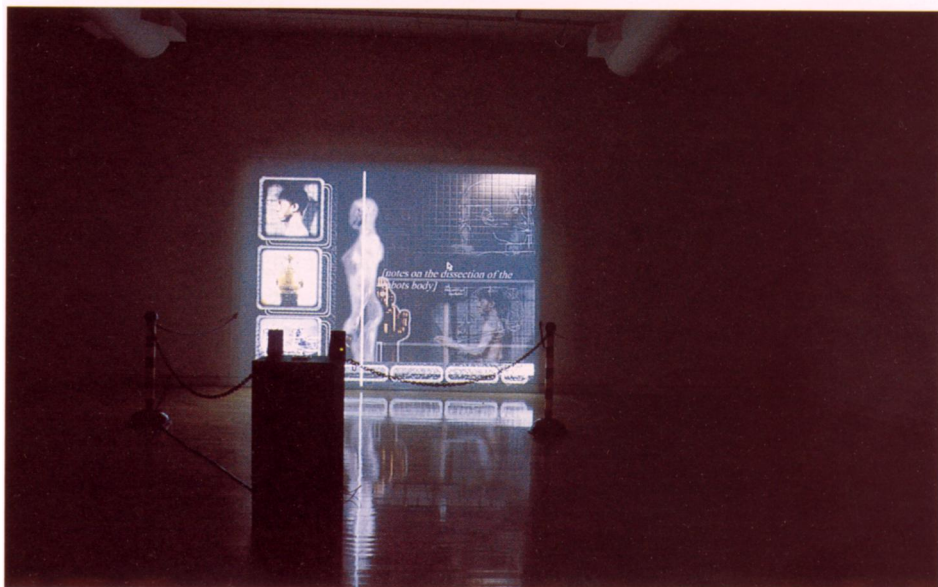
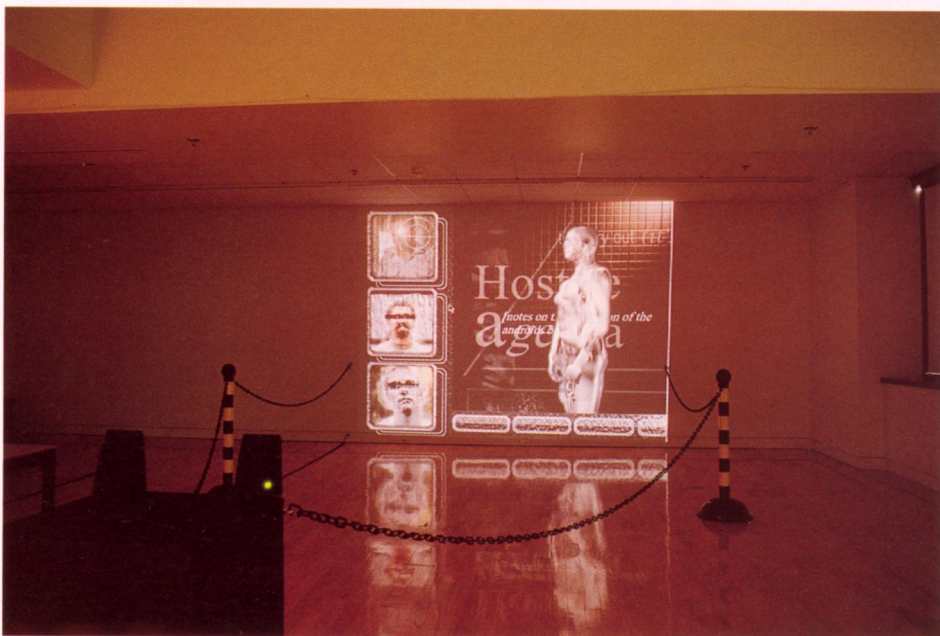
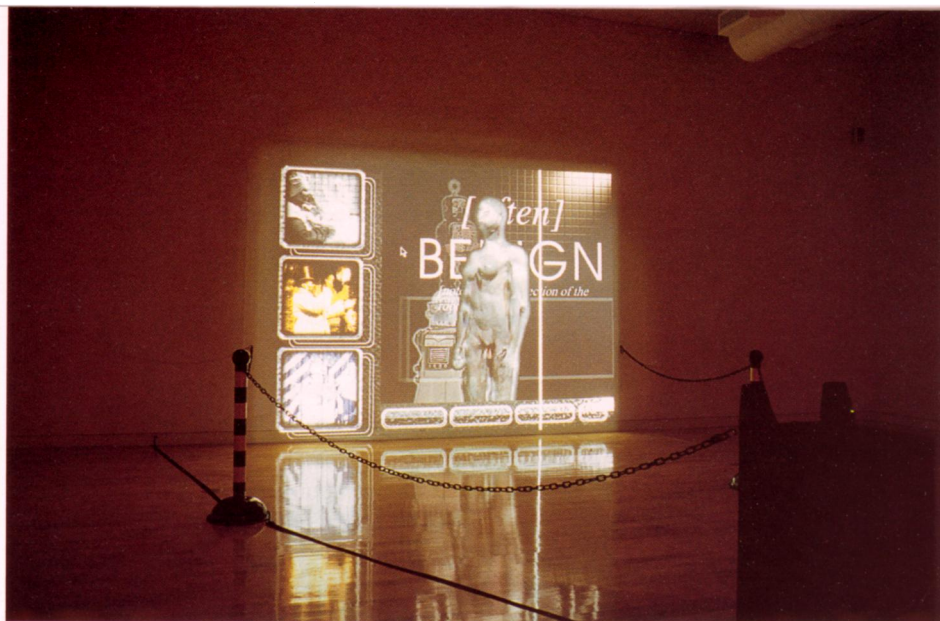
What then of the android? If the robot's visibly mechanical body explicitly marks its otherness, then the android's concealed mechanical body makes it a metaphor for the other, able to masquerade as a member of the dominant norm. From the Replicants of Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to the android Ash in Ridley Scott's 1979 movie *Alien*, the masquerade is most invariably depicted as subversive. The android's true identity is concealed to allow it to fulfill its preprogrammed, usually hostile agenda. The android can thus be seen as activating metaphorical anxieties about such specters as the infiltrator, the fifth columnist, the "red under the bed," the closet-dwelling sexual other, the "international Jew," and the "white nigger."

And what of those instances in which elements of the robotic other are integrated with the human organic norm within a single entity? Here we encounter a third category of mechanoid. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the *cyborg*, derived from the term *cybernetic organism*, is defined as "a human being who has certain physiological processes aided or controlled by mechanical or electronic devices." In fictional cyborgs, such as Murphy, the central character in Paul Verhoeven's 1987 movie *Robocop*, the depiction speculates about miscegenation: the physical power of the robot other is merged problematically with the human sensibilities of the organic norm. At key points in the narrative of *Robocop* we witness the purely separate entities as fundamentally in crisis: human principals are in violent conflict with preprogrammed robotic machines. The cyborg, which is neither one thing nor the other, reenacts the tragic mulatto theme, common to racial melodramas. In Douglas Sirks' 1959 movie *The Imitation of Life*, the character Sarah Jane is tortured and finally destroyed by the conflict between her loyalty to her black mother and her longing for acceptance in the white world.

An examination of science fiction as a site in which robot metaphors replay notions of racial identity has been an ongoing thread of enquiry in my creative practice in recent years. I first explored these themes in 1998 with my interactive installation *Robot Bodies*. I recently extended the project to produce another interactive environment, *The Mechanoid's Bloodline* (2001), using the digital tools of sampling, collage, random and planned juxtaposition, and user interactivity.

Keith Piper is an artist who uses digital and interactive technologies in video, CD-ROM, and web-based projects. He is from the United Kingdom, and is currently an Assistant Professor in Electronic Time-based Art at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

Keith Piper. *The Mechanoid's Bloodline*, 2001. Installation at the Regina Miller Gallery, Purnell Center for the Arts, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. Three interactive CD-ROM projections on gallery walls with lecterns, chains, and mixed media. Courtesy of the artist.



No wonder we need aliens.

No wonder we're so good at creating aliens.

No wonder we so often project alienness onto one another.

This last of course has been the worst of our problems—the human alien from another culture, country, gender, race, ethnicity. This is the tangle alien who can be hurt or killed. . . . And yet we are unable to get along with those aliens who are closest to us, those aliens who are of course ourselves.

—Octavia E. Butler, “The Monophobic Response”¹

The cultural theorist and novelist Albert Murray once remarked that the mandate of the black intellectual was to provide “technology” to the black community.² By technology, Murray didn't mean mechanics, new media, or the Internet. Rather, he defined it as those novel analytic approaches he believed necessary to understanding black life “on a higher level of abstraction.”³ For Murray, this process was one of distillation and complication. He advocated theories of African American existence that, like a blueprint, would be sufficiently robust to reveal the larger patterns of society and do justice to its intricacies and complexities. By Murray's definition, the artist Laylah Ali is a technologist of the highest order. In spite of their striking clarity, her gouache images reflect the contradictions of the human condition.

Ali's work explores the tragic lives of the Greenheads, her hypercephalic, thin-limbed, brown-skinned creations. Using a limited palette, she composes provocative visual fields noticeably lacking in scenery, save the humanoid figures that inhabit them. A master at sleight of hand, she uses bright comic-strip colors in a way that recalls the Sunday funnies; but these images have more in common with sardonic political cartoons, for the figures she depicts inflict all manner of insult and injury on one another. Although Ali provides no script for her images, their despair and anger is unmistakable. But there is

no violent haste in her brush stroke; the images are controlled—eerily exact. As befits the work of a technician, these tortured lives are rendered with the sharpest precision.

More troubling still for the viewer is the family likeness of the individual Greenheads to one another. The symbols that distinguish one Greenhead from another are remarkably superficial: one wears a dotted shirt, another a solid-color top; one wears a uniform, another a tunic. Why would these characters, who are so seemingly similar and whose sole medium of differentiation is their attire, be at violent odds with one another?

In Ali's paintings these differences, though only skin-deep, have grave consequences. Encounters in the land of the Greenheads typically end in violence: loss of limb, decapitation, subjugation, and abduction. Moreover, the power trips in this dystopic universe appear to be racialized. In *Untitled* (2000), a Greenhead pair attired in white hats and robes that resemble white supremacist get-ups meet two similarly dressed figures, one with hair ornamentation that harkens back to ancient Egyptian ceremonial attire. One pair offers a severed head to the other. Violence is pervasive and all encompassing where the Greenheads dwell; all are subject to it. Such exercises of power,

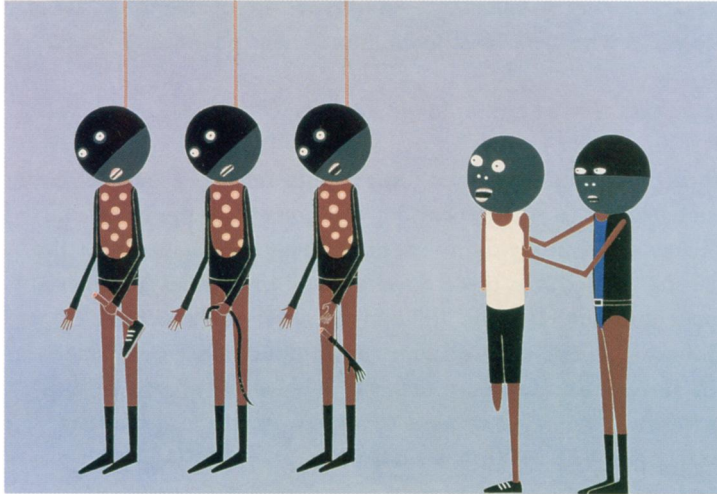
Alondra Nelson

Aliens Who Are of Course Ourselves

1. Octavia E. Butler, “The Monophobic Response,” *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (New York: Warner Books, 2000), 415.

2. Albert Murray, quoted in “The Alain L. Locke Symposium,” *The Harvard Advocate*, December 1, 1973, 18.

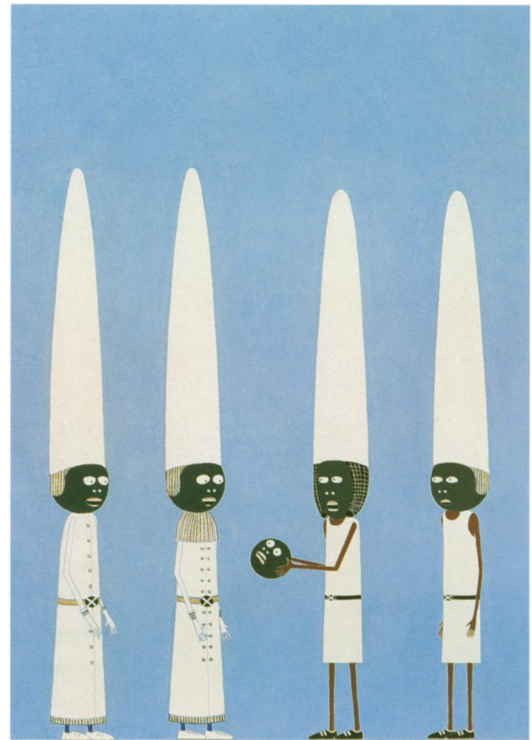
3. *Ibid.*, 17.



Laylah Ali. *Untitled 2000.*
Gouache on paper. 13 x 19 in.
(31.2 x 45.6 cm). Courtesy of
303 Gallery, New York

Laylah Ali. *Untitled 2000.*
Gouache on paper. 19 x 14 in.
(45.6 x 33.6 cm). Courtesy of
303 Gallery, New York.

Laylah Ali. *Untitled 2000.*
Gouache on paper. 7 x 6 in.
(16.8 x 14.4 cm) Courtesy of
303 Gallery, New York



however, are also the imposed heritage and present-day reality of people of African descent. The brown-skinned Greenheads do double duty as agents in humanity's universal power struggles and as actors in the performance of racialized violence.

The Greenheads are humanoid—human like—but their countenances and outlines are conspicuously similar to the Grays, the archetypal aliens who appear in abduction stories in popular culture. Elaine Showalter and Jodi Dean argue that aliens are *doppelgänger* of our human fears and

desires.⁴ Although Showalter and Dean provide different explanations for our strange attachments to aliens, both have argued that U.S. culture is obsessed with them.

In an essay in the anthology *Dark Matter*, the science-fiction writer Octavia E. Butler provides a related theory of the economy of the imagination that produces aliens. She suggests that we create the ethereal, otherworldly figures of sci-fi and speculative fiction in part as an escape from dealing with local others. Yet, as Butler reminds us, back in the real world we also have homespun “tangible aliens” who are marked as irrevocably different by virtue of their language or culture (rendered as attire in Ali’s vocabulary). We fashion aliens, and we “project alienness onto one another.” Ali could be said to be sending the same message since she uses alienness to reveal both human connection

4. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

and detachment. In this sense, we are all aliens, though blacks, are doubly so.

Ali's *mises-en-scène* are both otherworldly and familiar. This alien-ness is at once personal and collective, local and global, nodal and networked. Laylah Ali's images are a poignant reminder that the brother from another planet is still kin. The aliens are in fact ourselves.

Alondra Nelson is co-editor of *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* (New York University Press, 2001). She is a doctoral candidate in the American Studies Program at New York University and the Ann Plato Fellow in American Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

Remember when you used to watch science fiction? How it was acceptable that there were no black characters because it was an imaginary world? Well, that didn't sit well with David Huffman, an artist who inserts the black subject into science-fiction narratives. His fantastic sci-fi images go so far as to suggest that the black psyche can be liberated by ultra-advanced robotics and military technology. Huffman's choice to portray black characters turning toward technology to escape inner and outer defects is full of implications. While his work deals with notions of race enforced by images in the entertainment media, it is particularly concerned with the psychological and physiological ramifications of our shared history and anxiety about blackness.

When I first encountered Huffman's artwork, I was organizing an exhibition focused on professional artists' and folk artists' concepts of outer space, UFOs, and paranormal phenomena. The idea for the exhibition

Arnold J. Kemp

If Sambo Were a UFO

*Above and Beyond*¹ was sparked by the actions of the UFO cult Heaven's Gate. Led by Marshall Applewhite, thirty-nine members of Heaven's Gate committed suicide in late March 1997. They believed that Hale-Bopp, an unusually bright comet passing our

planet at the time, was a signal to shed their earthly bodies—"containers"—and join a spacecraft that they imagined traveled behind the comet. They were attempting to achieve a higher plane of existence which had they religiously studied in the television programs *Star Trek* and *The X-Files*.² Science fact and fiction and pop culture were combined to disastrous ends for Heaven's Gate members, especially for Thomas Alva Nichols, an African American man found among the deceased. Strangely, he was the brother of Nichelle Nichols, the actress who portrayed Lieutenant Uhura, the communications officer on the original *Star Trek*.

Star Trek first aired in the 1960s, during the height of the Civil Rights movement, and has continued to do so for more than thirty years. In the original episodes, Nichelle Nichols portrayed a beautiful, accomplished, intellectual black woman of the twenty-third century, and an indispensable member of the starship *Enterprise*'s crew of brave space travelers. Her character was one of the first of many African American characters in sci-fi, fantasy, and spy-thriller action programs. These characters were always overdetermined, so that there was no question as to why they were there; they could never just be ordinary black people, and they were never written as leading roles.

Remember Barney Collier, the quiet, efficient electronics expert on *Mission Impossible*; Sergeant Baker, another electronics and mechanical genius on *Hogan's*

1. *Above and Beyond* presented at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, February 26 to April 30, 2000 was originally titled "Above Human." It examined fringe belief systems in a culture saturated with representations of the paranormal, the extraterrestrial, and the metaphysical. Participating artists and organizations were the Aetherius Society, Dennis Balk, Jessica Bronson, Davis & Davis, Douglas Curran, Cameron Jamie, David Jarvey (in association with Harrel Fletcher, Chris Johanson, Elizabeth Meyer, and Alexis Hurkman), Chris Johanson, Corey McCorkle, John McCracken, Sun Ra Research, Ionel Talpazan, Mungo Thompson, Rubén Ortiz Torres, and Charlie White.

2. The details of the Heaven's Gate tragedy were sensational. The police described an eerily placid death scene. Applewhite and several of the cult members had undergone voluntary castration in the months before the mass suicide. The revelation that Heaven's Gate was comprised professional web designers used the Internet to win converts and spread their message, compelled me to examine my own role as a producer of esoteric events and exhibitions. I was grappling with how to evaluate my responsibility as a cultural producer to a culture in which bizarre events take on a daily basis.

Heroes; Valerie, the technical genius of *Josie and the Pussy Cats*? These character types were so prominently displayed in the television of my youth that as a child I associated them with the character of Mr. Spock, the Vulcan science officer on *Star Trek*. I paid special attention to Spock, reading his character as black, because he was overly logical, analytical, and scientifically gifted, like other black characters on television at the time. It seemed obvious that Spock was not played by a black actor because he was second-in-command of the ship; if something should happen to the captain, a black character could not become the main focus of the action. Still, I was sure of his blackness.³

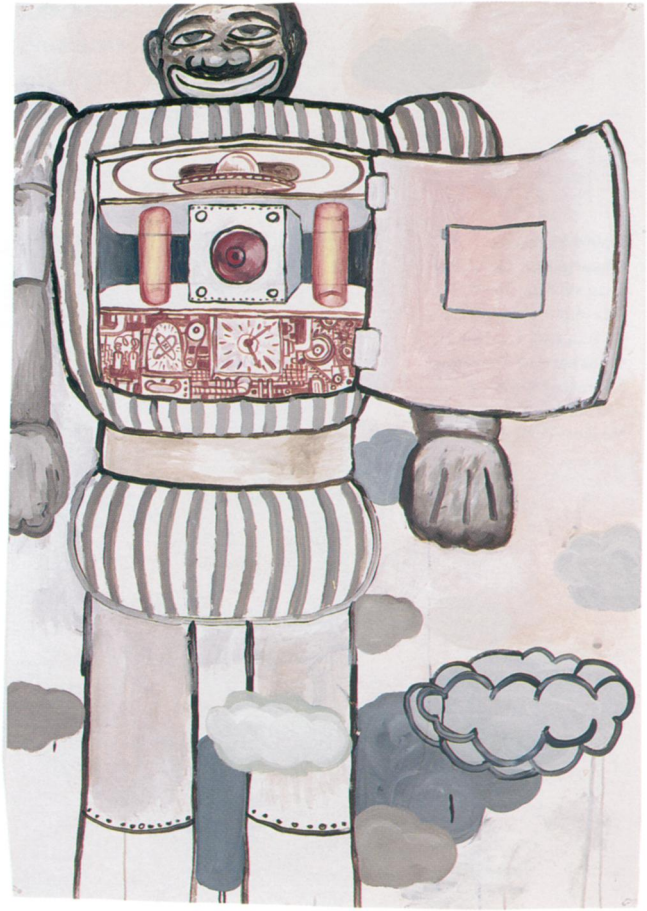
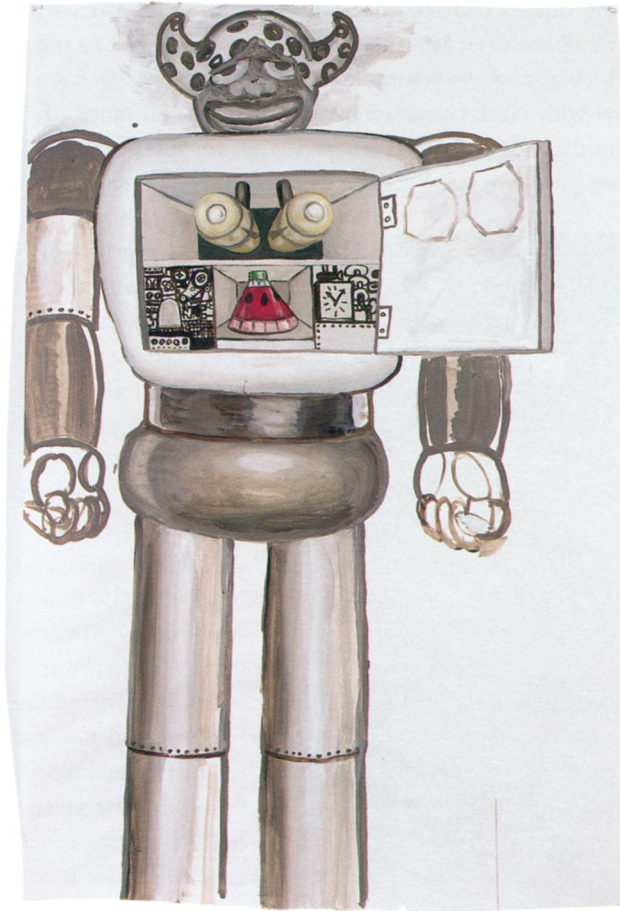
But what was the reason for so many of the black science officers, inventors, and technically proficient operators of advanced computer equipment on television? Were they meant to be the opposite of the minstrel—the other major television and radio role for blacks? If so, characters like Uhura or Barney Collier could not have come into being if the entertainment media were not paying attention to the political climate of the 1960s and compensating for the horrific caricatures of black people made popular in previous decades. Even so, heroic characters like Uhura were just new stereotypes, though different from bug-eyed, clowning spooks of the past. Watching their shallow development, one could not help but see the minstrel, the Uncle Tom, and the mammy as their fictional antecedents.⁴

It is out of the fragmented context of television's sci-fi adventure programs that David Huffman cobbles together an artistic identity. Born in 1963 in Berkeley, California, Huffman grew up with television that regularly aired programs like *Astroboy*, *Shogun Warriors*, and *Transformers*. He combines imagery reminiscent of these animated sci-fi series in painterly works on paper and freestanding ceramic sculpture. His muted colors and cartoonish imagery form a body of work that relates a narrative about a race of fictional black people whom he calls Trauma Smiles. The story is that Trauma Smiles have undergone the same degradation as actual black people, yet they have developed a perpetual grin, an evolutionary trait that came into being in the days when they attempted to perform the stereotypical roles assigned to them. In Huffman's mind, the grin was meant to subvert the pain of an unresolved history of playing at being an ethnographic commodity; thus the name Trauma Smile identifies a people of inner anguish, confusion, and a crippling lack of direction.

To this already interesting tale that touches on genetics and social conditioning, Huffman has added the Trauma Bots, the powerful robotic servants of the Trauma Smiles. The Trauma Bots are giant robots based on animation and toy action figures originating in Japanese anime. Trauma Eve 1 bears a polka-dotted helmet and looks like an Aunt Jemima for the thirty-first century. She is a fighting machine equipped with nuclear-powered rockets that launch from her mechanical breastplate. Another Trauma Bot, Luxor DX, named after the site of the great Egyptian temples, looks like a super-armored Sambo who fires a rocket-powered forearm with a clenched fist. Trauma Bots have docking areas in the rear of their heads, into which the Trauma Smiles navigate small vehicles shaped like wedges of watermelon. This action supposedly creates a bond between Trauma Smile and Trauma Bot that allows the Trauma Bots to fly through space. The space they explore is unspecific, filled with vaporous,

3. My view of Spock as a black character is supported by the fact that Leonard Nimoy, the actor who played Spock, grew up in Dorchester—my neighborhood in Boston. He was also physically stronger than any of the other characters and could bear great pain. He had suppressed his emotions to the point of appearing emotionless, and he also had access to advanced forms of telepathy and mind control; when in heat, he was nearly uncontrollable. These last aspects of Spock's character connect him more closely to what we see in the characters portrayed by contemporary "gangsta" rappers, but in the late 1970s this type of character was just beginning to appear as a model for urban black youth. In my all-black neighborhood, I was used to seeing this extremely cool, Spock-like posture on street corners and in schoolyards.

4. If we can accept the speculation that Spock may be read as a black character, then we can accept that *Star Trek* actually touched on some interesting issues. For instance, Spock was a biracial or, more correctly, bispecies character: part human and part Vulcan. In society, he was mocked for being neither one nor the other. His intuitive, emotional, human side was at war with his unemotional, logical Vulcan side. He was often portrayed, as preferring the hardened Vulcan side of his genetic makeup, turning to scientific, mathematically precise thought processes as a way to escape the part of himself that he hated. He made a decision to protect himself from the little bit of pain that his humanity allowed him to feel. Subsequently, Tuvak, the Vulcan character featured in the later *Star Trek Voyager* series is played by a black actor.



David Huffman. *Inside Trauma Eve I*, 1998. Acrylic on paper. 51 x 40½ in. (122.4 x 97.2 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.

David Huffman. *Inside Luxor DX*, 1998. Acrylic on paper. 60 x 40½ in. (144 x 97.2 cm). Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.

pastel-colored gases and objects that recall intestinal organs in an enlarged digestive system. Huffman's depiction suggests that the spiritually challenged Trauma Smiles, freed from the limitations of the physical body, use the Trauma Bots to go inward toward an unexplored space where they may find the key to correcting their deformed features. At the frontier of this inner space the Trauma Bots are further depicted as being in conflict with another creation of Huffman's, Mechaman. Seeking the extermination of the Trauma Smiles, Mechaman has no Trauma Smile in control of his actions. He is perhaps the creation of the damaged psyches of the Trauma Smiles, an enemy from within undermining the actions of his people. Anything seems possible in Huffman's images, where a purposeful ambiguity holds the interest of the viewer.

Huffman's production over the last three years mediates controversial images that he has inherited as an African American artist. We share some of his anxiety as he attempts to come to terms with a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to minstrel and mammy images. With friendly sci-fi imagery Huffman pulls us into pictures that depict a universe of anxiety populated by black characters suffering from a sense of shame and fascination with their own image, on an inward quest to escape their outward appearance. He is essentially lifting a clouded mirror that reflects an aspect of black reality—namely, the real desire of blacks to look for themselves, even in the

unpleasant or unfulfilling images that society reflects back to them. Even with the best intentions, early episodes of *Star Trek* never satisfied the need to portray fully realized black characters. Its writers were not able to assuage our memory of the minstrel with black characters who, without a full range of emotion, were no more than highly skilled laborers. Still, for their time, *Star Trek* and other adventure programs provided the least offensive source of

images of blacks.

They also provided Huffman with the model of a cultural allegory based on a technologically advanced society.

So what of Thomas Alva Nichols, an actual black man seduced by promises of a better life in a scientifically advanced society?⁵ What was he looking for on the fringes of science and religion, when he found the unconventional practices of Heaven's Gate? It is natural to look toward the future, hoping for answers to the frustrating puzzles of the mundane modern world. Some surviving members of Heaven's Gate have reported that their "away team" reached "the level above human."⁶

If so, it is possible that they found a world like that of the Trauma Smiles, a world where science fact and fiction and pop culture mix to less disastrous effect.

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David Huffman.
Watermelon UFO with Trauma Eve, 1999.
Acrylic on paper. 61 x 45 in. (146.4 x 108 cm).
Courtesy of Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. Photo: John Wilson White.



5. One has to wonder what dreams were set in motion for Thomas Alva Nichols, the namesake of one of the America's most famous inventors, Thomas Alva Edison. What dreams were deferred by the fact of his race?

6. See the Heaven's Gate home page at www.trancenet.org/heavensgate.