



Adriano Elia\*

## FORMAL EXPERIMENTATION AND TIME TRAVEL AS A RECONCEPTUALIZATION STRATEGY IN ANTHONY JOSEPH'S *THE AFRICAN ORIGINS OF UFOS*

If, besides being a creation of imagination, fiction is also a means for dealing with socio-political issues, it is possible to identify at least two useful methods via which militant writers have accomplished this task. The first one involves introducing fictional characters and narrating events mainly to make direct political statements and elicit social criticism. James Baldwin's outspoken fiction is a typical case, ever since the publication of his first novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), but the first seeds had been sown by W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *Dark Princess* (1928), both novels describing the condition of African Americans and clearly revealing the author's political views. An alternative way to tackle political writing is provided by Afrofuturist literature, grounded in science fiction and related issues such as time travel, space age metaphors and so forth. Typically, the conflation of past, present and future allows Afrofuturist writers to evoke counter-histories and imagine counter-futures reconceptualizing a number of questions concerning the African American and the Afro European diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

Within the latter trend, Anthony Joseph's novel *The African Origins of UFOs* (2006) is a groundbreaking case in point. Joseph is a British Trinidadian poet, novelist, musician and lecturer who was born in Trinidad in 1966 and moved to London at the age of 23. He is the author of four poetry collections – *Desafinado* (1994), *Teragaton* (1997), *Bird Head Son* (2009) and *Rubber Orchestras* (2011). As a musician, his debut album *Leggo de Lion* (2007) featured lyrics taken from *The African Origins of UFOs*. Later he released three more albums with his own group, The Spasm Band, and the very latest release presents him as a solo artist on an album with the meaningful title *Caribbean Roots* (2016).

*The African Origins of UFOs* is a striking example of Afrofuturist speculative fiction. Charged with innumerable allusions and conceptual abstractions, its experimental style, blending poetry and prose, is an ideal counterpart to the richness and variety of its content. Divided into three interweaving sections set in space in the future, on land in the present and in water in the past, this eccentric novel draws on time travel as a means to reconsider notions of race, identity, exile and collective memory.

The first section is set in the year 3053 on the planet Kunu Supia, where only the darkest-skinned people are able to survive. One of the protagonists is the hustler Joe Sambucus Nigra, who sells synthetic melanin: "Joe Sam's hustle was the cusp of voodoo funk technology: bootleg melanin to keep pale niggers ticking on Kunu Supia!" (2006, 23).<sup>2</sup> This passage is quite significant in political terms, as it indicates that on Kunu Supia blacks are no longer discriminated against but are now the strongest population. The second section takes place in present day Trinidad and its title, "Journal of a return to a floating island," hints at Aimé Césaire's experimental poem, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939). The reference to Césaire's surrealism reinforces the idea of a narration characterized by unexpected ways to describe the existential condition of the black community. The third and final section is set in the past and is titled "The genetic memory of ancient Īrè," Īrè being the original name of Trinidad, meaning "land of the hummingbird." The narrator's story is thus interrupted by periodic flashbacks and flashforwards, taking the reader on a journey from ancient Īrè to Kunu Supia via present day Trinidad.

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\* Adriano Elia is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Rome "Roma Tre." His publications include essays on contemporary British fiction, Afrofuturism, W.E.B. Du Bois's short fiction and poetry and four books – *La Cometa di W.E.B. Du Bois* (2015), *Hanif Kureishi* (2012), *The UK: Learning the Language, Studying the Culture* (co-author, 2005) and *Ut Pictura Poesis: Word-Image Interrelationships and the Word-Painting Technique* (2002).

<sup>1</sup> The term 'Afrofuturism' was first coined in 1993 by Mark Dery, who referred to it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture." For an overview of Afrofuturism as an interdisciplinary cultural movement see Elia (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Edition used: Joseph (2006). Henceforth the page numbers of quotations are in brackets.



As suggested above, *The African Origins of UFOs* shows a wide-ranging array of references and a wealth of historical and literary allusions and cultural influences. However, two specific issues are crucial to its success as a novel: formal experimentation and the use of time travel as a reconceptualization strategy.

With regard to formal experimentation, *The African Origins of UFOs* is undoubtedly an unconventional, avant-garde novel, and therefore it disrupts the standard horizon of expectations concerning the artistic contribution of a black writer. Actually, for a long time the phrase "black avant-garde" has been seen as a sort of oxymoron, black and avant-garde being perceived as mutually exclusive terms. Apart from Césaire's *Cahier*, there is also the seminal production of avant-garde jazz composer and poet Sun Ra, to name just one, which seems to have been overlooked by critics, and this stance has strengthened racial stereotypes (Rieder and Bacchilega 2016). Joseph himself has complained about the peculiar penury of black British avant-garde writers, whereas this is not the case in Black British cinema, painting and criticism, if one considers the contribution of the Black Audio Film Collective, of filmmakers such as John Akomfrah and Isaac Julien, of painters such as Frank Bowling and Chris Ofili, of architects like David Adjaye, of theorists like Kodwo Eshun and so on (Joseph 2009, 151).

As a matter of fact, the novel's stylistic experimentalism is the result of a highly innovative blend of genres and styles. Among the influences on his original poetry and prose Joseph mentioned some techniques received via the diaspora, such as the magical realism of the Anancy stories and the verbal gymnastics of Trinidadian robber talk, itself derived from Griot traditions. Further avant-garde features are the use of multiple voices, of collage and pastiche, the experimentation with syntax and typography and the occasional presence of weird sketches and drawings (Joseph 2009, 151).

As we have seen, the novel comprises three interconnected sections, each with its own distinguishable style and set of characters. Set on the planet Kunu Supia in the future, in stylistic terms the first section is the most innovative and can be described as a narrative mixing science fiction and "gangsta rap" (Alizadeh 2007). Here is a distinctive excerpt from "Kneedeepinditchdiggerniggersweat," the first chapter, where Joseph's unnamed narrator is introducing the protagonist Joe Sam:

His voice had the deep burrr of a man who kept fishhooks in his beard. So I put on my white muslin jumpsuit, slid sleeves and levers tight, pulled my hair shut with Sirian beeswax and en-route superterranean to Toucan Bay via Antimatic Congo Pump I met Cain waiting with the contraband: 8 grams of uncut Ceboletta X. (3)<sup>3</sup>

Joseph's challenging style blurs the boundaries between poetry and prose. As Alizadeh has argued, whereas free verse poetry can be defined as "cut-up prose," the prose of *The African Origins of UFOs* could be termed "glued-up poetry," that is condensed poetry, or poetry disguised as prose. The novel is further characterized by a strong presence of independent poems interspersed throughout the narration, as well as by numerous prose passages that are quite 'poetic' both in form and in content.

As mentioned above, the title of the second section, "Journal of a Return to a Floating Island," clearly alludes to what was perhaps the first experimental work of modern Black European poetry, Césaire's *Cahier*, rich in neologisms. There are frequent neologisms in Joseph's language, such as 'niggerfish,' 'pissfunk' or 'badniggermantra,' bringing to mind some of Césaire's own coined terms such as 'verrition,' 'l'odeur-du-nègre' and, most famously 'négritude.'<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Joseph's passionate description of the floating island is very effective:

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<sup>3</sup> Toucan Bay is a Caribbean enclave on the planet Kunu Supia, Congo pump is a luxury car and Ceboletta X is a medicinal plant known to cause hallucinations. The spelling of 'burrr' is with three r's. This and the following quotations are faithful to Joseph's peculiar style (syntax, punctuation, spelling, the use of lower case and so on).

<sup>4</sup> With reference to Alizadeh (2007). Alluding to the Haitian fight for independence, the term "Négritude" was first used in 1935 by Aimé Césaire in the third issue of *L'Étudiant noir*, a magazine which he had founded in Paris with Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas.



but some colours cannot be deciphered by the bare hearing eye. and the sound: brass wrestles wounds through asphalt, steelband jammin' like they bound to make a body make a body leap arcs of abandon, take days to come down. drums like cathedrals tumbling. hi-hats reeling sparks like cutlass lashing de road [...] but some sounds cannot be measured [...] this floating island spun centre of the earth as an epicentre of all things sensual. here we measure time by temperature. distance by breath, prefer death by fire. (47)

This 'sensuality' of the floating island seems to echo Césaire's often quoted description of black people as "ceux qui n'ont inventé ni la poudre ni la boussole / ceux qui n'ont jamais su dompter la vapeur ni l'électricité / ceux qui n'ont exploré ni les mers ni le ciel / mais ceux sans qui la terre ne serait pas la terre." (Césaire 1995, 112-13).<sup>5</sup> Speaking in terms of style, like Césaire, Joseph believes in the revolutionary power of a language that refuses assimilation to a dominant cultural norm and teaches resistance and liberation by combining high literary terms with colloquialisms, and archaic words with new coinages (Césaire 1995, 162).

Such an innovative form is paralleled by a compression of content, in which virtually every single word exposes several layers of meaning. As Ramey has noted, Joseph employs a syncretic blend of genres and styles, where the diaspora is seen in a new light and becomes the subject and the inspiration for a fresh form based upon experimental traditions (Ramey 2006, XII).

The third section, "The Genetic Memory of Ancient Īeré," brings the story back to an ancestral and nostalgic past, and perhaps for this reason its style is deliberately more traditional and less experimental. Worth mentioning are chapter 6, titled "Hummingbird," with a poem on ancient Īeré before the flood that forced Trinidadian people to leave the island, heading for space to Kunu Supia, and chapter 18, titled "Wallerfield," with moving descriptions of the resilience of old negroes doing hard work. Here is a brief passage from "Wallerfield:"

Dennis, that red nigger was strong. He did the bull work on the farm. He worked for food and shelter then he smiled. His mind reclined in madness but he smiled [...] He chop the bamboo, he wash the yard, shovel cowshit, he bathe the heifer – dig that ditch! [...] Adolphus Gray had the slack thighs of an old man. Water filled his knees. [...] He wash canister, he mix grain, he spin the salt lick – crack that whip! But soon sick. He caught a stroke. Death sharpened his toes. (103-105)

As we can see, Joseph manages to create very credible characters who seem almost alive in their idiosyncrasies even when he sketches them by broad strokes using only a few words. Moreover, references to recognisable and defining magic motifs, myths, fables and rituals of African history are easily noticed throughout this section. It is also interesting to mention that the song "Wallerfield" from Joseph's album *Leggo de Lion* features a tabla accompaniment, a significant musical choice that is evidence of the influence of the diaspora from the Indian subcontinent to the West Indies. As is known, in Trinidad there is a large East Indian community, the descendants of indentured laborers brought to Trinidad from the Indian subcontinent during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Going back to the issue of formal experimentation, Joseph himself has pointed out that he put a lot of effort into finding his own style, resulting in what he termed "poetic prose" or "liquid text fiction:"

my struggle was how to write fiction as a poet, how to write narrative. I had to train myself to write in paragraphs and not verse [...] eventually I developed my only way of doing fiction, and still keeping my poetic sensibilities intact. I could not escape the poet in me. I ended up with poetic prose (Ramey 2009, 93).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "Those who have invented neither gunpowder nor the compass / those who have never known how to subdue either steam or electricity / those who have explored neither the seas nor the sky / but those without whom the earth would not be the earth."

<sup>6</sup> The source is an e-mail by Anthony Joseph dated 12 June 2005.



Ultimately, Joseph's poetic prose is a composite patchwork of disparate elements: the ironic and witty lyrics of the great calypso singer Mighty Sparrow; the above-mentioned speech-making of Trinidadian robber talk, also to be found in Earl Lovelace's novel *Is Just a Movie* (2011); the oral tradition of the Anancy stories, the African folktale character taking the shape of a spider and being a symbol of slave resistance and survival, originating, as the symbol of Sankofa, from the Akan people of present-day Ghana; Ted Joans's surrealist black poetry, for example in poems such as "Africa," "Ouagadougou Ouagadougou" and "The Nice Colored Man;" Kamau Brathwaite's evocative poems such as "Alpha," "Twine" and "Fever;" Wilson Harris's abstract and metaphorical style; and, most of all, the figure of the griot, the traditional West African storyteller travelling from village to village to tell stories and news.<sup>7</sup> The griot was a receptacle of history carrying all the memories and the ancestral stories. Joseph himself is a contemporary urban griot and has even written a song with this title, where he referred to the griot as "the sound of universal culture / of vocal music of black Africa."

Thus, in view of his career as a musician, we can define Joseph's literary style as being 'improvisational.' This is because of the wealth of musical influences on his way of writing; for example, Amiri Baraka's use of onomatopoeia and penchant for a poetic interaction between his poetry and experimental jazz; Thelonious Monk's unique style, characterized by dissonances and sharp melodic twists; and especially Ornette Coleman's aesthetic philosophy of 'harmolodics,' where "harmony, melody, speed, rhythm, time and phrases all have equal position in the results that come from the placing and spacing of ideas" (Coleman 1983, 54-55). Coleman's free jazz technique is akin to Joseph's peculiar style of writing, distinguished by strong improvisational skills and acute verbal riffs. If the general effect of harmolodics in music is the immediate achievement of an open expression unconstrained by tonal, rhythmic or harmonic limitations, the same happens in Joseph's inventive and unpredictable prose, where all meaning is equal and no element is hierarchically foregrounded (Ramey 2006, XIII).

With regard to the use of time travel as a reconceptualization strategy, the conflation of past, present and future makes this novel an ideal example of Afro European and Afrofuturist fiction. At a first glance, like the previously mentioned phrase "black avant-garde," the term Afrofuturism may also be received as an oxymoron. 'Afro' and 'Futurism' have often been considered as terms in opposition, the former evoking images of primitivism and backwardness, the latter celebrating instead progress and modernity. It is precisely in order to challenge this stereotypical assumption that Afrofuturist practitioners have proposed counter-histories that re-evaluate the role of black people in Western society in the past and envisage alternative roles for the future (Elia 2014, 83-84). To confirm Joseph's interest in Afrofuturist tactics, it is interesting to consider his own remarks about the genesis of the novel:

The origin was a tourist guide book to Trinidad [...] it mentioned something that happened in 1837: a slave called Daaga [...] was always saying he'd make it back to Africa, and take his people. So one day he [...] gathered his men and 'they set off to walk to Africa,' that line haunted me, that was the genesis. I imagined them getting into a spacecraft, I then saw their journey as a metaphor for black people trying to find their roots, to find a mythical Africa. It became a sci-fi story [...] So the idea of past present future took hold. (Ramey 2009, 92)<sup>8</sup>

Using this Afrofuturist motif, Joseph imagined that Daaga and his companions travelled back by spacecraft to a mythical Africa to find their roots and thought science fiction would be the best genre for this story. It could be argued, then, that Joseph's Afrofuturist approach involves a reconceptualization strategy of hegemonic discourses taking such different shapes as a historical revisionism reconsidering the history of the black

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<sup>7</sup> Ted Joans has divided his poetry into "Hand Grenade" and "Fertileyes & Fertilears" poems, the former – including "Africa" and "The Nice Colored Man" – being more direct and evoking his black ancestry, the latter, i.e. "Ouagadougou Ouagadougou", being more influenced by Breton and surrealism. Both these trends were influential for Joseph. See Nicosia (1999, V).

<sup>8</sup> The source is an e-mail by Joseph dated 12 June 2005.



diaspora, the use of time travel as a political tool, the crisis of the category 'black,' the UFO as a contemporary symbol of the slave ship and the trope of the longing for home.

First of all, the novel triggers a historical revisionism challenging the typical idea of the backwardness of Africa and the African diaspora, thus denying the Hegelian view according to which Africa had made no substantial contribution to the progress of the world.<sup>9</sup> Joseph insists instead on the modernity of the African past, whereby the ancient African traditions and some particular elements (i.e., the Egyptian cosmology) are evidence of the fact that African civilization is indeed a very modern one.

Moreover, Joseph's use of the time travel trope is reminiscent of Octavia Butler's groundbreaking fiction, notably her novel *Kindred* (1979), in the way it is made functional to an innovative discussion of traditional discourses regarding racial politics (Elia 2014, 92-94). As epitomized by Sankofa, the African bird with its head turned backwards, time travel gives black people the possibility to reconsider the past in a positive light, taking what is good from it, in order to imagine and construct a different future. For example, a crucial political issue introduced by Joseph is the voiding of 'black' as a socio-political category, its place being taken, in Joseph's terminology, by "post-earth negroes." The idea of blackness was only relevant on Earth and, paradoxically, if you are not black enough you need synthetic melanin in order to survive on Kunu Supia:

His modus upset some post-earth negroes [...] They claimed that black as a concept of being was only ever relevant on Earth [...] Instead of the industrial revolution, we could've had niggers in space! They said black was dead. Black as in the tones of Nuyorican niggerpoets ranting militant in ancient days, [...] earth long, living in cold water Brooklyn warehouse space, no food but Fanon, no cash but Jackson! Back then them rhetoric was hip and On-the-One 'cause subversive boots and dreder guerrillas were needed on the urban battlefields and word was sword, shield and dagger. (37-38)<sup>10</sup>

The above quotation is yet another interesting example of fiction tackling socio-political issues. Joseph's Afrofuturist approach allows him to consider the possibility of a post-racial society while looking back from the future to the contribution of the Black Power movement in the Sixties, with an allusion to the rhetoric of their political speeches and to the fundamental influence of Fanon.

Another important issue suggested by the novel is the redeeming of the historical slave ship that has now become a UFO. This transfiguration had already been considered by Sun Ra in the film *Space is the Place* (1974) and later by George Clinton in his Mothership Connection concerts (Elia 2014, 87-89; 94). In metaphorical terms, going back to Africa by flying saucer after being forced to leave on a slave ship is a considerable success that also subverts the usual commonplace of the backwardness of Africa. That is the true meaning of Daaga's accomplishment, the result of his determination and stubbornness in going back home, as Joseph shows us in lyrical terms at the end of the novel:

Long time people used to call them flying saucer, UFO an' space ship. Dey didn't know then 'bout pansperming dust. Dey never get genetic flashback. Or spend nine nights on de mourning ground. But now we know different, how plenty time them object appear in de sky, was just Daaga and those he led, lost in space, drifting from place to place, still trying find where they come from. (137)

The reference to Timothy Leary's notion of "panspermic dust" reinforces the rationale behind the twenty-four chapter structure of the novel, inspired, in Joseph's words, by Leary's belief that "human consciousness evolved through twenty-four evolutionary niches of three levels each, from birth to death, from stasis to stasis, from water to land to space to panspermic dust" (Ramey 2006, XIII). The UFO thus becomes a potent

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<sup>9</sup> In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, posthumously published in 1840, Hegel dismissed African history in its entirety in only a few unflattering pages. See Elia (2016, 181-182) and Buck-Morss in Cagliero and Ronzon (2002, 21-59).

<sup>10</sup> In the text, 'black' is in bold type.



polysemic icon, extremely useful to Joseph's Afrofuturist fictional approach. It is, at the same time, the evidence of the technological advancement of African society; an updated version of the old slave ship, which allows a return to Africa in style, à la Sun Ra or George Clinton; and finally, a sign of the times, a symbol of dislocation, of being "lost in space, drifting from place to place." (Alizadeh 2007).

As we have seen, Joseph's very long list of authors and cultural movements cited as influences is indicative of the richness of *The African Origins of UFOs*. To those already mentioned, we may add musicians such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane, poets and writers such as Léopold Senghor, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Ishmael Reed and his use of historical caricature, Mircea Eliade's auroral beginnings inherent in myth, cultural movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, as well as the traditions of soca, calypso, reggae, Carnival, East Indian Trinidadian culture and so forth.

As Ramey has argued, the novel is about a "diasporic wave extending into the future, but whose purpose is to reverse migration – to achieve a return to the Africa of pre-slavery industry" (Ramey 2006, XI-XIII). Albeit in a different way from both Du Bois's and Marcus Garvey's versions of Pan-Africanist ideas of "going back to Africa," the ultimate message of *The African Origins of UFOs* is the evocation of a feeling of incompleteness due to the yearning and nostalgia for Mother Africa expressed through a challenging and experimental language. Since this sense of longing for home is reminiscent of the above-mentioned "Africa" by Ted Joans, it is fitting to conclude by citing a few inspired lines from this suggestive poem: "Africa you are in me / My future is your future / Your wounds are my wounds [...] / Africa I live and study for thee / And through you I shall be free / Someday I'll come back and see / Land of my mothers, where a black god made me / My Africa, your Africa, a free continent to be" (in Nicosia 1999, V).

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