"The planet is the way it is because of the scheme of words": Sun Ra and the Performance of Reckoning

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"THE PLANET IS THE WAY IT IS BECAUSE OF
THE SCHEME OF WORDS":
SUN RA AND THE PERFORMANCE OF RECKONING

BY

MARYAM IVETTE PARHIZKAR

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

"The Planet is the Way it is Because of the Scheme of Words":

Sun Ra and the Performance of Reckoning

By

Maryam Ivette Parhizkar

Adviser: Ammiel Alcalay

This constellatory essay is a study of the African American sound experimentalist, thinker and self-proclaimed extraterrestrial Sun Ra (1914-1993) through samplings of his wide, interdisciplinary archive: photographs, film excerpts, selected recordings, and various interviews and anecdotes. In composing this essay, I particularly consider how these fragments resonate against each other, offering insight into how Ra radically subverts the restraints imposed upon him as a black man in the United States and thus transfigures his racial alienness into a liberatory, literally alien performance. This self-transfiguration allows Ra to transform such impossible restraints into a condition of possibility for reckoning. I consider how reckoning—a word loaded with allusions to judgment, questioning, and the mythical end of the world—can function, through aesthetic experimentation, as a radical survival strategy. It is through such reckoning that Ra proposes alternatives to the current dominant structures of a white supremacist Western society (often made synonymous with "the Earth," "the world" or "the planet"), coded in metaphors of space travel, apocalypse, resurrection and myth.
I score various acts of reckoning from Ra's life-long alien performance—as conveyed through his costume, music, verbal and written language and philosophy—alongside each other, as a way of understanding how he transforms his dissonant experience as a black U.S. American man into an alternative epistemology for human survival. Because Ra's primary way of reckoning is through sound, my method has been a somewhat experimental reckoning in its own right: I have tried to maintain the position of a listener-scholar, in the most synesthetic sense. While hearing can be a passive act, listening is active: it is an act of attentiveness. Because aspects Ra's performance can initially seem opaque or strange, I attend to the "lower frequency" meanings of his work—that is, the intentional meaning within the codedness of his language.

The exigency of this work emerges from a concern with the legibility of experimental work by minoritized artists, particularly those who are either embraced as mad genius "outsiders" or dismissed as eccentrics. While they are not always explicit in this essay, two dissonant parts of our present historical moment have also underscored the essay's development: Ra's 2014 centennial, which incited many celebrations of his legacy (including performances by his ensemble, the Sun Ra Arkestra, at conventional, high-profile jazz institutions such as Jazz at Lincoln Center); and the increasingly hypervisible devaluation of black life (as well as the lives of other minoritized people)—particularly in the United States, and particularly at the hands of law enforcement and deeply flawed justice systems. Thus, while I have composed this essay, some central questions have persisted: what afterlife will we make for Ra in the present moment? Given the risk of depoliticization with the increasing historicization of his work, could we restake the value of his life-long sonic reckoning project vis-à-vis the contemporary circumstances of black futurity—and the preservation of a human future at large?
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I. PRELUDE: LISTENING IN THE ARCHIVE—A METHODOLOGY

*Among all the sounds in the earth’s many-colored dream  
A soft note calls to the secret listener.*

- AUGUST WILHELM VON SCHLEGEL

If an artist cultivates a radical aesthetics of possibility from the materiality of the surrounding world—refusing the limitation of this world's boundaries—then how do we trace and theorize the impetus that fuels their creation of an alternative way of being? How do we understand such an aesthetics when, upon first glance, it seems strange, unordered or opaque in our common understanding? As researchers in this kind of undercommons, it is necessary to work against the dominating narratives around an artist's work that can tend toward pathologization: particularly, those that may frame them as an "outsider" on the margins of the world we are most familiar with, speaking in tones unfamiliar to our trained ears. To be the one who listens in secret is to be attuned to something not inaudible, but soft. If we take up the position of researcher-as-secret-listener – working alongside the so-called "outsider" artist who is not outside at all, but instead looking outward from below and within this world that we reside in – what then becomes audible?

Such an endeavor requires our engagement with a multiplicitous archive—one that, in itself, might refuse or at least trouble the institutional boundaries that define a site of research. While physical archives, such as those found in libraries, museums or other cultural institutions, are certainly important resources for the study of specific people or events, they are as capable of being destructive of knowledge as they are of creating it. When we rely on the materials preserved by such institutions and solely on what those institutions hold as objects of resonance—without considering the sources of information that exist off of the page—then we
risk producing myopic, even positivist research. Ammiel Alcalay has written about how materials that provide an understanding of a whole are often dispersed, “housed in disparate institutions, remaining unedited, unlinked, and out of touch with each other. Distortions can be introduced. The record of work, as well as the coming together of people in common endeavor and friendship, is atomized, pulled apart, stored in separate containers, making it much harder for us to inhabit coherent stories, to make sense of ourselves, our history, and the times we live in” (8). On top of this, materials can stay boxed up those institutions for years before resources become available for archivists and librarians to even begin cataloging them. This can be especially true for those artists, thinkers and writers who have been minoritized and/or considered against the grain in some way – to say nothing of those whose “complete” materials may not yet have institutional homes, if ever at all. Whatever we find then, may be part of a larger score, “orchestrated fragments,” as Brent Hayes Edwards has written, that "echo the fragmentation of the archive itself. They are meant as a reminder that the redistribution of archival artifacts into a historical narrative cannot deliver the past in a manner that would be seamless, much less exhaustive" Even when we do find the papers that could be read in concert with one another, Edwards writes, “Still, the gaps remain” (961).

How do we begin to fill the gaps, especially when we study a figure who seems to always running from both their subjection and objecthood? Tactile encounters with the physical archive are only a first step in attuned, secret listening. Diana Taylor has written of the etymological origins of archive as "a beginning, the first place, the government," in which much stake is put its material documents – the most tangible and accessible form of historical information (19). The archive is only the initial site of inquiry. We can think of listening in secret as being attentive to details: the seemingly peripheral, lower-frequency cues in an artist's work that
beckon our attention—those that, as Alexandra Vazquez has written, "attend to us even as we attend to them," that serve as resonant "portals offered and withheld by many a sage elder during the study of difficult histories" (29). To understand the radical potential of the performer/artist-as-experimentalist—the insider called outsider—we must sound deeply, seeking such cues in the remnants of a life, composed across time: texts, images, sound recordings, contradictory proclamations, poetic prophecies, live renditions of myth-driven repertoire as performed by successors. Not just the documented information, but the undocumented as well. Even, to some extent, hearsay, tales, or the unplaceable and ungrounded anecdotes in the aura that the artist has left behind.
II. ALIEN PERFORMANCE AND THE ACT OF RECKONING

“….The refusal to let images of destruction destroy: joy. The refusal to allow the looping cycle of violence to quell imagination: joy. This is the aesthetics of possibility, of making something out of the materiality of what is in order to imagine, and enact by imagining, that possibility is irreducible.” ASHON CRAWLEY, "Do It For the Vine"

“I am looking for people to make Judgment Day a reality and to realize that neither God nor anybody else is going to judge humanity – they have to do the judging as to what is proper for them to survive.... I'm paving the way for humanity to recognize the myth and become part of my mythocracy instead of their theocracies and their democracies and these other -ocracies they've got....” SUN RA, from Robert Mugge’s A Joyful Noise

Such an artist-experimentalist might perform time travel to reckon with the historically imposed structures of impossibility upon their alienated life. To reckon can mean to interfere with something that has been a place – perhaps a (re)calculation or (re)consideration. In prophecies of the earth's apocalypse, reckoning is the passing of judgment, coinciding with the resurrection of the dead. If such action can also be considered a refusal to accept things that one supposedly cannot change—the as if that allows for possibility to be summoned—how can this refusal undo the death grip on the body? If, to paraphrase artist Martyne Sims, this planet is all we have—and the physical body itself cannot depart from the present dimension—how do we perform within the world we have in order to make such alien life possible? How to mediate between the language of impossibility that has put constraints on the present experience of the alien members of humanity, and the creative experiment necessary to proceed?

As researchers, we can use the variations on the archive as a score in our own repertoire of reckoning, especially when we are trying to make a place in scholarship that challenges the undermining of minoritized people. My broader study is particularly invested in the reckoning performances of artists of color: those whose bodies have been racialized and historically rendered alien throughout the western world, and whose existence has been subject to a long,
perpetuated history of devaluation within social order—one in which western bourgeois "Man" (i.e. white, male, typically Christian) is a superior form of humanity. Such devaluation can be understood as an imposition of social death—a remnant condition of slavery in which a person was uprooted from their heritage, environment and general way of life, rendered into a liminal alien subject because of their perceived “threat to the moral and social order” (Patterson 46). (Lisa Marie Cacho more recently has articulated the imposition of social death as the way in which “human value is made intelligible through radicalized, sexualized, spatialized and state-sanctioned violences” (4).) My intention is to understand the ways in which certain artists of color perform alien strangeness—already non-commonsensical or disorderly within the racialized world we live in—for the sake of life, or perhaps even an alternative to the concept of life in our present society.

As Alexander Weheliye writes, "Because black cultures have frequently not had access to Man's language, world, future, or humanities, black studies has developed a set of assemblages through which to perceive and understand a world in which subjection is but one path to humanity, neither its exception nor its idealized feature" (135). I want to articulate what it is that we can learn from the black artist who, in their act of reckoning, leaves behind their subjection and objecthood through such alternative assemblages. I am especially interested how such multimedia and multi-time assemblages manifest themselves in the performer’s body and allow them to realize a different way of being. How can we articulate the process of leaving the white-orientated definitions of “Man” behind for such different ways of being—one that might be spoken in a different kind of language?

Moving forward, I consider the archival materials and traces of African-American sound experimentalist, big band leader, prodigious keyboard player, poet, thinker and self-proclaimed
Saturnite Sun Ra— an artist who reckoned by subverting and owning his alien position in a way that confounded many of his spectators. I am considering Ra’s work as a social intervention of experimental performance, embodied in his dress, music, language, thinking and general being. Performance can comprise of the practices or events “that involve theatrical, rehearsed, or conventional/event-appropriate behaviors” (such as music performance or poetic recitation), but it can also be any embodied practice that functions as a way of knowing: the rehearsal of “[c]ivic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnic, and sexual identity, for example…in the public sphere” (Taylor 3). I would emphatically add racial identity to this rehearsal list, and, in the vein of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s work, emphasize that study is an operating force in such rehearsal—study being "what you do with other people," the "talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three" ("Studying Through the Undercommons"). For the artist of color, or any minoritized person for that matter, life itself—precarious and not always mattering enough, if at all, in the world at large—might necessitate experimentation so that new methods of survival might be discovered. When such an artist projects their non-normative and precarious personhood outward, refusing to be held down, then a utopian space of possibility is conjured into existence—like a countering hologram upon the structures of a world that tries to keep it from manifesting. Such projection is a way for the artist to both be in and know their world, but also something that an audience can receive and accept as knowledge—if they are so able to tune in.

Born in Birmingham in 1914 (a birth that he referred to as his “arrival day”), Sun Ra reinvented an identity for himself that embraced racial strangeness as an alternative way of being. He claimed for most of his adult life that he was abducted by aliens in 1936, taken to his origin planet of Saturn, and told by the aliens that "when it looked like the world was going into
complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak….I would speak, and the world would listen” (Szwed 29-30). Ra rarely broke character from his alien act until his passing in 1993. His band—commonly known as the Sun Ra Arkestra, though they play under several permutations of that name[^1]—continues to perform his music today under the leadership of original member Marshall Allen, still donning the science fiction/Ancient Egypt mash-up costumes that they have worn for decades. Ra’s performative character cannot be isolated from his sonic innovation—he championed electronic instruments in his music early on, and since his passing has been increasingly acknowledged as a forefather of both free jazz and Afrofuturist aesthetics. With the recent occasion of his 2014 centennial, Ra has even been celebrated at New York’s Jazz at Lincoln Center—a mainstream jazz institution that, until recently, has shied away from the experimental (Walls).

However, Ra received little mainstream attention in the U.S. and was often dismissed by music critics in his lifetime, even with the rising popularization and institutional shaping of jazz throughout it. Scholars and aficionados alike have rectified this decades following his death: there exists an exhaustive and impressive biography by John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (1998); various archival, curatorial and publication initiatives by John Corbett (particularly, archival reprints and artists’ essays under the WhiteWalls imprint); Hartmut Geerken’s edited collection of Ra poems, *The Immeasurable Equation* (2005); and most recently, collected texts published by Miriam Linna’s Kicks books, *The Planet is Doomed: The Science Fiction Poetry of Sun Ra* (2011) and *Prophetica* (2014), with several poetry and other rare recordings on Linna and Billy Miller’s label, Norton Records. That being said: in both criticisms and celebrations of Ra, past and present, there is a tendency to highlight his eccentricity and outsider status without much consideration to the relationship between his
political ideology and aspects of his performance. In the last 10 years, there have been some scholars and artists who have more explicitly addressed this relationship. Most immediately, scholarship by Nathaniel Earl Bowles, Brent Hayes Edwards, Carter Mathes, Anthony Reed and Nathan Ragain come to mind, as well as interdisciplinary projects by artists such as Cauleen Smith and Rana Hamadeh. Several of these thinkers have especially meditated on the particularity of Ra’s language in relation to his alien act and outer space. Their studies greatly underscore my understanding of his work, and have provided some footing as I proceed.

Ra would often speak elliptically, never claiming absolutes but often speaking in the abstract, at times alluding to some other plane of reasoning—something distant from western civilization, even Earth itself. “On this stage of existence I am nothing. But on another I am in the role of Ra,” he says to the writer Henry Dumas, in a recorded 1966 conversation at Slug Saloon in Manhattan’s Lower East Side. He continues, explaining his music as a function of that other stage, calling it “Astro Infinity music” in the moment: “The highest aspiration for many on earth is freedom. Astro Infinity music is beyond freedom. It is precision, discipline…. It is coordination and sound interdependence. It is the design of another world.” Though upon first hearing “Astro Infinity music” may sound like something nonsensical, there is serious meaning in Ra’s playful phrase: it implies a music that is limitless, beyond the bounds of the current configuration of the world we live in. As he says to Dennis Irving of WBAI Pacifica Radio in 1968, “Infinity is only a method for dimension because it can’t be measured. Anything which can’t be measured can’t really be proven to exist. Infinity is so big that it can’t be measured.” To claim that such infinite music is beyond freedom in 1966 feels especially weighted, foreshadowing the civic estrangements of black people to come in the years following the historicized “end” of the Civil Rights Movement (Tillet 135). We can understand Ra as offering
a further counterculture to a preexisting U.S. counterculture of the time, evoking another (way of being in the) world so that such an alternative can in fact be imagined into practice, beyond the limitations of governance or other forms of human ordering—a “mythocracy instead of their theocracies and their democracies and these other -ocracies they’ve got.”

Music, then, is Ra’s way of producing and transmitting knowledge; a tool to break the master’s house—a way of undoing much of the language that keeps us ordered, or in order. As he says, "They say history repeats itself. But they say history is his story. You haven't heard my story yet….Because history repeats itself, but my story is endless: it never repeats itself"

(Mugge). Sound does not stay in; it projects outward, and by embodying himself as a musical prophet, Ra is able to project himself, too, outward into the infinite, where he cannot be restrained. But where to? For Ra, space is what is out—unknown and uncolonized territory unlike Earth, perhaps best reachable through sound. Music is a mode of knowing, an ontology, for determining what else is possible; this is what Ra means he tells his band members that they are not musicians but “tone scientists.” Anthony Reed makes the case for taking Ra’s idiosyncrasies seriously, suggesting that “space is a revolutionary trope” in his work—thus making him “fundamentally a political realist who uses a particular grammar at a critical moment in time to “remove or circumvent what W.E.B. DuBois termed the ‘limitations of allowable thought’—ideology itself.” Ideology, as Reed uses the term, “names the imaginary forms through which we live our relations to real, material conditions…. [It] does not refer to the 'ideas' or 'preferences' of the dominant classes, but instead refers to the processual forms and mechanisms within which… the horizon of the possible—the predictable regularity and integrity of the system—is inscribed" (121).
Within Ra's broader project, reckoning, then, could be read as the way in which he tries to transcend the horizon of possibility. As Ra says to Irving, “You can’t represent infinity unless you touch the past too…. Mostly I’m talking about the future with infinity, but you have to be able to demonstrate the past too, in order to even compare anything else.” To be able to look towards a future away from an inhibiting planet requires a reckoning with the past. For the alien artist, to reckon with the past geographical and temporal sites of impossible living may be reoccurring, necessitating the improvisation of one’s alternate existence a little further each time.

One such past site for thinking about Sun Ra’s vision is 1950s Chicago, the place where he chose to leave behind his “slave name,” as he described it, of Herman Poole Blount, and first embarked on his music-driven mission with the Arkestra. In 1957, he and the band performed a soundtrack for a polemical documentary film called *The Cry of Jazz*, directed by a local disc jockey named Edward Bland. Guided by a black narrator in the presence of an interracial group of young people, Bland’s film offers a brief social history of jazz as an African American art form, lashing predominantly at white critics who fail to credit it as such. While the film has been recognized as the first polemic by an African American to be directed at white culture, it may also be the first moment in which skepticism is so directly expressed toward the musical genre’s future: the infamous, now decades-old proclamation that “jazz is dead.” The narrator, Alex, states that while the spirit of jazz thrives, the “jazz body”—the repetitive and constraining form of the chorus and its improvised variations—“cannot grow because it was not meant to grow. Its dead body stands as a monument to the negro, who is who is supposed to die in the American scheme of things. Any attempts to develop the form or changes of jazz is only a circular see saw, which leads America or the negro to nowhere. Jazz is dead because in a way the
strangling image of the futureless future has made the negro a dead thing too. The negro can only become alive by the construction of America’s future.”

Meanwhile, the blaring horns of the Arkestra enter the soundtrack, while images of decrepit buildings and a burning house flash on the screen, alluding to earlier montages in the film where similar structures were shown with black people moving through and living in them. (Consider that Chicago was at that time, and still is, one of the most segregated major cities in the United States, the result of decades of racist lending and housing policies instigated by corporations even the federal government to prevent neighborhoods from integrating.) Through this depiction Bland makes black people and the structures to which they are confined analogous to the jazz spirit and the musical form that it resides in. The narrator concludes, “Jazz is dead because the restraints and suffering of American life on the negro have to die. The spirit of jazz is alive because the negro spirit must endure.” We hear a young Ra play a spiked, looped fragment on a keyboard, with an increasing sense of dissonance at each repetition. Some undisclosed number of years later, when asked about Bland’s thesis in The Cry of Jazz, Ra said that “he was wrong,” offering no further explanation (Szwed 163).

Though we cannot know the specifics behind Ra’s curt refutation, I include it here because it beckons us to listen: what are the possibilities of dissenting belief here? One, perhaps, is that the body should not be pathologized as simply “dead” so quickly—there is subversive potential in that repetition that burgeons with noisy vitality in each looping. I am drawn in this moment of the film to the detail of Ra’s demonstrated “changing same”—to take a phrase from Amiri Baraka—in which we see his hands run furiously over the keys. While this illustrates the constraining, dying jazz body of Bland’s thesis, it also brings to mind later scenes of elliptical performance in Ra’s repertoire. To be elliptical, by definition, has multivalent possibility: it is to
be condensed, repetitive, and/or opaque. Consider the ellipsis, too, as the thought that drifts off, left open to someone else’s response or interpretation. But to be elliptical also implies an ovular motion, and thus, always being in orbit. The elliptical moments in Ra’s archive are integral to this ontological reckoning, especially when considering his politics and poetics of transfiguration; they are the moving components necessary to put an aesthetics of possibility into performance. Functioning much like a sonic feedback loop, the elliptical moment is a constant return to and augmenting of the body outward, forced by the restrictions upon the body’s mobility and making transcendence from the corporeal possible. This interference begins softly, but the noise that emerges through this insistent poetics refuses to stay locked into the repeated futureless future that surrounds it. Thus, by becoming more audible, this poetics insists on black futurity on a different wavelength, and demands that we, the secret listeners, take note.

As I watch and listen to Sun Ra’s repetitive, evolving motion, I begin to wonder if, perhaps, the wrong in Bland’s conclusion (to Ra’s mind) is an error of semantics: if the body of jazz is dead but the spirit is alive, then jazz is not dead at all but on, as Ra would say, a different plane of existence. The problem could be a limitation of description, the insistence that death comes when the body no longer works. If the body of a spirit is proclaimed to be dead, it is possible for the spirit to seek out a new form of embodiment—or perhaps more aptly, disembodiment. In order to break out of the frame of conditions to which one has been relegated, one must escape the burning building, but also, abolish the need for the building in the first place. I do not mean an elimination of the black human body, but rather, claiming a different set of meanings for the black body. Regarding Bland’s statement that “the negro can only become alive by the construction of America’s future,” this may be another point of disagreement for Ra,
or at least a point of departure. The solution may be, instead, to create a circumstance in which the person of color does not have to rely on (U.S.) America’s future to become “alive.”

Rather, the construction of America’s future instead might rely on the black person’s search for a way out, a future in which America’s neo-Jim Crow chains die without ever regenerating. America, after all, rose upon the enslavement and depersonification (and resulting social death) of black people. What would a future that simultaneously remembers and makes a radical break away from that strand of history look like? To expound on Reed’s point that space for Ra might be a revolutionary trope—and here we can consider space as a place that is unoccupied—the solution could be to find something new: a means of escape without ever actually departing from the black physical body, jazz body, or even planetary body. Though this could mean, as Amiri Baraka once pointed out in a lecture, “don[ning] a costume…. completely outfitted, as if from that vantage point – from outer space.” It was in this way that Sun Ra could “see the planet and its people and its problems from a higher viewpoint…[by] remov[ing] himself the planet itself.”
III. AFRO-ALIENATION AND TRANSFIGURATION: RA IN COSTUME

In the summer of 2013 I had the opportunity to look at materials in the University of Chicago's Chicago Jazz Archive, specifically the Alton Abraham Sun Ra Collection. This series of papers, photographs, books and ephemera were kept by Abraham, Ra's business manager of nearly 50 years, until Abraham's passing in 1999. Nearly disposed of entirely, the collection's items were salvaged by School of the Art Institute of Chicago faculty members John Corbett and Terry Kapsalis, who then donated them to the university. While there are many personal items of Abraham's in the collection, they also offer a paper trail for Ra's activities as a performer over a long period of time, ranging from business records to poetry to polemical pamphlets. While there is a general sense of order in the organization of materials and a good amount of identification (especially of typed poems, promotional materials and recordings), several items and most of the photographs are vaguely identified, if at all.

In one of the last boxes that I looked at during my visit, I pulled out one of these folders, intrigued by the mystery behind its generic yet anachronistic labeling: "Sun Ra and Arkestra, 1950s, 2002." Inside, among the photographs, was a receipt (corresponding with the 2002 date) for the recently processed negatives. Among the redeveloped photographs, four red-hued, re-developed photographs of a young Ra stand out to me. They are each in the same proportion, with a velvet curtain in the background. As subject of the portraits, Ra is always gazing upward, mouth closed, with a closed-mouth almost-smile; it is subversively reminiscent of European Enlightenment portraiture. In each photograph he is in slightly different dress: once in a standard dark suit and tie (fig. 1); once in a fez and what may be a Moroccan-style cloak (fig. 2). In the other two images he dons a silk turban-like headwrap, with shimmering fabric draped over his
suit across the shoulder in one image (fig. 3), and with a silk neckerchief tucked into the jacket in the other (fig. 4).

The clothing is peculiar on the African American Ra, not in the least for the juxtaposition of the western-style suit and foreign clothing, with origins not quite placeable to the common U.S. American eye. Around the presumed time of the photographs, he and the Arkestra would draw attention for what would become signature look: colorful, reflective costumes inspired by ancient Egyptian mythology and futuristic science fiction. Recalling that Ra had changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra in 1952 and began dressing himself and his band in their signature garments in the late 1950s, I could only speculate that these images came from some time in between. According to an anecdote recorded by John Szwed, the relationship between costumes and identity had been on Ra's mind as early as 1944. Reflecting on an early gig that he'd had with a commercial band—whose members would costume themselves in 18th century pre-Liberace clothing—Ra said, "Being black, you don't get no jobs unless you're a freak or something….

People just don't understand that" (Szwed 52).

Daphne Brooks, in her book *Bodies in Dissent*, writes of "Afro Alienation acts," performance strategies in which black subjects turn their state of alterity into cultural expression, rejecting the devaluation and dehumanization of black personhood by transfiguring themselves via literally spectacular performance. Afro-alienes have "questioned (or perhaps eschewed) the high (and unrealistic) bar of credibility set for them by dominant culture in representing and (un)doing themselves, favoring instead dissenting methods of narration and aesthetic articulation….Through their efforts, they [have] waged a battle to reverse the crisis of representational timelessness projected onto blackness" (6). To elaborate on Brooks' articulation: embracing one's position of alienness is a strategy. When Ra speaks of his experience in costume
at the beginning of his career, he is speaking of it as a necessity for economic survival as a black musician in the world: in this context, to appear as a "freak," can supersede one's visibility as a devalued black man in some way, perhaps by making oneself strange enough to transcend visibly racial constraints. As Ra's career develops, the strategy that he first learned as economic becomes a more holistic political tactic. In other words, by coding himself in strange costume, he embraces an act of subversion that pronounces—rather than hides—his strangeness, becoming so much of a spectacle that he is able to own that strangeness and thus seize his own right to life. But it is not so much a right to the particular terms of life for the black person that are defined by the governing forces of the surrounding world; rather, it is the right to life on one's own terms—a right to being, perhaps. This is necessary to move forward and begin imagining possibilities for a way of living that have not yet become real in the present world. If to be alien is to be a stranger in the world—for your appearance, actions, way of speaking, general (non-common) sensibility—then your communication might emerge as code, decipherable only to those who are willing to listen carefully to its nuances.

In the same archival box as the red-hued photographs, I opened another folder holding a single color portrait by photojournalist Richard Scherer (fig. 5). Dated circa 1993, it is a candid shot of Ra near the end of his earth life, costumed in sequined clothing and a soft gold-colored hat, still with the same glance: away from the camera, directed somewhere distant. Flickering between this and the earlier photographs, their adjacency illuminates the transfiguration of black man into self-determined extraterrestrial. They manifest the life-long (and through the archival encounter, resonantly after-lifelong) experiment in pursuit of alternate possibilities through one's blackness. The encounter, crackling with noise, brings to mind Paul Gilroy's definition of a politics of transfiguration: the utopia-oriented "emergence of qualitatively new desires, social
relations, and modes of association," working in a lower frequency, "under the nose of the overseers" (37).

I want to better articulate the way in which such politics—through their performative poetics—are communicated. Consider the etymology of transfiguration: *trans* + *figura*, the changing of the figure: the changing of the body. In the spiritual sense, transfiguration is the moment of divine radiance that allows the spirit to project and take precedence over a mortal body. The increasing loudness of Ra's costumes throughout his life make visible what his music and writing declares: a transcendence of socially dead black life in the present, via an embrace of its peculiarity, executed by projecting *outward* through it. Consider this with the explanation that Ra gave for his and the Arkestra's dress in 1986:

“[I]n the early days in every nation, everyone had their costume. Cause they identified the nation. Like everyone today got their flags and things. That represents the nation. And that's the colors. If you're out fighting a battle, they say: 'Fly your colors. You got to have your colors.' And so every night I'm fighting a different kind of battle, so I have to change according to that night.... Costumes are music. Colors throw out musical sounds, too. Every color throws out vibrations of life.” (Corbett 313)

While Ra is speaking metaphorically here—of the musical stage as a battlefield—in the context of Ra's larger body of work, there is also much to unpack: what is the nation that Ra represents? As one of the Arkestra songs go, perhaps it is the "Astro Nation of the United World in Outer Space:" "we hereby declare ourselves to be another order of being." By making costume and music analogous in his synesthetic explanation, we can understand the two as components of his multivalent ontology: costume as color as music as the vibrations of life. In the daily, changing-same battle that the artist must fight (or perform), it is the vibrations – via music –
through which one transcends the limits of the body, and thus, the normalization that it could never be a part of.
Four images from the University of Chicago Alton Abraham Sun Ra Collection, (Box 56, Folder 5: "Sun Ra and Arkestra, 1950s, 2002"). All images courtesy of University of Chicago Library.
(Fig. 5) Photograph of Sun Ra by photojournalist Richard Scherer, circa 1993, from the University of Chicago Alton Abraham Sun Ra Collection. Courtesy of University of Chicago Library.
IV. REPRISE: TIME TRAVEL AS RECKONING IN SPACE IS THE PLACE

As Ra says, "They say history is his story: you haven't heard my story yet." Before proceeding forward, we need to loop back. Once Ra has transfigured himself and found a way to move into the future and out of our present time, what does he do with his past? To recapitulate Baraka’s comments, it is through such transfiguration that Ra could see Earth—or “the world,” presumably, a world overwhelmingly colonized by white supremacy, capitalism, theocracies, democracies, and “all these other -ocracies”—from a distant position.

As I tread again over Ra’s piano-playing scene in The Cry of Jazz, a scene from another film, made 15 years later, comes to mind. In 1974 Ra starred in Space is the Place—directed by John Coney, co-written by Joshua Smith and Ra, and aptly described by Ra biographer John Szwed as parts documentary, science fiction, blaxploitation and revisionist bible epic. From what we are told at the beginning of the film, Ra and the Arkestra have been away from the Earth since 1969, having set out on a music-powered spaceship in search of a new planet for black people to settle on, away from Earth’s violent “sounds of guns, anger and frustration.” Upon finding this new and promising planet, Ra travels back to Earth, but also back in time, to the year 1943. There, we see Ra under the employ of Chicago burlesque club as piano player “Sonny Ray” (a real nickname that he used in Birmingham). When a man, a black pimp-overlord known as “the Overseer,” demands that Ra get off the stage so that the main attraction could follow, he does not leave, instead transitioning into a fast swing riff. At first the music passes for an accompaniment, so the dancers emerge onto the stage. Ra persists playing so furiously, however, that the music wreaks havoc: as he plays with increasing loudness and cacophony, smoke fills the room, furniture flies across the room and both patrons and dancers alike run for their lives. Ra’s musicianship (brought over by way of a musician’s ship, of course), in other words, literally
brings the house down. Finally the piano rolls away and he and the Overseer, the only two people in the room, sit across from one another, Ra stone-faced. “I should have known you would pull some shit like this,” the Overseer says. “What is this?” Ra only responds, “Are you ready to alter your destiny?” Both characters are instantly transported to a desert, and so commences “End of the World”: a supernatural tarot card game in which the Ra and Overseer compete for the fate of the black race before the Earth’s imminent demise.

Initially I wondered about the relevance of 1943, which seemed an arbitrary year for this moment in the film. In actuality, 1943 was the year in which Ra had been imprisoned as a conscientious objector in Walker County, Alabama, where psychiatrists described him as “a psychopathic personality,” “sexually perverted,” yet a “well-educated colored intellectual” (Szwed 46). He was ultimately released on account of a hernia that would have disqualified him from military service anyway. Ra (still named Blount then) returned to Birmingham angry and disillusioned, though he briefly maintained a professional swing band there. After the passing of his beloved great aunt in that same year, Ra saw no reason to stay in Birmingham and departed for Chicago, joining the large wave of black departures from the South that we know as the Second Great Migration. While I am mindful of the ambiguity of authorship in Space is the Place—Smith and Ra were acknowledged as its “co-writers,” and I can only make assumptions as to whose idea the 1943 time-trip may have been—the knowledge of Ra’s real-life 1943 makes the scene that much more symbolic, especially when it is prominently scored by Ra’s vengeful piano playing.

Though Ra’s revisitation of the past may seem a fiction, we can actually read the scene as a metaphor for his own reckoning, and all the meanwhile reckon alongside him. Time travel is exigent because it allows the traveler to make sense of a historical experience (whether their own
or someone else’s), with the possibility of liberating themselves from a dominant historical narrative that dictates how it is, exactly, that they or their persons of study are supposed to be interpreted. Ra revisits a relevant year of his past after having been to the future. He intervenes with his history through a changed and charged musical sound, capable of dismantling the room that he plays in. Here I cannot help thinking, simultaneously, about Bland’s images of burning and derelict houses in *The Cry of Jazz*, and Audre Lorde’s words: “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (2). Through his particular sound—experimental and nevertheless rooted in black American blues tradition—Ra transgresses and transcends both history and the present moment. By going back to the 1943 burlesque club, he intervenes in two ways: 1) with his own early years as a swing pianist, as though to pay homage to his musical upbringing while showing how he himself had always been farther out of the tradition of his time, and 2) with the assumption that the black musician’s role is simply as entertainer or accompanist, with no relevance in his work beyond that. As we learn from the beginning of *Space is the Place*, musical language can be the source of intellectual thought and thus actually affect the scheme of the world. We see how Ra uses music as a way of proselytizing the new black planet as the film progresses. However, that he could not do this without having first been to the future and back.

Meanwhile, it is curious that the Overseer is himself a black man, though one who is unable to liberate himself from this world of guns, anger and frustration. (Of course, the character’s name refers to the Southern plantation authorities who oversaw the daily labor of slaves; usually the overseer was a white man, but occasionally a black slave would fill that role.) The first card that the Overseer pulls from the tarot card deck is “THE WORLD” and the next is
his mode of transport: “THE CHARIOT,” depicted by a white winged Cadillac. Over the course of the film we see how the Overseer is a salacious character, concerned with, as musicologist Philip Ford writes, “the world as he understands it — the world of cars, clothes, cash, and ass. The world of matter, the world as it is, not what it might become, not what transcends it.” The black man cannot rely on this already collapsing planet for survival. Ra, of course, follows by pulling a card called “JUDGEMENT,” featuring his reckoning tool: the music-powered spaceship in which he and the Arkestra have traveled.
V. INTERLUDE: REPETITION AND GOING "OUT" IN "SPACE IS THE PLACE"

"The music is different here; the vibrations are different, not like planet Earth—planet Earth sounds of guns, anger and frustration. There was no one to talk to on planet Earth that would understand; so we set up a colony for black people here to see what they could do without White people. They could drink of the beauty of this planet; it would affect their vibrations, for the better of course. Another place in the universe, up under different stars. That would be where the alter-destiny would come in. Equation-wise the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time. We bring them here through either isotope transportation, transmolecularization, or better still, teleport the whole planet here through music."

SUN RA, *Space is the Place*

As the endless loop of the battle for everyday black survival continues (and the resistance against a universal notion of living that is hardly universal at all), it seems like an apocalypse would be eminent. However, it is music’s time-based form that allows Ra to perform and proselytize the potential of transfiguration for overcoming such a moment. Sun Ra's breadth as a musician was as wide as his longevity, encompassing everything from ragtime and swing to free jazz, experimental classical music, funk and even disco. The underlying thread of his music making has persistently been an orientation towards what *could be*; he is able to retain elements of the jazz form but also go out and away from it, freeward. While Edward Bland dichotomized the relationship between the jazz chorus and its improvisations as hope for change against a "futureless future," Ra's music can complicate the assumption that such hope is in vain. In resonance with the film of the same name, I want to fixate on the song "Space is the Place" as an example. In this composition, it is the perpetual chorus—steadfast though slowly falling away from its retaining structure—that enacts the possibility of ideological undoing. First recorded and
released in 1973, “Space is the Place” remains a mantra and standard for the Arkestra to this day—the song is performed or alluded to in many of their performances. Depending on which recording or performance you listen to, the song can range anywhere from a few minutes to nearly half an hour. The original version, which I will refer to (released on a record also called *Space is the Place*), is over 21 minutes long. The song's chorus is comprised of three semi-constant parts: a 5-against-4 beat baritone saxophone riff in the background, enduringly in orbit and performed by veteran member Danny Ray Thompson, at various times taken over by Pat Patrick (usually renowned for his sax playing) on a funky electric bass; the melismatic alto singing of the late June Tyson in the fore, following an even 4-beat rhythm; and somewhere in the middle of the orchestration, a group of voices that play off Tyson's, credited in album as part of the "Space Ethnic Voices" (Cheryl Banks, Judith Holton and Ruth Wright, plus doubling instrumentalists Akh Tal Ebah (trumpet) and John Gilmore (tenor sax)). Thompson and Tyson's rhythms are almost always present but never line up. Thompson's idiosyncratic countermelody hardly ever changes. Tyson's main verse is simple: "Space is the place / Space is the place / Space is the place, yeah / Space is the place," with the female Space Ethnic Voices echoing an almost contrapuntal, elongated version of the phrase ("space is the plaaaaace"). Other verses are also simple, uplifting and easy enough—as though for children to remember, like:

There's no limit
To the things that you can do
There's no limit
To the things that you can be

Your thought
Is free
And your life is
Worthwhile

These verses are not simply hopeful—they are assertive and doubtless in their joyfulness. Space is infinite and unrestrictive, unlike Earth: *there's no limit!* Beyond the parts of the chorus, there is even more happening, and things get weirder (or farther out) as the song develops. Sun Ra alternates between chords on his electronic "space organ" while a male Space Ethnic Voice sounds ecstatic, blues-ing vocalizations with some whooping thrown in, "*Yeah, yeah, yeah!* *Space is the place....*" The reeds, which begin by previewing Tyson's theme in unison, get freer and freer from one another, becoming more autonomous but remaining part of the collective; –at some point, Gilmore starts to get into bebop-like territory on his tenor sax, while bass clarinetist Eloé Omoe swims around in the swirl. And of course, there is Ra on the keyboard, varying his sound often: sometimes he produces deep and dissonant chords on the lower end of the space organ, while at other times, he goes along with the horns and gives the effect that we are on a spaceship exiting the Earth's apocalypse, making science-fiction film sounds reminiscent of a sputtering engine or buttons on a command board. Human and instrumental voices fade in and out and the dynamic varies, but always, there is a sense of going out and away from the uneven-yet-rhythmic groundedness of the chorus. The song, as an enclosed form with a beginning and end, is absolute: it knows its mortality by these parameters yet refuses to accept their inevitability. "*Space is the place!*" the male voice shouts. "*Don't you know?*" This is the alter-destiny that becomes possible for black people after reckoning, the flip side of the warning that the Arkestra chants in the opening of the film *Space is the Place*: "*It's after the end of the world!* *Don't you know that yet?*"
When the rhythmic chorus finally fades out with Tyson's lone and distant voice, it is Ra's space organ that joins at a louder dynamic, ultimately having the last word with its imitations of a spaceship going into overdrive. It is a literal musical example of "time as officially ended," to echo Ra's phrase in the film. Time on the Man-dominated planet has a particular rhythm and history; it is the transfiguring ensemble, in its disavowal of such time through dissonance, which can undo it. The ensemble's interruption of tonal acceptability is an interfering resonance, a message that gets in the way of another message—holding its own agenda, interfering with the reception of the more dominant, louder message (Attali 26). The ensemble jams the greater signal, comprised of the institutions that deny blackness to even exist. The noise is an interruption, and could be blasphemous, disorderly and cacophonous to the common harmony. This is the noise that becomes the alternative to earthly life, knows what happens around it and seeks an elsewhere, sounding through its surrounding space—sounding to those of us who will open our ears to it. Not just those who will hear it in passing, but those who will listen carefully to it. In Space is the Place, while investigating the new black planet, Ra gives a plan: "We'll work on the other side of time." This is the only thing to do once time and Earth, bound up in one another, have officially ended. By Ra's account, we have already entered a post-apocalypse in which being part of mankind on Earth is not enough; the new planet, meanwhile, is full of promise for an actual future.

To re-contextualize the words of Sara Ahmed, we might make joyful noise when we wish to transcend pain (215). The body is the ultimate place of pain, for it is perishable, disposable, refuse—it is refusale. It is also the body's appearance that determines its mobility or immobility in its place of inhabitance. The uplifting verses of "Space is the Place" are stuck in the constraint of time, though they occasionally seem to slip down into the lower frequencies, where they can't
be heard unless we are listening for them. What becomes possible when we keep trying to quietly push ourselves out of the loop that encloses us? It feels so impossible to escape. Yet, about 18 minutes into the song, all sound halts. Then, we hear it: a distant arpeggiated hum, sounding in a blues scale. This is the penultimate utterance of the song—before June Tyson resumes singing in *a cappella*—that offers the listener the most determined flight away from the constant chorus.

To evoke the words of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney: "Some people want to run things, other things want to run." If they ask you, tell them we were flying. Knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a *break*" (*The Undercommons* 51, emphasis mine). The hum is the first clear break from the loop. Quiet as it is, we can also hear it as the first act of subversive signal jamming—it reckons with the space that carries it, navigating the air to determine a way to proceed. When Ra sets foot on the new planet in *Space is the Place*, his first utterance is also a hum: the voice leaves the body as though to evaluate the unfamiliar air, then comes back to the ear for assessment. "The music is different here, the vibrations are different," he observes, determining the planet to be a space that makes black being possible—one in which the damages of the past place are far away. Remember? "Not like planet Earth…with its sounds of guns, anger and frustration," he determines. The hum—the music that becomes the ontological extension of the body—is a method for sounding the air, and the first thing to suggest whether this new place could become home once the current configuration of Earth fully comes apart.
VI. THE SCHEME OF WORDS: RE-ORDERING, RESURRECTION, MYTH

In his piece "The Case of Blackness," Fred Moten addresses the pathologization of blackness as social death at length, asking, "How can we fathom a social life that tends toward death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which because of such a tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality…. How is it that the off harmony of life, sociality and blackness is the condition of possibility of the claim that there is no black social life?" (187-188) For Ra, the enactment of that condition of possibility comes through music, a means of flight away from the psychic and physical destruction of Planet Earth, with all of the violent and painful sounds that underscore humanity's being, especially black being. Jacques Attali might call music, by way of its being organized noisemaking, "[t]he only possible challenge to repetitive power…. the route of the permanent affirmation of the right to be different…. that is, the right to compose one's life" (132). Ra's music—a manifest body of sound that extends from the physical body—is as much an ontological extension of oneself as it is a projection of a desired future, away from the death-pathology that the world can impose on one's personhood. Music, therefore, is also part of the broader way in which Ra uses sound to reckon with the pathologizing constraints that keep many members of humanity from the right to compose their own lives. As he writes in the poem "man and planet earth," "the planet is the way it is because of / the scheme of words" (1-2). This scheme, or these “patterns of concept” (5), determines what man is in relation to the planet. Ra declares that

      it is not that
      the planet is wrong or man is wrong

      It is just that
      the scheme of words are not possible
In this poem, "the scheme of words" articulates the connection between language, place and ideology. "The scheme of words" equals language, and language is a knowledge system through which we define society and its governing powers (i.e. "the planet"\(^{11}\)). Such a knowledge system could constrain humans (presumably synonymous with "man" in Ra's poem) to a particular conception of personhood—or, a "pattern of concept." Therefore, this conception also determines the legibility of humans as worthy citizens—as "man"—of the place (i.e. "the planet") that we inhabit. When the scheme of words proves to be dysfunctional, an alternative scheme—a different way of knowing, a different "planet"—is necessary for humanity's survival.

Sylvia Wynter quotes from Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* to this extent: "among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things and their order…only one, that which began a century and a half ago [in the Western world] and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear. And that appearance…was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge…. If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared…one can certainly wager that man would be erased" (257). Wynter proceeds to articulate this notion of man as "Man," with a capital *M*: "our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human…which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself…. [A]ll our present struggles, with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation ethnicity, struggles to the environment, [etc.]…—these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle" (260-261). As Ra states in an earlier line of "man and planet earth," "if the scheme of words"—again, the language, which is the means by which knowledge is produced—"were changed / then man and planet earth would be / different / than what it is today" (6-8). In order for humanity to break away from the caste system in which
"Man" is deemed the supreme configuration of the human, the scheme words must be reconfigured: that is, humanity must find alternate forms of knowledge and existence. One alternative, then, rather than to live or die as a human in a [M]an's world, is to hold the position of an alien—someone from some place else entirely.

Thus, while Ra performs his afro-alienness as an extraterrestrial messenger on Earth, we should also understand such performance—music especially, but also words, appearance, a general state of being with and affecting others—as a refusal of the world of Man and the structures that allow its various violent forms of normativity and purification to prevail. By Ra's logic, in order to escape such social death, one must also abandon a belief in the ideologically imposed definition of life within this particular social order of the planet:

"I've separated myself from everything that in general you call life. I've concentrated entirely on music, and I'm preoccupied with the planet. In my music I create experiences that are difficult to express, especially in words. I've abandoned the habitual, and my previous life is of no significance to me anymore. I don't remember when I was born….And this is exactly what I want to teach everybody: that it is important to liberate oneself from the obligation of being born, because this experience doesn't help us at all. It is important for the planet that its inhabitants do not believe in being born, because whoever is born has to die." (Szwed 6, emphasis mine)

Cryptic as that statement may initially seem, it does provide insight into the way in which Ra performed his own mode of being in the world. Within this explanation may be a primer for those of us listening in the present: one for departing from the definition of life, which we can perhaps understand to mean belonging, or citizenry, or freedom—all those things to which Man
is entitled. To liberate oneself from being *born* is to refuse taking part in a racialized world in which one's humanity is not enough—in which you are almost instantly and systemically categorized by the social structures that support the dichotomy between Man and "Other." In being born into such a world you become definable, tangible, easily restrained. To be pinned down in this way within a social order, a scheme of words, is to be predestined in value and belonging. Music, then, is a system of thought and communication that, in its lower-frequencies codedness, offers a kind of *after-life* or "*alter-destiny*" (as Ra often put it) where the conventions of this particular mortality can be undone. Through this embodied epistemology of music, blackness in particular can transcend the pathologization that such schemes of words incite.

As Ra explains to Henry Dumas in the Slug's Saloon interview, "The blackman [sic] is under the name of death…. A *negro* equals a *necro*. The sound of one is in the other. In Greek *necro* means dead body. Necropolis is a city of the dead. Once you accept the name without checking into things then you are automatically a citizen of the city." Here, we hear Ra equate the blackman-as-*negro*, in the Man-oriented scheme of the world, to a dead body. If one accepts the word *negro* (just one sub-pattern of concept in the larger scheme of the planet), then one is instantly part of the city of the dead. "*Negro*" is, too, a word of human categorization in the western world, once used to pathologize black slaves transported across the Atlantic not as Man but as an "irrational or subrational Human Other" (Wynter 266), and thus, a word that facilitated the imposition of social death upon black people. When Dumas asks Ra how the citizens of Necropolis in this analogy might be resurrected, Ra responds that it will occur "*[m]ostly through music and myth. But it's not just the blackman who is in trouble. You can look in your newspapers and read how the whole planet is in trouble, in need of a spiritual awakening."
Interestingly, while Ra's knowledge emerges specifically from his experience as a black man in the United States, the above statements about being "born" and being a citizen of Necropolis seem to also direly speak to a more collective humanity. If we accept the logic of Ra's above statements, then anyone who accepts "being born" as a way of coming into this world will die; anyone who accepts the language of negro (as a category for themselves or others) will become a part of the city of the dead. Being born and to accepting the scheme of language are synonymous. The newspapers in the time surrounding 1966 (the year in which Ra and Dumas are speaking to one another)—with regards to the United States alone—are filled with news underscored by the stakes of survival: revolts in Watts, Harlem, Rochester and Philadelphia, violent attacks and killings of Civil Rights activists, critical marches for Civil Rights around the country, the death of Malcolm X, Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty, the Moynihan Report, the Vietnam War, and much more—to say nothing of other world events. These events are context for the urgency that Ra is communicating. In the actuality of things, we all remain on this planet. If the scheme of words that define the planet cannot be altered with the help of humanity at large, then those seeking resurrection will have to reorder something on a different plane—that which Ra refers to as myth. Such a plane exists on alternative terms—"infinite terms," as he later tells Dumas: "I am painting pictures of another plane of existence, you might say, something so far away that it seems nonexistent or impossible. In infinite terms anything is possible."

Here we are again with infinity: that which cannot be measured and thus cannot be proven to exist, just as a myth cannot be proven to exist. Myth is not just infinite, but also infinitive, unrooted in time. In this sense, mythmaking allows for transcendence from the repetition of the world's common time ("the futureless future") and language. As Ra tells Dennis
Irving in their 1968 interview, when asked about one of the many credited permutations of the Arkestra's name (the "Myth Science Arkestra"):

"The myth science is over within infinity, which is the myth to what you might call humanity. They don't know about that. They're [here] in this limited world, which is the reality. Outside of the reality is the myth, which—if they don't reach out to the myth, they're still gonna be in the circles of the reality, which tightening, it's just like tightening a noose around someone's neck, and this reality keeps on tightening on people and things getting worse and worse…"

Reality—that which we subscribe as our existence on "the planet"—is where the life-death dichotomy resides, magnified for minoritized people. Myth, because it is immeasurable, is a means of getting away from this dichotomy. Minutes later in the interview he continues (emphasis mine):

"One reason why I really [haven't] said too much about [myth] is because it's not in accordance with this system of things, or any system of things in any country….Most people are talking about life, I'm not talking about that, and most people are talking about death, and I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about something that's the third thing, that's entirely different. I'm not seeking eternal life and I'm not seeking eternal death….So the third thing, I just call it myth. Because it's not life and it's not death. People don't know anything else, so you would have to call it something just impossible, I would say. The myth. So that's why I say myth science, because I'm dealing in equations, that makes it a science. To prove that this is it, as far as balanced equations are concerned."
Ra's "myth science" and "tone science"—organized sound, or music—are synonymous, and are means of flight away from the terms that define life and death. This means is difficult for us to imagine in the present scheme of the planet. However, myth, when performed (whether through music, verbal language, motions and/or appearance) can transcend the harmful common sensibilities of a world that predetermines one's personhood. The commonality of these sensibilities is often a myth in itself, but has been ideologically realized through systems of legislation, education, economy, culture, and more encompassingly, language. These are the systems that predetermine how one is valued in life, if one could even "live" in such a world at all. The blackman's state-within-the-state of Necropolis can only cease to exist if both the living and the dead refuse the pathological meaning of its name. This is what is at stake in Sun Ra's myth embodiment, so crucial to his politics and poetics of transfiguration. Here, Ra leaves an equation for us: if music and myth hold the answers to such resurrection, how will we ourselves hear the call, and in turn, respond from within our material world?
REPRISE #2 (CONCLUSION): "EARTH IS ALL WE HAVE. WHAT WILL WE DO WITH IT?" MYTH AND SKEPTICISM, THE PRESENT

"It is…a mistake to regard myth as an inferior mode of thought, which can be cast aside when human beings have attained the age of reason…[M]yth is make-believe; it is a game that transfigures our fragmented, tragic world, and helps us glimpse new possibilities by asking 'what if'?…The Neanderthals who prepared their dead companion for a new life, were, perhaps, engaged in the same game of spiritual make-believe that is common to all mythmakers: 'What if this world were not all that there is? How would this affect our lives—psychologically, practically or socially?…. And, if we did find that we were so transformed, would that not show that our mythical belief was true in some way, that it was telling us something important about our humanity, even though we could not prove this rationally?"

KAREN ARMSTRONG, from A Short History of Myth

The question in the title of this reprisal is a repetition of Martine Syms' question (mentioned in the first section of my writing), which she originally asked in an essay called "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto." In that work, Syms rejects many of the tropes of Afrofuturism and throws them into a "bonfire of the Stupidities," and makes a call for "a means of speculation and asserting a different set of values with which to re-imagine the future"—one that does not rely on unrealistic imaginings of "interstellar travel," "alternative universes," "Martians, Venusians, etc." "No inexplicable end to racism" either, she says, as "dismantling white supremacy would be complex, violent, and have global impact." Syms' manifesto is sharp with wit but also rings painfully true; it is an artist's critical intervention in the repetitive embrace of the pre-standing Afrofuturist aesthetic, of which Ra is considered an exemplar. Syms' essay, written in December 2013, comes in midst of an increasingly hypervisible number of incidents in which black people have been killed by police and security officials in the United States. I think too, meanwhile, of Robin James' speculative piece on the place of contemporary drones in Afrofuturist mythology. There, she quotes a series of Twitter posts by Tavia Nyong'o, who asks:
what comes after Afrofuturism, given that "[T]he imagination of space/science/future feels so colonized right now"? If violence against black people persists in this country, and space has become the place from which the U.S. drops bombs on brown bodies in other parts of the world, then what value could we even place on Sun Ra's seemingly dated myth-making in the present?

And then, yet another sampling from *Space is the Place* comes to mind, in which Ra materializes out of thin air in the common room of a black youth club in Oakland. He introduces himself to the slightly bemused teenagers as "Sun Ra, ambassador from the intergalactic regions of the council of outer space," to which they respond only with questions and skepticism: "Why are your shoes so big? Are those moon shoes?" or, "How do we know you're for real?" and, "I'd probably take off running, I see somebody walkin' down the street comin', talkin' all that mess to me...about goin' to outer space." As the questions and remarks continue, the kids laugh. Sun Ra, who only stands silently for awhile, eventually speaks:

"How do you know I'm real? I'm not real, I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be speaking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as a reality, I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are. I came from a dream that the black man dreams long ago. I'm actually a present sent to you by your ancestors. I'm gonna be here 'til I pick out a certain one of you to take back with me."

Perhaps the seriousness of Sun Ra's performance can best be heard in its lower register, by an attentive undercommons classroom of listeners\(^{13}\) willing to study and decode the seemingly too-far-out lessons. Myth, as we commonly know it, can be a phenomenological tale that explains certain actions or occurrences—or it can be a widely held, false belief. Myth can be both those
things simultaneously. If black Americans, as well as other minoritized people, are myths in this world, then we can think of their societally-imposed identities in the same way: either as rationalized explanations for who they are, or as lies. Nevertheless, as Karen Armstrong tells us, this does not mean that myth is an inferior way of thinking (or perhaps, being). Even if we do accept myth as both an explanation and a lie, it is the "what-if" of myth that opens the possibility for new thought. If certain people, too, are myths in this world, then perhaps one tactic for reckoning with that position is to subvert the "what-if," and take ownership of that myth position. (The mattering of black life, for instance, is a myth in the United States, but the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement has promoted its name as a slogan with the intention of reordering the state and abolishing racism: perhaps, if the phrase is perpetuated, its audibility will affectively will cause people to do something.

However, even when a myth is subverted, it can be dispossessed of its political power by the very supremacist scheme of the world that it has tried to challenge. Afrofuturism, for example, has gradually and paradoxically become a mainstream subculture, bringing Sun Ra along with it; meanwhile, "outsider" art has become increasingly fetishized by art collectors and experimenters who have little interest in the peculiar knowledge and experience that underscore the work. Even social movements such as Black Lives Matter are at risk of cooptation because of their beautiful decenteredness. Indeed, Earth is all we have; how will we study, remember and build upon the work of those who have reckoned with the structures that have tried to remove us from it? Even with the threats to subversive myth-making abound, we can still act as attentive listeners. Listening beckons a quiet but urgent alongsidedness; when we listen to the music of myth, we allow it to enter our system and become part of our consciousness; it becomes part of the way we think, move, feel, and of course, reckon with the scheme of words. Given this, then
maybe we too can become part of the ensemble, whether we join the big band, sing along, or tap or feet despite our incredulity.
Notes

1 My own translation, as printed in the epitaph of Robert Schumann’s piano score, Fantasie in C Major Op. 17.

2 The accessibility of these materials is either contingent on a chance encounter by researchers, or the availability of resources (and capital) required by institutions to make them sortable, categorizable in some way. Take, for instance, recent cases in which graduate students unexpectedly encountered novels by Claude McKay and Muriel Rukeyser in the collections of Columbia University and the Library of Congress, See “Recovering Muriel Rukeyser’s Savage Coast,” Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, Paris Review: The Daily blog (June 11, 2013), and “New Novel of Harlem Renaissance is Found,” Felicia R. Lee, New York Times (Sept. 15, 2012).

3 For more on the Man vs. human divide see Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument” (2003). Winter’s writing is more extensively mentioned in section VI of this paper.

4 The Arkestra frequently recorded as or was billed under various ornamented versions of their name, such as the Myth Science Arkestra, Intergalactic Research Arkestra, Astro Infinity Arkestra, and dozens of other expansions.

5 For more about Bland’s work, see Matt Rogers: “In Time: Ed Bland Transcended the Moment with Music and Film,” Wax Poetics February/March 2007.

6 For thorough background on the history of segregation in Chicago, see Ta-Nehesi Coates’ article, “The Case for Reparations,” published in The Atlantic, June 2014.

7 With credit due to the late poet Akilah Oliver, as channeled by poet HR Hegnauer (at Naropa 2012), for her constant question: “What are the limits of the body,” if the body is the language through which the poet must write?

8 For the record, Thompson still plays this riff in live performances of “Space is the Place” to this day!

9 Sylvia Wynter has extensively written about the emergence of the “racially pure” European ideal of Man as something separate and superior to the human, particularly in her piece “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” written in conversation with work by Michel Foucault, Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano and others. There, Wynter’s “argument proposes that the
struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves” (260).

10 This note is to acknowledge the dissonance between earlier Ra’s aim to move “beyond freedom” and Moten and Harney’s use of the word. I am not certain of For clarification, perhaps, we should think of Ra as objecting to the ideologically determined meaning of freedom (which I do not believe is the definition that Moten and Harney are using here).

11 In Ra’s language, “the world,” “the planet,” and “the earth” can be interchangeable. Anthony Reed points out that *Space is the Place* “conflates the Earth (the planet itself in all of its known and unknown forms), with the world (the existing sociopolitical relations of peoples to the earth and each other, extending beyond terrestrial confines). The world, given the film’s narrow geographical focus [predominantly of Oakland, California], is figured by the United States as the secret destiny or truth of the world whose end is declared makes perfect sense” (128).

12 Consider Ra’s own articulation of the relationship between his music words: “My words are music and the music is words but sometimes the music is of the unsaid words that always are to be” (quoted in Edwards 39).

13 For more on the musician as undercommons teacher, see Alexandra Vazquez’s reference to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in her study of Graciela Pérez, “‘Una Escuela Rara’: Havana Meets Harlem in Montmartre.”
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Sun Ra circa 1993, box 56, folder 14, Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center.


