

Whither Sun Ra?

Sun Ra Arkestra. *Swirling*, Strut Records 153, 2020.

Sun Ra. *Lanquidity*, Strut Records 237, 2021.

Sun Ra. *Egypt 1971*, Strut Records 209, 2020.

William Sites. *Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism and the City*. University of Chicago Press, 2020. Pp. 328. \$30.00 pb.

Jayna Brown. *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*. Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. 212. \$29.95 pb.

Brent Hayes Edwards. *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 336. \$40.00 hc.

Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures*. NYU Press, 2019. Pp. 288. \$30.00 pb.

Sun Ra. *Extensions Out, Plus: Four Poetry Books (1959/1972)*. Corbet vs. Dempsey, 2020. \$50.00 various bindings.

John F. Szwed. *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. With a New Preface, Duke University Press, 2020. Pp. 512. \$24.95 pb.

Alex Zamalin. *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*. Columbia University Press, 2019. Pp. 182. \$26.00 pb.

Over the last few years, Sun Ra's music, poetry, and philosophy have attracted renewed attention. His work merged a mystical view of Egypt with a fascination with the space age. These themes of Africa and the future course through his prodigious musical and literary output and continue to guide the repertoire of the ensemble he founded, the Arkestra.

Under Sun Ra's nonagenarian successor Marshall Allen, the Arkestra still tours and performs, and they released a new album in 2020. At the same time, various record labels, including the rightsholder for Sun Ra's Saturn Records label, continue to offer a bewildering array of new, old, and remastered releases. His poetry has also seen renewed interest. The Chicago gallery Corbett vs. Dempsey reprinted four of Sun Ra's books of poetry, and Brent Edwards' 2019 book offers the first critical assessment of Sun Ra's literary output. Last year, Duke University Press republished John Szwed's authoritative biography of Sun Ra, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*. A new work by William Sites documents Sun Ra's time in Birmingham and Chicago. And, perhaps most importantly: three recent books engage Sun Ra's distinctive utopian vision of a Black future. His music and poetic visions appear to speak to our contemporary situation in which consumer culture and exploited workers produce profits that can send billionaires to space, but we cannot find ways to keep Black people, poor people, and queer people from dying violently. For Sun Ra, these things are connected. The possibility of space travel in the 1950s and 1960s represented a future where anything could happen. It coincided with the growing prosperity of the postwar middle class and the Civil Rights movement. The cover of his 1960 album *Rocket Number Nine Take Off for Venus* read: "The impossible is the watchword of the greater space age."

Sun Ra's music looked forward into the impossible and backward into the world of myth and history. His name evoked the ancient Egyptian sun god Ra, but his recordings and performances embraced the space age and often marked out the far reaches of contemporary jazz and improvised music. Born Herman Blount, he changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra, but was more commonly known as Sun Ra, in the 1940s when he moved from Birmingham, Alabama, to Chicago, where he made his name as a bandleader. He also established his own record label and publishing company, Saturn Records, and brought together the core members of the Arkestra, an ensemble that would follow him to New York City when the Chicago music scene became less receptive to his music in the early 1960s. In New York City, Sun Ra performed and recorded prolifically, and his poetry and music contributed to the Black Arts Movement, albeit in his own unique way. In 1968, he relocated once again and moved to the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia, where the father of his longtime alto saxophone player Marshall Allen owned a house. From there the Arkestra toured the world, commuted to New York City for

regular gigs, and became a part of the Philadelphia music scene. Sun Ra left the earthly plane in 1993, but the Arkestra continues to perform and record from its base in Philadelphia. In this sense, Sun Ra's music continues to look forward and inspire new engagements, new critical inquiries, and new opportunities to contextualize and find meaning in his work.

#

Swirling is the most recent release from Sun Ra's eponymous Arkestra. This group of musicians continues to celebrate Sun Ra's spirit under the direction of Marshall Allen, Sun Ra's longtime alto saxophone player. *Swirling* both featured many members of the Arkestra who played with Sun Ra—including the late Danny Ray Thompson and Atakature alongside Michael Ray, Vincent Chancey, Knoel Scott, and other Arkestra stalwarts—and also dug deep into the Arkestra's vast repertoire. The result was an album that embraces the expansive Arkestra catalogue and projects it into the future through its polished production quality, disciplined performances, and new arrangements.

For connoisseurs of the seemingly infinite discography of Sun Ra's Earthly work, *Swirling* requires a trip through *The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra* (2nd edition), Robert Campbell's and Christopher Trent's eight-hundred-page effort to document Sun Ra's recordings. Sun Ra retained ownership of many of his recordings and released, traded, and sold them almost at random over the course of his career. Many of the releases lack recording dates, locations, and proper lists of performers, and they often combine recordings made at different times and situations. The work to untangle his discography remains a monumental task. In some cases, this is more than simply a forensic exercise. Anchoring the works performed on *Swirling* in the twenty-first century connects the contemporary Arkestra to traditions of performance that stretch back to Sun Ra's days in Chicago. The 2020 version of the Arkestra evoked Sun Ra's complicated musical legacy that combined standards performed by the great swing bands of the interwar period with new forms of music that drew inspiration from the emerging space age.

The opening track, a slick and tidy version of "Satellites are Spinning," flashes back to 1968, the very end of Arkestra's formative tenure in New York City. The earliest recordings of the next track, "Seductive Fantasy,"

date to 1979, during a time when the Arkestra had a modicum of popular success including an appearance on Saturday Night Live in 1978. “Swirling,” the third track, is a new piece composed by Marshall Allen, but the fourth and sixth tracks, “Angels and Demons at Play” and “Rocket No. 9,” date to Sun Ra’s days in Chicago. The fifth track, “Sea of Darkness/Darkness,” is apparently a piece discovered by Allen in Sun Ra’s archive. “Astro Black” was first released on one of Sun Ra’s dates for the Impulse! label in 1973, whereas the very next track, “I’ll Wait for You,” harkens back to the Arkestra’s most experimental period as part of the Choreographer’s Workshop soon after their arrival in New York City in 1962. “Unmask the Batman” is a pastiche of the Batman theme by the Ventures from the mid-1960s; the Arkestra original “I’m Gonna Unmask the Batman” is from the early 1970s. This piece served as playful reminder of when Sun Ra and some members of the Arkestra recorded a novelty album of music from the Batman television series in 1966 at the same time that they held down a regular gig at the infamous heart of avant-garde jazz, Slug’s Saloon. “Sunology” and “Space Loneliness” date to Sun Ra’s Chicago days, with the former appearing on the very first album released by Sun Ra and Alton Abraham’s Saturn Records. “Queer Notions” evokes an even earlier time in Sun Ra’s musical career, as the earliest recordings of this piece were by the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra (featuring the great Coleman Hawkins) in the 1930s. When Sun Ra first came to Chicago in the 1950s, he found work arranging music for Fletcher Henderson, and when Henderson decamped for California, Sun Ra took over his band. He continued to perform pieces from this era even at such bastions of free and improvised music as Slug’s in New York City (Szwed 224). The final track, “Door of the Cosmos/Say,” returns to the late 1970s.

The point of this long and perhaps tedious archaeology of the *Swirling* track listing is to demonstrate how *Swirling* provides a distinctive introduction to Sun Ra’s rich catalogue, the Arkestra’s diverse repertoire, and most importantly, the approach to music taken by Sun Ra during his nearly half-century of performing and recording. The Arkestra’s ability to juxtapose songs made famous by the interwar big bands with music set on the bleeding edge of contemporary jazz in the 1960s and 1970s spoke to Sun Ra’s tendency to blend the past and the future in his view of contemporary society as well as his disarming practice of combining recordings made over the course of a decade in the same album.

#

Swirling emphasized Sun Ra and the Arkestra's Afrofuturist vision. Their 1978 classic *Lanquidity*, reissued this year by Strut Records in an expanded version, captures a perspective on Sun Ra's Afrocentrism and includes reflections by the late Danny Ray Thompson. In the liner notes, the baritone saxophone player notes that the title track, "Lanquidity," evokes an ancient Egyptian stargazing ceremony; "Where Pathways Meet" is "a funky version of an Egyptian march," which "when the other army heard this they ran the other way, proclaiming 'Here comes the Pharaoh Ra and his army of musicians. Time to get outta here!';" and "That's How I Feel" includes Marshall Allen's "snake charming oboe." The final two tracks, "Twin Stars of Thence" and "There Are Other Worlds (They Have Not Told You Of)," return to more cosmic themes. The reissue combines the original recording with a rare remix of the original album prepared for a very limited pressing originally sold at a concert in Atlanta in 1978. While the remixes sound only slightly different from the original mix, access to these tracks offers us an opportunity to encounter one of the more idiosyncratic aspects of Sun Ra's legacy: the vast array of limited edition pressings and casual publications that define his legacy. Experiencing the Arkestra performance not only meant hearing spontaneous and improvisational music, but also encountering the full range of Sun Ra's output, including books of poetry and limited pressings.

Egypt 1971 is another recent reissue that opens a window to Sun Ra and the Arkestra's live performances and draws attention to Sun Ra's interest in Egypt and Afrocentric narratives. This 2020 release of forty-three tracks constitutes a massive collection of music recorded during the Arkestra's visit to Egypt in 1971, many of which were previously issued under various names in the early 1970s (including *Dark Myth Equation Visitation* and *Nidhamu/Horizon*). John Szwed's magisterial 1997 biography of Sun Ra, *Space Is the Place*, republished in 2020 by Duke University Press, has established the standard account of Sun Ra's visit to Egypt. The trip was apparently a spontaneous detour at the conclusion of a European tour. Hartmut Geerken, a German Orientalist and jazz aficionado, and Salah Ragab, an Egyptian musician and military officer, helped the Arkestra organize a scrappy series of concerts in Egypt. This included recordings made in Geerken's home and some for Egyptian public television (Szwed 292–294). *Egypt 1971* provides a good window into the repertoire of the Arkestra in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Like so much of Sun Ra's catalogue, the tracks on *Egypt 1971* combine new and much older compositions, including those from his Chicago days ("Space

Loneliness” and “Angels and Demons at Play”), his time in New York City (“We’ll Wait for You”), and his time in Philadelphia. A series of tracks titled “Discipline” represent compositions developed during the Arkestra’s European tour in 1971. Intriguingly, *Egypt 1971* includes a track titled “Nidhamu,” which means discipline in Swahili. The sound quality often reflects the improvised character of the Arkestra’s tour. The performances range from raucous concerts by the Arkestra at full strength to intimate, solo versions of familiar songs played by Sun Ra on the organ. As with so much of Sun Ra and the Arkestra’s output, it simply defies expectations.

Sun Ra’s visit to Egypt embodied his interest in Africa and the Egyptian roots of Black culture. According to Szwed, Sun Ra’s appearance in Egypt allowed him to indulge his view of Africa as the mystical home of Black people. Geerken recounted that when Sun Ra visited the King’s Chamber in the Great Pyramid at Giza, the lights went out, leading Sun Ra to quip: “Why do we need light, Sun Ra, the sun is here.” A short video of members of the Arkestra dancing among the ruins in their flowing costumes offered vivid images of Sun Ra’s interest in Egypt. Despite the opportunity to finally encounter modern and ancient Africa, Sun Ra was disappointed that Egyptians did not appear to be descendants of the “Hamitic race.” This disappointment did little to challenge Sun Ra’s Afrocentric views, and his interest in the idea of Africa persisted as a counterweight to his more cosmic musings.

The twin visions offered by Sun Ra of Afrocentrism and Afrofuturism in many ways define his ambivalent engagement with the postwar world. His continuously developing Afrocentric view of history sought to connect Black people’s past with the history of ancient Africa and with Egypt in particular. These ideas, refined by such thinkers as the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop and Molefi Kete Asante at Temple University, were part of an effort to locate the origins of a global Black culture on the continent of Africa. This supposes that African culture has a kind of historical continuity often associated with its origins in Egypt, Nubia, or Ethiopia capable of sustaining the sometimes disparate ideas of African nationalism and of global Blackness. It provided Black people with a history that predates the experience of enslavement and colonialism, and serves as a response to whites who saw Africa as a continent without history. Sun Ra’s efforts went further in seeking to identify northeastern Africa and Egypt as the mystical homeland of Black people. According to Szwed’s biography, these more spiritual reflections were met with skepticism by the Egyptians that he encountered. Stephen

Howe's *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes* (Verso, 1998) documents how the more studied and academic views of Cheikh Anta Diop, one of the founders of modern Afrocentrism, met a similar fate three years later at the famous 1974 UNESCO-sponsored symposium in Cairo on "The Peopling of Ancient Egypt and the Deciphering of Meroitic Script." Despite Diop's enthusiastic advocacy, the attendees generally rejected the idea that ancient Egypt was a racial and ethnic wellspring of Black African culture. Challenges to Afrocentrism, however, and its close association with various forms of mystical, theosophist, and esoteric thought, reinforced the notion that white European scholars sought deliberately to suppress the glorious achievements of African people, especially that preserved in the ruins of the Nile Valley, as well as the powerful secret wisdom possessed by these societies.

Sun Ra's interest in Afrofuturism was inspired as much by his extraterrestrial encounter as the public fascination with the space race, and it provided a profoundly modern perspective on esoteric Afrocentric knowledge. In many ways, Sun Ra's Afrocentrism draws on his own experience growing up in the industrial city of Birmingham and his deep (and often explicit) commitment to an almost industrialized discipline among his musicians. The result is a complex, utopian vision that is both mystical and modern, esoteric and public, with eyes to the past and the future. In this way it echoes his music, which often juxtaposed classic jazz compositions and traditional instruments with more futuristic sounds that drew not only on electronic instruments and keyboards but also improvised and free forms of composition.

#

In many ways, Sun Ra's legacy is split between his music and his idiosyncratic philosophy, which his larger-than-life personality amplified. William Sites' book *Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism and the City* traces Herman Blount's journey from the steel town of Birmingham to Chicago. Sites suggested that Blount's upbringing and early career in Birmingham provided a key for understanding his later development as a musician and thinker. Birmingham was one of the most industrialized cities in south, and Blount developed musical discipline while attending the city's Industrial High School from 1929–1934. Industrial High School was the largest all-Black high school in the US and its curriculum was designed, in part, to prepare Black youth for jobs in Birmingham's steel industry.

Sites suggests that through these encounters, Blount developed his famous commitment to discipline that shaped the expectations he had for his musicians. It also instilled within him a commitment to personal betterment and advancement that was consistent with efforts in the Black community to leverage industrialization as a way to develop social, economic, and political power.

During his time in Alabama, Blount also had his first encounters with Afrocentric thought. Sites notes that Birmingham had an active Moorish Science Temple with connections to the Masons and a distinctive blend of Afrocentric mysticism and Near Eastern lore. From 1935–1936, Blount briefly enrolled at Alabama A&M, whose founder and longtime president, William Hooper Councill (1848–1909), composed several tracts tracing the history of the Black race during his time as president of the institution. Bount's time at Alabama A&M may have overlapped with the Guyanese writer George G. M. James, whose book *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (Philosophical Library, 1954) was a widely circulated Afrocentric text that appeared in Sun Ra's personal library. It is also during his time at Alabama A&M that he was abducted by aliens and experienced an epiphany. While the exact details of his abduction remain unclear, it appears that his encounter confirmed that he was set apart for special things. In some accounts, this encounter confirmed that he was from outer space. In other versions, the visit to Saturn transformed his existence by giving him supernatural powers, insights, and wisdom. Whatever the precise details, it transformed Blount's view of himself and shaped his musical identity.

When Blount relocated to Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood in the late 1940s as Sun Ra, he had continued to develop his interest in an Afrocentric view of the world, which he ultimately melded with his distinctive form of Afrofuturism. In Chicago he became friends with Alton Abraham, who became his longtime business partner. Together they founded Saturn Records and developed Thmei Research. This loosely organized group of intellectuals met regularly to discuss Eastern and Afrocentric ideas, which many of the men had developed during their time in the military. These conversations formed the basis for a series of partly mystical and partly historical broadsheets published by the Thmei Research that blended theosophy, Egyptology, numerology, Christianity, and philosophy. They circulated these broadsheets throughout Chicago's Black community. These works set out a path for enlightenment and liberation for Black people by appealing not only to

the potential of an expanded spiritual life, which often drew on mystical readings of the Bible, but also to various stripes of pan-Africanism and more conventional Garveyite overtones.

Sites argued that Sun Ra's philosophy in the 1950s and early 1960s developed in the spatial context of postwar Bronzeville, Chicago. Concepts of urbanism changed in the postwar period as white cities increasingly viewed with suspicion the growth of thriving and independent Black communities of the interwar period. At the same time, an increasingly disillusioned Black population realized that the promises of postwar prosperity and expanded rights grounded in the shared sacrifice of military service would not be forthcoming. In fact, Chicago in the late 1950s and early 1960s was characterized by aggressive efforts to limit the expansion of Black neighborhoods through urban renewal projects that often targeted low-cost housing and Black businesses. This coincided with the growth of new ideas and expectations of middle-class life as defined by home ownership amid a rapidly developing halo of suburbs. For Sites, the growing discontent played out in Washington Park, where various groups, from the Nation of Islam to Sun Ra's Thmei Research, offered new and sometimes competing visions of a Black future, frequently drawing on Afrocentric perspectives on the Black past.

What distinguished Sun Ra from the Afrocentric visions offered by many of the more organized groups in Black communities in Chicago and elsewhere was his equal commitment to the potential of the space age. Twenty-first-century scholars have started to rediscover Sun Ra's Afrofuturist vision as part of a larger revival of interest in the works of Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and the film adaptation of the Black Panther. In this context, it is hardly surprising that *Swirling* draws heavily on Sun Ra's legacy as an Afrofuturist thinker and has a greater emphasis on his vision of the future than his vision of a Black past. Sites connects "Rocket No. 9" with a series of pieces that traces the route of a futuristic version of Chicago's elevated railway across an interplanetary landscape (Sites 198–199). The call "Rocket No. 9 take off for the planet Venus" mimics the departure call of a future shuttle, complete with departure tones that would sound appropriate on a modern subway. The version of the song recorded toward the end of Sun Ra's time in Chicago included a final verse with the chant "The second stop is Jupiter" that further reinforces the connection between the rocket and a railway. Sites suggests that these pieces superimpose intergalactic imagery on the expanding suburban landscape of Chicago with the "L" taking Black riders not

just beyond the increasingly circumscribed Black neighborhoods, but outward toward the newly emerging middle-class suburbs. The absence of the final verse in the most recent arrangement of the piece perhaps reflects a bit of pessimism in the current situation and circumscribes some of limitlessness of outer space and perhaps the aspirations for a contemporary Black middle class.

#

Even when mapped onto the landscape of late-1950s Chicago, Sun Ra's music and thinking are anything but concrete. Sun Ra's fascination with outer space and spaceships presents a wide range of associations, from the Chicago "L" to slave ships. Graham Lock's *Blutopia* (Duke University Press, 1999), which considers the utopian visions in the works of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton, argues that Sun Ra's journey to space and his cosmic claims had parallels in African American experiences of journeys heavily associated with Christian revelation. Sun Ra's spaceship finds a scriptural parallel in Elijah's chariot, on which the prophet escaped from the earthly realm. In the chants and dances of the Arkestra during their performances, Lock also recognizes allusions to spirituals and parallels to rituals in the Black church that evoked the Exodus or the incantations that brought down the walls of Jericho. Sun Ra, of course, was uninterested in explicit references to the Bible. At best, he considered it a book laced with secret knowledge accessible through cryptic readings and wordplay and, at worst, an obsolete icon in an age where spaceships replace flaming chariots (Lock 41). His broadsheets from his Chicago days reflected a sustained effort to find new meaning in scripture on the basis of substitution and numerology, and he dismissed Christianity and organized religion as meaningless. At the same time, the often mystical references to scripture, parallels between his cosmic journey and Christian spiritual experiences, and the Afrocentric impulses that celebrated the accomplishments of the Egyptians created a public persona that simultaneously looked toward the space age and a Black past. For Lock, the contradictory and ambiguous character of Sun Ra's utopian vision reflects part of the genius of his "Astro Black Mythology" carved out of a space between the specifics of history and the past, and the universals of myth and the future.

Jayna Brown's book *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds* notes that Sun Ra once quipped "Me and time never got along so good—we just sort of ignore each other" (158). She goes on to

argue that, for Sun Ra, time represented a linear understanding of human experience and progress. For Sun Ra's utopian view, the concept of utopia as literal placelessness coincides with its timelessness. The poem "Black Myth" from his 1972 volume *The Immeasurable Equation* establishes the borderlessness and timelessness of his Black mythology:

A better destiny I decree
Such tales and tales that are told
Are not my myths
But other myths of Black mythology
Radiate from beyond the
 measured borders of time (9).

This created space for Sun Ra's commitment to the impossible and the potential for "radical alterity" (Brown 159). Nowhere is this embodied more clearly than in Sun Ra's identity, which regularly defied definition. He was neither human nor alien, he was not living in the past, present, or the future, and his poetry, in particular, continuously sought to locate his existence on a different plane. Sun Ra states bluntly in the first issue of Amiri Baraka's journal *The Cricket*: "Some people are of this world, others are not. My natural self is not of this world because this world is not of my not and nothingness, alas and happily" (quoted in Edwards 131).

Brent Hayes Edwards' book *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* is the first work to engage with Sun Ra's poetry in a sustained way. He traces Sun Ra's poetic output from the liner notes of his early Chicago albums and mystical broadsheets to his appearance in the famous anthology produced by the Umbra Collective of New York City's East Village from 1962–1964, in Amiri Baraka's journal *The Cricket*, and in the volume of Black fiction, prose, and poetry that Baraka edited with Larry Neal called *Black Fire*. Edwards celebrates the discontinuities between Sun Ra's work and so much of the production of both the Umbra Collective and the later Black Arts Movement. Sun Ra's work neither embraced the vernacular language of Umbra poets working in the model of Langston Hughes nor the more formally experimental work. Instead, Edwards notes that Sun Ra's embracement of "alter" heritage and mystical, cosmic themes cut through his poetry and music to create new transmedia spaces that neither required the intense drama of an Arkestra performance nor stood anchored in an obvious poetic tradition or idiom.

This transmedia practice is made clear by the recent republication of

four collections of Sun Ra's poetry by the Chicago gallery Corbett vs. Dempsey. Each volume has a distinct appearance cleaving very close to their original forms. Two collections, a booklet that accompanied Sun Ra's first album in 1957 called *Jazz By Sun Ra* and the liner notes from his 1959 album *Jazz in Silhouette*, place his poetry alongside his music. The other two books in this collection, *The Immeasurable Equation* and *Extensions Out: The Immeasurable Equation Vol. 2* (both published in 1972 by Sun Ra's El Saturn Research), are more conventional volumes of poetry, albeit in the tradition of self-published works. These two were generally sold at concerts alongside various recordings. These books work together with his music and its live performance to open the door further to the swirling complexity of Sun Ra's vision.

This radical conceptualization of the past, the future, and Sun Ra's own existence finds parallels in the science fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, which features creatures that defy our notions of personhood and who can exist outside of conventional time. For Alex Zamalin in his *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Sun Ra's willingness to operate at the level of impossible paradoxically pushed his audiences to ponder the limits of the present, Black experience, planetary existence, and humanity itself. For example, Sun Ra deliberately avoided appealing to contemporary expressions of Black nationalism in the US, with its roots in interwar efforts by the communist party to define the South's Black Belt as an internal colony or in various attempts to define a distinctly Black African nationalism. The audaciousness of Sun Ra's vision included little room for existing institutions and lacked anything approaching a political theory. Instead, it unfurled a future defined as much by what it is not as what it might be. The opening stanza in the poem, "After That" from *Extensions Out: The Immeasurable Equation Vol. 2* expresses this:

After that, what is there after that?
And that afterwards is
Or doubly no The not of those things which are. . . .
If I to be am
Then to be is and are. (1)

Kara Keeling starts her book *Queer Times, Black Futures* with a study of Sun Ra's cult 1974 film *Space Is the Place*. Her chapter begins with a quote from an Arkestra performance in the middle of the film: "It's

after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?" In the film, an extraterrestrial visitor played by Sun Ra arrives in the late 1960s Oakland intent on leading Black people to a new planet in a spaceship powered by music. A mysterious antagonist called the Overseer, however, works to thwart Sun Ra's efforts both in the present and in the past. In fact, his past conflict with Sun Ra took place in a Chicago club in the 1950s, where he was vanquished by the power of Sun Ra's music. Scenes of Sun Ra and the Overseer playing a kind of cosmic card game in a timeless and spaceless setting punctuate the film and have clear consequences for Sun Ra's efforts to rescue Black people on Earth. Throughout the conflict, the power of Sun Ra's music neutralizes the efforts of the Overseer as well as other forces, including NASA scientists, who seek to disrupt his plans. Ultimately, he manages to save Black people in Oakland by teleporting them onto his spaceship and departing the planet. Keeling notes that Sun Ra's vision of a Black future is laced with impossibility, from rejecting the science of NASA officials to his music-powered spaceship and the dream of colonizing another planet. Keeling's discussion of *Space Is the Place* shows how the film, despite its campy style and at times absurd narrative, nevertheless presents a critique anchored in progressive trajectories tied to capital and political developments which so often serve to deny Black people equality. By queering the tidy linearity of time, Keeling shows how Sun Ra used new temporal forms to disrupt the seemingly orderly procession of past injustices to an unjust present and ultimately a settled future. In this way, *Space Is the Place* complements Sun Ra's larger project manifest in his poetry as well as the Arkestra's performances, which likewise sought to disrupt temporal expectations and present the unreconcilable tension between unstructured improvisation and disciplined musicianship.

#

Sun Ra's fascination with the impossible might seem frivolous or even irresponsible in light of the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement, the continued roiling of toxic and racist populism, and the persistent threat of violence. More than that, his appeal to Afrocentric ideas and Afrofuturism seems too abstract and mystical to contribute in a meaningful way to contemporary society. After all, even modern Afrofuturist heroes like the Black Panther derived his powers from extractive industries organized by the state of Wakanda, and he performed his acts of daring in

a world populated by nation states and neatly etched notions of good and evil. In contrast, Sun Ra's view of the future as the domain of the impossible distances it from our current fixation on the real potential of science and narratives set amid lightly reimagined contemporary institutions. In some ways, Sun Ra's fascination with the impossible may be the only way out of our modern situation as we grapple with global crises of COVID-19 and climate change. The challenges of distributing the COVID-19 vaccine and convincing individuals to receive it reveals the limits of the possible when defined by scientific solutionism. Likewise, for all of our scientific understanding of climate change, our commitment to the inequalities inherent in capitalism and the politics of nation states has hampered meaningful global action. Sun Ra recognized even in the blush of postwar prosperity that there were no easy solutions to the world's problems. By situating the present at the intersection of myth and the impossible, he offered a view of the future that we could decouple from the burdens of the past. The mythic power of Blackness could produce a future that flagrantly defies the pragmatic gradualism of so much of the contemporary struggle for rights. In some ways, Sun Ra's blurring of the Black past and the impossible future anticipates Paul Gilroy's famous reformulation of W.E.B. Dubois' concept of the Black double consciousness. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and the Double Consciousness* (Verso, 1993), published in the same year as Sun Ra's departure from earthly existence, Gilroy argues that Dubois' concept of double consciousness continues to define the experience of Black people as they work to negotiate the tensions between being European and Black. Sun Ra sought to reconcile this tension by rejecting the temporal division between pre-slavery, pre-colonial, and pre-European Africa and the future.

The influence of Sun Ra's music continues to flow in contemporary jazz and improvised music. The cosmic themes present in saxophonist Kamasi Washington's music and performances certainly draw inspiration from Sun Ra's Arkestra, and their mutual respect came out during a shared festival performance with the Arkestra's Marshall Allen and Pharoah Sanders in 2016. It may be, however, that the resurgent London jazz scene is where Sun Ra's influence is the most visible today. A literal manifestation of Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, the diaspora Black jazz community in the UK continues to explore Black music and identity with ensembles like the Heliocentrics making direct reference to Sun Ra's iconic 1965 album *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, Volume One*. More obvious is Shabaka Hutchings' various projects, which draw

upon both Afrocentric and Afrofuturist themes. His ensemble Sons of Kemet has produced two albums of music that blend scathing political critique with tightly arranged music influenced by Caribbean sounds, Afrobeat rhythms, and traditional jazz. The title of their 2018 album, *Your Queen Is a Reptile*, evoked the reptilian conspiracy theories drawn from science fiction stories of alien invaders and bizarrely popular among contemporary conspiracy theorists. Hutchings' collaboration with keyboard player Danalogue and drummer Betamax called The Comet is Coming blends his saxophone with programmed drums and keyboards. Its millenarian name, science-fiction-inspired song titles, and exuberant use of electronic instruments evokes the Afrofuturist sound of Sun Ra. Their 2019 album *Trust in the Lifeorce of the Deep Mystery* hints at the potential mystical underpinnings of their endeavor.

There is no doubt that Washington, Hutchings, and others continue to lace their music with themes influenced by Sun Ra's work. This complements recent interest in Sun Ra's music and broader thought in contemporary society. For a world increasingly constrained by the limits of technological solutionism, Sun Ra presents a figure even more foreign to the present than he did to his time. He offered few solutions to problems that he traced with cosmic dimensions. As we confront a series of existential challenges in the twenty-first century that seem to exceed our imagination, it may be that we need Sun Ra now more than ever.

REFERENCES

- Campbell, Robert L, and Chris Trent. *The Earthly Recordings of Sun Ra*. Redwood, New York: Cadence Jazz Books, 1998.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Howe, Stephen. *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes*. London: Verso, 1998.
- Lock, Graham. *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton*. Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1999.