Sun Ra: His Myth, Music, and the Alter Destiny

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the abundance of research that has been done on the cosmic, philosopher-musician Sun Ra there has not yet been a full study attending to the primacy of mythology in his life, thought, and music. This dissertation explores this mythic aspect and the multifarious stories that Ra told, as woven into the kaleidoscopic body of work that he created throughout the 20th century. As a composer, writer and leader of one of the last great big bands of modern jazz, Ra created a personal mythology that could reach back into ancient Egyptian culture and forward into an intergalactic, sci-fi cosmology. This dissertation unearths the myth that Ra created, elucidating its enactment from a comparative mythological, new comparative, and depth psychological standpoint. This research makes clear that not only was Ra's a potent, emergent myth, but that it was engineered for widespread social transformation, in defiance of dominant cultural myths and belief systems.

Ra was keenly aware that mythology encapsulates a powerful cultural force: one that could be used by artists for curative purposes or by religion and political forces to control the public's views and actions. Myth could be used to coordinate minds and souls with a transcendent super-reality or be deployed to justify violent, racist dogmas. Therefore, Ra interlaced myth into every aspect of his being: he took on a magical appellation granting him the power of a timeless, Egyptian Blackness, and told the story

of his band travelling the cosmos in a spacecraft powered by music. His myth, he hoped, could become a redeeming spiritual narrative of the future.

Ra's myth is contextualized in this writing by Joseph Campbell's four functions of a living mythology, which allow us to view it as a complete system of story, idea, sound, image, performance and ritual, capable of provoking powerful effects. Ra's concept of the "alter destiny*"* is shown to be the ultimate goal of his work, a supernatural dynamism that could potentially change the course of history and time, first for African Americans, then the world.

Keywords: Sun Ra, Arkestra, mythology, Afrofuturism, cosmology, personal mythology, visionary artists, avant-garde jazz

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

We're in prehistory, the heroic age of the space age,
we're the cavemen of the capsules that depart for the universe

Etel Adnan

Reality has touched against myth

Sun Ra

Outroduction

Throughout his life the intergalactic jazz mystic Sun Ra was known as a trailblazing keyboardist, bandleader, composer, philosopher, social activist, and infinity poet: a renaissance artist in the body of a spiritually enlightened jazz man. He was a performance artist, sonic magician, and surreal story teller: the inventor of a deeply personal cosmic mythology which he unfurled over a long and storied career. Despite being heralded as one of the most forward thinking composers of avant-garde jazz he is perhaps known more for his otherworldly persona. Ra claimed to be an alien, and unfailingly asserted his origin to be of the planet Saturn. He had experienced extraterrestrial abduction and had been given a supernatural calling: he was meant to change the world through art and the sharing of his own divergent myth. He felt he was an interpreter of a transcendent, secret knowledge; a sort of messianic figure with a transformative story to tell. If he did this well, he had been told, he could permanently change the world. His music, writing, art, and persona would therefore become the vehicle for an emergent myth that he would share with the people of Earth. He abandoned a terrestrial personage, changed his name from Herman Poole Blount to Sun Ra—

convinced of his mythic quest—and made the sharing of his otherworldy program his central concern; the guiding practice of his life and work.

For over five decades Ra lead one of the last great big bands of Jazz, the Arkestra, and toured the world sharing this sci-fi mythology in sound and performance. The band, an integral part of Sun Ra's myth, was said to travel from planet to planet along the intergalactic spaceways, bringing joyful, transformative music to new worlds. They dressed in elaborate, sparkling robes and ornate headwear suggesting the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt and the glittering uniforms of futuristic space travelers. They were the living embodiment of ancient myth while enacting a liberating futurism. Ra was their gloriously robed leader conducting the band in renditions of classic swing tunes, otherworldy exotica, abstracted bop, wild free jazz and searing avant-garde noise experimentations. They would perform "space chants," group sing-alongs that detailed aspects of Ra's mythic program, and conduct ancient African-inspired theatrical rituals complete with dancers and confrontational full-band parades into the audience. All the while channeling the story that Ra wanted to impart, a mind-altering mythos of widespread transformative potential.

This dissertation is therefore about the story of one visionary artist's emergent, personal mythos and the power he felt inherent to its creation and elaboration over a lifetime. While containing a supernatural, extraterrestrial aspect it also addresses racism, war, and class. Earth, Ra said, had been "fed a bad truth" and it had put the planet "on the edge of chaos and destruction" (Ra qtd. in Szwed 256). Christianity was explicitly connected to the false idea of "truth" and its badly translated holy book the misguiding text of that bad truth's dissemination. The American culture that it shaped, he felt,

produced conditions that allowed the terrible realities of Black enslavement, the south's enforcement of Jim Crow laws, and the everyday racism that he and the rest of Black society were made to endure. Moreover, he said that the cruelty against Blacks was only one indicative horror among many, intimating a largescale, unconscious drive toward earthly society's imminent self-destruction. Christianity was therefore a false spirituality which society had weaponized against Blackness in specific and life in general. It was a mythos that had been hijacked and made ghastly. If life was to continue on Earth, Ra said, the people would need a new myth, a different kind of story to live by. The past must be abolished and Christianity's "truth" with it. "They say that history repeats itself," he avowed "but history is only *his* story. You haven't heard my story yet." (*Joyful* 11:00-11:50). Perhaps, he thought, his could be the redeeming myth of the future.

Ra felt that myth had an elastic quality which could be an antidote for these oppressive "truths." For him myth was the province of "the impossible," the potential, and a guide toward life; an entrance into the immortal and mystically orienting song of the cosmos. It was a way to overrule an objectionable reality and institute his own utopian dream. Mythology was an empowering, magical force to conjure with, a malleable, living dynamism which he could use to effect change in the world. Myth, being "greater than the truth" (Ra qtd. In Szwed 256) allowed Sun Ra to surpass the annals of history and to connect with something greater, more ancient, and powerful: a mythic substructure that undergirds all cosmologies, history, time, space, and reality. Utilizing myth's power as a mind-altering machinery Ra felt he could induce world-wide transformation, perhaps remaking all of reality as he imagined it, and restoring the world.

In Paul Youngquist's words, Ra's works announce "not merely a demand for a better world but a program for building one" (2).

Culled from the deep strata of mythic material via his own research into the occult, religious and spiritual traditions of the world, Sun Ra worked to create a new paradigm blending the cosmological and mytho-magical wisdom of the ancients, especially that of the Egypt, with the sci-fi possibilities of future thought. One side of this myth speaks of a Black exodus into outer space: the entire population of Black earthlings leaving for an Edenic paradise on another planet far, far away. Ra's most famous song "Space is the Place" details his invitation for Blacks to leave Earth and its racial subjugation behind. This aspect of his myth is about inducing a state of expanded consciousness in which African Americans can witness their own ancient grandeur, value, and limitlessness: perhaps attaining a state of immortality as spoken of in the Egyptian *Books of the Dead*.

The other side of his myth encompasses the recapitulation of a cornucopia of mythemes and symbols into a new, personal myth with the proposed metaphysical capability of inducing widespread societal transformation: a myth that could potentially deliver humanity from its destructive obliviousness. "He spoke of creating myths of the future," remarks Ra's biographer John Szwed, "to tell us what we should do" (256). Ra's personal myth is instructive, mysterious, and multifarious, inferring an overwhelmingly large vision in fragments; from the art of his album sleeves to the costumery the Arkestra would perform in, each piece of Ra's work points toward an otherworldly story that he said humanity "needs to know about" (*Joyful* 10:30-11:00).

Music, for Sun Ra, was the prime mythic vehicle through which he worked and by which a new and less truth-bound future could arise on planet Earth. “The beauty of music,” he affirms “is that it can reach across the border of reality into the myth” (Ra qtd. In Szwed 329). Music carries myth to Sun Ra’s listeners, and as he hoped, perhaps to the entire world. Sun Ra believed a new music was necessary for the future, a type that was beyond the bounds of what is normally considered as such. Sun Ra’s music “performs the impossible,” Youngquist alleges “transporting people to better worlds” (175-176). In other words, it delivers listeners into a new state, that of transformative, mythic consciousness. “My job,” Ra affirmed “is to change five billion people to something else” (qtd in Szwed 295).

A key supposition of this dissertation proposes that while myths tend to be thought of as something created and sustained by ancient societies they are still in fact being generated today. Myth’s power is incited by artists, writers, businesses, corporations, and governments alike. Myth is very much alive as a culture-generating medium, whether it be a tool to sell cars, a method by which a political regime might enforce a power-stratifying narrative, or a filmmaker’s way to retell an old story for a new audience. Myth is powerful and can actively change the way people experience the world around them. This is important to note because, as C. G. Jung suggested, the “religious impulse,” (CW 10, para. 544) which he says is one of the “instincts,” (CW 10, para. 544) remains central to the functioning of the modern, human psyche. Spiritual narratives are still key to the structure of societies, and can spontaneously erupt out of the imaginative minds of individual people. Myths can be born out of anywhere and anyone.

Despite having been relegated by science and philosophy to the naïve confines of a superstitious past—or the domain of the pious fanatic—each of our post-modern psyches reaches out for meaning toward a sense of spiritual fulfillment. We still organize our lives around symbols; and so it matters how those symbols have been used, and who is organizing them. This is key in terms of understanding why Sun Ra wanted to generate and live out myth in his life and work. As a Black artist whose life had been actively harmed by the society he lived in he felt a natural creative urge to respond. Further, his mind was capable of engendering a response that surpassed the limitations of the offending paradigm so completely as to begin to ingeniously dismantle it. Myth, he believed, in the hands of a visionary artist who could dream a better future, could potentially work wonders. Moreover he maintained it was imminently necessary. Ra like Jung knew that myth is nourishment for hungry souls. It is not a vestige of the past: it could be the living word of a new future. Sun Ra would actively attempt to make it real.

On a very personal level, for Sun Ra, using the mechanisms of art to create a new mythology suggests the inherent power in doing so. As a person who had had influence and personhood arrested from him by dominant American culture—both as a Black person and as an artist—Ra reclaims something truly empowering that can be used to affect the culture that restricted and injured him. Myth in this vein can undermine reality, the story determining what is and what could be; giving Ra the ability to actively write what he saw as a better reality into existence. “I have my right and authority to change the planet” (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 317) he declared. Myth is agency and power. It comprises the facility to make or remake culture for the better. Moreover, myth allows Ra to write the world story from an othered perspective: a Black myth for a limitless future.

"We sing this song to a great tomorrow / we sing this song to abolish sorrow" (1:46-2:02) as the refrain to Ra song "The Satellites are Spinning" goes. Ra's myth was an ingenious, activated modus for bringing that future on.

This dissertation unearths the myth that Sun Ra created, elucidating the contents and enactment of that myth from a comparative mythological, new comparative, and depth psychological standpoint. This mythology—built of various strains of occult, ancient, and fringe philosophies, multi-cultural symbologies and religious images, complex and forward thinking musicological experimentations, sci-fi pseudo-scientific invocations, and a personal poetics comprised of what Ra called rhythmic "equations" in language—is nothing short of a cosmos spanning oeuvre, a mystically-oriented body of work unopposed in 20th century music and art. This research examines these interlocking aspects of Sun Ra's myth, charting how the personal—his embodiment of myth in narrative and persona—is joined with scholarly and poetic thought, creative practice, and ritual performance to create an activated, potentially efficacious mythos cultivated specifically to induce psychospiritual transformation on a personal and cultural level. This form of transformation Sun Ra called the *Alter Destiny* and is shown here to be the ultimate goal of Sun Ra's life and work.

Review of the Literature

Sun Ra and Related Scholarly Texts

Sun Ra produced a great deal of writing in his lifetime in a variety of forms: broadside leaflet manifestos, books of poetry and prose, as well as the chants, poems, manifesto-like prose pieces that would make their way to the album jackets of his records. *The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcorner Leaflets*, compiled and introduced by John Corbett, provides us access to some of Sun Ra's earliest thought and shows the gravity of his fledgling work as an autodidactic and countercultural scholar. These broadsides demonstrate the origins and sources for what would become Ra's larger mythos; they argue the oppressive nature of Christian doctrine, most evidently on African Americans, and how an alternative mythology is necessary to obtain sociopolitical and spiritual liberation. These broadsheets begin to recombine Christian and ancient thought in order to invent a new, linguistically experimental and life-giving mythology.

Another key text of Sun Ra's is *The Immeasurable Equation*, his collected poetry and prose. This massive volume contains several hundred written pieces illuminating Ra's mythos. These writings establish his position that mythology contains potentialities for personal and cultural transformation via pseudo-mathematical rhythmic "equations" in language.

Ra's music, performance, and the filmic works he collaborated on with others will also be considered as texts for exploration; many of his records will be considered both in their lyricism and tonality as basic textual expression of his mythos. Three films are incorporated: the 1974 science fiction blacksploitation film *Space is the Place*,

directed by John Coney, an allegorical retelling of Sun Ra's personal myth as well as Robert Mugge's 1980 documentary film *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise,* which contains a plethora of interview and performance footage with Sun Ra and his band. Don Letts' 2005 film *Sun Ra: Brother from Another Planet* lends a more recent and comprehensive overview of Sun Ra's life and career, being the only documentary produced after his time on Earth had ended. Among other things, these films provide interview material from Sun Ra, his band members, critics, fans, and allow entrance into the visual and performance aspects of Sun Ra's work.

A variety of scholarly texts will be used to further examine Sun Ra's work and mythos. Paul Youngquist's excellent *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* provides a curated framework for exploring an oeuvre as mammoth as Sun Ra's. Youngquist explains the integrity of Ra's work, exhibiting the fundamental connectivity of his music, writing, thought and shows through a variety of short thematically organized chapters, that Sun Ra's works became "a kind of user's guide to infinity," (2) a transcendent mythos made for transforming the world and its consciousness.

John F. Szwed's *Space is the Place: The lives and Times of Sun Ra*, the most thorough and meticulous biography yet written on Ra's time on Earth, provides indispensable scholarly material for this study. Szwed paints Sun Ra as an artist, teacher, and scholar who aimed to take his audiences "beyond the realm of the aesthetic to those of the ethical and the moral" (xviii) and to create music that was a "living entity" (xviii) that could play a role not only in the lives of his listeners but on a broader, cosmic level, as well. Szwed uncovers, through comparisons of poetry, music lyrics, and ritual

performance the various strains of mythological thought therein. Further, Szwed mines Sun Ra's library, revealing textual details of his personal, autodidactic scholarship, so that we might glimpse where certain strains of his philosophy and poetics were originally gleaned. Szwed's beautifully detailed reading extends into every facet of Sun Ra's creative life, demonstrating how his persona, personal mythic narrative, style of playing, and ritual performance program were built, piece by piece.

Graham Lock's *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* paints Ra as a revisionary artist and thinker who cultivated an "unswerving commitment to a singular vision" (7) including "Ra's own cosmological trilogy of space, music, and the future," (36) a mythic mode that could "free [individuals] from the limitations of the past and prepare our minds for the wonder to come" (27). Lock places Ra within a Black intellectual tradition utilizing transcendent mythologies, religious imagery, and music to improve the lives of Black Americans. Lock's work deepens this dissertation's understanding of Sun Ra's philosophical vision as a Black artist, and to witness how his understanding of history as a racist, manipulated complex of narratives lead him to posit myth as a necessary alternative. Lock shows how this enactment of myth acted as not only an alternative to white, Christian culture, but as a launching pad for an exhaustive revisionary program that consumed Ra's every creative impulse.

Several scholarly collections of writing on Sun Ra figure in here, as well. *Sun Ra: Interviews and Essays*, edited by poet John Sinclair, including pieces by Steve Fly Agaric, Amiri Baraka, David Henderson, and Sinclair himself figure into this dissertation. *Travelling the Spaceways: Sun Ra, The Astro Black and Other Solar Myths*,

a compilation of writings assembled from presentations made at a 2006 symposium at the Hyde Park Arts Center in Chicago is also utilized. Pieces in the collection, by artist and performer Terri Kapsalis and Lock among others, help to shed light on Ra as a post-modernist and avant-garde creative, whose mythic impulses were brough into a highly complex form of artistic-intellectual vision. *Sun Ra: Omniverse*, a large scale book of photos and essays assembled by Hartmut Geerken and Christ Trent, rounds out the Ra related literature, offering pieces by author and scholar Sigrid Hauff, Astrologer Gabi Geist, and Geerken himself which share creative-mystical lenses for observing Ra's work and Ra himself as a spiritual personage.

A variety of interviews with Sun Ra are also utilized and belong in this category: Ra, in interviews, could produce some of the most startling, improvised articulations to be found in his oeuvre. He would use them as teaching opportunities, and a creative avenue for the continued sharing of his philosophical perspectives, and further myth-making. One such useful interview appears in John Corbett's book of collected essays and writings entitled *Extended Play: Sounding off from Cage to Dr. Funkenstein*. YouTube and other digital sources deliver further interview materials, including famous interviews with Sun Ra from 1971 in Helsinki, Finland and another on WKCR radio in New York City entitled "Sun Ra Talks on the Possibility of an Altered Destiny" from 1979.

Musicology, Mysticism, and Myth.

Any scholarly work taking Sun Ra, myth, and music as its subject matter necessitates a grounding in thought that considers the relationship between music and

mysticism. Jamie James' *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe* shows the consistency of the Pythagorean model of the cosmos throughout Western history—one that embraces creation as an inherently musical structure, with a mythic and mystic underpinning—and its prevalence in culture which extends into contemporary thought. Sun Ra is an inheritor of the basic Pythagorean model. James' book helps to contextualize Sun Ra's cosmology, and to grasp its origins in an ancient and musical cosmos.

Also crucial to my study is Victor Zuckerkandl's *Sound and Symbol* which claims a nondiscursive but "dynamic symbol" (69) found in the structural tones of music. The dynamic symbol is a "supermaterial…force" (69) translating a nearly mythic vibration to the personal psyche of the listener, linking the "tangible" world with the "invisible" (71) i.e., the material with the mythic. Zuckerkandl lays the foundation for a more complex understanding of music on a mythic level, showing how sound carries myth's symbols in its very structure.

Comparative Mythic Perspectives

Joseph Campbell claims that the central and perhaps essential reason for myth is in the way it affords a deep and inexplicable connection between human consciousness and greater, immaterial forces. Myth unites individuals with a transcendent, awe-inspired state of being. Ra's intention was to fulfill this function implicitly. Hence Campbell's concept of the transcendent quality of myth is significant in understanding how Ra meant to utilize his own mythos. Moreover, having read deeply in both Campbell and Ra's works I've found that there is a synchronistic resonance between their worlds of thought.

Equally iconoclastic, obliquely traditionalist and forward thinking at the same time, they were two mystics of different ethnicities and classes who often shared the same views and even occasionally used uncannily similar phrases. For this reason Campbell's works are used extensively throughout this writing to clarify the archetypal and mythic patterns of Ra's mythology. Several of Campbell's texts are used including *The Masks of God Vol. IV: Creative Mythology*, *Pathways to Bliss*, *Thou Art That*, and *the Inner Reaches of Outer Space*. These texts will be utilized to illuminate the transcendent aspect of Sun Ra's myth and to show how, as an artist, Ra was capable of "looking past the broken symbols of the present…to forge new working images, images…transparent to the transcendent" (*Pathways* 20) as Campbell puts it. These images, and their structural symbols, as Campbell shows, can have powerful, psychic impacts. This theory helps us to understand the transformative aspects of Sun Ra's myth in action.

Further, Campbell's *The Masks of God Vol. IV: Creative Mythology* helps us to more easily witness Sun Ra as an artist creating a densely symbolic body of work. The text, which argues that in the age of modernity a "galaxy of mythologies," (Campbell, *Masks* 3) exist, essentially one for every artist. Artists are engaged in their own creative mythology borne from a personal experience of awe, which are then expressed in signs. "If [an artist's] realization has been of a certain depth," writes Campbell, then their work "will have the value and force of living myth" (4). Translating personal realization to artistic expression is clearly central to Sun Ra's creative practice and *The Masks of God* allows us to more easily chart Ra's mode of operation in this regard.

Pathways to Bliss posits the power of what Campbell calls *Personal Mythology*: the building of a personal symbolic narrative via the restructuring of universal

mythological narratives, cultural histories and symbologies. Personal myth is by definition a creative act which builds meaning into one's life. This dissertation shows how Sun Ra cultivated his own personal mythology and perhaps how his life and work function as an example of Campbell's concept *par excellence*. Finally, Campbell's *Inner Reaches of Outer Space* establishes the importance of outer space-centered mythemes which he shows have become increasingly important to contemporary storytelling and art in the 20th century.

Several comparative texts examining the myths and symbologies of ancient Egypt are used to explore Sun Ra's relationship with Egyptian iconography and mythology. Lewis Spence's *Ancient Egyptian Myths and Legends* allows us to parse what aspects Sun Ra may have borrowed from the mythic Ra for use in his own mythic persona, and from Egyptian myth in general. R.T. Rundle Clark's *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* explores the ancient figure of Ra in his connection to life, death, and rebirth: aspects of Egyptian religion that Sun Ra was particularly concerned with, and saw as an antidote to what he saw as Christianity's all encompassing obsession with death. Theodor Abt and Erik Hornung's *Knowledge for the Afterlife: The Egyptian Amduat, A Quest for Immortality* deepens this relation between the Egyptian Ra, Sun Ra and the question of death and rebirth. Abt and Hornung explore the Egyptian Ra's nightly journey through the underworld from a depth psychological perspective, showing the god to be connected symbolically to primordial darkness, rebirth, and protection through sound, which can be easily viewed in Sun Ra's personal mythology and myth at large. E.A. Wallis Budge's *The Gods of the Egyptians* further supports this connection, claiming that the ancient Ra

"was not only the god of the living but also the god of the dead and of everything unborn," (348) essentially, a god of rebirth, a psychopomp encircling all the realms.

To complete this section of texts relating to Egyptian mythology, a key text that Sun Ra himself studied: *Stolen Legacy: The Egyptian Origins of Western Philosophy* by George G.M. James is included. Arguing that Greek Philosophy was essentially stolen from the Egyptians, James aims to reveal "a fundamental truth concerning the contribution of the African Continent to civilization" (7). Sun Ra read this text and its conjectures became a central, historically revisionary tenet of his philosophy: according to James, and then Sun Ra, thinkers of African descent created Western thought. Therefore, *Stolen Legacy* is observed to comprehend how myth, especially that of the Egyptians, and not history—which Sun Ra and James both submitted African American thinkers had been written out of—could be embodied as an expression of Black culture.

In studying the apocalyptic aspects of Sun Ra's mythology I turned to two important texts: D.H. Lawrence's classic *Apocalypse*, which is an interpretation of the final book of the Bible, *Revelations*, which he says is "is still a book to conjure with" (121), as Sun Ra does. Lawrence helps us to better understand how the literary form of apocalypse was used in ancient times and what it means for it to be reinterpreted for modern use. Michael Meade's *Why the World Doesn't End* expands upon Lawrence's work in showing how apocalypse is an art form which often appears as a response to trauma, as with the early Christians. But it goes on, in many ways echoing Lawrence, to assure us that, at its core, the archetype of apocalypsis, as Meade refers to it, is symbolic, representing psychological and cultural rebirth. The "deeper sense of apocalypsis," he confirms, "means to see with a revelatory eye, to revision and revise the big picture, and

to find our place again in the ongoing, metaphorical, metaphysical, and cosmological story" (Meade 17). This allows us to see how Sun Ra's apocalypse works: as a revivifying and purifying modality.

In terms of reading the stranger, more mystical, and sci-fi side of Ra's work and personality through a academic lens, I've borrowed a tool from scholar of religious studies Jeffrey Kripal. In his *The Super Natural* (written in collaboration with Whitley Streiber), he explains an academic approach known as *new comparativism* which was developed in part as an attempt to revalue the stories and experiences of individuals and communities undergoing what he calls "anomalous experience" (271). These are experiences of abnormal reality that challenge agreed upon collective conceptions. Sun Ra claimed he was from the planet Saturn, had traveled the galaxies, experienced abduction, and through these occurrences obtained world-shifting wisdom. Kripal reveals how individuals enduring esoteric, and supernatural phenomena, such as abductees, might be the carriers of a novel and numinous manifestation of the sacred—one not yet culturally recognized as such. In this sense Kripal gives us a lens for more clearly witnessing the anomalous in Sun Ra's work: the extraterrestrial, the visionary, the nonlinear; in order to see Ra as part of a burgeoning pseudo-religious psychology.

Finally, to close out this section of comparative, mythic literature I make use of several texts which catalogue and elaborate on symbols from a plethora of cultures, modes of thought, and times in history. These include the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism's (ARAS) *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* and *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* compiled by Jean Chevalier and Alain

Gheerbrant, both of which help to contextualize Ra's work in terms of the symbolic and cultural material that he was mining as part of his oeuvre.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is organized according to Joseph Campbell's four functions of a living mythology—mystical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological. Each chapter is aligned with one of Campbell's functions, which lends us access to central aspects of the work and mythology of Sun Ra. Chapter Two explores the *mystical* function which, according to Campbell, reconciles "consciousness to the preconditions of its own existence" (*Thou* 2) and opens an individual to the mystery of the cosmos through an "epiphany beyond words" (Campbell, *Inner* xxiv). This chapter explores how the apocalyptic aspects and images of Ra's mythology—both in narrative and philosophical forms—were used to induce a mystical, transformational effect in his audience, which fulfill this first function of Campbell's. This chapter also surveys Ra's attempts at Biblical hermeneusis for the improvement of the lives of Black Americans which Paul Youngquist says contains an "apocalyptic potential" (60) perhaps capable of engendering a "wholesale reinvention of reality" (60). This section attempts to show how Ra's concept of apocalypse is engineered to end the systemic destruction of Black life and to promote psychic rebirth for African Americans, and by extension, for the world.

Chapter Three is an exploration Campbell's *cosmological* function as demonstrated by Ra's mythos. This chapter expounds the structure of Ra's cosmology showing it to be borne equally of ancient musicological and philosophical mystical systems as well as thoroughly modern scientific views and futurological sci-fi

exploration. This chapter shows how Ra combined these elements to form an expansive and visionary cosmos, which could contain the other philosophical and musical elements key to his mythic project. The second half of this chapter is dedicated to the mythic figures and archetypal motifs that most centrally populate Sun Ra's cosmos, including the Creator, who guided Ra's music, and the planet Saturn, which Ra claimed to hail from, and which offered to his philosophy important astrological and mythic resonances. The archetypal and planetary symbol of Saturn is shown in this chapter to be important mainly in Ra's linking the planet to the concept of "discipline" (Szwed 115) which is central to the way he conducted his life, band, and modes of thought.

Chapter Four delves into the *sociological* component of Sun Ra's mythos, via what he called *Astro Black Mythology*, a musicological myth uniting ancient science and mysticism with future technological, sci-fi and Black liberation themes, in order to create an efficacious musical and performative program: a ritualized myth for the future-present. This is shown to be the centerpiece of his work, conjoining his various interests, intentions, and creative modalities into a cogent and efficacious mythology, unlike anything else created in modernity. Considering the structure of *Astro Black*—the joining of the symbols of Egypt and outer space, the performative aspect known *Cosmo Drama Myth Ritual* and the mystic efficaciousness of music, which Ra called *tone science*—this active, creative form of modern mythology is shown to be engineered for the transformation of not only Ra's listeners but of the society on the whole. The social and communal aspect of his band, the Arkestra, who are known as the last great big band to have survived the 20th century and continually lived together—albeit with ever-shifting members—from the time of its inception to the present day, is also shown to be an

example of the type of social structure that Sun Ra aimed to engender with his myth. This chapter shows how Ra's unique blend of ancient-wisdom oriented philosophy, traditionalist-meets-experimental jazz practice, and Black futuristic space-age poetic code coincide to create a re-visionary mythological platform, for generating a unique, transformational brand of culture. The theories of James and Zuckerkandl become especially prescient in this chapter, as sound itself, and its psychospiritual, mythic properties are expanded upon to explore the utilization of the sonic as a tool in Sun Ra's creative cosmos.

Chapter Five discusses the creation of Sun Ra's mythic persona and the effect it was meant to stimulate, which, as part of Sun Ra's mythos, fulfills Campbell's final function of a mythology: the *psychological.* Throughout his life Sun Ra called himself "the living myth," (Youngquist 214) a way of embodying the potentialities of the imaginal, mythic world in response to the hard, oppressive realities of material living. Native to the planet Saturn, Ra had been sent to Earth for the purposes of enlightening the human race. This chapter is an exploration into the varieties of ways that Sun Ra engaged myth to create a provocative otherworldly persona that simultaneously enacted another world on Earth. This chapter embraces Sun Ra's biography, and through the new comparative lens put forth by Jeffrey Kripal, shows how the anomalous experiences of Sun Ra's life—specifically an extraterrestrial abduction, and a lifetime's worth of visionary experiences—inspired the creation of his persona, worldview, and creative-mythic program. Finally, this chapter shows how Sun Ra's vision of an *alter destiny* for planet Earth could be brought about as a vibratory emanation, passing through an

individual and their work—in this case Sun Ra—and how that presence could possibly provoke powerful psychic shifts on an individual level, culturally, and the world at large.

CHAPTER TWO
THIS PLANET IS DOOMED

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the /
beginning and the end / But I do not talk of the beginning or the end

Walt Whitman

It is written on temple walls / and pyramids and tombs /
even to the end of time / boldly there to declare immortality /
then why do you live just to die?

Sun Ra

Mysterium Tremendum

"The first function," of a living mythology, Campbell writes, is for the purpose of "reconciling consciousness to the preconditions of its own existence" (*Thou* 2). This means that a given mythology will support an individual, and the culture they belong to, in understanding and communing with a basic truth of the universe: there is life and death, and each person experiences these things without exception. For Campbell the first function of a mythology affirms life "to the root, to the rotten, horrendous base" (*Pathways* 4). He emphasizes that in traditional cultures an affirmation of these brutal life-and-death realities was assured through painful, sometimes body-altering initiatory rituals.

Before the individual can experience the "epiphany beyond words" (Campbell, *Inner* xxiv) they must be confronted with the horrors of life on Earth: that nature "is something that eats itself" (Campbell, *Pathways* 104). Campbell means this in a literal way: that the circle of life, animals eating other animals, the growth and decay of the

natural world, in an endless cycle of birth and death, is an essentially unbearable thought. By having to witness this, up close, sometimes in their own bodies as part of the ritual, initiates were entered into a state of radical submission to this reality. According to Campbell, this allows the affirmation of not only life itself—"saying yea to the world as it is" (*Pathways* 104)—but a recognition of one's own part in it, therefore affirming one's own existence simultaneously.

In an experience like this, an individual is way beyond the bounds of the ordinary and is plunged into a larger zone of being: that of the great mystery of the cosmos. Their body and psyche are inexplicably altered and accept a new state of being, an expanded consciousness, and a sense of knowing that there is meaning in the pain of being—even tremendous beauty. In this moment, the myth completes its task of "aligning waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum* of the universe, *as it is*" (Campbell, *Thou* 2). The incomprehensible mystery of the universe is surreptitiously visited upon a person's psyche. They then belong to it.

This incomprehensibility, according to Campbell, releases the mind from naïve fixations (*Inner* 28) and awakens in the individual "a sense of awe...mystery and gratitude for the ultimate mystery of being" (*Pathways* 104) which exists "beyond the phenomenal field" (Campbell, *Pathways* xvii).

For Ra the opening of human consciousness to this transcendent mystery was a crucial dynamism of his own myth. As he suggests in Robert Mugge's documentary *A Joyful Noise*, myth is a transcendent force which can transmit individuals direct to the realms of pure potential. "Those of [this] reality have lost their way, now they must listen to what myth has to say…those of [this] reality have been slaves of a bad truth. So there's

nothing left now but the myth. The myth is neither bad nor good. Its potentials are unlimited" (22:24-23:05). Myth, in Ra's eyes, could free the people of planet Earth from the "bad truth" they had been fed and place them on the threshold of the unlimited sphere—an initiation into a deeper sense of being. Otherwise he proposed, the Earth and the destructive culture that dominates it would be annihilated. Without a pervasive initiation into a mythic perspective he professed "THIS PLANET IS DOOMED" (*Planet* 1).

Sun Ra's understanding of mythology, and the making of his own creative, personal myth, therefore aims to perform the essential task of aligning collective consciousness with the transcendent, awakening the multitudes to the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," (Campbell, *Goddesses* 127) and saving humanity from its caustic, demythologized perception. For the "potential of myth" which is "inexpressible" (Ra qtd. in Szwed 329) to be gleaned by the masses, a mode of interaction is required, per Campbell's first function of a mythology, an image of the inexpressible: to blast the minds of the uninitiated open to the wild grandeur of the cosmos, and the state of life "as it is." Sun Ra had just the thing: an apocalypse.

The Other Side of Time

The scene opens in outer space. A bizarre, slow-moving, oblong-shaped space craft pilots through the cosmos and a chorus of disembodied voices chants "it's after the end of the world! Don't you know that yet?" in reverberating repetitions. Then a verdant planet of strange, psychedelic plants and Sun Ra, dressed in what appears to be ancient Egyptian garb appears striding down a strange path through this extraterrestrial jungle.

He wanders through the dense, otherworldy forest, accompanied by a hooded, mirror faced figure. What looks to be a red, ball-shaped brain encased inside a plastic orb—with its long, blue, iridescent brain stem dangling in tow—floats down a trail leading Ra to clearing. Strange, colorful, protruding fruits abound and distant saxophones echo in incoherent, skittering phrases through the psychedelic brambles. Ra seems to be listening very carefully. "The music is different here," he translates,

> the vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth. Planet Earth: sound of guns, anger, frustration. There was no one to talk to on planet Earth that would understand. We'll set up a colony for Black people here. See what they could do on a planet all their own without any white people there. They could drink in the beauty of this planet…it would affect their vibrations, for the better of course. (*Space* 02:00-3:30).

The floating brain and the mirror-faced figure attend his every word. Ra continues: "Equation wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially *ended*. We'll work on the other side of time" (*Space* 02:00-3:30). He and his band then proceed to fly their space craft to Earth, declare Ra as intergalactic savior, and his band the musical accompaniment to the potential restitution of the human race, in outer space. He will take any of the Black population who believe in his myth with him to the unknown regions. Humanity, he proclaims is headed towards its own, hubristically fueled apocalypse. Time on this planet, as it were, is over. Earth he declares is a war-torn place, nearly unlivable, and a locale particularly oppressive for African Americans. The first thing to do about Earth's problems is to "officially" end time and give up on this cursed space rock. Ra's goal, at face value at least, is not to save Earth but to spirit the believers into outer space.

Not your typical Messiah, but something stranger: he posits a different kind of life altogether, constructed out in the ether. While life on Earth is ending a more transcendent way of being is beginning somewhere else in the cosmos, outside of time. "Time," writes Joseph Campbell "shuts you out of eternity…it is the transcendent dimension…to which myth refers" (*Pathways* xxii). Myth is not related to, or part of, time: myth is timeless.

Sun Ra's myth, therefore, begins as soon as time ends and a new, timeless story begins. Moreover, Ra's story is a sort of post-modern "cosmogony," (32) an inventive "re-creation" story, implying return to an "original time" at once "mythical…primordial" (Eliade 72) as Mircea Eliade claims. This rolling back of being to an original moment means "starting time *over again at its beginning*" (Eliade 78). In short, cosmogony implies renewal and rebirth—making space for something totally new to emerge. But rebirth is not available in the ordinary space of time, only in eternal realms, the otherworldy landscape of story, of myth. Therefore an apocalypse is coming, in Ra's universe, which cracks time open and allows for his myth, in the shape of a musically guided space ship, to come to Earth and invite humanity towards something better, something new—a new life charged with spiritual resonances.

But why apocalypse? Why not use some other form of transformation for these purposes? Why end time and work on the other side of it? For Ra, this began in a very personal, emotional location. Ra saw the omnipresence of racial violence on Earth—something he had been subjected to as a Black man—as a sign of humankind's uniquely destructive nature. It was indicative for Ra of a larger problem with humanity: in them he detected an instinctive and uncontrollable viciousness lurking in the fabric of their very souls. This impulse, he prophesied, would flare unstoppably until the entire planet would

be consumed. Humanity had been possessed by an apocalyptic tendency for eons—as the brutal bloodshed of history attested to. This, Ra thought, had manifested alongside the advent of religion in general and remained a key unconscious tendency of the Christian mythos: its American iteration a specifically heartless version. In short, humanity's life span would be short, hurried by their systemic beliefs, as well as their innate propensity for violently celebrating the most contemptible aspects of their own beings. Bad truths, Ra said, were guiding the human race, not wisdom, and it had led to a terminal condition. "These equations," charged Ra

> [are] about to kill you unless you get some more…cause the [destiny] you got is spelled D-O-O-M, you see, and its knocking at your door. So therefore it's impossible for you to get out cause there's such a thing as karma. So then what must you do? You must appeal to god's impossible department because the possible can never save you. And the truth cannot save you. ("Possibility" 25:30-26:05)

Therefore "ultra-chaos,"—the very witnessing of an overwhelming apocalyptic presence—indicted Ra "makes a different story. Everybody's involved" (Ra qtd. in Sinclair, "It Knocks" 19).

Even science he charged—one of the greatest inventions of the "enlightened" age—had become demythologized, deranged: a tool of mere destruction. "That's the main thing about science," Ra told John Sinclair in 1966, "that it's set up to find new ways for people to kill each other" (23.) Indeed, Western science has unconsciously grown into a monster capable of destroying all existence with the push of a button, as one of Sun Ra's most famous songs "Nuclear War" glibly puts it: "they're talking about

nuclear war / ... / it's a motherfucker, don't you know? / if they push that button / your ass got to go / ... / what you gonna do / about yo' ass?" (0:17-3:00).

As Corbett affirms, in an interview with Christopher Eddy on the *Sun Ra Arkive* podcast, it was Ra's intention, with the release of the song "Nuclear War" to sound the alarm, and to instill this awareness of self-induced apocalypse

> for those of us who grew up listening to Ra, and Ra sort of talking about outer space and talking about travelling the Spaceways and getting away from this planet, to then suddenly become extremely dedicated to a kind of social activist role was very surprising to me….suddenly it's about, like, this is *real*. We have to take care of this. And [Ra] was warning constantly that if we don't treat our planet better, there are going to be dire circumstances, and I have to say I think that's where we are now. (1:09:33-1:10:12)

The apocalypse, therefore, is an indispensable mythological image for every being to contemplate: a vision imbued with ethical, initiatory force that, more than ever, is needed on an ailing, threatened planet. Ra could see this and chose to work a dramatic "ending" into his work: as a mythic mirror for us to peer into.

As mythologist Michael Meade extols, meditating on the concept of apocalypse "can create a mythic condition that helps to reveal the underlying unity of life" (18). Apocalypse uncovers the mystic harmony of the universe and the importance of life within it. In chorus, D.H. Lawrence proclaims "The Apocalypse shows us what we are resisting, unnaturally…our connection with the cosmos, with the world, with mankind" (125). According to these two scholars the purpose of the image of apocalypse is to show

us what we have shaded from our gaze or what we would grieve were it all truly destroyed. Perhaps that is the mystic antidote to the nuclear bomb. Or even the climate crisis which, at the time of this writing, has potentially usurped nuclear war as the reigning, imminent threat to life on Earth.

Further, the word "apocalypse," as Meade writes, beyond representing "The End written in large letters" originates etymologically in several Greek words including "*apokalypsis*" which holds the meanings of "to reveal," "to disclose," "to discover," and finally "to lift the veil" (2-3). Apocalypse, according to Meade, implies psychological revelation—with "underlying forces of life becoming more palpable and evident" while "old structures may collapse" and "barely imagined designs are on the verge of being revealed" (3). Apocalypse is therefore a mythological description of psychological upheaval, mirroring outward experience, and returning the mind to a stripped-down origin point from which archetypal substructures can be drawn. From a "cosmos," states Meade, the world "slips from order to collapse, as everything shifts back towards the original state of chaos that existed before creation" (12) and in this is the restoration of great awareness: the revelation itself, the primal ground from which every mythological and psychological reality originates. Further, the revelation of this space, implies "regeneration of the world" (16). The "deeper sense of apocalypsis," he concludes, aligning the archetype of apocalypse with a creative sensibility, "means to see with a revelatory eye, to revision and revise the big picture, and to find our place again in the ongoing, metaphorical, metaphysical, and cosmological story" (Meade 17). In essence, the archetype of apocalypse suggests a process of creative selfhood, a space from which creation, in line with larger mythological tenets and awarenesses, might be conjured.

For a visionary artist like Ra working in the realms of myth, apocalypse contains within it the ultimate initiatory potentials for accessing the "mysterium tremendum" a la Campbell and beginning to disclose the "barely imagined designs" on the verge of coming into being. Beginning with apocalypse, and exploiting revelatory ideas, allows Ra to wipe the slate clean, resetting our preconceived notions of what is and what should be.

Intergalactic Messiah

Initiating this apocalyptic space allowed Ra to begin generating his own mythic narrative and granted him the agency to become the narrator and protagonist of said myth. "It's easy to forget," Ra scholar John Corbett reminds us, "Ra was a messianic figure…he set himself up…as a savior: 'I've come back, come to you to help you save this planet. Because I've been told to. I didn't want to, but I had to, so I'm here to do it" (*Arkive* 1:08:20-1:08:53). As such, he is able to contain the complex of apocalypsis in all of its seemingly dissonant simultaneity: birth and death, end and beginning, destruction and creation. The central function of a messiah figure is, as C. G. Jung tells us, the facilitation of rebirth through what he calls "*apocatastasis*, or restitution" (*CW* 18, para. 527). The image of Christ, he tells us, represents the apocalyptic prospect for the world to be "restored…to its original and perfect state" (*CW* 18, para. 527). In this is implied the "destruction and restoration" of apocalypsis (*CW* 18, para. 527). The messiah wields the apocalypse as a visionary modality for upending everything, and restoring balance to the universe. In this regard, Ra fulfills the archetypal trajectory of the messiah: an arrival on Earth, the delivery of a message, the ending of the world and the chance for humanity to be "saved," experience transcendence and the universe regenerated, cleansed.

Ra also embodies the apocalyptic tensions present in other mythic figures. For one, the Ancient Egyptian Ra, of whom Sun Ra writes, "it is written…in the book of Ancient / Egypt / that because of his displeasure RA / destroyed mankind" (*Prophetika* 3). Here he refers to the story of when the Egyptian Ra, according to Lewis Spence's telling, began to grow old and the people of Egypt mocked him, neglecting to give him his "reverence due" (166) at which point Ra decides to destroy the blaspheming humans. "The eye of Ra," then relays Spence, "descended in the form of the goddess Hathor, and smote the men in the desert and slew them" (167). Ra was pleased. But Hathor, bloodthirsty, wished to destroy the rest of humanity, and in a benevolent attempt to "deliver mankind out of her hands" (Spence 167) Ra, brewed a massive amount of beer, tricked Hathor into drinking it, and she became so drunk that her rampage quickly ended. Here the Egyptian Ra embodies both the destructive and creative aspects of the deity. In this connection Sun Ra, embodying the apocalyptic duality of the Egyptian Ra, relates "READ THESE HIEROGLYPHICS AND / UNDERSTAND! / today you see the world / on the verge of total destruction / ONLY HE WHO SET THE DESTRUCTION / IN MOTION / CAN STOP IT!" (*Prophetika* 3). The messiah figure is both creator and destroyer, world wender and benevolent deliverer, at once.

In this connection, Ra conceived that images of the end of the world, wielded by a messianic figure, contain within them a commanding inborn ultimatum and the possibility for something truly new to be born. An ethics and an embodied metaphysics, working in simultaneity. "Apocalypsis," after all "has to do with alternative visions of reality," reminds Meade (14). Ra claimed that a world like this one, on the edge of destruction, would never survive, or necessarily even *should* survive, as such. And yet he

espoused that an "alter destiny" (*Space* 17:15-17:25) was possible, an alternative way of life within reach, if humans could only aid in its manifestation. And it was Ra himself who could show the people of Earth this possibility, help them to bring it into being. As he incants in the poem "The Universe Sent Me": "Far beyond any star in the sky— / From thence came I / … the universe sent me / … I can save humanity" (*Prophetika* 73-74).

As Sun Ra cryptically equates in another poem: "Do not make the end you seek / The end. / There are different kinds of ends" (Ra qtd. in Szwed 328). He hoped he could offer a necessary reconciling imperative for the human race: if humanity does not change its way of living it *will be* the end times. As Nabeel Zuberi points out, like the space prophet Klaatu in the 1951 sci-fi film classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, Sun Ra's messianic message comes in the form of a redemptive ultimatum, brought to this planet to implore earthlings to universally denuclearize or be destroyed (991). Klaatu, unwilling to negotiate with a "single nation or group of nations" instead vies to communicate his message to all Earth people directly, which he does by shutting down all electrical activity on Earth (Youngquist 159). Like Ra, "he requires the world's attention" (Youngquist159), and for his message delivered to be about the Earth's fragility on the whole. For both Klaatu and Ra, each a space-prophet with their own world-altering message, the situation on Earth is dire, requiring a near-total shift. In this case Ra's apocalyptic message, says Corbett, is bolstered by "concretized metaphors" demonstrating that the danger, though explained through mythic story, is "real" (Arkive 1:08:20-1:08:53).

It's After the End of the World, Don't You Know That Yet?

Another tactic Ra uses to impress upon us the immediate necessity of reappraisal of our self-created expiry is by having us view the threat from a different location, which is the future. And so he proclaims that time *is already* at an end, ("we'll work on the other side of time" (*Space* 02:35-02:50)) or that it may even be *after* the end. As Ra loudly proclaims in another poem from the *Prophetika*: "IT'S AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD— / DON'T YOU KNOW THAT YET?" (*Prophetika* 41) which is one of his most uncanny and mythic equations. *Space is the Place*, the film, demonstrates this post-apocalyptic vantage. Youngquist writes, it "begins by transporting its viewers to a point in time after the end of the world—and therefore after the movie they are watching, forcing them to reflect on life from a posthumous, or maybe posthuman, perspective" (211). This linear and symbolic "dislocation" (Youngquist 211) is an imperative in itself, only reinforced by an image of actual planetary destruction, which is the explosive, though extremely low budget, conclusion to *Space is the Place*. In the final moments of the film a literal image of apocalypse appears on a television screen in Ra's ship as it flies away from Earth—whole cities crumble, forests go up in a blaze, dams give way to roaring floods—as the planet is immolated in a fiery plume, its cardboard pieces spinning off into the dioramic blackness of space. Sun Ra and the Arkestra exiting in their bulbous yellow spaceship, chant through the echoing ether: "In some far off place, many light years in space, we'll wait for you! Where human beings have never trod, where human eyes have never seen, we'll build a world of abstract dreams and wait for you! In tomorrow's realm, we'll take the helm of a new ship, like the lash of a whip, we'll safely

journey to another world!" (1:18:19-1:19:21). We see a piece of the Earth tumbling through an endless sea of darkness, lost forever.

These lyrics combined with this image suggest a dual action apocalyptic ultimatum—there is destruction and loss but somehow hope remains. We are straddling a contemplative condition akin to paradox. To be "after the end of the world"—having just seen the planet viscerally obliterated—implies a view of the world in its entirety. An image of completeness vanquished and holism fractured, that could stoke love, or, in its tragic destruction, regret. In this regard, it seems that Ra's apocalypse is, in one sense, about a recovery of the whole, of Earth itself, and of learning to see the world anew, from beyond it. Sun Ra asks us to look back from the future on our planet and to grasp a novel mythos, which is not the destructive, limited, positivistic landscape of the possible but something unifying, transcendent, clarifying. A "new mythology" such as this, says Campbell, might be of the "unified Earth as…one harmonious being" (Inner xix). Maybe this kind of view is only possible from Ra's terrible hereafter. Does the Earth survive? Paradoxically, only if we can witness that it is truly, right now, after the end of the world, and that the apocalypse that's already occurred, or is occurring, is our own.

The Bible is a Book of Death

It seems clear why Ra saw the need for an apocalypse on a societal level and as the blast-off point for his myth, but how did he feel personally implicated in adopting this archetypal position? Why had he been chosen for this dramatic mission? Apocalypse as a creative form, claims Meade, has historically appeared as a response to trauma. The Biblical apocalyptists of the first century were "persecuted…visionaries living through a

time of radical change" who "believed the end of the world would come during their lifetime" (5). John of Patmos, the author of *Revelations,* the canonical Bible's final text, had been sent to an island and sentenced to "permanent exile" (Meade 5). Meade suggests that John's revelation may have arrived in urgent response to "suffering condemnation, isolation, and a long imprisonment" (5) positing a "psychological connection…between extreme feelings of oppression…and notions of worldwide destruction" (5). Intense suffering—having no way out—conjures images of the end, a will to destruction so powerful that it might consume the whole world. D.H. Lawrence confirms what he calls the "suicidal" (124) urge of the early Christians destined to "death at the hands of the Roman State" (121) and who, in turn, harbored "mad hostility…to the…world, and…cosmos…having in the end, to will the destruction of them all" (124). With no palpable continuity available, and an ongoing experience of oppression, it seems a natural psychological response to dream the end. Persecution can render an entire cosmos null and void.

Sun Ra's apocalypse too appears as a response to trauma and his myth a mystic response to oppression. And yet, his response to this trauma differs greatly from early Christian apocalyptists, and his particular end-of-the-world vision, though clearly inspired in part by the Bible, reveals him as a very different kind of apocalyptist. Ra's apocalypse is a central facet of a creative, modern myth. Creative mythologies as Campbell says can reveal both the artist's vision of "order…beauty…exhilaration" (*Masks* 4) or, conversely, their deepest pains: "an experience of [their] own…horror" (Campbell, *Masks* 4). We can assume that Ra's apocalypse is borne from a personal

experience of pain, struggle, alienation, and a profound feeling of otherness sharpened by trauma.

Ra's childhood and early adulthood were marked by experiences so othering that, in tandem with visionary experiences that we'll discuss later, inspired him to "destroy his past, and recast himself in a series of roles in a drama he spent his life creating" (Szwed 5). He grew up Black in the deeply segregated city of Birmingham, Alabama, shadowed by the ever present rubrics of Jim Crow. Life felt like a strange, bleary nightmare. Of his adolescence he later declaimed "I felt that all this was a dream, that it wasn't real. And suffering…I just couldn't connect…my mind would never accept the fact that is like it's supposed to be. I always felt there was something wrong" (qtd. in Szwed 6). The ordinary ugliness of racism surrounded him. As a high school student he was known as a copious reader and suffered the painful injustice of using the segregated public library which meant "going to the back door, ringing a bell, and counting on black aides to slip books out the door" (Szwed 21). To call this degrading is an understatement, and he began keeping a journal as a means of "recording and totaling up the injustices" (Szwed 23) he experienced, and gathered many while undertaking some of his first music tours with high school bands. At most shows, he and his Black cohort could not enter through the front door, and as J.L. Lowe, a saxophonist who played with Ra at the time, remembers "it didn't sit well with him" (qtd. in Szwed 23). Shortly after, in the early throes of the second world war, he was drafted. Despite registering as a conscientious objector and being granted the classification he was ordered to appear at a civilian work camp, or head to prison. He was sent to the Marienville, Pennsylvania where he "raked underbrush in the forest during the day, discussing spiritual matters with fellow inmates...in the

evening" (Youngquist 15). "Ill-suited to labor and confinement," writes Youngquist, he wrote regularly to officials pleading to be released, stating a variety of dire health symptoms, which ultimately lead to a suicidal state. He felt his imprisonment was racially motivated, and noted this is many of his letters. Luckily, his pleas were heard, and, believed to be of no benefit to the war effort, he was discharged. As Youngquist attests he never forgot the indignity of this time in his life, and "his experience…[of] confinement, stress, and humiliation…would stay with [him] the rest of his life and permanently mark his music" (16). It would also constellate the preconditions for an apocalyptic mindset.

Naturally Ra came to link his own racially inflicted suffering with the general plight of Black society in America. As a student of history he had decided that the "history" that had been recorded was "only one…among many" (Szwed 105), in effect a "white history," (Szwed 105) which had "robbed black people of their past and their true individual and collective names" (Szwed 105). This yielded a spiritually bereft Black population without a country—without a world—who were overly reliant on the Bible, the "poisoned book" as Ra called it (qtd. in Szwed 105). Further, Ra would have known the Church's historical support of African enslavement and the use of the Bible to justify the transatlantic slave trade. As scholar-activist Patricia M. Muhammad writes, in 1452 Pope Nicholas V "charged Alfonso of Portugal with the Christian duty to enslave any non-Christian" (179). This is the first "international edict to…grant a Christian nation the right to promote, enforce, and heavily profit from slave trading" (Muhammad 179). This was enshrined in Christian colonial practice decades later when "Pope Alexander VI beckoned Christian monarchs to conquer native populations in the name of the Catholic Church, upholding his predecessor's tradition to enslave non-Christians" (Muhammad

179). The Catholic church therefore became a prime instigator and pillar of African enslavement.

These colonial practices were built upon the philosophical foundations that theologians like Saint Thomas Aquinas had laid when he claimed that "slavery exists as a consequence of original sin" (Maxwell 84) making "some people…slaves 'by nature'" (Maxwell 84). A conceit that John Francis Maxwell tells us "continued to be expounded at least until the end of the 18th century" (84). This idea originates in a literal interpretation of the Bible in which, among many other examples, Paul affirms slavery when he states "Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as unto Christ" (*Authorized King James Bible*, Ephesians 6:5-8). The Bible encourages, as Ra saw it, willful subjugation. Further, certain characters in the Bible, those popularly thought to be "Black" Ra observed being treated "disrespectfully or pushed to the margins of the story" (Szwed 64). For instance the story known in the white-washed, common version as "the Curse of Ham" in which Ham, the son of Noah, is arraigned by his father to become the servant of his brothers. Despite the fact that "Noah and his family are not described in racial terms" in the scriptural text "as the story echoed through the centuries and around the world…Ham came to be widely portrayed as black; blackness, servitude and the idea of racial hierarchy became inextricably linked" (Lee "Noah's Curse"). Interpretations like these paved the way for enslavement and the continued oppression of Black people in American society, which Ra considered to be mythic equations—flexible philosophical beliefs that could be amended or completely transformed. For him, they had the elasticity of myth.

Ra, witnessing these "bad" interpretations and their real-world consequences as a process of living mythology, decided to embark upon a powerful re-reading of the Bible, as part of his autodidactic mythic studies, and in direct response to the trauma he had accrued coming of age Black in America. This would become the philosophical, scholastic underpinning of the apocalyptic aspects of his mythos, and an often unseen origin for his personal myth-making in general. His revisioning of the Bible would be the impetus for an entire career built in revisionary myth.

"Like Milton," writes Szwed Ra had come to the conclusion "that much of the Bible seemed to be badly translated—perhaps intentionally so—from some unknown original" (Szwed 63). It was, from a modern perspective, a deeply distorted text. Szwed affirms that as Ra

> went deeper into the bible he began to understand the meaning of "revised": it had been edited, and some books removed, maybe first at the council of Nicene, where it was said that certain books which connected Egypt to the Bible had been suppressed. Now, as he read, some of the most critical passages appeared either suspiciously transparent or hopelessly impenetrable.[…] nonetheless clues to correct reading seemed to be buried in the Bible itself—"Alpha and Omega"—perhaps it should…be read backwards. What if Revelations was the first book of the Bible, Genesis the last? (63).

Seeking its deepest transcendent feature Ra's goal became reinterpreting a bad reading of the Bible, which had been propagated in the West almost since the book's inception. "He saw that to decipher [the Bible's] true meaning," continues Szwed "to make it whole

again, would take knowledge of ancient languages and histories as well as of esoteric texts that reached beyond the canonic boundaries established by Protestant churches. He would have to undertake hermeneutics in the most literal sense" (64). To undo the West's holy book would imply the revelation of its deep historical, spiritual, and racial shadow, refracted through a lens of experimental exegesis and creative revisioning, to awaken and free the people of America, Black and white, and beyond.

Ra, as Youngquist affirms, "understood the Bible to constitute the ideological structure of contemporary Western society" (54) and believed that the "organized forms of black religion" (Youngquist 55) that come out of it fail "to promote black life" (Youngquist 55) instead "trading in death as the only means of salvation" (Youngquist 55). Ra could read his own suffering, and more generally the pain of Black Americans, as an outcome of Christian doctrine, based on a deeply misinterpreted Bible. But in its very fabric was hidden the secrets of the whole Western world; a holistic mystery to be uncovered and a deeper truth revealed.

The Bible therefore required decoding. It needed to be stripped back to its most original version and retranslated as, in Ra's words, "THE TRUTH…CONCEALED TRUTHS" (*Wisdom* 65). In Ra's eyes, the active mystical apparatus of the Bible, its wisdom, remains within, covered by interpretations that others had heaped upon it over centuries. In his view, a different reading was possible and necessary.

Words, for Ra, and their palimpsested substructures, could be re-appropriated to reveal what is inside them. This he called "THE MATHEMATICS OF WORDS" (*Wisdom* 122). This mathematics he wrote was the key to unlocking the Bible:

> WITHOUT THE KEYS; IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO TRACE WORDS TO THEIR ORIGIN. THE KEYS TO THE CLARIFICATION OF WORD STUDY ARE IN THE BIBLE, THEY ARE OPENLY APPARENT TO THOSE WHO HAVE AN OPEN MIND (*Wisdom* 122).

Words unlock the Bible, and the Bible further unlocks words, the words of the world, which are accessible if one only works their very structure in a creative and probing way. "Much of Sun Ra's work and thinking," says Szwed "begins with the interpretation and reinterpretation of biblical texts, refuting fundamentalism, really, living to prove the Bible was written in symbols and metaphors with no room for literalism. It has to be interpreted in other ways, and not be limited to one phonetic reading" (302).

Phonetics itself, the breaking down of words in terms of sound, became Ra's crucial access point for reinterpretation of the Bible—a creative act akin to musical composition. This mode, a "conflation of literary and musical connotation," (Youngquist 76) gives Ra the ability to, in his own words "Create a System" rather than being "enslav'd by another Mans" (qtd. in Youngquist 77). He would find his own way through the Bible by hearing into the text—construing its symbolic, sedimentary layers, encrusted by generation after generation—rather than be drawn into traditional and damaged interpretations that painfully subjugated people like him. "To those who seek true wisdom," he wrote "the bible should be considered as Code (Cod) word instead of the Good Word…if you regard the bible as the 'Code Word,' you will be able to gain its hidden secrets" (qtd. in Szwed 76). He would work to unravel this code which might divulge the cause of the suffering of Black People in America, creating a new, Black hermeneutic for Biblical exegesis. This revolutionary and innovative act might allow a

truly modern, creative reading of the Bible by which the "evils of racism could be overcome" (Szwed 62). He would tear the text apart until it had been exposed, remade.

Working in the tradition of "the theosophists and the kabbalists" (Kapsalis 68) Ra, while living in Chicago in the fifties, created a huge number of hand typed, philosophical broadsides that work the text in this way. In these he would utilize the syllabic and homonymic restructuring of words in order to generate surprising queries and obtain incendiary answers. In one he asks "Does the Bible contain anything about the Negro?" (*Wisdom* 66) and riffing on the words of Jesus in Matthew 8:22 responds

> Yes. Jesus said, "Let the Negro bury the negro." At least that is what he said in the original Greek Version of the New Testament. But according to genesis C and G are interchangeable and for this reason the words of Jesus also reads, "Let the Negro bury the Necro"…The original Greek and Ancient Hebrew definition of Negro…is dead body. (*Wisdom* 66)

As Youngquist is quick to assert this "provocative etymology" (58) suggests that "in scriptural terms…blacks are already dead. In racial terms, they are nothing at all" (58). The reconstitution of Biblical phrases reveals big sociological truths, conceivably a literary source-point of Black suffering, and perhaps modes of repair. For Ra, to be Black means to be aligned with death, and the Bible makes it a racist, gospel truth: the conductive substructure of a noxious collective Western belief. But, as Ra points out, it is not the Bible itself which is responsible for this but the interpretive readings which have been built upon scripture, which are a form of segregation themselves. "THE BIBLE IS WRITTEN IS SUCH A WAY," he proclaims "THAT IT HAS ONE MEANING FOR THE NEGRO AND ANOTHER MEANING FOR THE WHITE MAN" (*Wisdom* 77).

Different races stoke different readings from the text, gleaning oppositional destinies—supremacy and heavenly spiritual rebirth for whites, and earthly, dissociative death for Blacks.

According to Ra there is a way to undermine this Biblically induced necrotypical reality, which is to "stop being a Negro" by "studying and understanding true life giving wisdom" (*Wisdom* 66). Otherwise the Bible would remain "a book of death" (Ra qtd. in Youngquist 55). To be "negro" assumes Ra, is to be linguistically categorized, and to be catalogued as such steals one's sense of personal autonomy. Hence the term is an etymology of negation, which had been weaponized against Black people for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. But how do you remove a racial label from an entire people?

Ra thought he would dig deeper in the Bible for ways to achieve this: to "resuscitate the dead" (Youngquist 61); to free Black Americans from their scripture-decreed racially sanctified deaths, and this, like a blast from Gabriel's horn, came in the form of life-affirming wisdom. For Ra, attending to "proper wisdom" (Youngquist 61) means taking on a transcendent perspective, one attuned to the process of what he called "enlightment" [sic] (Kapsalis 68)—a way *out* of death—which as artist Terry Kapsalis points out, is, for Sun Ra, an inherently Black pursuit. "On no uncertain terms," she writes "Ra made the connection between 'Negro' and...light by way of the Bible" (69).

Light, he found in the Bible was connected to both Jesus and Lucifer, each connoted at different points as a bright, shining "star of the morning"—Lucifer in Isaiah 14:12 and Christ in Revelations—and concluded that Christ and Lucifer were secretly one, of the same essence. He loudly decrees "READ REVELATIONS 22:16…JESUS IS THE BRIGHT AND MORNING STAR AND THE NAME OF THAT STAR IS

LUCIFER OR VENUS" (*Wisdom* 88). Not only are Jesus and Lucifer identical, but "the true identity of the Negro is Lucifer" (*Wisdom* 66). It follows that Black Americans are not only intimately connected to the two most powerful forces in the Christian cosmos, but are themselves "light bringers" as the etymology of Lucifer's name reveals; fallen angels, whom in the enlightening ranges of language and myth, are the keepers of wisdom. Ra may not only be overturning the common white, racist stereotype of aligning African Americans with demons—a trope from European folklore that found its way to America via Puritanical thought—but may also be taking a page out of theosophist Helena Blavatsky's book here, when she claims

> in antiquity and *reality*, Lucifer, or *Luciferus*, is the name of the angelic Entity presiding over the *light of truth* as over the light of the day. In the great Valentinian gospel *Pistis Sophia* (§ 361) it is taught that of the three Powers emanating from the Holy names of the Three [[*Tridunameis*]], that of Sophia (the Holy Ghost according to these gnostics — the most cultured of all), resides in the planet Venus or Lucifer. (512)

Ra was an adherent of Blavatsky's writings, and his equation may even be in direct relation to this passage, which shows that wisdom (Sophia), in the gnostic tradition, is as aspect of the fallen star that is Lucifer, also represented by Venus. If wisdom, which is in Lucifer, who is, for Sun Ra, the symbolic incarnation of Black People in America, then wisdom is within. Gnosis is readily available for the so-called negro in rescue from their linguistic and Biblically arraigned demise. "Ye cannot hide anymore," writes Ra, speaking directly to his Black readership "Ye are the light of the world" (qtd. in Kapsalis 68). Black Americans are the people of wisdom and the keepers of truth imbued with a

transcendent light, it is only that they've been made not to see it. One need not be a so-called negro but rather might take up the bright torch of Luciferian brightness—the energy of which was once evil but restored as "eternal delight" in Blake's own revisioning of the Bible and its devil (29)—and engage the enlightened and enlightening quality of being.

According to Ra, though, to truly live—to be reconnected with the archetype of life in a more profound way—Black people must transcend death altogether, which means surpassing Christianity and its tomblike holy book. "WE MUST SET OUR MINDS," writes Ra "TO ACHIEVE THE ABSOLUTE IMPOSSIBLE…WE MUST CONQUER DEATH…WE MUST TAKE THE FIRST STEP FORWARD BY MAKING LIFE REAL" (qtd. in Youngquist 56).

Beneath the Bible is life, and the death decreed therein, especially for Black Americans, is defeated by witnessing the divinity of life, in the present. This "eschatological devotion to life," (60) as Youngquist puts it, lends Sun Ra's revision of the Bible "apocalyptic potential" (60) with the capability of engendering a "wholesale reinvention of reality" (60). Seeing to the very bottom of the key text in the Western religious cannon can cause its deadening embrace to come loose, shaking out the life-giving truth therein.

Spiritual Re-Historicization

As Kapsalis makes clear, Ra's form of exegesis is truly modern, as she aligns Ra with other modernist literary deconstructionists such as William Burroughs and Brion Gysin "who asserted the power of the cut-up and the permutation" to "unlock words and

release the truth, even foretell the future" (68). Ra's Biblical hermeneutics requires a modernist's deconstruction, which could release the truth of words, and potentially shape the future. A futurist's recontextualizing of the past, with apocalyptic intention.

These modern literary mechanisms could also allow Ra to rewrite a past he saw as scripted by a false reading of the Bible, and further place Black People in a "rited" history, full of wisdom, promise, and mystical power. For Ra does not stop at attempting to free Black People from the sanctioned death of misread scripture, he goes on to show, that modern Blacks are the rightful inheritors of a rich, ancient history trailing back through ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, in language and myth. "I WILL SPEAK OF THE NEGRO AS A MAN," inscribes Ra "ALTHOUGH HE IS NOT OF THIS WORLD…BUT IN REALITY IS THE SPOOK, THE HOLY GHOST" (*Wisdom* 77). Playing on a racial slur Ra further connotes another unconscious linguistic connection between Blacks and death, revealing the ghostliness implied in the term. Black People are spirits, ghosts. But not just any ghost. Ra equates them as *the* holy ghost of the Bible—the powerful intermediary between the Christian God and His people. "HOLY GHOST," continues Ra, "IS REALLY HOLY SPOOK" (*Wisdom* 75). Black people, therefore, are not only Luciferian wisdom bearers, but holy beings of a spiritual nature. Further, claims Ra,

> THE DISCIPLES CALLED JESUS A SPOOK…
> THEREFORE…YOU ARE CALLED A SPOOK…YOU ARE THE SPOOK PEOPLE…THE SPOOK'S PEOPLE…JESUS' PEOPLE…THE TRUE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL…THE REAL ISRAEL…JUDAH INHERITED ISRAEL'S NAME THEREFORE YOU ARE

> JUDAH…YOU ARE THE JEWS OF THE BIBLE…YOU ARE THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK…YOUR HOME IS IN ISRAEL. (*Wisdom* 75)

Luciferian, spiritual beings, and, here Ra adds, Black Jews of the Bible. Sun Ra performs equations to assure that this reconstructed spiritual history is rediscovered from beneath and inside of the Biblical words which encapsulate it, and is made plain to the people that need to hear it—the Black community. Further, he attempts to chart the history of Black Americans back to its very origin, showing the presence of their ancestry throughout time and religious history. This inherently posits the eminence and ever presence of Blackness itself, and lays claim to a lineage which is centrally integrated in the growth of Western religious culture. If Black Americans are actually of Jewish ancestry, their original, cultural value increases infinitely. In this claim is a refutation to American racism in all of its forms. If Black People are the people of the good book, the guiding spiritual text of the western world, the racism heaped upon them is shown to be evermore hypocritical and misguided, built on a history and reading of the Bible so erroneous, that it might make that reading entirely invalid.

Sun Ra's revisioning of Judeo-Christian history here, in effect making it Black, is not entirely new. The Black Hebrew movement which posited that "blacks were heirs of the lost tribes of Israel, while white Jews were descendants of inter-racial marriages between Israelites and white Christians," as scholar of Religions Dawn Hutchinson writes, had been active since the turn of the 20th century (139). Further, as Rabbi Sholomo Ben Levy comments, there are a number of mythic associations that modern Black People can make between themselves, their culture and struggle, and the ancient

Hebrews, which is expressed in religious tradition as well as popular culture. Of this he writes

> the biblical struggles of the Hebrew people--particularly their slavery and exodus from Egypt--bore a strong similarity to the conditions of African slaves and was therefore of special importance to them. This close identification with the biblical Hebrews is clearly seen in the lyrics of gospel songs such as "Go Down Moses" and remains a favorite theme in the sermons of black clergy today. (Levy)

Ra adopts this line of thought, and appropriates this aspect of Black cultural tradition, not merely for the purpose of drawing an emotionally cathartic (as in the Gospel Spirituals) or comparative through-line to the ancient Israelites, but as a process of further bestowing upon American Blacks the mythic status of an ancient people, and situating them not in opposition to whiteness "but beyond it" (Youngquist 58). "American blacks," in Ra's eyes, are the rightful heirs to a "history [which] antedates that of whites and Western culture and in fact gave rise to that culture (as well as its horrors) through the errant destiny of the Jews" (Youngquist 58). In another broadsheet Ra plays with the phrase "Spo-dee O-dee—from Stick McGhee's 1949 song "Drinkin' Wine"—to show that even via popular song lyrics a connection to the ancient, pre-Eurocentric world can be gleaned. Sun Ra "runs it backwards to make a remarkable discovery: 'SPOITHE-OITHE is EHTIOPS. THIO-ETHIOPS….(read it backwards). […] ETHIOPS is the true identity of the American negro'" (Youngquist 58). Read in reverse, meanings reveal themselves. Old, forgotten truths are uncovered, and we are led backwards through the Old

Testament, to an Ethiopian beginning: a secret origin place of the African American, in a world that pre-dates any sense of whiteness.

Sun Ra's revisioning of history not only challenges hierarchical notions of authorship in relation to religion, but simultaneously re-spiritualizes it, gifting Black Americans a deep, ancient, and empowering lineage to draw from. For Ra, this rewrite grants power to the disempowered, and in the grand scheme, diminishes the supremacy of Western racism, as to make it seem puny and limp. What he conjures in this creative act of revisioning is a new sort of revelation, an unveiling of mythic potential, engineered for an apocalypse in thought.

Black Revelations

Outside of his exegetical revisioning, Ra's apocalyptic metaphors for life on Earth take on a stark quality—there is less probing in the past and more ambiguity about what the potential future might consist of. We see the beginnings of an outer space-themed mythology: one based in the survival and potential thriving of Black people. In reading the Bible he found light and a prospect for the witnessing of a Black past full of ancient value, but standing on the Earth in the present, Ra was not so optimistic. Perhaps an exodus was necessary; though he had rited the past in language, had morphed the words of scripture, of history, to reveal a life-giving origin, unfortunately the Earth remained a disastrous place to live: a literal form of incarceration with no escape. "This entire planet is a prison house / with no future" (*Prophetika* 40) he vigorously asserted. Elsewhere he avows that the death prescripted for Black People is actually a universal earthly sentence: "all planet Earth produces is the dead bodies of humanity" (*Joyful* 00:26-00:35). And yet

he found this particular prison house and its religious history, even its preeminent holy book, malleable enough to work into a potent, new myth, with revelatory, life-giving potential. Death should be transcended and immortality, in the ancient Egyptian sense of an afterlife, gleaned. “I am Pharaoh, I should know; the only thing I have left is immortality,” Ra incants on a record from 1979, “Why don’t you be my people now. Give up your death for me?” (qtd. in Szwed 352). His hermeneutics, built for undermining subjugating narratives and misread theology, transcending prescripted narratives and destinies, and restoring wisdom, allowed for an entrance into the impossibility of the immortal realm, which could in the words of Ra “AUTOMATICALLY FREE NEGROES” as well as “THE WORLD” (Youngquist 55).

Wisdom itself, is apocalyptic, in the sense of Meade’s definition, and can inspire a whole new vision of history, a reconnection to life, not only for Black People, but for all of humanity. Youngquist calls this process, as I already mentioned, an eschatological, devotional practice, with “apocalyptic potential” (60) which could perhaps engender a “wholesale reinvention of reality” (60). By taking the Bible, which Ra felt had been “put together wrong and was being read wrong” (Szwed 63) and exposing it to reappraisal, following clues buried in its very text, he could reveal a deeper, mythic sense of truth, and possibly build a better, Blacker, future.

Reading according to synchronistic signposts (“the first will be last,” “Alpha and Omega”) as Szwed shows, Ra contemplated if “perhaps it, too, should be read backwards.” (63). “What if Revelations was the first book of the Bible, Genesis the last?” (Szwed 63). What if the symbolic underside of the Book of Revelations, the waking of the dead on judgment day, was actually a metaphor that could be used to reframe the

importance of the lives of Black People? What if the great awakening, the revelatory apocalypsis held in the Bible, is actually a wakeup call for not only Black folks but for all humanity? What if the end is *actually* the beginning? What about a *Black* Revelations?

If the "end of the world" is not literally "a fiery Armageddon" (Campbell, *Thou* 107) but the end of "ignorance and…complacency," (*Thou* 107) division, and a demythologized worldview, as Campbell posits, then the "fear of the end of the world," as poet Harmony Holiday puts forth, "is really the fear of the defunct ideologies that sustain Western civilization" (*First)*. These ideologies—white supremacy thriving with impunity chiefly among them—align blackness with nullity, death, and what she calls "Black suicide" (*First*). The implicit disregard for and systemic destruction of Black life. "Ra comes in," she writes, "to call out Black Suicide…and lure us back to a sustaining source" (*First*). Black Resurrection in the face of the horrific wiles of white supremacy. The "sustaining source" for Holiday—what Ra calls "proper wisdom"—implies the archetype of apocalypsis, as she explains

> Everyone who is poised to overthrow the West's dead ideas and the habits they demand is ready for the end of the world, and the most ready among us occupy a territory that visionaries like Ra guide us toward…where our sense of sound becomes invincible and whole and grammar is world building and elemental. Here, in this afterworld, we use sound to keep the biosphere alive and vivid, to align with the geometry of the universe…in this limitless after the end of the world…we are responsible for its integrity, its capacity to endure itself. (*First*)

As Holiday so magnificently paints here, the birth out of self-abnegation, its transcendence, allows another world, as she conjures the image from *Space is the Place*, which began this chapter, with Sun Ra surveying an alternative planet, full of thriving life, made entirely of visionary vibrations. What if Revelations were the first book of the Bible and Genesis the last? Wouldn't one be borne out of death, travel through an ancient and supernatural spiritual history back to the place it all began—the wilds of greening Eden? After the end the world, in Sun Ra's vision, in the rebirthing modes of apocalypsis, do we not find new life, which far surpasses any defunct ideology, especially those deadening hallucinations of the whitened west? Is the "sustaining source" this mythological locale that is, at once, after the end of the world, and in a Biblical flip, the Edenic landscape of uncanny, but totally revivifying origin?

And perhaps it is specifically the transcendence of the West's conditioned "Black suicide" which makes this revivifying vision possible. Ra, in the *Space is the Place*, is asked by a local radio DJ why, after coming to Earth to teach the world his mytho-scientific program for an alternative destiny, is talking to "ghetto blacks" and not "white nuclear-physicists" (42:06-42:22). He responds that his is "the kingdom of darkness and blackness" and that Black People are "on the bottom because they're in an inverted position…they ought to be on top" (*Space* 42:42-42:50). Blackness, for Ra, shares a meaning with the "Blackness" of outer space. The subtle implication therefore is that Black People should be, poetically speaking, on "top," that is aligned with the possibility of outer space, and, in a more earthly sense, cognizant of their own inherent value. For Sun Ra, it is not whites who necessarily need to "wake up." Rather the Black population must find their rightful place in the grand, cosmic architecture, and out of the conscripted

negation that is thrust upon them. This is illuminated by something philosopher and poet-scholar Fred Moten says in his piece "Blackness and Nothingness.*"* For Moten, Blackness encompasses

> another way of living in the other world we are constantly making in and out of this world, in the alternative planetarity that is the intramural, internally differentiated presence—the (sur)real presence—of blackness serially brings online as persistent aeration, the incessant turning over of the ground beneath our feet that is the indispensable preparation for the radical overturning of the ground that we are under. (779)

Blackness, here, is underground, socially and politically, and so is, in Moten's frame, otherworldly, surreally, only somewhat part of life and culture. Blackness is buried, below—in an inverted position—when it should be on top. Blackness is placed in "ontology's underground," (Moten 739) in the "burial ground of the subject" (Moten 739), which we can equate with Ra's inverted positioning of Black life and culture. But, obviously this is not where it should remain, and so Moten, engaging what he calls a "social poetics of nothingness" (742) (in an extremely Ra-like turn of phrase) suggests that the very "possibility of black thought" is "cause for celebration…that will produce the absolute overturning, the absolute turning of this motherfucker out" (742). When the world "turns over" or at least the dirt that Blackness is buried under, blackness itself is lent an apocalyptic effect, and it is Black thought, which causes this overturning. "I bear the hope," he further incants "that blackness bears or is the potential to end the world" (739). Blackness potentialized, bearing the capacities of apocalypsis, can radically alter not only the ground under which Blackness is imprisoned—the "prison house" which Ra

calls planet Earth—but allow the mere thought of the "overturning" i.e. the transcendence of that philosophical, social, and cultural location, is cause for celebration, which instigates a sort of superior arbitration of transformation. There is a leave-taking from negation and a birth into the world, as the motherfucker is, as it were, turned out. Here there is rebirth, and a Black revelation. The dead awaken, a new day dawns, and Blackness finds its rightful place on top—enlivened, and re-livened in a new world, perhaps like what Ra and Holiday both describe as a lush, vibrationally supportive landscape.

In the Christian myth, when the world ends, it is only the chosen who enter the kingdom of Heaven: those who have accepted Christ as their personal savior. But Sun Ra's hereafter—after the end of the world—is the kingdom of darkness and Blackness and "none can enter except those who are of the Black spirit" (*Space* 42:42-42:50). Blackness is the prerequisite of transcendence, and the Revelation itself is Black. With this Ra rescripts the Biblical apocalypse, and its final book, regenerating it as a Black rebirth motif, and leaving those without proper wisdom in the dust. Indeed, as D.H. Lawrence affirms, the final book of the Bible, "is still a book to conjure with" (121). For Ra, indeed it is, revealing an imperative of healing and birth—engendering the "turning over" or "turning out" of Moten's apocalyptic notion. Rather than imploring the traumatized "suicide…[of the] individual and en masse" (Lawrence 124) as part of the early Christian's apocalyptic psyche, bound only to the inevitability of destruction Ra uses the Bible and an apocalyptic potential to bring about something new, something brighter, for Black Americans and for the world.

Tomorrow Never Comes

Apocalypse, as we've seen, can be a creative method by which value and futurity are reinstilled for a people who've been scripted into nullity. Apocalypsis can mean rebirth for a community, a culture—lending new life, transcending death's cold histories. But Ra's apocalypse is meant to extend well beyond the Black community, it is meant to change the entire world. His perspective as a Black person in a society impressing a Christian fatality upon him lent him acute insight into what was wrong, and how it might be amended. The modern world, its beliefs, philosophies, systems of governments, economics, religious practices, art, culture, music, are the product of a myth. He was keenly aware of this, when, seemingly, the rest of the world walked around not knowing that their lives and deaths were being controlled by a two-thousand year old story misread by clergy and laypeople alike. His Blackness in tune with his brilliant and searching mind, had uncovered this truth and had granted him authority, insight and the creative self-assurance to demand planet-wide transformation: to become a cosmic revolutionary. As Szwed writes "having been cast in the role of a person of color in this country, he studied that part closely, and found within it the possibility of witnessing for all the peoples of Earth" (Szwed 383). Hence, his myth—taking place in the sleepwalking theater of a broken world—could be the mirror of tragic reflection on the edge of complete planetary self-destruction. Not unlike the tragedies of ancient Greece—which were, in the Aristotelian sense, engineered to provide a "civic space in which [the community] can look at itself in the mirror of…ancient myths" (Segal 75) and meditate on their own thoughts, beliefs and actions—Ra's myth is meant to instigate an almost ancient sense of catharsis. His apocalypse is a mimetic container developed to stimulate

the "pity and fear" (Aristotle 23) which Aristotle said was key to "the purification…of emotions" (23). It is meant to change things from the inside out, stimulating grief and distress.

For this reason Ra's myth centers an image of the destruction of the planet as he and the Arkestra blast off into the pure potentialities of space. In the final scene of *Space is the Place*, before a dramatic launch, Ra, standing in the big, open hatch of his already steaming spacecraft, flanked by a golden Thoth and half-hidden members of the Arkestra, declares that the people of Earth have failed him. They have not heard and heeded his messianic message. He tells them "Farewell Earthlings! You just want to speak of realities. No Myths. Well, I'm the myth talking to you. So its farewell" (*Space* 1:17:34-1:17:50). The door to Ra's spaceship closes. Humanity has failed to receive the transcendent communication of Ra. They have forsaken the myth!

But is the end truly nigh, or is Ra's image of our impending destruction a function of the tragedy we are watching? Tragedy, as scholar Charles Segal reminds us

> is full of elusive details, missing pieces, unexplained motives, puzzling changes of mood, decision, or attitude. Instead of the oral poet who tells us in person of the will of Zeus, we have the absent poet who has plotted out every detail in advance. And we have the feeling, at times, that we have been plotted against, that we are the victims of a calculated counterpoint between surface and depth, appearance and reality, seeming and being. (79)

Ra too might be goading us with a sort of "calculated counterpoint" in the way his myth has him abandon Earth. And he may be "plotting against us" with a tragedian's hope for

the apocalypse to do its cathartic work. We are back with Eliade and the sense that apocalypsis inherently encompasses a mythic "regeneration" (80)—a destroyed world archetypally initiates a new one.

This clues us into some of the intentionally paradoxical nature of Ra's apocalypse. Youngquist asserts that Ra's destruction of the world in story—a "poetics of transposition" (75)—reveals "holograms of a higher world glimpsed completely in its scattered shards" (Youngquist 72). By witnessing the "brokenness" of things we might feel ourselves suffused with "pity and fear" for what was, or what could have been. In a poem called *Tomorrow Never Comes,* Ra evokes this is in a purely linguistic sense, intimating the future's negation. He writes

> Tomorrow Never Comes
>
> Comes Tomorrow Never
>
> Never Comes Tomorrow
>
> Tomorrow Comes Never
>
> Never Tomorrow Comes
>
> Comes Never Tomorrow (*Immeasurable* 391)

How can we understand this? Is it a word game? A magic square? A philosophical dictum? A spiraling mantra? A cracked religious parable? It may be all of these things. With this Ra has generated the apocalyptic liminal space of "necessary confusion and disorientation" (Meade 17) which presages a mythic psychology: an entrance into the cognitive and corporeal experience of myth. Then meanings start to appear: the future perhaps may never arrive. Or maybe "never," the place of myth—the "never" of otherworldly fairytale; never never land with all of its flight and eternal continuity—

"comes tomorrow," and so a promising future looms. "Tomorrow," writes Sun Ra in another poem-equation, "is said to be a dimension of myth / or even the very realm of myth itself" (Immeasurable 324). And so perhaps the power of the mythic could be arriving to our reality, imminently.

Further, in equating "tomorrow", the romantic sense of futureness and mythic possibility, and "never," i.e., futurelessness, we are subjected to a paradox and its tension, which cannot properly be understood in a logical way. The future arrives and…doesn't; it has to come and simultaneously it won't. We are *beyond* somehow, thrust into a palimpsest of meanings surrounding being and nonbeing: continuance and destruction. Szwed calls this a "mathematical parable" with the "touch of myth" (304-305); it is also a "parallel assertion" (Szwed 305), a mythic construction with multiple meanings and outcomes. In it we sense the fear of "no tomorrow," our own deaths, the end times, nonbeing; and simultaneously swim in the vast waters of the never-zone, with all of its imaginative possibility and unbound creativity. Eternal life is so close, we can almost taste it. In this dual emotional reading of this poem, and Ra's apocalyptic expression more broadly, we begin to get a sense of how his mysticism works. Through equation, paradox, and the tension therein, new, more complex meanings and understandings can be found; infinities made possible past the point of ordinary cognition. One could even, like Ra reworking scripture, build something new from rusty linguistic shards.

The Space Age Cannot Be Avoided

For Ra "after the end of the world" is, as put in the very beginning of this chapter, on the other side of time—the place of myth. Apocalypse, therefore, ending time, institutes a mythic locality. As Earth is unwilling to receive this mystic quality it must be transmuted into the myth through destruction. A poetics of transposition, indeed. We might also call this a poetics of transcendent negation: a type of positive repudiation, that allows a birth in consciousness via paradox. Negation is, as in the *Tomorrow Comes Never* equation-poem, for example, equated with affirmation: in saying no to myth, humanity has it thrust upon them. Mysticism *becomes* humanity in destruction—a lesson taught via an old testament cum sci-fi modality. Affirmation in this sense, is assured, and in being destroyed the people of earth are made "transparent to the transcendent," as their bodies and souls are blasted into the Black void of outer space and joined with dark infinity. John the Revelator, it seems, has nothing on Sun Ra, whose very language and myth is engineered for metaphysical success.

While this might not seem, at first glance, like the type of "reconciling" (Campbell *Thou* 2) image that Campbell says can allow the "affirmation" (*Thou* 3) of life on its own terms in the basic structures of myth, he suggests that there are actually three different ways of arousing this sense of mystical awe. There is the "affirmation of the world" (*Thou* 3) as in traditional cultures, "the negation of the world" (*Thou* 3) as in the Christian myth, and, lastly, a third route which Campbell calls the "restoration of the world to what it ought to be" (*Thou* 3) which encompasses the process of "effecting a correction" (*Thou* 3). Sun Ra is powerfully engaging this latter mode and using aspects of

the second (the negation of the world) as an effective and affective vehicle of implementation.

In a pivotal scene in *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra and the Arkestra set up to play a concert to save the world—as part of an ongoing wager Ra has going with "The Overseer," a Black Mephistophelean figure who vies to damn Black society—and declare their mystic music the proper mode of universal and earthly restoration. The band begins to play: it's truly otherworldly. As Youngquist describes

> a clangor, clash, and cacophony fill the theater, wrestling, beating, struggling against tempers tuned to other, less vital vibrations. A long, stentorian call and response erupts between Sun Ra (leaning swiftly into and away from the microphone) and June Tyson (standing behind him), the effect of which is to catechize listeners…and inspire their participation. (223)

Ra and Tyson begin to chant:

> We are another order of being
> We bring you the mathematics of an alter-destiny
> Look up, see the greater universe
> Everything is in place, every star, every planet
> Everything is in place but you, planet Earth. (qtd. in Youngquist 223)

An image of Earth's blindness to the deeper truths of the universe takes shape: the cosmos is perfectly structured, and it has a divine order, which humanity rejects in their ignorance. Sun Ra continues his Pythagorean-apocalyptic meltdown incantation, with Tyson's startling voice echoing his phrases powerfully: "You are just like you always

were! / living your improper lives / and dying your improper deaths!" (*Space* 1:09:00-1:09:12). The people of Earth are wildly unaware of the "preconditions of their own existence." Therefore, a correction is necessary: "I will take you to new worlds / I will take you to outer unseen worlds" Ra shouts, declaring the imminent arrival of the Messiah's transcendent proposition on Earth (Youngquist 223), and the possibility of a supernatural trip into the reaches of the unknown potentialities of outer space. The "restoration of the world to what it ought to be" (Campbell, *Thou* 3) is contained, right here, in the message of Sun Ra, the music his band is blaring over and around his blistering sermon, and in the very presence of this intergalactic prophet, dressed in a glistening, silver, braided space helmet. It must only be accepted by the audience and Ra will avidly and metaphysically transmit them into it, body and soul. But he must truly drive home the problem here and demonstrate the hopelessness of the situation. "I hate your reality," Ra blares, "I hate your positive absolute reality / We refuse to be a part of your life, your…death!" (Youngquist 224). And with that the fiery sermon closes; it is not the existent reality which will be Earth's saving grace but the pattern for the spirit of humankind found in the sounds, words, and works of Sun Ra: a harbinger of something beyond the opposites of life and death.

If the first function of a mythology is represented in the "discovery and recognition of the dimension of the mystery of being" (Campbell, *Thou* 3) we can safely say that we are granted entry into this mysterium here in the performative challenge of Ra and the Arkestra's startling apocalyptic ultimatum in poetry and sound. While "affirmation" of that mystery might only be found equationally—planet Earth refuses Ra's mythic invitation—Ra offers a potent corrective potentiality with his alter-mythic

invocations. As Youngquist concedes "the spaceship Arkestra blasts off from a planet destined to explode on this side of time" and yet "on the other side,"—what we might consider the timeless landscape of the mythic—"the Arkestra plays on and awaits human awakening" (225). *Space is the Place* ends with another vision from after the end of the world, a "hope borne of myth, music, and outer space" (Youngquist 225), and a reminder of how to read the mythic image of apocalypse, mystically. Campbell concurs: "we must not understand apocalypse literally…or as something that is going to happen in the future. The kingdom is here, it does not come through expectation" (Thou 107).

For Ra, apocalypse, that fiery signpost of complete transformation, is linked to the unlimited potentials of outer space, which erected itself as one of the central images of his mythos. People needed to meditate on the image of outer space, because as he said in the late 80s "the year 2000 is right around the corner" (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 316). The reality of "the future" as emblemized by the next millennium was something to be spiritually reckoned with, in the moment. In a poem entitled "Points Of The Space Age" Ra boisterously proclaims, "THE SPACE AGE CANNOT BE AVOIDED" and goes on to connect space, in art and music, as "greater" expressions of a future "living culture" which is "THE GREATER KINGDOM" (*Immeasurable* 308). It follows that if "space" = ultimate potential, and the "space age" = here and now, then we are already there, inside of this apocalyptic potentiality. It is open to us. The space age has arrived, the kingdom is come: it is only that we do not see it.

A proper "affirmation" of Ra's apocalyptic challenge then on the part of humankind would be in welcoming this space age wisdom with a mythic future, which already exists on the other side of time; connecting to that mystic potency which is

present, now and letting a defiled "reality" as Ra sees it, fall away. In Ra's sense, what is coming is unavoidable, is *here*, it *is* after the end of the world.

Campbell affirms the connection between the transcendence of outer space and images of mystical apocalypse when he claims

> the mystical theme of the space age is this: the world, as we know it, is coming to an end. The world as the center of the universe, the world divided from the heavens, the world bound by horizons in which love is reserved for members of the in-group…is passing away. Apocalypse does not point to a fiery Armageddon but to the fact that our ignorance and our complacency are coming to an end. Our divided, schizophrenic worldview, with no mythology adequate to coordinate our conscious and unconscious—that is what is coming to an end. The exclusivism of there being only one way we can be saved, and the idea that there is a single religious group that is in sole possession of the truth…must pass away. What is the kingdom? It lies in our realization of the ubiquity of the divine presence in our neighbors, in our enemies, in all of us. (*Thou* 107)

Hence, the future-now that is the space age is a recollection and reconnection to that mystic ground which underlies reality—a tether still strung on the eternal, the unknown, which, according to Sun Ra "never passes away" (*Space* 1:08:00-1:13:00) and has never actually left us. Further, the myth, according to Campbell, in its connectivity, allows us safe passage from the most dangerous and threatening impulses of our own natures: the collective will to religious power and all the violence that entails, the ignorance of hubris and consequent destruction of the Earth and all the varieties of life that it contains, and

the psychological maladaptation to living harmoniously in a hyper connected world. Campbell's view of mystic-apocalypse also suggests a new era of presence: seeing our neighbors and enemies not as other but as fundamental relations. This itself is an impetus for witnessing ourselves in the tragedian's mirror reconstellated in Ra's myth: allowing the "divine presence" within all of us to rise up out of the ashes. As Ra argues, it is actually our duty to do so, which implies an almost ancient sense of platonic unity. "It's always been predicted about armageddon," he reminds us:

> this is it. So whether you want to be part of it or not, you will have to get involved. It's not a matter of religion or politics or nothing, it's a matter of your survival. If you bow down to forces that represents death you're through on this planet. This is your great decision. So then you have to do what you know to be right for yourself and the only thing right for you to do and to be is *to be*, you see. Anything other than that is wrong. Because you here and you wouldn't be here unless you were intended to be. (Possibility 11:25-12:10)

Sounding not unlike a sage Ra imparts the ancient, spiritual advice to commune with a sense of purpose, of integral union with the cosmos, which annihilates conscripted spiritual death. Impending "armageddon" actually symbolizes the immediacy of being alive; of witnessing life happening. To live, fully, in presence, contends Ra, is proof itself of one's meaning, which is key to the project of survival for the planet. Simply believing that one is *supposed* to be here is enough. Mythology can offer a way to witness one's place in the spiraling, universal totality; the mystery of that harmony a natural, resonant fact. If we could *hear* that totality, Ra submits, its tones cutting through the mire of

materialist illusion so powerfully manifested on Earth, we might become aligned to things as they are—the deep wisdom of our lives flaring up at the exact instant of a fresh, mythic dawn. “Myth,” Ra concludes, “permits man to situate himself in these times and to connect…with the past and future. What I’m looking for are the myths of the future, the destiny of man” (qtd. in Lock *Blutopia* 61). Past the limits of history, through the portal of the mythic, the future-now is gleaned. Those who think they are in “sole possession of the truth” (Campbell *Thou* 107) haven’t heard Sun Ra’s story yet.

CHAPTER THREE
COSMOS SONG: MYTHIC COSMOGRAPHY

Face of the skies / preside / over our wonder…
innuendoes of your inverse dawn / suffuse the self

Mina Loy

What do you do when you know that you know / that you know that you're wrong?
You gotta face the music, you gotta listen to the Cosmos song

Sun Ra

Toward a New Cosmology

We now move to explore the second function of Campbell's four functions of a living mythology as visioned in Sun Ra's creative mythos: the cosmological function. This chapter elucidates the structure of Ra's cosmology showing it to be borne equally of ancient musicological and philosophical mystical systems, particularly of the Pythagorean variety, as well as thoroughly modern scientific views (Ra's cosmos was necessarily heliocentric, therefore Copernican) and futurological sci-fi exploration. This chapter shows how Ra combined these elements to form an expansive and visionary cosmos, which could contain the other philosophical and musical elements key to his mythic project. The second half of this chapter is dedicated to the mythic figures and archetypal motifs that most centrally populate Sun Ra's cosmos, including the Creator, a god figure who guided Ra's music, and the planet Saturn, which Ra claimed to hail from, and which offered to his philosophy important astrological and mythic resonances. The archetypal and planetary symbol of Saturn is shown in this chapter to be important mainly in Ra's linking the planet to the concept of "discipline" (Szwed 115) which is

central to the way he conducted his life, band, and modes of thought. The final section of this chapter elucidates Ra's concept of an omniverse, or a structural concept of the cosmos that contains multiple manifest universes, and how this was important to his music, thought, and mythology.

To begin, we must first grasp what Campbell felt the second function to be about. For Campbell, the second function renders "an interpretive total image" of the cosmos "as known to contemporary consciousness" (*Masks* 4); the culture of a given time and place creatively rendering the structure of the universe for itself. This cosmic image must also "maintain and elicit [an] experience of awe" (*Pathways* 6). Cosmic imagining must be done in such a way that is, in effect, evocative. In this way it fulfills the myth, reinforcing the mystical reality which the first function of a mythology initiates. "The life of a mythology," writes Campbell "derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors delivering, not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realization of transcendence" (*Inner* xx). A myth that works contains symbols that are active, and initiates a deepening into the experience of life itself and the all-pervading mystery that is behind it. So too, a culture's cosmic imaging should generate depth and a sense of psychic involvement gesturing toward mystical transcendence. The observed cosmos is reflected in myth as potently symbolic.

Yet how does a "consistent image of the cosmos" (Campbell, *Thou* 2) provoke participation in the great mystery? According to Campbell it is by invoking the cosmic order as a universal container that reproduces observable realities—i.e. the empirically perceptible planets of the galaxy and their order—while imbuing that discovery with mythopoetic significance. The process of cosmologizing, discerning the order of the

universe and translating that structure in a meaningful way, makes vital connections between the universal unknown and the human realm, as the historically long and widespread practice of astrology shows. In this regard, the metaphor of the "cosmos" as a synonym for "structure" allows humanity to feel itself a part of something infinitely larger than itself. In fact, the biggest thing of all: the ever expanding and unfathomable universe.

This process of observation and mythologizing (or cosmologizing), has been occurring consistently from antiquity until the present day, as humans continuously attempt to meaningfully place themselves within the vast universal frame. This, for Campbell, is paramount to the process of mythology. The cosmological function of a mythology also locates the human in the larger schema of mystery, generating a poetic and spiritual connection. A cosmology saturates the human psyche with awe at seeing ourselves as part of this imposing, enigmatic, cosmic edifice. Or, to quote Stephen Hawking, paraphrasing the anthropic principle: "We see the universe the way it is because we exist" (128). The process of cosmology is an ongoing, cultural act of creative self-reflection creating an image that would not exist without our vision.

With the arrival of the great, ancient civilizations, writes Campbell, comes early science, cosmology, and a sense of awe in the face of the perceived grandeur of the universe (*Thou* 4). This created a connective line that can be traced between ancient religion and modern science, both of which translate the "high mystery," once universally embodied by the gods, now rendered by the numerical reaches of mathematics (Campbell, *Thou* 4). We humans are still busily at it, gleaning a more accurate image of

the cosmos. Since ancient times, our technological vision has obviously advanced a great deal. Our mythologies perhaps less so as a poignant story of Campbell's relays

> On Christmas Eve, the first verses of Genesis were read by astronauts, three men flying around the moon. The incongruity was that they were several thousand miles beyond the highest heaven conceived of at the time when the Book of Genesis was written, when such science as there was held the concept of a flat earth. There they were, in one moment remarking on how dry the moon was, and in the next, reading of how the waters above and the waters beneath had been walled off. (*Thou* 4)

As this story makes clear, our scientific faculties, as accomplished as they are, have not yet replaced the evocations and emotional powers of the religious imagination. We still turn toward the ancient images as sources of nourishment, despite our cosmology having moved far beyond any widely held religious idea.

A cosmology then, being borne of a certain time and place and, in the case of the contemporary world, of a certain scientific prowess, must accord with the limits of what is known. The heliocentric, Copernican cosmos and its observed realities, that have provided our image of the cosmos for the last several hundred years, has in the words of Campbell, "never been translated into a mythology. Science and religion have therewith gone apart" (*Inner* 17). The problem, he says, is compounded by the scientific "recognition of the inconceivable magnitude of this galaxy of stars, of which our life giving sun is a peripheral member, circling with its satellites in this single galaxy among millions within a space of incredible distances, having no fixed form or end" (Campbell, Inner 17). The incomprehensible vastness of the galaxy—and, indeed, the far vaster

universe—he seems to be saying, resists our characterizations, and our limited narrative capabilities. It might also be true that our overwhelmed contemporary minds reach for the habitual tropes of Western religious thought, fleeing from the incomprehensible vastness that science portrays, instead vying for the narrative refrain of a well-worn, and more manageable cosmos. And yet, the current cosmological framework can still induce awe, and invite vivid narrativization—as any avid stargazer or committed trekkie will tell you—creating a space in which science's precise and expansive vision overlaps with the ancient, evocative wiles of the religious imagination.

While the expanses of the universe still baffle us, perhaps more now than ever, in their vastness, a ceaseless curiosity continues to drive humanity grasping towards the cosmos, and with that search an awe in pursuit: ample space for the imagination to refigure our relationship to, and place ourselves in, the universal sphere. Science and religion need not stray so very far from one another, while the cosmos all around us beckons for a variety of reflections, and the human imagination with as few bounds as the expanding universe itself, strives further and further out into its titanic mystery. Are we headed towards a new, deeply storied cosmos? And what part does the imagination have to play in this supposed recapitulation? Do we still need myth to do the work of imbuing our physics-defined universe with spiritual significance? If Campbell's story of the astronauts mechanically reading from Genesis is any indication—it being only a fragmentary glimpse into the scientific-religious rift that pervades the Western cultural psyche—then the mythic imagination is still powerfully with us, even at stellar altitudes. A new cosmic image, imbued with symbolic power, is possible, and perhaps unavoidable. According to Campbell the answer would be to translate the universe that *is*, into a new

mythic equation, borne of the deep imagination. This might lead into a deeper sense of awe and connection with the great mystery.

Myth Science

How might our modern cosmos be properly translated into mythological language? How can we use our scientifically observed reality as an initiatory entry point towards deeper meaning and connection, rather than as a way to eschew that relation? How can the ever swelling limitlessness of the universe be remythologized? Enter Sun Ra: keeper of cosmoses, vaster Blacknesses, and the initiator of a philosophical-musical exercise known as "Myth-Science" (Youngquist 189). "Everything is of a particular science / and myth is no exception," writes Ra in one poem (*Immeasurable* 324). For Ra, myth-science was the putting-into-practice of ancient thought through the forms of word and sound: poetry and music. Or as Youngquist puts it, it is "the form that knowledge takes as space music" (198). Wisdom in action; music as activated knowledge. Myth-science, in this regard, speaks to how one might construct a new image of the cosmos incorporating contemporary science, and then move well beyond it, by activating it, creatively. As Szwed writes, Ra's conceptual-creative articulation of "science" was

> somewhere between or beyond science fiction and science. More than a method of reasoning and a set of laboratory practices, it was also a mystical process, and (as the rappers imply by 'dropping science') a kind of secret or suppressed knowledge which had the power to create new myths, erase old ones, altering our ratio to each other and the rest of the universe. (132)

Like Ra's early modes of biblical exegesis, myth-science has to do with excavation and getting underneath preconceived notions and methods of study—to the mythic undergirding of the thing. As the musician and DJ Steve Fly Agaric clarifies, myth-science is "a sort of inspired mathematics which gives useful equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres, but *équation humaine*, for approximating human emotions," which he adds, are the "names of mystery" (150). Myth-science, therefore, is a revelatory, psycho-spiritual mode which can disclose deep truths; a mathematical method for unveiling the deeply human, the primal, and archetypal. A way of getting back, out of the high minded presence of so called modern "enlightened" thinking—done using the intellect—into a more ancient and primal mythic form of mediating the phenomena of the world. Myth-science then places the body's reception of the world not in the brain but in the heart—as in the ancient Greek concept of *aesthesis* (reading the beauty of the world with the aesthetic heart) and the Egyptian myth of the "Weighing of the Heart"—to see if it had been made lighter than a feather—which would happen just after death. The guidance of the feeling organ brings an altogether different kind of "science" to experience and the way we conceive of creation.

It's also worth mentioning that the word *mythology* contains both *mythos* (the story told—done with the *mouth*) and *logos* (the way story understood via the intellect)—a mystic-mathematical equation in itself. Sun Ra would have understood this etymological breakdown, as well as the connection of "logos" to discourse, going all the way back to the dawn of Western philosophy. He would also have known that the logos in Neoplatonic thought evoked original consciousness and forms of gnosis. Therefore,

mythology itself is the deepest form of myth-science. Carried by Ra's far reaching musicological thought, it could attain sublime heights.

Myth-science therefore is naturally guided by and constructed of equations in sound and language; the substructures, both cultural and mystical, shared by music, mathematics, and myth. At the bottom of sound dwell the structures through which it is expressive to the human organism: rhythm, tempo, pitch, intensity, scale, counterpoint, tone. The "science" of music. Similarly, beneath myth is the apparatus of explicating the very nature of reality, humanity's relation to themselves, the Earth, the cosmos, the animal world, and to one another, in story, culture making and the potencies of ritual. Both contain, if examined deeply enough, a sort of mathematical complexity that in its essence is revelatory and awe-inspiring.

For Ra, writes Szwed, "every myth is a mathematical parable. Myth is another form of truth: it is a parallel assertion. Myth in Greek is mythos, a word meaning a word, speech, legend" (Szwed 304-5). Myth being "mathematical," as a "a form of truth" in language, makes Myth into a type of linguistic science capable of imbuing wisdom. Myth is functional partly because it is a language. Language is music; music is number, number is science. Myth-science therefore is "music as science, and science as myth" (Youngquist189). In the Ra pantheon these concepts are used so interchangeably that they nearly become a singular notion. All of Ra's (and the Arkestra's) practices, written, spoken, played, sung, performed, and recorded, are forms of myth-science: mythological researches in sound. Various creative modes of actualization leading toward vaster conceptual understanding. As the artist-philosopher Hartmut Geerken so eloquently names it, myth-science is "a means towards a holistic explanation and an order of things"

(10). Myth-science orders, in sound and language, returning us conceptually to an origin point: the first-spoken Word of creation, the primal Om bellowing out. Myth-science in effect reveals the cosmos.

The word "cosmos" comes from the Greek "Kosmos" which means "order," or "arrangement" and also possibly "adornment" (Bratcher 430) as it is sometimes translated in the Bible. A cosmos is the arrangement of the known universe, placed there by the creator or the original deity, and observed by watchful humans. Historically the two ways that the orderings of the cosmos are gleaned is through the mythos of religion or the methodical observations of science. As is clear already, for Ra there is no difference between the two. Myth-science, perhaps especially as a form of music, is intentionally revelatory, and aims to glean a new order: combining the ancient (word-myth) with the future (music-science) in service of a cosmic revelation.

In the liner notes of the 1971 album *The Solar-Myth Approach Vol. 1* photographer Tam Fiofori claims that Ra's music touches upon

> the areas of Myths that separate our Awareness of Now and Other-times…and…opens up a communication-channel with/in the Arkestra, to/for the listener…evoking all the natural senses of being inside a panoramic-motion-picture, set in and with/in space with an outer/other imagery of moving space, space-being/s and being/ness. The music thus communicates the interrelation of this planet with the Cosmic system.

Here we have a description of myth-science enacted: music instilling the ancient-futureness of the Cosmos, directly to the listener. To listen to Sun Ra's music is to be in "outer space/ness," and for our planet and its inhabitants to find ourselves located in a

broader, cosmic frame. We are in the story, cloaked in the mathematical structures of the imaged universe, explicated in felt sound. Myth-science takes us there, with a sense of visceral reality, in order to show us the cosmos that Ra is so eagerly working to inculcate.

Cosmography

Ra's oeuvre is positively brimming with musical pieces and sung "space chants" that paint pictures in sound of his constructed cosmos. Szwed creates an exhaustive list of related song titles including "Cosmic Chaos,' 'The Cosmic Explorer,' 'Cosmic Forces,' 'Cosmic of Africa,' 'Cosmo Approach Prelude,' 'Cosmo Dance,' 'Cosmo Energy,'" (125) and so on, in which the centrality of narrativizing the cosmos is fundamental. The Song "Face the Music," in which the Arkestra joyfully incants "you gotta face the music, you gotta listen to the cosmos song" also comes to mind ("Night Music" 8:00-14:00). Yet Ra, per Fiofori's previous comment, didn't merely intend to invoke the cosmos, but meant, via the patterns of myth-science, to conduct us sonically through the solar system and beyond. As the Arkestra repeats in a live version of "Space Chant - Medley" from the *Space Age is Here to Stay* compilation, in effect piloting the listener on a journey through the milky way,

> Everybody's talking about heaven and going there…Mercury is the first heaven, Venus is the second heaven…Planet Earth is the third heaven, Mars is the fourth heaven, Jupiter is the fifth heaven, Everybody's talking about heaven and going there, Saturn is the sixth heaven, Everybody's talking about heaven and going there…Uranus is the seventh heaven (I'm sure you heard of seventh heaven)…planet Neptune is the eight

> heaven…Pluto is the ninth heaven…you in the space age now…why go to the Moon? Try Pluto, too. (1:06-4:05)

Elsewhere, the Arkestra mirthfully sings that their central project is to "travel the spaceways from planet to planet" ("Spaceways" 0:17-0:54) effectively steering us through the cosmos while spreading their joyful music far and wide. Hence, in this aspect, Ra's personal cosmology is painted in song according to the Copernican model of the solar system. Not only is it observed, even visited, but is approached with mysticism, each planet containing a "heavenly" aspect that is accessible to us through Ra's mytho-scientific music.

The individual planets are also given attention in Ra's songbook. The joyful, swinging "Rocket Number 9" from *Interstellar Low Ways* allows us to travel to the blue sulphuric landscape of Venus, with the entire band, chanting together atop the propulsive beat, "Rocket Number 9 take off for the planet Venus! Venus! Zoom! Zoom! Zoom! Up in the air!" (0:06-0:18). The slow groove of "On Jupiter," from the recently released album of the same name, takes us there, orbiting the massive planet to the echoes of call and response horn, keys, and psychedelic guitar lines that approximate what Miles Davis would sound like if he were interested in playing exotica-inspired space music. On Jupiter the "skies are always blue," (1:05-1:10) according to Ra and the Arkestra. "Neptune" a shuffling, laconic number from the record *Discipline 27-II* isn't so much chanted as communally muttered by the band—"Have you heard the latest news from Neptune?" (0:24-0:32)—suggesting that a trip to the frozen, windswept planet is a rather ordinary enterprise. "Plutonian Nights," from *Nubians of Plutonia*, swings somewhere between nocturnal menace and groovy nightlife evocation, transporting us to a surreal

nightclub at the foot of one of Pluto's icy mountain ranges. The sun and moon too have their share of songs in the Ra canon, as does the Earth: respectively, in songs such as "Sun-Earth Rock," a bopping, distorted, exotica-styled piece which feels like the soundtrack for a luxury spaceship cruise to the sun and "Night of the Purple Moon," a trippy, stumbling blues featuring an electric piano heavily affected with vibrato—with a truly lunar vibe—both from *Night of the Purple Moon*. Likewise, "Planet Earth," from *Sun Ra Visits Planet Earth*, a sorrowful and off kilter tune, with a nearly Ellingtonian atmosphere, paints Earth as a colorful if slightly askew realm of intermingling voices and sounds, surrounding gorgeous horn solos with ringing bells, jangling keys, and clacking bottles—perhaps intimating the materially obsessed lives lived in American capitalism, coke bottles and all. From one side of the galaxy to the other, the Arkestra translates its visions of each planet in sound, inviting us to experience these vivid tones of infinity.

In performance too, Sun Ra and the Arkestra would present the cosmos to their audience in sound, theater, dance, and costume; the delivery of Ra's philosophy would also abound in space chants, and sometimes—as was imaged in the second chapter of this dissertation—via cosmic preaching direct from the mouth of Ra. This performative style known as the "cosmo drama myth-ritual," or simply "cosmo drama" (Youngquist 70) intertwining multiple expressive art forms, will be discussed in more detail later on. But for the purposes of this chapter it's useful to imagine into these "intensely dramatic" musical performances "moving from stasis to chaos and back [with] horn players leaping about, or rolling on the bandstand [was] an all-out assault on the senses" (Szwed xvii), which were centrally engineered to take the audience on a psychosomatic journey. The "dramatic coherence," (xvii) of these shows, as Szwed writes, were overwhelmingly

transportive, turning myth-science's creative potential into an affective and overwhelming transmission. Space, and the Arkestra's journey through it, came to life in vivid sound and color at these shows.

These travels along the spaceways, says scholar Graham Lock, come from a long lineage of Black performance in America, specifically in the gospel traditions of the church, and contextualize the enigmatic and evocative power of Ra's performative style: "Call it 'the celestial road,' as Ra did in 1979, or call it the 'heavenly way,' as DuBois did in 1903, but African Americans were traveling down it long before Herman Poole Blount arrived on Earth" (Right 30) he writes. He goes on to align Ra's style of space preaching with late 19th and early 20th century sermons in which congregations would be taken on a "heavenly march" through the cosmos, stomping their feet and singing in unison as they traveled "through the milky way to the gates of Heaven" (Lock, Right 30). Specifically Lock mentions Reverend A. W. Nix who recorded an important sermon in 1927 known as "The White Flyer" in which "he exhorts his congregation to accompany him on a special gospel train that will carry them through the first heaven…and into outer space" (Right 30). The text of Nix's sermon read almost identically to the lyrics of the aforementioned "Space Chant - Medley": "Higher and higher! Higher and higher! /…pass on by Mars and Mercury / And Jupiter and Venus, and Saturn and Uranus, / And Neptune, with her four glittering moons!" (qtd. in Lock, Right 30). "Turn, some six decades later," says Lock, "to the last track on Sun Ra's *Live in London 1990* CD and you will hear him exhort *his* congregation of concert goers to take a similar trip and 'travel the spaceways' with him to Venus, Jupiter, Neptune and, as he slyly points out, 'we're going to Pluto too.'" (Right 30).

Synchronistically, tells Lock, Reverend Nix, like Ra, was a native of Birmingham, "which raises the possibility that he may have preached this very sermon at the Tabernacle Baptist Church that the young…Blount used to attend with his grandmother" (Right 30). Whether he did or not, Ra's performances are "clearly based on the heavenly journey of the Baptist sermon tradition" (Lock, Right 30). Further, writes Lock, Ra's space chants (a distinct form of "brief, repetitive, and antiphonal" (Right 30) songs, including well known songs such as "Space is the Place," "Astro Black," "Interplanetary Music," and "Nuclear War") are

> comparable in form to the 19th century African American slave spirituals, whose themes and imagery they constantly echo. At many concerts, Sun Ra specifically drew attention to the similarity by quoting from or alluding to various spirituals during the performance of the space chants….Many of these spirituals fit easily into Ra's own cosmology for example, 'This World Is Not My Home' accords with his claim to 'not be of this planet,' while 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot,' echoes his various chants about spaceships, such as 'U—U—UFO, take me where I want to go.' (Right 30-31).

For Lock this comparison is paramount to understanding not only Ra's cosmology but his larger metaphorical project in that the spirituals, as a precedent, "propose a utopian site, a heavenly space, through which African Americans can move freely and be at home" (Right 31). But, characteristically, and in line with his exegetic upending of Biblical scripture, Ra eschews the promise of a Christian hereafter and instead declares with his space chants that "by embracing the Space Age, African Americans can enjoy the

freedom of the heavens in this life" (Lock, Right 31). Ra, in adopting this early 20th century Black performative-spiritual technology, transforms it into a 21st century liberative modality with ecstatic potential. Further, Ra's image of the cosmos, one based in contemporary science, is made clearer and more vivid and is, in fact, experienced mythologically. I imagine Campbell rescinding his assertion that the Copernican cosmos had not yet been translated into mythic language if he were granted the privilege to witness one of the Arkestra's sonic space flights through the milky way.

But it was not only the sound and lyricism of the space chants through which the creative potential of this music flowed. Lock goes on to link the performance of the space chants with the ring shout: "the central ceremony of African American slave worship and the original area in which the spirituals were sung" (Right 31). As happened during the ring shout, during one of Ra's concerts the Arkestra would "leave their seats and come to the front of the stage, where, clapping and chanting, they would circle in a counter clockwise direction," intimating the original ritual (Lock, Right 31). This further instigated the audience to empathic participation with the band, their music, and the ritual trajectory being instilled. Continues Lock, citing historian Lawrence Levine: "the shout often became a medium through which the ecstatic dancers were transformed into actual participants in historic actions: Joshua's army marching around the walls of Jericho, the children of Israel following Moses out of Egypt" (Right 31). Ra, invoking this same potential not only has his band self-initiating into his cosmic flight but through the band actively inducts the audience to join this galactic form of travel—"transmolecularizing" them into a new vision of the cosmos they currently inhabit. The audience, welcomed to

travel the spaceways along with the Arkestra, is ritually transformed, the vision becoming real.

Yet, as Lock concludes, the ritual "reality" that Ra was conjuring was intently different than the mythic location of the early spirituals, for his "outer space utopia was offered as an alternative to the mythic space usually invoked by those means, i.e. the Christian heaven" (Right 31). The forms of the ring shout and the spirituals, were, as it were, launching pads for the space chants, and aspects of the far out performative rituals through which Ra might take his audience beyond. The heavenly arc of the milky way held a more profound, modern, and poetic relevance to Sun Ra, as he retranslated the galaxy into an accessible and deeply spiritual experience. For him, the map for travelling the stars was drawn by science but accessed through ritual—and specifically the rituals of Black cultural and religious tradition. These things together, combined as a novel mytho-performative invention, might allow a new consciousness and a revivified image of the cosmos to emerge. Myth-science reveals a deeper, more potent, more imminently cosmic reality. Christianity and the Bible were important relics, perhaps worth conjuring with at the launch site of a new world, but to truly reach the universal and omniversal distances to be accessed through Ra's music, a myth-science approach is indispensable. As Ra told an audience in 1979, "You've outlived the Bible, which was your scenario. You're in a science fiction film now" (qtd. in Lock, Right 32). Indeed, through the works of Ra and the Arkestra we are catapulted into the cosmos to view and psychospiritually inhabit the worlds that exist there. Unlike the astronauts orbiting the moon in Campbell's story, in Ra's space-flight trajectory, we leave the Bible, and its cosmology, behind on Earth,

instead reaching into deeper terrain visioned by the ancient-future technologies of a mytho-scientific cosmos.

A Musical Cosmos

Sun Ra's performative and sonic flight, piloting audiences into space, in effect renders "an interpretive total image" of the cosmos "as known to contemporary consciousness" (Campbell, *Masks* 4). He shows that the cosmos, and our local galaxy, might be reconstructed through music, performance, word, and image. His musical myth genuinely reveals a cosmography. We've seen how this cosmographical aspect of Ra's project was inspired by African American cultural and religious tradition, but we've yet to explore an even more ancient mythological tradition that Ra is working within. Here we journey to the origins of myth-science and to the dawn of Western Philosophy.

In his book *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe* critic Jamie James charts the intermingling of music, science, and mysticism in Western thought, beginning in the work of Pythagoras and stretching across time into modernity. He focuses centrally on how the related fields of science and mysticism (which were especially intermingled in Pythagoras's time) reveal a musical cosmology, and what he calls "the great theme," described as "the belief that the cosmos is a sublimely harmonious system guided by a Supreme Intelligence, and that man has a place preordained and eternal in that system" (19). According to James this belief runs throughout Western thought, and has survived in the creativity of musical practice even as the worlds of Western science and spirituality have come apart from one another. He shows how resilient the myth of the great theme has been, noting its appearances in the

work of thinkers as intellectually diverse as Plato, Cicero, Augustine, Galileo, Marsilio Ficino, Kepler, Newton, Bach, and Schoenberg. To account for the great theme's long standing prominence, James presupposes that "as the orthodox culture focused its attention earthward and selfward, the impulse to connect with the universal became more and more esoteric" (19). As science and mysticism came apart, and Western science became strictly material in practice, this cosmic concept retreated into the underground, into the creative unconscious, and came to present itself in both "the compositions of the twentieth-century avant-garde" as well as the "folk culture of the occult underground" (James 19). We can easily include the works and thought of Sun Ra in both of these categories, and add his name to the list of composers and thinkers above, as an inheritor of this tradition and the musical cosmos that it assumes.

The "great theme" as James calls it also contains the concept of the "music of the spheres"—as the title of his book suggests—which insists that the universe itself is made of music. Whether this idea is literal, metaphorical, or a blend of the two depends on which theorist-musician is in question. But in the Neoplatonic tradition, the philosophical location from which Ra gleaned many of his ideas, it's clear that music is both cosmic substance and a human response to that mystic substrata. Ra "charged his music with Neoplatonism," writes Szwed, and defines the Neoplatonic as "the philosophical-mystical tradition in which music is seen as both a model of the universe and a part of its makeup, and where it has the power to bring human beings in line with the cosmos" (113). This is what James calls the "musical universe" (30) originating in the philosophical thought of Pythagoras, and built on mytho-scientific number patterns. Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, he says "did not simply discern congruities among number and music and

the cosmos: they identified them. Music *was* number, and the cosmos *was* music" (James 30-31). The Pythagoreans, writes James

> distinguished three sorts of music in his philosophy: to use the nomenclature of a later era, *musica instrumentalis*, the ordinary music made by plucking the lyre, blowing the pipe, and so forth; *musica humana*, the continuous but unheard music made by each human organism, especially the harmonious (or inharmonious) resonance between the soul and the body; and *musica mundane*, the music made by the cosmos itself, which would come to be known as the music of the spheres. (31)

These three layers of music, the instrumental, the human, and the cosmic were especially important to the Pythagoreans for they "governed the whole scope of the perceptible and even the imperceptible universe" (James 31) establishing "exact correspondence between the abstract world of musical sounds and the abstract world of numbers" (James 35). These correspondences create what James claims is the first truly scientific model of the universe, which before Pythagoras was "much closer to poetry than to science" (37). Pythagoras therefore, stands as the bridge between the entirely mythic world and a rational, scientific one, and paints a new, more complex image of the cosmos, which is, to some degree, numerically quantifiable while retaining its poetic reality.

This numerically musical cosmos is epitomized in the myth-scientific image of the heavenly spheres, purportedly first posited by Anaximander, and inherited by Pythagoras, who "made the logical assumption" that these crystalline structures, which expanded in ever widening circles outward from the Earth "must make sounds in their revolutions; and that being the case, these sounds would of necessity be musical and

harmonious" (James 38). The cosmos became imaged as a vast lyre-like artifice, with huge crystalline spheres replacing the resonating strings, and a planet circumambulating on the crystal rung of each sphere. This image is the metaphorical temenos of the great theme, as it is carried from Pythagoras on through history. The spheres themselves had set musical intervals, ascending from the Earth out to the realm of fixed stars, beyond the planets, creating a musical scale. Each planet was assigned a note in the scale, hence the cosmos itself becomes actively musical.

While the "so-called Pythagorean scale" that the galaxy creates does "not sound very musical" (James 40) to the average listener (if played on an instrument), the numerical intervals create a type of music beyond ordinary comprehension, and earthly concepts of beauty. The metaphorically harmonious nature of this scale, as played by the very rotation of the solar system, is beyond aesthetics, instead entering into a realm of pure beingness, a mathematical fact with undeniable presence, even if it remains literally unseen, and more importantly, unheard. The harmony of the spheres, though ever present, cannot be heard by the human ear. James cites Aristotle to explain that the sound "is in our ears from the very moment of birth and is thus indistinguishable from…silence, since sound and silence are discriminated by mutual contrast" (41). Thus the sound is total, and indistinguishable from not only silence, but also from *reality* as it is: indistinguishable from *us*.

That we are joined almost unknowingly to this great, mytho-scientific truth, and resonate with it, gets at the heart of the great theme. That the universe is harmonious and humans—resonating with the cosmos as *musica humana*—are part of that harmony stimulates a symbolic totality. The great theme, and the harmony of the spheres "created

an overarching view of the cosmos, and showed man his place in the great scheme" (James 23). In short, the Pythagorean model of the musical cosmos ensures humanity's vital integrity as part of the universal schema and implores them to live according to this mathematically ordained harmony.

The Pythagorean Ra

For Sun Ra, this concept is central to his cosmological project, and the structural basis for his myth-science. According to Ra the universe is made of music, as substance and as spirit. In a dialogue emblematic of this, when Ra, in *Space is the Place*, having just landed on Earth to deliver his transcendent message, is asked what "the power of his machine" (i.e. his space craft) is, he simply responds "music" (17:30-19:00). Later, he expands upon this in a series of mytho-scientific rhetorical queries, relaying each question with a cheshire-cat like squint, while the lunar-disk atop his Egyptian headdress—worn by Horus, Isis, and Thoth in turn—nods along. He inquires, mysteriously

> Why doesn't the Earth fall? How can you walk upon it? It's the music. It's the music of the Earth. It's the music of the sun and the stars. It's the music of yourself, vibrating. Yes, you're music too. You're all instruments: everyone's supposed to be playing their part, in this vast arkestry of the cosmos. (19:28-20:03).

It's clear from this statement that Ra conceptualized the cosmos according to the music of the spheres. The Earth doesn't fall because it's held in place by music's invisible force—a sonic gravitational totality—which aligns the entire universe. He then nods to the three

types of music in the Pythagorean schema. The music of the Earth, Sun, and stars is *musica mundana,* the tones of which can be found in the Pythagorean scale, while the music of "yourself, vibrating" speaks to *musica humana*, the resonation of the human organism, in or out of tune with the universe. He plays with the third type, *musica instrumentalis,* or the playing of ordinary musical instruments, by claiming that each person *is* an instrument, which poeticizes this layer of the schema suggesting that humans are integral, musical, microcosmic facets in a vast musical cosmos. Despite the implication that "everyone's supposed to be playing their part," and are presumably not, humanity's role in this titanic "arkestry" remains central.

The concepts of *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis* remain powerfully blended in Ra's thought, a vital connection between the world of the human and the cosmic bodies: the link forged in music. This is natural, ancient, mythic concord. For the scholar Sigrid Hauff, Ra's "understanding of his role as an artist," which she connects to the Pythagorean formula, represents an "uncorrupted relationship to the environment, [a] harmony with it" in which "man as a universal self understands himself as a meaningful and necessary part of the world and daily takes part in the creative process" (*Extensions* 62). Ra's music in this respect is clearly aligned with the "harmonic world order" (Hauff, *Extensions* 66) and provides impetus for an active, mystical engagement with the "music" of creation. Not only for Ra and the Arkestra as literal musicians, but for everyone currently living in the world whose "parts" are yet to be "played." Ra's pythagoreanism implies creative reconnection of humanity's natural vibration with that of the music of the spheres. An ancient musical cosmology reinstantiated.

Like so many aspects of the Ra pantheon, this musical cosmos exists in a zone of mythical potential, requiring invocation and manifestation for it to take on "real," effective qualities. This potentiality is evoked in the poem "Music of the Spheres" in which Ra instills the burgeoning quality of the great theme in reader's world:

> Music of the spheres: of the outer spheres
>
> For there are dimensions
>
> That yet are not...
>
> Of the Kingdom of Not...the void
>
> For it is of the unsaid words
>
> Concerning the things that always are to be…
>
> This music came from nothing…
>
> in response to the
>
> Burning need for nothing else
>
> For nothing else will do
>
> For something elseness. (*Immeasurable* 243)

This music certainly comes from elsewhere, the "Kingdom of Not," a mythical zone, identical with the void—nothingness—and yet, it comes "in response" as though called into being. It is somehow both fundamental, and new. This speaks to how the music of the spheres, at one point a scientific and spiritual mainstay of Western belief, has fallen out of favor and been intellectually relegated to the realm of the irrational. But in Ra's view, it brings forth something primordially essential. "Something elseness," the gift of the music of the outer spheres, delivers qualities of the potential—from sonic

nothingness, a force indispensable and renewing, and yet unwitnessed. Music itself is othered and, at once, vital, perhaps healing.

For Ra the Pythagorean image of the musical cosmos not only provides a "rational and consistent relationship between the limited…and the unlimited" (James 28) via an unseen and vast mathematics, joining humanity to greater realms, but also allows a type of medicinal potency through the sympathetic vibrations of the human and that of the spheres. The spherical sounds, an otherworldly presence out in space (realm of not/nothing/elsewhere) offer frequencies that could potentially put the human organism in accord with nature, another key aspect of Pythagorean belief. As James tells us

> the laws of music were of paramount importance, for they governed the whole scope of the perceptible and even the imperceptible universe. Pythagoras considered himself above all a healer, and he used music as a remedy for every manner of sickness. (31)

Hence, the spheres in Ra's conception satisfy a "burning need" for a type of medicine, a "something elseness." Lock quotes Ra summoning this healing, sphere-originating vibration which is "rushing forth as fiery law" (*Blutopia* 27) in the liner notes of one of his earliest records, the 1957 LP *Jazz by Sun Ra* (later retitled as *Sun Song*). "Already", he describes "music is configured…as something akin to a cosmic force that can free us from the limitations of the past and prepare our minds for the wonders to come" (Lock, *Blutopia* 27). Attunement though, according to a musical-cosmic orientation is key. Elsewhere, in *Space is the Place*, Ra explains that the people of Earth are depressed because they "have no music that is in coordination with their spirits. Because of this, they're out of tune with the universe" (43:10-43:23). And yet music, which is "existence"

and “the universal language,” as Ra calls it in a poem entitled “Music the Neglected Plane of Wisdom” can rush “like a wild thing and takes its place at the core of even the minutest part of being” (*Immeasurable* 244). In this way, music, “the ambassador of the Airy Kingdom” generates “Life” (Ra, *Immeasurable* 244). By allowing oneself to be moved by these cosmic vibrations one can expect to be renewed and put in tune with the greater universe.

This concept shares an uncanny resonance with Plato’s take on the universal harmony between cosmos and human realms in the *Timaeus*. Timaeus, according to James

> explains that musical sounds are like little darts propelled by the musician, when, for example, he plucks the strings of his lyre. These darts, which have a circular motion, come into contact with the circular motion within the human organism—the *musica humana*. When these two motions are in concord, we experience the pleasurable sensation of acoustic harmony. (52)

Music, which is “in coordination” with one’s spirit, generates reciprocal and perhaps lasting harmony. For Sun Ra, this truth is not only central to his cosmological framework, but also to his larger project: awakening and altering the people of planet Earth. Hence, his knowledge of the universal correspondence between the exquisite mathematics of cosmic sound and the human organism is deeply important, and makes the myth-science of his transformative music possible.

In practice, writes Szwed, Ra and the Arkestra are following in the footsteps of Pythagoras, Plato, Ficino, Agrippa and others and the “magical musicologists” of the

Renaissance, keeping alive their "own version of this common heritage" in which "order [is] modeled in musical performance…where the universe can be constituted from the interaction of the musicians, and in which aesthetics takes a back seat to the ethics displayed in the interplay and representation of the music" (114). Musical performance in this mytho-scientific tradition allows for the mystical continuity of the cosmos to be enacted by the musicians (*musica instrumentalis*), in harmonic conversation, which reveals something through the art: a more meaningful and ethical imperative. There is something that *must* be gleaned through this expression, an essential. Ra, continues Szwed "along with Schopenhauer, thought that music is the purest form of expression…which reaches the emotions directly" (114). In fact, Ra goes way beyond this concept, it is not only the emotions that are reached through music, but a harmonic unity which underlies the entire universe, which is its most fundamental and poetic reality. By expressing this totality in music, humanity could be transformed according to the basic tenets of the musical cosmos.

For Ra, the concept of harmony, which is revealed along with the order of the musical cosmos in musical practice, is about balance—for humans creating culture and remaining in concord with nature, and the larger universe. Touching on this mathematically Ra justifies "I balance my equations, and I balance them scientifically, and I know that that's the main thing that's bothering this planet" (Sinclair, "It Knocks" 21). If the musical math is balanced, harmony prevails. Or as he says elsewhere "if music is in your heart, you can't do anything wrong" (qtd. in Szwed 114). To be oriented by music means to be at one with the cosmos, and its transcendent orderliness: "A sound

music is to build sound bodies, sound minds and sound beings" (Ra, *Immeasurable* 459). Cosmic music can transmute the entirety of a human beingness.

It is for this reason that the "real aim" of Sun Ra's music—revealed here in a prose piece entitled "[I always called myself Sun Ra]"—is "to coordinate the minds of people into an intelligent reach for a better world" using "space music" which is an "introductory prelude to the sound of greater infinity" (*Immeasurable* 457). "It is a different order of sounds" which is *musica mundana*, the music of the cosmic spheres, "synchronized to the different order of being" (Ra, *Immeasurable* 457). This arrangement of sounds, a translation of the sonic-cosmic order, which Ra says is "of, for, and to the Attributes of the Natural Being of the universe" is nothing less than the great theme enacted as a functional, spiritual-musical machinery in the music of Sun Ra (*Immeasurable* 457). "This intergalactic music," he concludes "is…hieroglyphic sound: an abstract analysis and synthesis of man's relationship to the universe, visible and invisible" (*Immeasurable* 458). A hidden order, drawn on as spiritual inspiration, and played back to by the spiritual musician, creating the ancient bond between the resonating human being and the co-vibrating cosmic spheres.

This co-resonation is the central image of the cosmos that Ra intends to paint for us. These "pictures of infinity in music" (*Immeasurable* 457) reveal an ancient and musical cosmos with healing potential, in which we might take part if only we can find the frequency on which to do so. If music, is in fact, "the science of modulating correctly" (qtd. in James 74) as Augustine posits and Ra implores, then the practice of musical consciousness implies a type of personal-universal synthesis, a cosmic attunement, that is always available in music. This is again, where the "ethical" aspect of

the great theme, as Szwed calls it, reenters. As Vincenzo Galilei, minor composer of the 16th century and fierce ancient-musical theorist, entreats

> let men, who have been endowed by nature with all these excellent and noble parts, endeavor to use them not merely to delight, but as imitators of the good ancients, to improve at the same time, for they have the capacity to do this and in doing otherwise they are acting contrary to nature. (qtd. in James 100)

Like Ra, Galilei believed that musicians should be moved by a natural imperative to engage music according to the ancient ways—the cosmic superstructures of music—for to do otherwise would be against nature. The cosmos is a natural and creative process that humanity must engage actively. In doing so, we are put in tune, harmony is instilled, and the world made more beautiful, orderly, and right. Consciousness of the musical cosmos might in effect fix a broken world.

In the final chapters of his book Jamie James claims that Arnold Schoenberg is the "last in the line that begins with…Pythagoras, the Hermetical sages of the Renaissance and the esoteric societies of the Enlightenment" (220) as a translator of the great theme in modern music. Alas that James never had the privilege of examining Ra's omniverse of composition. For its clear that outside of the 20th century's canonical avant-garde, the so called "folk music" of Ra was able to flourish, and instate just as powerful of a musical-cosmographical statement as the Austrian composer whose modes of composition, to many, "provide the means of divining the very meaning of life" (James 220).

Alternatively, Szwed places Ra in the great lineage of "composer-mystics" which includes "Ives, Schoenberg, and Stockhausen, to name only a few moderns; and Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Anthony Braxton within the jazz tradition" (387). For him this proves that Sun Ra's mysticism—and, I would add, his image of the musical cosmos—is not at all "surprising" but rather part of an undeniable throughline in western music: "scratch any musician and you find a crypto-Pythagorean," he says (Szwed 387). That this ancient musicological view is joined to the "ultramodern…technology…[and] space travel" (Szwed 387) makes him anything but a "run-of-the-mill mystic" (Szwed 387) but rather, something more profound: a messenger of a more altering cosmic artifice, expanding ever outward into omniversal immensity, and inwardly to the most profound depths of the human soul.

Mythic Figures and Planetary Otherworlds

It feels important to acknowledge that in Sun Ra's cosmos some galactic locations, celestial bodies, and mythic figures take precedence. In many creation stories, the structure of the cosmos is set like a stage, and is quickly populated by creatures and entities—gods, demigods, spirits, unseen forces, elements, matter, humans and animals, plants, planets, moons, stars, and so on. We've set the stage of Sun Ra's cosmos, and you might say that Ra himself, his band, and the whole of humanity already occupy this landscape. Ra was very specific and poetic about the planetary bodies and spiritual presences that live in his universe, which take on an outsized aura in relation to human presence. In this way, the cosmos is further constructed, clarified, and the awe that humans might feel in the face of this wondrous, dangerous, musical place, is deepened.

In the final section of this chapter I touch on some of these presences, including Saturn. Saturn takes on several dimensions: as Sun Ra's planetary origin place and as astrological-mythic figure. Similarly, Sun Ra's concept of the Creator is looked at multidimensionally, as a god image who also happened to function as musician and artist, which Ra compiled from a variety of traditions. Lastly, we touch on the concept of the "omniverse," the fullest expansion of Ra's cosmos: which contained unlimited universes, and expressed an ineffable vastness which he intended to invoke.

Saturn, Keeper of Discipline

Sun Ra claimed to hail from the planet Saturn. It was his spiritual origin place and acted as an invigorating symbolic force in his life and work. An early abduction experience—which I'll draw out thoroughly in the final chapter of this dissertation—places Ra there. Sometime in the early 50s, after being contacted by "space men," Ra was teleported via a beam of light ("my body was changed into something else") and "landed on a planet…identified as Saturn" (Szwed 29). This experience, pivotal to his persona and mythos, created the mythological evidence he needed in order for him to unflaggingly assert that Saturn was his home. "The last planet I remember is planet Saturn…I'm from there" he said in a 1989 interview for NBC's *Night Music* TV show (13:55-14:03).

"Sun Ra found his home in a spiritual world," writes Hauff, "why did he choose Saturn as his home planet?" (*Thought* 18). She begins to answer this by considering Saturn as an astrological influence. Western astrology bases the symbolic weight of Saturn on the ancient Greek myth of Cronus (or Kronos), a carnivorous Titan who

castrated his father and consumed his own children. After killing his father he ruled the universe with his sister Rhea for ages but was eventually usurped by his son Zeus. As classical Greek mythology gave way to the Roman era, Cronus softened, became Saturn, and having been driven out with the rest of the Titans by the Olympian gods, escaped to Rome and instituted a "golden age." Later, in the Renaissance, he was conflated with time in general, the figure of Chronos, or "father time." His symbol became the scythe (an intimation of the earlier castrating weapon) indicating both the harvest and the cycles of birth and death. All of these myths of Saturn contain the implicit symbolization of limitation, restriction, and order.

Hauff suggests that the Saturnian astrological influence exercised a powerful stimulus upon Ra's birth sign, Gemini, which is ruled by Mercury. Astrologer Gabi Geist concurs stating that this especially "karmic planet" which "provides all things with structure, form and earthiness" and who is "often found in relationship to Venus in the charts of artists and musicians" balances what might be seen in Sun Ra as an "ungrounded" propensity (117). Instead this structuring force, which stabilizes the dualistic and airy essence of Gemini, produces a serious, transformational individual concerned with "unraveling the riddle of life with his cleverness and excellent mind" in a "permanent search for intellectual insight" (117). Saturn, in Ra's chart, places him on a permanent quest.

This pursuit engendered by Saturn is interpreted by Ra himself as the spirit of "discipline," which as the respected astrologer Liz Greene affirms is central to its style of influence:

Saturn symbolizes a psychic process as well as a quality or kind

> of experience. He is not merely a representative of pain, restriction, and discipline; he is also a symbol of psychic process, natural to all human beings, by which an individual may utilize the experiences of pain, restriction, and discipline as a means for consciousness and fulfillment. (10)

Or as Ra puts it, "what I'm talking about is discipline—striving for things that will never be…so that they can do something beneficial for people" (Sinclair, "It Knocks" 22). In engaging a Saturnian process of transformation, by committing to discipline, new beneficial possibilities might arise from unknown, perhaps impossible, regions.

Discipline for Ra is aligned both with the painful, restrictive side of the archetype and its transcendent aspect, and this dichotomy is truly evident in his relationship with his band, whom he subjected to countless hours of practice—often at odd hours for unpredictable durations—and incredible amounts of touring, gigging, and so on. As saxophonist and sometimes manager of the Arkestra Danny Thompson relays in *A Joyful Noise* "you never know when rehearsal's gonna be. It might be at four in the morning, it might be at six in the morning. It might be from six in the morning to twelve at night. You know, it might be any time, you know you just have to be ready." (33:00-33:15). Sun Ra would joke that his musicians were in "the Ra jail" which was "the best jail in the world" (Ra qtd. in Youngquist 67) because they could learn things there that couldn't be gleaned anywhere else, musically or philosophically. Hence, "discipline and precision" the "watchwords" (Youngquist 67) of Ra's work could also provoke the transcendent side of the Saturnian experience: arousing new consciousness and a sense of personal self-actualization in his musicians, taking their music into a space beyond the ordinary. In

2016, Thompson further relayed how the sometimes grueling discipline of Ra's band could yield amazing results in one's own playing, "Sun Ra had a talent for bringing out something that you didn't even know you had inside you. And when you found it out and you wondered how did I play that?" (1:16:40-1:16:56). Through the rigors of discipline comes something transcendent, as is true of so much of the practice of creating jazz.

According to Youngquist, discipline and precision were utilized by Sun Ra for a more profound purpose than offering his musicians the experience of personal and creative growth—although that was central to his larger musical program. Discipline was a means of surpassing the ugliness of life on planet Earth, inculcating true beauty, and being placed in tune with the universe. As one broadsheet proposes, everything must be done "TO MAKE LIFE BEAUTIFUL" (Ra qtd. in Youngquist 68).

Disciplined musical practice is about transcendence, creativity, and the revelation of a more beautiful life. "The focus of [Ra's] music and politics," was, in this regard, in opposition to freedom, and "toward discipline as the means for mastering the creation of beauty under circumstances of restraint" (Youngquist 68). In Ra's cosmos, freedom doesn't really exist, and restraint is a natural force of universal creation. And yet, Ra would often link his own belief in the necessity of discipline to his own personal experiences of racism, and of the history of enslavement, in general. As he explained

> I don't believe in freedom…because I've never had any. I have to work for the creator whether I want to or not and that's discipline. I have to do like the Sun and the Stars in the sky. They have to be in the right place all the time. That's what I have to be. I don't know what people are talking about when they're talking about freedom. All superior beings have no freedom.

> They have to be obedient to the creator. Talk about freedom. Biggest lie I've been told because it can't be you see. No one is free down here. They never have been and, really, they never will be. (qtd. in Youngquist 68)

At first, it might seem contradictory, that having lived in an oppressive atmosphere his entire earthly life, Ra would outright discredit the prospect of freedom—so inherent to the philosophies and practices of the civil rights movement—and instead align himself with a more constrictive, and prescribed conceptual framework. But in doing so, says Szwed, Ra invokes some of Booker T. Washington's educational methods of survival in a segregated society, which Ra was steeped in. "Only by the methods provided by the sciences and mathematics," Washington believed "could the race gain the machinelike precision and discipline necessary for its development and for its opposition to the irrationality of racism: anything else was a distraction" (Szwed 17).

In his cosmology, Ra believed that freedom was only useful if it was connected to a sense of discipline. Black people, according to Ra, require limits in order to witness themselves within a vision of more expansive potential. The freedom *of* discipline—a paradoxical equation if there ever was one—lends the authority to chart a cosmic course, and stakes an unequaled residence for Blackness in the universe.

Saturn, as archetypal psychologist James Hillman tells us, is "associated" with "blackness" (*Senex* 257) which is also the "Old King" and the "*lapis*" (*Senex* 45) of the alchemical philosophers. *Lapis*, in the European Alchemical tradition, is sometimes considered synonymous with the *prima materia* or earthly "source material" for the great work (Roob 28). Hence Saturn, whose metallurgic association is with heavy lead, is also associated with the beginnings of the alchemical work. Through the putrefaction

(blackening) of the lapis, says 17th century German physician and alchemist Michael Maier "this blackness unites the body with the spirit" (qtd. in Roob 79). In this sense, Ra's feeling for discipline, connected to a sci-fi myth-science, acts as both a type of "machinery" for outflying racism's earthly pulse (the concretized metaphor of a spaceship), and a type of "alchemy" for joining body and spirit, in Saturnian transformation. Moreover, in Blackness one might transmute, transcend. Blackness and discipline therefore powerfully go together, as they are both of Saturn's realm.

Ra takes Washington's idea and combines it with a galactic, Pythagorean mysticism, in effect submitting, as Youngquist translates, that "from a cosmological perspective, all things have their place; all movement proceeds under determined impulse. Freedom belongs only to children (or whites) who can't apprehend the forces that regulate their lives" (Youngquist 68). Sun Ra, living in intimate relation with these forces, their structures held in place by Saturnine propensities, presents himself as a superior being, untethered by the lie of so-called freedom, offering inevitable transcendence through discipline. It's worth mentioning that in the Pythagorean structures of the great theme, "the spheres of Jupiter and Saturn are inhabited by hierarchies of angels" (Lambert of Saint Omer, qtd. in Roob 42).

Ra often claimed to be an angel, therefore linking his own celestial persona with the eternal, deterministic configurations of the universe. Discipline in this regard, says scholar Jayna Brown, lends Sun Ra and the members of the Arkestra a "focused—if enforced—permission" toward "productivity" and "creative freedom" (161) which is, in the Ra conception, a totally different venture than personal or cultural emancipation, societally. Creative freedom, according to Ra, means "speaking in other harmonic ways

than the earth way" (qtd. in Youngquist 69). The Earth's musical language is infinitely inferior to the harmonic superstructure of the cosmos—the Creator's vast and perfect music. Saturn's influence, then, an intense, if sometimes painfully structuring force might inspire one to venture further outward, into communion with the precision of the ancient, harmonic spheres. Marsilio Ficino, one of the most important mystic-philosophers of the Renaissance would agree that "by withdrawal from earthly things, by…constancy, esoteric theology and philosophy, by superstition, magic…and grief, we come under the influence of Saturn" (qtd. in Hillman, *Senex* 258). *That*, according to Ra, is discipline; that is being in tune with a more powerful, all-encompassing vibration, and the gateway to other worlds.

Ra's modes of discipline are therefore initiatory, and in alignment with Greene's idea that Saturnine experiences "are educational in practical as well as a psychological sense" (11) meaning that they transform us, shaping us in deeper, unanticipated ways. These experiences being emotionally painful, or psychologically uncomfortable, are usually avoided at all costs, and yet, when met, are inevitably emancipatory. "Human beings do not earn free-will except through self-discovery, and they do not attempt self-discovery until things become so painful that they have no other choice" (11). Therefore, Saturn's influence presents essential, if seemingly compulsory, entries into the work of burgeoning selfhood. For "it is not enjoyment of pain which Saturn fosters," Greene affirms "but rather the exhilaration of psychological freedom. This is not often recognized because not many people have experienced it" (11). For Hillman, Saturn's influence also represents the archetypal background of the creation of the psychological

Ego, as imaged by the "Self" or the "Wise Old Man" (42)—the influence of which grows a child's consciousness into an adult's.

Sun Ra's engagement with Saturn, though, was expected to take one further, past the engendering of ego-consciousness. For Ra, Saturn could provoke selfhood as a superior being and a more expansive sense of psychological freedom only available through discipline; recognition of the inescapable order of the cosmos—the infinitudes of outer space. He would tell his musicians, after countless hours of practice, to play what they didn't know. "There *are* no mistakes," he claimed (qtd. in Szwed 114). "If someone's playing off-key or it sounds bad, the rest of us will do the same. And then it will sound right" (qtd. in Szwed 114). Freedom comes from attunement, and the knowledge that the universal order always precedes human conduct. Therefore discipline in musical practice is a profound mode of self-discovery, which, says Ra "ought to permit people to find the most natural things. Without the base, total freedom is impossible. Everything needs roots" (qtd. in Szwed 115).

One of the "most ancient and persistent of teachings" regarding Saturn, says Greene "tells us that he is keeper of the keys to the gate, and that it is through him alone that we may achieve eventual freedom through self-understanding" (11). Sun Ra, as ambassador of Saturn, and the Saturnine influence, embodies this threshold keeping energy. He is the master, the initiatory elder, permitting his band to enter the cosmos through him, and reach eternity through restriction. By engaging Ra's art, we too are ushered through the portal into other more expansive dimensions, via the discipline of his emancipatory sound.

Solar Myth as Saturnalia

Hillman, like Greene, sees Saturn as a multifaceted figure, which he gleans from admiring Saturn's astrological personage. Saturn, for Hillman, is both the "*coagulator* through denseness, slowness, and weight expressed by the mood of sadness, depression, or melancholia" (43)—the dark, hungry, miserly father figure—as well as the "creator of wise men" and "builder of cities" (42)—the bright, shining mythological figure of the Roman "golden age." In Sun Ra's work both these Saturnian influences are present, the former as form-making discipline and the latter as Ra's hope for a better life in outer space. This concept of a future golden age, obtained through musical discipline, Ra sometimes referred to as the "solar myth," (Youngquist 217) syncretically linking Saturn to other shining, paternalistic gods such as the Greek Helios and the Egyptian Ra; suggesting that through the power of a solar, heliocentric practice, the human race might reach a new age of unlimited potential. Sun symbology is therefore linked to utopian conceptualization. As Campbell translates, the sun as "sun-door…speaks of another kind of rebirth" invoking the idea "of not coming back at all…of passing beyond the spheres of rebirth altogether to a transcendent light" (*Thou* 89). A pure, solar consciousness for a heliocentric, golden dawn.

The solar myth in this regard harkens back to "the golden reign of the…Saturn in the mythological beginnings, who should reign as a fair and benevolent ruler. He enacted laws, brought peace and prosperity. It was [a] golden harmonious era without discord. There was everything for all in abundance" (Geerken, *Saturnalia* 13). At the point at which this mythic era ended the god was then celebrated in the Roman festival of the Saturnalia, which Hillman calls a "homeopathic cure" for the harsh, patriarchal grip of

Saturn in which his spirit was "honored with anarchy and propitiated from hardening into its despotic tendency" (254). The ritual was enacted by electing a "shadow" monarch for the extent of the celebrations, as Geerken explains

> a substitute king of the god of Saturn [was] voted in…and he reigned during the seven-day feast, dressed as a king. He could break all conventions during these seven days, alter laws, and without restriction question morality….The slaves of antiquity were granted absolute freedom during such Saturnalias…the masters had to serve food to the slaves; in short: there were no limits to the freedom within this period….after seven days, this shadow king that embodied Saturn, was executed, slaughtered, burnt, hanged, beheaded…to sacrifice his life for the progress-worthy world. (Geerken, *Saturnalia* 13)

We would expect the symbolism of such a ritual to be a rich realm of research for Sun Ra, as so many of his prime philosophical concerns are encapsulated within it: the altering of law (alter destiny) and interrogation of "freedom;" the emancipation of enslaved people, the necessitated ritual sacrifice. In short, the symbolic destruction of the world as it is, and created in its place: a rited one.

Geerken goes on to compare Saturnalia's "carnival-like celebrations" (*Saturnalia* 13) to Sun Ra performances. While the band's concerts had at their heart a mathematically-precise (and endlessly rehearsed) music, their performances—especially in the Arkestra of the 60s and 70s—often incorporated near abandon in the form of wild, ritualistic, cloaked dancing, sonic, textural explosions, and a theatrical display which transformed Sun Ra and the other musicians into glowing, golden-robed deistic figures in

cosmic headdresses. “The cheap, false crowns which Sun Ra wore,” in performance were those that “the Saturn kings [had] on their head” as they symbolically disintegrated societal norms (Geerken, *Saturnalia* 13-14). The Arkestra’s performances therefore are the invocation of such a norm-combusting spell, with Ra as the conductive Saturn-King at the head.

But it was not only in performance that Sun Ra invoked the ritualistic destruction of the Saturnalia, but in the entirety of his work. Ra, in this vein, Geerken chimes

> has broken many taboos, questioned the laws of music, was aware of breaking out of all the traditional music conventions and he did not leave out any jokes and humorous and artistic essences. He has put out of action the Christian monstrance, by substituting it with the glowing wreathe of the sun…his seemingly Dadaistic behavioral patterns break free of the restrictive forces under which the unfree person has to suffer. (Geerken, *Saturnalia* 13-14)

Ra’s oeuvre therefore is a living Saturnalia, upending the orders of music, religion, and society, sacrificing it all for a solar consciousness. This may explain why the planet Saturn was “chosen” as Ra’s homeplace (though it might very well be said that Saturn chose him). For his home world is equally “the planet of discipline and sacrifice” (Szwed 184): the structuring factor of containment, the stellar mathematics of myth-science, as well as the apocalyptically ritualized upending of a broken culture. Saturn’s double sidedness—the twin influences of containment and dissolution—are two necessary, altering apparatuses which make Sun Ra’s life, mythos, music, and cosmos so markedly his own, and all the more powerful.

The Creator

In Sun Ra's embodiment of Saturnian energies we might see him as a figure who truly grasped at a sense of authority, wielding discipline sometimes uncompromisingly—for instance, in order to punish a member of the Arkestra who refused to show up to band practice who then had to sit out that night's gig—yet Ra conceded much of his power to the mythic figure he referred to as "the Creator" (*Joyful* 7:00-7:05). Nearly every mythic tradition, including the Abrahamic religions, speak of a creator of the Universe, the Earth, and its people. Ra's image of this mythic figure specifically embodies aspects of creator deities from the Platonic, Gnostic, Egyptian and Biblical traditions and is linked to his vision of himself as an artist. In fact it is the Creator that gives him his artistic license and ensures his purpose, as we shall see.

Ra liked to say that the Arkestra "was the Creator's band" (Szwed 118) and that he was merely its director carrying out the Master's plan. As Szwed affirms, Ra thought of himself as "a secret agent of the Creator" (Szwed 109), a human-scale worker for the architect of the universe, generating music that could carry out his divine intentions. For Ra the music of the Arkestra was a way to embody the Creator's music, while remaining in mystic communication with him. It was also a way of demonstrating the "right" way for musicians to behave—after all god was watching! "When musicians are compelled to play anything," he would say "it goes straight to the throne of the creator of the universe, and that is how he sees you, according to your music. Because, see, music is a universal language" (*Joyful* 7:00-7:05). Music then is a way of demonstrating one's soul. If one can speak the universal language, be embodied in it, one might be known by the Creator, honored in his presence—be able to retain communion with him. In this way, music

retains the ancient connection between that which is above and that which is below, the Pythagorean-Platonic connection between the perfection of the spheres and the imperfections of Earth music.

The Creator, in Ra's cosmos, became a presence guiding the Arkestra's actions, a musical force that could insert himself into the goings on of the group, in practice or in performance, as Danny Thompson relayed in 2016: "Sun Ra's music was like that…it's a vibration. That the Creator just takes over your horn, he wraps his wings around you and he plays your horn, and you wonder 'how did I play that!' It wasn't you…it was another being" (*Legacy* 1:17:20-1:17:45). That the Creator could "take over" a member of the Arkestra's instrument suggests something of the traditions of spirit possession—gods "riding" practitioners in Haitian Vodun ritual, or the trance of "catching of the Holy Spirit," speaking in tongues and the like, in the Pentecostal church. That the Creator, or "other being" that's gripping that player's instrument, has "wings" intimates something of Gabriel and his apocalyptic horn, ringing out to initiate Judgement day. Sun Ra's understanding of the Creator is therefore archetypal and linked to many traditions.

We could also say that in the world of so-called "spiritual jazz," the Creator is something of a zeitgeist. In the works of Ra's contemporaries, namely the inventive saxophonist Pharaoh Sanders and keyboardist-harpist-spiritual teacher Alice Coltrane, the Creator is especially present. One of Sanders' most beloved tunes is "The Creator has a Master Plan," a sprawling, 32-minute suite, moving between lilting sax and flute meanderings in the Garden of Eden and all out blasting, cosmic noise-jazz for the ecstatic destruction of illusion. Coltrane, meanwhile invokes one of the principal Egyptian creator gods with her song "Ptah, the El Daoud," a prismatic walking blues featuring some of her

most exquisite, crystalline piano meanderings. The song seems to invoke the creation of the universe from a fractured disparateness: a mythic telling in sound. From these examples we might glean that the Creator is the patron deity of experimental and visionary Jazz, so too in Sun Ra's music.

The Creator also embodies a unique and deeply personal place in Sun Ra's life. As a child, dissociated from the rigors of society and the ugly, disquieting aura of everyday racism, Ra, who felt little to no relation to the family he lived with, turned to the spiritual dimension for connection. "I was really raised by the creator of the universe who guided me step by step" (Szwed 7). A parental figure and guide, the Creator acted as an artist-mentor on whom Ra could pattern his own destiny. "I came from somewhere else," he claimed "but…[the Creator's voice] reached me through the maze and dullness of human existence…the Creator separated me from my family. He said, 'Well, I'm your family.' And from then on I was under his guidance" (Szwed 5-6). The Creator was not simply some paternalistic fill-in though, but the spirit-force driving Sun Ra's own creativity, the artist-architect-musician at work. The god of gods, creativity itself. As Szwed writes

> The distinction between the Creator and God was not always clear, and [Ra] sometimes used them interchangeably, but it was the Creator who was most important to him. The Creator allows for creative thought. The Creator is nature's God, the God of the early romantics, or the eighteenth-century deists' conceptions of God. (296)

From Sun Ra's point of view, the Creator is the archetypal artist, the primordial force of making, which anyone might inhabit. His connection to the Creator though is of a more

profound nature as Ra's own name implies. For Ra, in the ancient Egyptian conception, is connected to Khepera, the primordial creator deity and a form of Ra. While Ptah is the "sculptor" of the universe, "the master architect and designer of everything which exists in the world" the commands of which "were issued by Thoth" (Budge *Gods* 501) it was "Khepera…the creator of what came into being" (Budge *Gods* 501) who started existence out of nothingness. Famed turn-of-the-century Egyptologist E.A. Wallis Budge reads from the Pyramid texts to explain that

> the Egyptians thought that a self-begotten and self-existent god lived alone in a primeval watery mass…of unlimited extent, and was eternal, and was enveloped in thick darkness. The self-existent god, at some unknown time and for some unknown reason, uttered his own name as a word of power, and he straightway came into being under the form of the god Khepera…he produced some material place, probably the earth, whereupon he could stand. (306)

This section of creation text is known as "The Book of knowing of evolutions of Ra," connecting Ra and Khepera in an original and primordial way. Khepera-Ra is the primeval-cosmic, creator deity, bringing forth all things from his "mouth" (Budge 309). It's worth mentioning again that "utterance" is one of the original meanings of the word mythos, connecting all creation to mythology, the telling of stories—as in the Egyptian creation myths—and the mouth. The mouth is connected to the utterance of the "word" in Christian Tradition, equated with Christ, the *Nous*—archaic intelligence of the philosophical domain. Therefore, creative utterance, the speaking of things into being, is connected to the mind, the intellect, and deeper wisdom. None of this would be lost on

Sun Ra and his taking the name of Ra puts him in league with all of these Creator archetypes, as well as the vast architectural intelligence of the cosmos. “The creator is a music lover,” he once claimed “…’cause look, the letters R-E, why that’s just another way of saying RA, my last name…so you see that religion is just the legion or RA…its peaceful thought” (qtd. in Szwed 86).

But the Creator is not only linked to ancient Egypt. For Sun Ra, this god image also contains Semitic and Gnostic inflections. From his time in Chicago, Ra began making cross-cultural symbolic connections between gods of different ancient cultures, instigating a comparative mythic study. In one interview, using the tool of phonetic recombination he playfully interrogates the word ‘Israel’ to unearth a curious, but academically sound, query. “I’m very interested in names,” he said “and ‘Ra’ is older than history itself…its very interesting to note that there is ‘ra’ in the middle of ‘Israel’: Is-ra-el. Take away the ‘ra’ there is no more Israel” (qtd. in Szwed 86). Is *Ra* in fact *El,* the God of Creation for the Canaanites? Sun Ra here dips into a lineage of thought, wavering between the occultism and straighter academics, in which these two ancient mythic figures are equated. As Blavatsky puts it, in an acrobatic mytho-comparative sweep: “El, the sun-god of the Syrians, the Egyptians, and the Semites, is declared…to be no other than Set or Seth, and El is the primeval Saturn—Israel. Siva is an AEthiopian god, the same as the Chaldean Baal–Bel; thus he is also Saturn. Saturn, El, Seth…are all one and the same deity” (*Isis* 524). The Egyptian Ra, according to Blavatsky, is in fact El. Further she illuminates, the ‘Is’ of Israel is cognate with Isis, making Israel an androgynously deific name, containing the Feminine. Elsewhere Ra posited that

> like the Canaanites' El, the Creator is the oldest of gods, the god of gods, the one that made all gods possible, the oldest known extraterrestrial beings. Yet, the Creator is not a god as Christians understand their God, but infinite, the omni-presence, the highest form imaginable; the God of the living, and like the Sun, the purest state of being. (Szwed 296)

As the purest state of being the Creator could offer a lot to humanity. The Creator's energy was something to welcome, inhabit, and become one with. Well beyond the Bible's God, and His book of death, the Creator is aligned with life, transcendence and light. As Ra roars in a broadsheet "THE CREATOR DOES NOT RECOGNIZE SUFFERING AS A VIRTUE. ANY EMBLEM OF SUFFERING IS THE DANGER SIGN OF EVIL" (*Wisdom* 77). He therefore exists to remediate suffering, and uplift creatively-assenting minds into the vicissitudes of artistic invention. For Ra, it was important to reach out to the Creator in language, by speaking to him directly as a form of manifestational prayer. "Saying something makes it so," he asserts "the problem is we don't know how to talk to the Creator, to ask for what we want or need or how the words should go together, so we don't get what we want" (Szwed 302). Sadly, the lack of connection in the world comes merely from not having the words to appropriately communicate, suggesting a dearth of soul-poetry.

Hence, as one of the Creator's creative intermediaries on Earth, part of Ra's mission, as put in his company Ihnfinity Inc.'s mission statement, becomes "to awaken the spiritual conscious of mankind putting [them] back in contact with [the] 'Creator.'…To make mankind aware that the 'Creator' is here now and that he is also present in other world-galaxies…To perform works as the 'Creator' (God) wills us" (qtd.

in Szwed 242). To live and create in alignment with the Creator's will relieves suffering and opens one to the cosmic, omniversal consciousness.

If this is the Creator's universe, Sun Ra his intermediary, and the Arkestra the Creator's band, then his is an ancient and musical cosmos built in Pythagorean vibrations, and voiced in modern, experimental space-sounds. Ra's song "The Satellites are Spinning" expresses how this type of consciousness alters suffering.

> The satellites are spinning
>
> A better day is breaking
>
> Great happiness is spending
>
> The Planet Earth awakening
>
> The satellites are spinning
>
> A better dawn is breaking
>
> The galaxies are waiting
>
> For Planet Earth's awakening
>
> We sing this song to a great tomorrow
>
> We sing this song to abolish sorrow (1:13-2:02)

In the Creator's cosmos, sorrow is abolished not suffered, the sun doesn't come up on fallow land, but pours light into the rooms of saddened people; a universal consciousness "spending" on happiness rather than on tombstones, spinning choral chords into a sound of joy, awakening the human race to a future without regret, arraigned pain, or racial malice. In the Creator's cosmos, the creative urge—as organized by the divine musical will—is the highest purpose. To incant that creativity into being, inspired by and in

communication with the supreme power, makes a new world and abolishes suffering from the galaxy.

Omniverse

I would be remiss to conclude this chapter before touching upon Sun Ra's concept of the *Omniverse*—a cosmos he conceived of as containing infinite universes, encompassing inestimable galaxies, planets, and stars. Its infinite and multitudinous aspect could be related to the "many worlds" hypothesis of quantum theory in that it posits a "multiverse" which may contain infinite universes. Near the end of his life this notion became central to Ra's cosmological view. Perhaps a myth-science translation of the multiverse concept, it becomes Ra's final way of poetically suggesting the truly infinite potential inherent in the universe we live in. It is a challenge to any earthly conception of the cosmos, a notion made to insinuate true transcendence. As Hauff relays, "Sun Ra's OMNIVERSE…[is] a form of higher reality, a spiritual world beyond life and death" (*Extensions* 58). The Omniverse, transcendent of the opposites, is connected to the Creator: the "infinite, *omni-presence*, the highest form imaginable…the purest state of being" (Szwed 296). As Sun Ra said in 1979

> I was trying to tell them about the creator of the Universe, but now I'm talking about the creator of the Omniverse, you see. I move along in spiritual planes of evolution. Now, at first I was talking about music being the universal language, now I'm saying that music has stepped up to be the omniversal language, you see. That's the eternal…the eternal everything

you might say. It's dealing with something that was always here.

("Possibility" 6:20-7:15)

In moving on from the concept of "universe" to an "omniverse" Ra expands toward a deeper and more complex sense of the cosmic. For in this omniversal dimension, creator and cosmos are one, the "uni" of a solitary consciousness is turned towards the "omni"—meaning "to combine forms"—which condenses all disparateness into a single, undefinable and infinite beingness. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine.

But his main point, I believe, is that the omniverse is an archetypal reflection of the eternal: something so vast and baffling as to be incomprehensible. In a dreamlike account of the Omniverse Ra described "a vision that…defies description…it was like a big supermarket. It was the supermarket of the omniverse, everything in the omniverse was in this market, I didn't see any walls because it was so big there were no walls" (*Possibility* 26:49-27:29). Beyond walls and conceptions, the omniverse is itself true infinity but still containing every concept one might consider "buying into." Hence, we might walk through, perusing its starry wares. In that same vision Ra mentions stopping "at one counter that had some socks there. These socks was like they were alive, they were glittering like diamonds" ("Possibility" 26:49-27:29). The sequins, shining in living infinitude, relate the omniverse to the image of Indra's net from the Vedic (and Mahayana Buddhistic) tradition, among others.

Indra's net, an infinite webbing of silvery strings, joined at every intersection by a glittering jewel (or pearls in some tellings) hangs above Indra's palace atop Mount Meru, demonstrating its location as the *Axis Mundi* in many Hindu and Buddhist cosmologies. Each jewel, upon inspection, reflects within itself every other jewel in the web, implying

inestimable interrelation. Indra's net is the universe, glittering omniversally in immeasurable limitlessness. When Ra asks us to "imagine a being that is always, is always, being, and doesn't touch upon the face of what you call life. Cos this being is greater than life and greater than death. This being only permits life to be" ("Possibility" 6:20-7:15) we are certainly in the realm of this Vedic cosmology, near the mind of Indra and the intraconnected superstructure of the omniverse.

Still there is another layer to Ra's omniverse which is brought out by the song "Omniverse," itself from an album of the same name. We might expect a psychedelic composition of swirling primal rhythms, dazzling flashes of synthesizer noise, and pinging metallic cymbals ringing in stereo. Instead, the song "Omniverse" is a minimal, eight-minute piece, moving laconically, slow-swinging its way through sorrowful—even mournful—chord changes that drift dangerously close to a feeling of nostalgia. Piano and baritone solos from Sun Ra and John Gilmore betray that this is a quintet performance, not a full-on Arkestra performance, which might feel more at home on a John Coltrane album rather than a Ra LP. And yet this minimal take translates something of the omniverse that it might not if it were more chaotically and flashily rendered. This piece is made as though staring through one of the jewels of Indra's net, through the lens of our own Earth-centric cosmos, to see the others. Plodding bass, a solitary ringing ride cymbal, Gilmore's breathy sax and Ra's glittery and sometimes sour piano lines inflict a recognizable matrix of sound through which we might *long* for infinity. "Omniverse" expresses desire for a greater cosmic vision, as seen from Earth. Perhaps listeners of the tune would have this yearning stimulated within them, too. Like a final plea, the vision of Ra's omniverse comes to beg the question, softly, *but don't you want more?*

Perhaps this is why in the latter part of Sun Ra's career the Arkestra took on several epitaphs containing the phrase "omniverse." There was the "Omniverse Arkestra," the "Omniverse Jet Set Arkestra" and the "Omniverse Ultra 21st Century Arkestra" among others. Ra and the band went from traveling the spaceways from planet to planet, playing music as the universal language, to traveling from universe to universe delivering omniversal incomprehensibilities. Ra's cosmology is expanded to the enth, it cannot be extrapolated any further. In this, we witness the measureless expanse Ra's imagination and vision reached for. Generously, he chose to share it as a form of inspiration, a spiritual incitement to personal and collective expansion, and crystalline vision. The poem "Omniverse" clarifies this invitation

Omniverse-
Is
The totality
Of
All the universes
And you
Are Welcome
To
Be citizens
Of
The Omniverse (*Immeasurable* 276)

Not merely an abstraction for intellectual pondering, but an actual place one might inhabit—it is a *society* for citizenry!—the omniverse, much like the other destinations in

Sun Ra's cosmos, is welcoming. Further, being a container of totalities, we get the sense that this omniverse may perhaps offer a healing effect. It may, in fact, be whole making, unifying our own disparateness.

With the omniverse Ra completes his charting of the universe(s), expanding his cosmology to the absolute brink of conception, and taking us along with him so that our cosmologies might expand to that same inconceivable threshold. If we were to step over the edge, our minds might become sound, and our spirits members of a novel culture birthed on the other side of cosmos-being, citizens of infinity at last.

CHAPTER FOUR
ASTRO BLACK MYTHOLOGY

The land that is nowhere, that is the true home…

The Secret of the Golden Flower

Gentlemen, I have the utmost confidence in your ability to perform…the impossible.

Captain Jean Luc Picard, Star Trek: The Next Generation

Social Strata

The third function of a living mythology in Joseph Campbell's view is the *sociological function* which can "validate and maintain a certain sociological system" (*Pathways* 8). It is the place where myth holds together a social order, where the laws of the universe, of the cosmos—of a certain god or band of deities—are imparted unto humankind, translating into human law. This law is "apodictic," (Campbell, *Pathways* 8), that is, undeniable. "You cannot change these; you cannot go against them" says Campbell (*Pathways* 8). Campbell cites the ten commandments of the Christian Tradition as an example, which are literally scribed in stone tablets. Or so the story goes: the solidity of this image, the hardness, suggests its totality, its godliness.

While in the traditional world, this kind of unflinching law-making might've provided a sense of stability and a direct connection to the divine, in the modern world these universally enforced laws appear as rigid dogma. Something genuinely disconnected from a sense of spirituality; a vestige of a patriarchal and inflexible universe. Despite their enforcement on many levels in contemporary society, these out-of-date religious regulations, can stimulate a "dissociation…from actual existence"

(Campbell, *Masks* 5). That is, our vision of cosmic law is disaligned from the cosmos we are living in. It no longer fits, no longer guides or genuinely helps the people. Even religious believers are often oppressed by the law they choose—or are coerced into following. This leads, says Campbell, to "spiritual disaster" and a loss of connection to the "living waters of the inexhaustible source" (*Masks* 5).

Further he says it is in this zone of a spiritual wasteland that the misuse of "authority and coercion" come into play (*Masks* 5). That is, mythologies are weaponized to benefit the powerful, and subjugate those with less means and influence. Myths become psychological machines of othering. What was once a living and potentially holistic social structure becomes merely a manipulative and unconsciously implanted social pattern within which individuals wither, losing a sense of connectivity to the cosmos in which they live. Moreover, says Campbell, people who come unstuck from the social fabric of their local mythos will inevitably begin a search for *something else* indicative of life and that inexhaustible source of beingness. From this quest—burgeoning within the seeking mind of a person in search of something better—might come new mythologies and with it, new societies and social structures: new ways of living and of being.

In Sun Ra's mythology, this pursuit of a better world with a new social order is central. This is clear in examining the mythologies that he borrowed from—most importantly those from ancient Egypt which he saw as the "kingdom of discipline and precision" (*Joyful* 16:44-17:04)—a deeply creative culture whose laws allowed for generations of undeniable, transcendent "wisdom [and] art" (*Joyful* 16:44-17:04). Egypt was, for Ra, a perfect Black society, totally aligned with the divine energies of creativity

and culture. Egypt offered a blueprint, he thought, for a contemporary society, only Earth wouldn't allow it. The Earth had been saturated in bad truth, disconnected from anything vital, meaningful.

That's why Ra turned to the modern sci-fi mythologies of outer space as a potential social sphere—he felt he could build a new, futuristic Black society amongst the stars, dimming the dissociation of life on Earth. His band, the Arkestra—a secret society and experimental social order unto itself—would act as an outline for this better world, demonstrating clarity of focus and mutual respect through the language of music and art; of communal living, and of demonstrated leadership in the visage of Ra himself. As a guide to this unique and burgeoning social strata, Ra, orbited by his musicians, could project a new, mythic social cohesion.

The Arkestra's performances too were an elaboration on this theme. Instituting liquid light-projection, theatrical performance, expressionistic dance, free improvisation, and poetry recitation collaged into their music, the Arkestra performed what was called *Cosmo Drama Myth Ritual* in which they would enact Ra's better world, in sound and image. This chapter centralizes these themes of the "sociological" intention behind Ra's mythos and examines here what is the central aspect of Sun Ra's myth which he called *Astro Black Mythology*.

Ancient Blackness

As Youngquist points out, Ra's interest in myth always had a social component. In 1950s Chicago, working with a group of like-minded radical thinkers called *Thmei*, Ra's interest and adoption of Egyptian imagery and ideas was blended into his

philosophical writing and became an act of social activism (Youngquist 37). In the group's search for a "deeper antiquity" (37) says Youngquist "Sun Ra found in ancient Egypt a precedent for social stability and spiritual prowess" (43) lacking in American culture. Behind the Abrahamic religions and its broken holy book "loomed an Egyptian antiquity whose longevity might alone might undermine [the West's] assurances of human rationality or divine entitlement" (Youngquist 43). Moreover, Sun Ra's Egypt was *Black. The* great Black culture of the ancient world. That its history and accomplishments had been coopted by white culture, placed in museums and text books as an inscrutable "lost society," only amplified its value to Ra.

That Egypt's Blackness had been whitewashed, perhaps intentionally obscured, proved its secret power as the origin of culture. In *A Joyful Noise* Ra says "somehow ancient Egypt is thought of as the kingdom of bondage. It would be better to say 'the kingdom of discipline, the kingdom of precision, the kingdom of culture, beauty, art'" (16:44-17:04). For Sun Ra Egypt is not only an "alternative to Western culture but…its unacknowledged origin" (Youngquist 44). A Black origin in which the most foundational and generative aspects of culture were, in fact, invented, predating white culture by thousands of years.

As both Szwed and Youngquist show, Ra had been gathering this alternate historical perspective on Egypt for many years before it ever became a part of his mythic program. He had steeped himself in a variety of writings on the subject including Volney's 1791 essay *The Ruins; or Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires* in which it was argued that "Africans gave birth to civilization and all its achievements: religion, law, literature, science, and art" (qtd. in Youngquist 44). In Theodore D. Ford's *God*

Wills the Negro he read that slavery had perhaps been a modern consequence of the fall of ancient Black empires and that the peoples of "Egypt had disappeared when their culture had fallen—possibly at the same as the black peoples of America had been enslaved" (Szwed 66). Strange connections emerged from this research, inspiring Ra to posit, as Volney and others suggested, that the "very people who had given birth to civilization" (Szwed 67) were now "rejected from society, for their sable skin and frizzled hair" (Volney qtd. in Szwed 68). American Blacks might be the direct and unacknowledged descendants of ancient Egyptians. Their culture, therefore, might be the original culture of the world.

One text really drove this home, guiding the way Ra would approach the aura of ancient Egypt in his own work. That book was the African-American author George G.M. James' *Stolen Legacy: The Greeks Were Not the Authors of Greek Philosophy, but the People of North Africa, Commonly Called the Egyptians.* "By the time [Ra] found [Stolen Legacy]," writes Szwed "he was not surprised to see that the Greeks had been given credit for scientific and religious ideas they had learned from the Egyptians" (Szwed 71). James, like Ra upending the Bible, was interested in a "relentless reevaluation of primary Greek texts" (Youngquist 45) to unearth a discomforting truth: that the "Greeks stole their celebrated philosophy from Egypt, and Western Culture has since colluded in the crime, devaluing an ancient wisdom and its black proponents" (Youngquist 45). James' aim, says Youngquist "is not simply to exonerate that wisdom. More purposefully, it is to better the social conditions of its black heirs" (45). "Had it not been for [the] drama of Greek Philosophy and its actors," appeals James in the text "the African continent would have had a different reputation and would have enjoyed a status

of respect among the nations of the world" (qtd. in Youngquist 45). Greek erasure of Egyptian wisdom robbed an entire culture of its just place in history. Egypt, therefore, as an image and an alternative cultural history, could provide the inspirational blueprint for a different kind of social sphere, inspired by original Black wisdom. A "counter tradition through which to reeducate the world" (46) as Youngquist says.

For Ra this countertradition for new social consciousness and a recovery of ancient thought is not necessarily achieved through philosophical or even political means. Following James he surmised that myth is the vehicle through which this change might occur. James' text makes the claim that Greek philosophers were the recipients of a wisdom that came not from preceding theorists but from "the Egyptian Priests and Hierophants" (Youngquist 45) of the Egyptian religion. The Egyptian mysteries—built of myth and ritual—were the actual source for what would become Greek thought. So called Western thought—"believed to be the sole property of the white west" (Youngquist 46)—was in actuality borne out of Black magical and religious practice.

If the false narrative of Western thought—something we might call, in the negative sense of the term, an obfuscating "myth"—is to be undermined, one would need to return to the original mythic and ritualized intentions of the Egyptian Mysteries. As James argues in *Stolen Legacy:*

> the Egyptian mysteries had as its most important object, the deification of man, and taught that the soul of man if liberated from its bodily fetters, could enable him to become godlike and see the Gods in this life and attain the beatific vision and hold communion with the Immortals. (27)

The purpose of Egyptian religion on the whole then is transcendence—a mythic resolve if there ever was one. That Egyptian religion and its spiritual goals—created by Black ancients—are at the root of Western culture, must have been an exciting if unsurprising discovery for Ra. It may have contextualized his feeling of otherness while strengthening his mysterious connection to Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras, who as James reminds us was educated in Egypt and secured the "consent and favour of the [Egyptian] priests" to study the mysteries, each of whom he gifted "a silver goblet" (43) in thanks. This discovery also granted Ra a connection, and a sense of emancipatory power, that could not be fostered anywhere else. It lent him a license for indulging myth: which was now Black and potentially efficacious, offering transcendent machinations for immediate use. Egypt's mythological spirit and its imagistic gravitas would provide the necessary launch pad for the Ra's Intergalactic explorations.

Myth Science Redux

But how did Sun Ra envision Egyptian civilization and how did it inform the view of society that he wanted to create? Besides seeing Egypt as a culture of "black people living complete, normal lives without white people" (Szwed 68) it was also a culture entirely structured around an all-encompassing and elaborate myth, from which sprung thousands of years of art, architecture, magic, ritual, religion, and science. As Szwed tells us, Ra had also read texts by the Alsatian philosopher R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz who had proposed

> an Egypt which was even more advanced spiritually and scientifically than we have been willing to admit. These first Egyptians had invented science,

> invented it as the other side of mysticism, so what to modern people looks like magic and superstition was once practical knowledge. The wisdom…was stored materially and symbolically in its architecture. (qtd. in Szwed, 70-71)

In *A Joyful Noise* we find Ra striding amidst an ancient Egyptian tomb poetically rephrasing Schwaller de Lubicz's idea. He says, running his open hand upon a vast, earthen wall of hieroglyphics: "this is the proof of [Egypt's greatness]: the stones speak, the stones are speaking through vibrations of beauty, vibrations of discipline, vibrations of precision. Yes, the stones speak to the people of planet Earth" (17:05-17:30). As Schwaller de Lubicz and Ra both propose, the inheritances of ancient Egypt are hidden within these surviving structures, containing a practical wisdom which is an obscured myth-science. They contain modes of inquiry that the so-called enlightened world has shadowed, or completely disregarded. For Ra, these values and practices are worth reviving. Beauty, precision, and discipline are desperately lacking in modern culture and can maybe even provide the structure necessary to build a better world. Mysticism and myth—modes of living a symbolic life—can inspire the birth of cultures and invoke exquisite creations.

Sun Ra's Egypt therefore is a superior culture, perhaps even more intellectually and scientifically advanced then the world we live in today. Naturally, he decided, the Egyptians lived more religiously profound lives as well, immersed in a mythic mindset which guided their society, and created art translating that perspective with an abundant acuity. Their example could potentially provide answers for a world consumed by chaos, destruction, racism, greed, and a supreme lack of connection, justice, vision, and

creativity. A world so disconnected from beauty as to be on the brink of destruction. "Man has not reached his best," Ra would say "he has been hindered by many things…I've been looking for answers to these problems, and I've been looking for a solution going back to ancient Egypt" (qtd. in Szwed 138). He did find a solution there, and it inspired a cosmos-traversing myth unlike any in the modern world.

Black Foundations

Ordinarily when people think of the word "mythology" they see images of ancient Greece, Rome, and perhaps…Egypt. Myth has become, in the popular imagination, unfortunately tied to a Eurocentric historicism. But anyone who digs beneath this misapprehension into the wilds of world myth finds a cornucopia of nourishing color and culture. Ancient Egypt is an example of a non-European culture constructed entirely out of a rich, living mythos which allowed their civilization to thrive for thousands of unbroken years. A Black Egyptian myth could fortify a culture stronger, more powerful and more connected to beauty than anything yet dreamed of in the modern world. Ra saw how puny and short-lived the so-called American project, built upon subjugation and slavery, the false myth of "manifest destiny" seemed in the face of millennia of ripe, Egyptian culture.

In this frame the Black culture and Black myth of Egypt are inherently more formidable and generative than anything to be found in modern art, music, and literature: all the creations of the "progressive" West, which for Ra are essentially cultural outgrowths of Christianity. As he said, speaking to Graham Lock in 1983, the cultural vestiges of Christian thought keep Black people

> back there in the past, a past somebody manufactured for 'em. It's not their past, it's not their history. They don't know nothin' about their history…and all that enslavement and all that ignorance and whatever they got, they was forced to have it and it became a habit. (Lock, *Blutopia* 20)

But, as he goes on to say in the same interview, this was essentially the reason he decided to deeply immerse himself in Egyptian cultural images and make them a central facet of his research and creative practice. He says

> I deal with the foundations of things. Everything started in Egypt. I mean, civilization. So naturally I got interested in the basic things. Egypt is basic….[they had] the culture. It had the truth too. Another kind of truth, which the world will have to recognize—although it went another way after Moses did his job. But its proven that the world's in the condition it is today because of Moses, not because of Pharaoh. (Lock, *Blutopia* 20)

This confrontation with Moses continues, with Ra accusing him—as a stand in for the entire Judeo-Christian tradition—of being bad "for the planet" (Lock, *Blutopia* 21): "he ain't left no art, no beauty, no alphabets. Nothin'….he learned magic along with the Ra priests and used it against them. Bit the hand that fed him" (Lock, *Blutopia* 21). Brutality, dishonor, ingratitude and trickery are the signposts of the Christian inheritance. Art, beauty, language: these are the trademarks of Egyptian society and thought. Moses' law is a pitiful detriment, Pharaoh's myth is life-giving.

For Ra, the next step is obvious. The Egyptian mythos—with its overflowing imagery, tantalizing visual language, architectural prowess, iconic archetypal godliness and powerful, culture-driving symbolization—would become central to his individual

persona, imagistic presentation of his art, and mythic framework. Egypt would be one half of the bigger creative equation.

Books of the Living

Egypt in Ra's eyes becomes a way of looking at culture and life that has a totally different tone and intention than the Christian modes of thought and practice. In Egyptian culture Ra found a counter tradition that could surpass the West's dominant framework.

The ancient Egyptian cosmos was built around the sun's trajectory through the sky, its disappearance at night, and this cycle that maintained the structure of the universe. Reading from the Pyramid Texts we find some of the oldest Egyptian cosmogonical writings which suggest "waters in absolute darkness" and that the "emergence of God meant the coming of the light, the first morning" (Rundle Clark 39).

Sun Ra's composition, from the *New Steps* album, "When There Is No Sun" is a retelling of this cosmogony, and the need for the divine light that will accompany him. Over the laconic swaying of a very abbreviated band—Ra's lilting, bluesy piano tapping out romantic, nearly abstracted chords, a weaving, quick-plucked bassline and a bit of lightly-brushed drums—John Gilmore's reverbed voice echoes out into the night

> Sky is a sea of darkness, when there is no sun
>
> Sky is a sea of darkness, when there is no sun to light the way…
>
> there is no day, there is no day
>
> there's only darkness
>
> eternal sea of darkness (0:18-1:00)

Sun Ra, by retelling this myth, places light and the visage of Atum-Ra at the center of his own cosmology, usurping the Christian god, that while also connected to light has, sadly, "no darkness at all" (*NKJV Bible,* 1 John 1:5). There is also the implication that Sun Ra here is embodying the cosmogonic light, appointing himself as the principal and generative focus of his own heliocentric universe.

He does this elsewhere, too. In *A Joyful Noise*, there is a scene in which the Arkestra sets up on a rooftop to give a performance, and following the band's absolutely free improvisation of squealing horns, smashed drums, and rollicking congas—intimating cosmic chaos and the creation of the universe—Sun Ra appears side stage, adorned in a twisted metal head dress worn over a pink wig, covered in a glittering golden lamé cape. His eyebrows are dyed lavender. The band quiets and June Tyson begins to sing out "When the world was in darkness and darkness was ignorance / along came Ra!" the band echoes her "along came Ra!" in chorus. She continues "The living myth, the living myth, the living mystery!" which the band also repeats (*Joyful* 4:15-5:16). Ra walks out with a sense of quiet, eminent grace and begins to give a poetic speech about his origins and the mysterious nature of his being. Here he is repeating the arrival of the Egyptian sun god, taking his place at the center of the cosmology, and potentially removing the "ignorance" of death, of non-being, as represented by darkness and the "primeval waters" (Rundle Clark 48). In the film, the band then explodes into a rollicking tune while Ra conducts the band, dancing slowly, his arms outstretched as though he's shaping the new, lighted world of forms, flaring into a new density of being.

The ancient Egyptian Ra was entirely synonymous with the cosmological function of that mythology, as well as its understanding of life and the hereafter. "As the sun, God

sailed across the sky in his boat governing the world as well as bringing light and life," says Rundle Clark "at death the Egyptian hoped, after many trials and mystic journeys, to reach the divine barque. This was the final beatitude, for it meant immortality in the eternal circuit of the heavenly bodies" (71). The "barque" or sun-boat "is the centre of the regulation of the universe" (Rundle Clark 250). Hence the Egyptian Ra, and his mode of transport, actively synchronized the cosmos. He *is* the universe and its holding together. In Sun Ra's performance of both "When There Is No Sun" and "Along Came Ra" he makes a claim for this same kind of cohering capability—that through his art, his music, his words, his very being, something is held together, completed, harmonized. It's no surprise then to learn that in ancient Egyptian myth "the definite path of Ra across the sky [as the sun] had been planned at the time of creation by the goddess Maāt, who personified justice and order" (Spence 131) and this also kept the universe stable.

Sun Ra also claims aspects of the Egyptian Ra as part of his own mythic persona. The Egyptian Ra, besides being an appropriate and powerful replacement for the Christian god, "stood in the position of creator," (Spence 135) making him the ultimate father-artist figure for Sun Ra. The Egyptian Ra, writes Spence, was for the ancient sun-worshipper "the god *par excellence*, the great quickener and fructifier" (134) whose cults promised a heaven "more spiritual than the cults of Osiris" (134)—which were often based in material rewards—in which devotees would be clothed and fed on pure, transcendent "light" (134). This is key in understanding why Sun Ra would choose to embody this particular deity's name and symbolism. The Egyptian Ra consistently traversed into the *beyond*: of the sky but also into the Egyptian underworld, the *Duat*.

Aspects of the Egyptian Ra's journeys seem to echo Sun Ra's own mythos. One of the sun god's avatars is that of "the traveler" (Shaw 194). Clearly Sun Ra's myth is built upon interplanetary travel. Outer space, a vast emptiness, oceanic and dark, could be seen as a corollary to the unlit space below the horizon that the Egyptian Ra would navigate nightly. Hence, Sun Ra's myth symbolically inhabits both of the traditional spaces of the ancient sun god. Relating the Egyptian Ra's nocturnal expeditions through the underworld to Sun Ra's excursions through the cosmos is an especially potent enterprise, and a powerful first step in understanding the meaning of Astro Black mythology.

The Book of the Dead, in which the sun god's night-journeys are described, reached prominence during Egypt's *New Kingdom* and "provided the deceased with a guide to the otherworld realm of the Duat" (76). As Egyptologist Garry J. Shaw tells us, "Egyptians read the book in life too, giving ample time for them to prepare themselves for the many oddities and trials that they would encounter in the Duat" (77). Like the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the Egyptian text—"one of the oldest Egyptian books of the afterlife" (Shaw 196)—lends potent guidance for a personal navigation of a space of spiritual mystery. It does this by following Ra through his journey in a "daily war against chaos" (Shaw 196).

The Egyptian underworld was filled with "dangerous beings, whose sole purpose was to frustrate the deceased's progress, from men, gods and spirits of the dead to strange demons" (Shaw 77) but the most profound monster of the Duat was the snake of chaos and Ra's arch nemesis, Apophis. According to Shaw his sole purpose was in disrupting "the sun god's cycle…every day, thereby bringing about the end of creation" (196). And

yet each night Ra would defeat this snake, reinstilling creation with liveliness and bringing about the birth of a new day. As Shaw describes "when darkness fell, in a death-like state, the sun god boarded his night boat to sail through the afterlife realm of the Duat, where he was rejuvenated… and ready to be born again at the eastern horizon" (196). During this journey, Apophis challenged Ra "each hour, but the sun god…was always victorious" (Shaw 196). The regeneration of the sun is an inevitable, if fraught, happening.

This journey, representing the battle of chaos and order, fits Sun Ra's mythos perfectly. As an intergalactic traveler from the void of outer space he comes to Earth to bestow a restorative power upon humanity, in a sense, leaving the lit space of day-sky for the "darkness" he found on Earth. Echoes of a previously used quotation feels useful again: "this entire planet is a prison house / with no future" (Prophetika 40). And "all planet Earth produces is the dead bodies of humanity" (*Joyful* 00:26-00:35). In a sense, the Earth itself is a kind of underworld of underdeveloped potential, producing death and suffering and lacking in transcendent experience. On the fraught planes of planet Earth, Sun Ra vies with a mythological darkness for the liveliness of rebirth, the opportunity of tomorrow.

In another light, Ra as redeemer said he would take those that truly heard his music, the believers, with him back into the freedom of outer space. Therefore, they could travel with him into the regenerative expanses of the otherworld, imaged by the Duat, where chaos itself might be properly challenged. The Egyptian Ra's nekyia through the underworld is an image of rebirth and so is Sun Ra's journey through outer space, taking whoever's souls could see the light.

"The sun god," as Egyptologist Geraldine Pinch reminds us, was for the Egyptians "the active power of the creator in the world…and each sunset was treated like the end of the world." (53) Therefore, "tomorrow was not just another day, but another world" (Pinch 53) altogether. This notion, coming from the Egyptian, is clearly enacted throughout Sun Ra's music and mythos. As he states "this music is all a part of another tomorrow…speaking things of blackness, about the void" (*Space* 18:10-18:30). From the rejuvenating darkness of outer space—the void—is birthed a new day.

The Egyptian Ra's trajectory through the underworld—a narrative culled in part from the *Books of the Dead*, are fortifying, freeing—a life-giving myth. Shaw points out that the books of the dead were referred to in the New Kindgom as "(The Book of) Going Forth By Day" (76) essentially conflating day and night, life and death, compounding them richly into a "guide to the afterlife" (Shaw 76) which could stir an aspiration to a higher state of being—a transcendent seizing of life (and death) in the cosmos. The Egyptian *Books of the Dead* are paradoxically, and in contrast to the Christian holy book—a "book of death" as Sun Ra dubbed it—*books of the living*: an invocation for a more profound life.

In an interesting example of the *Book of the Dead's* inspiring liveliness, there is a passage from the *Amduat*, one of the important funerary texts of the New Kingdom and what Abt and Hornung tell us is the "oldest book of the afterlife" (13). In it is described, among the many transformations Ra must undertake in order to be renewed and born again as the young, morning sun, two sections that have to deal explicitly with sound and music. In the first section, during Ra's first hour in the land of the dead, he is approached by the "praising baboons" who accompany him with "music and dance" and

communicate with the sun god in a "secret language" not understood by Earth people "but only by gods and the dead" (Abt and Horning 26-27). This creative, expressive language is comparable to the stones' speech that Sun Ra refers to above—a living mystery only understood by mythic personages. Later, in the fourth hour of the *Amduat*, the sun god having become the "night sun" in one of the deepest, darkest parts of the netherworld "cannot use its light to wake up those in the sleep of death" and so must "communicate… by acoustic signals sent through the darkness" (Abt and Horning 58). Ra, "takes care of those who are in (this hour) with his voice, without seeing them" (Abt and Horning 58). Sun Ra, who asserted that "those of this reality have lost their way" (*Joyful* 18:22-23:30) and that the world was in darkness aimed to awaken the sleepers of the world, like Ra in the deep, not through speech or incantation, but acoustically. Ra equated himself with the night sun and strove to find a way of communication with the people of Earth through music, relaying "instructions for better listening—and living—in a spiritual key" (Youngquist 73). Hence, we find here an explicit connection between the Egyptian Ra and sound, even a kind of echolocational music, which allows for the waking of the dead and Ra to "care" for the "sleepers," sonically.

This is almost exactly Sun Ra's mythic intention in coming to Earth, as the title of a broadside clearly states: "WAKE UP! WAKE UP! WAKE UP!" (*Wisdom* 88). This concept of awakening those who are asleep brings to the fore perhaps the most important aspect of Sun Ra's interest in Ancient Egypt. It is also the facet which can make clear a primary connection between Egypt and outer space in Ra's oeuvre. This is the idea of eternal life in Egyptian religion. In comparison to death-obsessed Christianity, the

Egyptian afterlife offered an alternative, transcendent trajectory which was without fear of punishment. “If there wasn’t a [Christian] God,” Ra said

> then people wouldn’t die…the only reason people [die is] because there is a [Christian] god…so death is a god…death’s their god…they’re subject to their god—Death. That’s very obvious. The point is, having reached that point, what to do about it?...should they be obedient…or should they rebel? (Sinclair, “It Knocks” 24)

Death, according to Ra, should be transcended and immortality, in the ancient Egyptian sense of an afterlife, gleaned. The slumbering disciples of the Christian myth should awaken from their dark dream. “I am Pharaoh, I should know; the only thing I have left is immortality,” Ra incants on a record from 1979, “Why don’t you be my people now. Give up your death for me” (qtd. in Szwed 352). Give up death, in the Christian sense: rebel against god. Don’t be like Job. Don’t be submissive to a control structure that doesn’t actually support your life and liveliness. Not “eternal life” but *immortality*—don’t submit to god, *become* a god. Drink ambrosia, expand into new shapes; into exquisite, infinite, untapped potential. “If you rebel [against the Christian God],” he said “you move over into uncharted paths” (Sinclair, “It Knocks” 25). On these uncharted paths, one need not die. One can live forever—not in an unsullied Christian heaven where, to quote David Byrne, “nothing ever happens” (1:00-1:10). But on a celestial rung vibrating against the expansive chords of eternity. What might one feel there? Eternal Joy. “My music,” explains Ra “really has happiness over in it…and people can listen to it and get that from it…what I call the ‘space feeling’…I’ve got some beauty for them too—there’s

no sadness over in that" (Sinclair, "It Knocks" 25). Space feeling is joy. Not fear of eternal damnation but limitlessness: freedom.

Immortality, for Sun Ra, is the marker of the Egyptian afterlife, and in comparison to the Christian hell-realm, it is not a landscape that invokes anticipatory dread. It is instead a corollary to the Black generosity of outer space, in which one can linger in joy "up on a different star" (*Space* 2:25-2:35). Ra, according to a mythological reading of ancient Egypt writings, is correct in this assumption. "There was nothing in the Egyptian creed to justify the belief in everlasting punishment," affirms Spence "and such a view is unsupported by the material of the texts. There is, in fact, no parallel in the Egyptian religion to the…Purgatory and hell of [the Christian religion]" (123). Moreover, he writes

> it is highly improbable that any Egyptian who had devoted any time to the study of the *Book of the Dead* believed that he himself was doomed. His whole future, according to that book, hung upon his knowledge of the words of power written therein, and surely no one with such a comparatively easy means of escape could have been so foolish as to neglect it. (Spence 124-125).

If the Egyptian imbibed the words and made their way into the afterlife, they would be brought into the radiant aura of the sun who held court and fed them upon the "rays of light which fell from the eye of Horus—that is they were nourished upon sunlight, so that in time their bodies became wholly composed of light" (Spence 125). The immortality of the Egyptian Ra, for Sun Ra, was something to strive for, and could join one with the greatest god of ancient myth, exploding their spirit-bodies into a super-novic oneness.

But most importantly the promise of immortality was a transcending of earthly limitedness, an expanding past the confines of the ordinary, unenlightened expectations of human society. A negation of mistreatment, an overcoming of divisive and weaponized prejudice—an evacuation from a type of social hell. This This is why Sun Ra chose outer space as his dwelling place, his royal road, his origin, and his other world. The promise of a dark immortality was built into it.

It seems the Egyptian Ra too became sick of human culture and decided to divest from planet Earth. As Shaw tells us "many myths describe rebellions against [Ra], led by different groups, including the children of Apophis and humans, and the actions taken to save him. Eventually, though, the sun god decided that enough was enough, and distanced himself from humanity, escaping into the sky" (198). Sun Ra, too made this choice, as the ending of *Space is the Place* demonstrates, with Ra and his band leaving in their ship for "some far off place, many light years in space" (1:10:00-1:30:00) as the Earth is destroyed. Sun Ra too had been hurt by humanity—and through him the entire Black population. "This is hell here…this planet…it's in worse condition than I ever dreamed of, and I didn't want to have anything to do with it" (Sinclair, "It Knocks" 24) he proclaims. This is why, in line with the Egyptian Ra's exit, Sun Ra too had to vacate Earth and tread the stars. "Sun Ra's consistent statement" explains poet and scholar Amiri Baraka "is that this is a primitive world. Its practices, beliefs, religions are uneducated, unenlightened, savage, destructive, already in the past. That's why Ra left and returned only to say he left. Into the future. Into space" (Baraka, "Sun" 4). Sun Ra came back to give us the message that something better is actively available to us if we decide to engage it.

That is why as the titles begin to roll at the close of *Space is the Place*, the echoing voices of the band, led by June Tyson, promise to wait for us in a place "where human beings have never trod, where human eyes have never seen…we'll build a world of abstract dreams and wait for you" (1:10:00-1:30:00). Immortality is still assured if one chooses to come; if you choose to listen, as the ancient Egyptian learning the spells and incantations of the *Book of the Dead* did. In the world of abstract dreams, the other world of the imagination, of the future, of the mythic, the immortals await your arrival with a nourishing light. In Ra's words, in his music, his art, is a spell of divine Blackness that could just save your soul, transforming it into something greater than you could ever dream of. "Life is a fire," wrote Sun Ra "those who are dead have been snuffed out!!! The SUN is a living ball of fire" (qtd. in Kapsalis *Enlightment* 71). To free oneself into that ancient light is immortality in the alter domains of an ancient, dark-shining mythic joy—and a promise of freedom from the torments of a brutally "unlit" world of so called "realities" (*Space* 1:17:40-1:18:00). We too can shadow him into the open possibilities of outer space, and we'll follow him there now.

Outer Space

We've already been between ancient Egypt and Outer Space a few times already, but we haven't fully defined what *Astro Black Mythology* is. The term was created by Sun Ra to indicate the poles of his cosmology—earthy saturnian Blackness combined with the futuristic darkness of outer space travel. Lock has called it the

> axis of the Ra cosmology, that is, the creation of an alternative mythic future and mythic past for African Americans…[that emphasizes]…Ra's

> conscious creation of a mythology, and it conveniently encapsulates the two dominant facets of that mythology, the Astro of the outer space future, and the Black of the ancient Egyptian past. (*Blutopia* 14)

Szwed has called the mythic link between past and future an "instrumental mythos" (95) by which to express the "unity of Egypt and outer space, of bringing [in]…elements of ancient history and science to update the black sacred cosmos" (256). This myth could embody "something greater than the truth," as Ra puts it: "myth was here before history…they were more pliable you see" (qtd. in Szwed 256). That mythic quality and its pliability is what Ra thought was needed for the future in body and in story. Ra's myth is the Black myth of the future, culled from the past, and super-charged with an ancient spirituality. Therefore, while Astro Black does the important work of creating alternative histories, and joining ancient and future Blackness, it does something else even more far out: it creates a mythic machinery for *making* the new future. It is artwork as magic, a transcendent mythos that could actually *work*. The future needs the mysticism of the ancients to function. Perhaps this is one of the reasons in *Space is the Place* that Ra has no contact with "white nuclear physicists" (42:00-42:20) instead preferring ordinary Black Americans as his confidants and devotees on Earth. White astronomers and scientists at NASA know nothing of ancient Black mathematics nor the other kinds of mysticism Ra intended to charge this project with.

As Szwed tells us "[Ra] did not limit himself to Afrocentric canonic thought. Egypt, he discovered, had already been connected to the galaxies by Edgar Cayce, Gurdjieff, and others of theosophic bent, following the lead of Pythagoras and the Hermeticists" (Szwed 138). Ra followed in a long history of combining these seemingly

exotic locales, but used this amalgamation in a new way. “I’ve been looking for a solution going back to ancient Egypt” he said “and now I’m looking for answers in the entire universe because I want to know the potential of man. Beyond music, I try to find another meaning, another reason. This why I’m dealing with the potential of humanity. But not with what has been done, because that doesn’t leave much space for what I want to do” (Ra qtd. in Szwed 138). The potentials of Egypt, as a mythic power source, are a match for the vast potentials of outer space and could unveil what Ra wanted to do: what he had to share with the world. These places contain the latent energies of the whole universe, connecting the past and the future, the ancient and the unknown. “He retrofitted antiquity to the future” (130) as Youngquist says, so something new could be born.

This is new technology hewn from ancient Black sources, in defiance of the Biblical tradition. Instead, this is about immortality, and breaking the laws of physics, jet-setting right out of death’s arms, supercharging thrusters with ancient, musical math. Not Bergman’s Knight pitifully playing chess with death on the shore in *The Seventh Seal,* who will inevitably lose his life. Rather, a space traveler whose engines are charged with piercing, grinding, unlistenable Moog synthesizer blasts, rocketing their craft skull-first into the unknown at the speed of sound.

Earth is Death’s playground—he is the god that rules human life. If one leaves Earth—but takes the *Books of the Dead* with them—one might remain connected to that ancient magic. One might reach immortality. Space is, therefore, the place. “[With “Astro Black”] I’m talking about space” says Ra “I’m talking about not being part of this planet, because it’s not proper…it doesn’t fit with the universe and is selfish and egotistical” (qtd. in Szwed 256). Hence the myth must be about leaving the planet. This myth would

therefore be “a bridge to potential, to the future” (Szwed 256). “Myth…equals immortality” (Szwed 256) in Ra’s equational world.

Myths, which have always been associated with a deep past, a vestige of human thought, even a pre-historic blunder to the so-called “enlightened” mind, becomes an architecture for a better tomorrow. Ra, says Szwed “spoke of creating myths for the future. Myths have always been about the past, to explain what happened. He proposed that myths should tell us what we should do. The future that people talk about is no good; we need to do the impossible, for everything has been tried and failed” (256). Myth therefore, in Ra’s vision, can be a guide, can provide a spiritual map for living, for traversing the cosmos, for becoming something better than one is allowed to be, as the lyrics to “Space is the Place” (1973)—a propulsive and chaotic anthem of light-speed liberation—so beautifully encourages.

Space is the Place

Space is the Place

Space is the Place, yea

Space is the Place...

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 (00:34-1:54)

If these lyrics are the living philosophy—an embodied and inspirational chant beckoning the chosen into an outer space ripe with distinct emancipatory possibilities—then the lyrics to “Astro Black Mythology” explain the method, the math, the mystic machinery for blasting the soul into the ether.

Astro black mythology

Astro timeless immortality

Astro thought in mystic sound

Astro Black all outer space

Astro natural of darkness stars

Astro reach beyond the stars

Out to endless endlessness

Astro Black American

The universe is in my voice

The universe speaks through this song

To those of Earth and other worlds

Listen while you have the chance (0:30-02:01)

Astro Black mythology is a type of theatrical space—a mythic zone—beyond time ("some place far away in space we'll build a better world and wait for you") a place of the immortals where one might reach for with "astro" means—a mode of transcendent travel, carried out via "mystic sound." Through the imagination-stimulating qualities of music one can reach this "natural" i.e. Black space of "darkness stars." One can ride music—the music which powers Sun Ra's spacecraft—to this ring of darkly shining star clusters. Beyond these stars, in pure, unending darkness is "endless endlessness," the true void. But who is called to enter this space? The answer is clear: the "Astro Black American" is the space traveler we're concerned with. This is a Black revolutionary spaceship—a mode of escape for the Earthlings suffering from the scourge of racism, white supremacy, and a direct, racialized threat to their own lives. And yet the universe,

here speaking directly to us, appeals to the whole of Earth society and even "other worlds." The whole universe should take note. This is a fleeting opportunity, even a threat. Now is the chance, it might not be around forever. In fact, it definitely won't be. We're headed…out.

While it's Blacks that have the primary opportunity to leave this god-forsaken planet, all Earth peoples can and should consider allowing themselves to be *altered* by Ra's mythic art. The flight into outer space means transformation: new, unbelievable states of being. Through music, Earth-people can escape into outer space, to that place *beyond*: into regions of Black immortality, which must be reached for. The music can teach you, it holds mystic truths, equations which can transmutate. There's no threshold on this, as the lyrics of "Space is the Place" confirm. To enter this realm of outer space—Ra's realm which is also connected to ancient Black beingness—grants new consciousness, that is well beyond any Earth conception.

Outer space therefore represents a *Future Blackness*, which encircles ancient Black symbols and "retrofits" them for what's coming. Astro Black is "all outer space," i.e. connected to Blackness on an archetypal level. Space contains *all* Blackness and if Sun Ra has anything to do with it, all Black people. Ra said that his music is "another kind of language, speaking things of nature, naturalness, the way it should be; speaking things of Blackness, about the void, the endless void, the bottomless pit surrounding you" (*Space* 18:00-18:35). His language is nature's language which is also Black—which knows the underlying order of the universe and how it should be.

Space is ancient, inhuman, and godly. To quote Szwed, according to Sun Ra "God is Space" (Szwed 137). Therefore, Ra's invocation of the dark void of space has a two-

fold intention: on the one hand he intends to invite Black Earthlings to a spiritual location in which there is "no limit" on what they can be—free from Earth's systemic oppressiveness. On the other hand, he aims to initiate everyone else into the space of Black thought, musical cultural influence, and vast, intergalactic states of consciousness. This is way beyond an intellectual, philosophical argument about racism in America (although it also is that). It is a form of initiation into the church of Ra, in which you will be inexplicably altered, ripped apart—as thought traversing the pit, the black hole—and be reborn like the weird baby floating at the edge of the Earth's atmosphere at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. If god is space and space is pure transformative Blackness, then to be brought there means to be bathed in this Black purity, and to be made completely new in its image. Blackness itself revivified, Black people revalued—re-potentialized, made infinite, even immortal—and the rest of cosmos' consciousness bathed in a transforming, all-encompassing Black energy.

As Sun Ra says at the opening of *Space is the Place*, "better yet, transport the whole planet here [to outer space] through music" (qtd. in Youngquist 212). Though it is a place only the "Black of spirit" may enter, the whole planet is obligated to come, too. Youngquist interprets this paradox in this way

> Sun Ra's musical teleportation holds…the potential for everyone on Earth to become black. No longer merely a historical identity, blackness becomes a transformative effect of space music, the cultural means of inhabiting a new world. Blacks may be in the best social position to make the most of this opportunity, but *Space is the Place* holds it open to others,

> too, at least theoretically. Astro Black mythology can transport people to a brave new black world. (212-213)

To become one with outer space means to become "Black" in a symbolic way, and this creates new culture—a new world. For Black people, this means to be put in a re-empowered place—back "on top"—that is, in touch with the greatest influence in the universe. A dark, divine, astro-power; a godly darkness which is full of an infinite potency: one stripped from them by a deathly Earth culture. Ra aspires to grant a truly far-out sense of sovereignty to Black people via the archetypal qualities of the Blackness of outer space. Simultaneously he aims to transport and transform all living creatures, making them completely new. Can racism exist in a new society that's been permanently altered by an archetypalized intergalactic Blackness? It's unlikely. Perhaps, for Ra, this is what is truly intended with Astro Black: to alter things so drastically that all people, transported to another world, cannot possibly create a society based on a notion as arcane as a racist ideology. Instead, this new society is a utopic zone in which something "too incredible to be true" (Ra qtd. in Sinclair, "It Knocks" 21) is the norm. In this mythic landscape exists a better place for "for people to live, not…a place where they have to die to get there" (Ra qtd. in Sinclair, "It Knocks" 27), but rather where they can live out what Ra calls the "natural self" (qtd. in Sinclair, "It Knocks" 23). Music transports people there, darkens the scene, and transforms them into something so afar from their ordinary selves that the "self that's never really had a chance" (Ra qtd. in Sinclair, "It Knocks" 23) can live freely in a mythic landscape beyond any pre-conception, beyond any limitation.

Nothing Is…

Blackness in Sun Ra's sense—expressed, essentially as the *same thing* as Outer Space—recovers its archetypal sacredness, and is removed from the Christian sense of it having a negative bearing. It's no longer a "dark night of the soul." Rather it's pure joy, transcendence, mystery—a unity of spirit and a transformative modality. Sun Ra achieves this recharacterization of symbolic Blackness in a very interesting way while simultaneously empowering Black people, and creating space for the transformative potential of the symbolic quality to affect (and change) culture.

He does this essentially by playing with the connotation of Blackness's symbolic relation to the void—nothingness. Outer space is a void, a vacuum full of wondrous wilds. In essence, it is empty. And yet it is Black. For Ra, this emptiness which is the "bottomless pit surrounding you" is an expression of a feeling native to Black Americans. Speaking to the value of Black people in society Ra quips "they're priceless. They have no price. They're worthless. Which makes them priceless. They ain't worth nothing" (qtd. in Youngquist 192). Youngquist translates this logistical equation to mean that "socially considered blacks are nothing…from that nothingness, perhaps, can come everything" (192). Everything because by "assimilating blackness to space, Sun Ra potentiates 'nothing' remaking it into 'living spirit'" (Youngquist 193). In essence, Ra makes nothingness—and by proxy Blackness—a powerfully "positive" thing, by equating it to its opposite. Further, he engages ancient archetypal resonances in doing so, giving it the force of "living spirit." In this sense nothingness and symbolic Blackness are connected to a host of philosophical and archetypal traditions.

Philosophers have been arguing about whether or not "nothing" exists since ancient times. Famously, in the 5th century BCE, Parmenides argued that an actual void could not possibly exist, while the "atomists" such as Democritus and Lucretius posited that "matter and no-matter coexist" and where matter did not exist there is genuine emptiness (Gleiser "Void"). Aristotle put forth that what was thought of as nothingness was actual "aether"—a mysterious and semi-divine substance that was everywhere that Earth was not. While the existence of aether itself was eventually disproven, it was replaced by the modern scientific understanding that outer space is a vacuum full of pervasive gravitational forces, electromagnetic occurrences and a vast number of galaxies, stars, planets, moons, varieties of massive floating rock, and other absolutely strange and awe-inspiring phenomena that exist in a space we might think of as "nowhere."

Even our modern scientific understanding seems to metaphorically harken back to a sense of nothingness. While light can exist in outer space, it is the dark parts that most intrigue: the obliterative, lurking black hole and an omnipresent, utterly mysterious "dark matter" are two facets of outer space that seem to elude comprehension despite being fundamental to our ongoing, scientific probing of space. Both are "dark" in nature—Black even. Symbolically speaking it seems fitting to relate these phenomena to Sun Ra's concept of nothingness. The phenomena have a sort of mysterious divinity, harkening back to the ancient concept of aether. And that outer space is, as was in the beliefs of the atomists, a place where these phenomena can exist within a vacuum relates to Ra's idea that by broaching nothingness, infinity is reached. Black holes might be a gateway to a higher consciousness. Dark matter might be the immaterial eyes of the gods woven into

the veil between the worlds, hiding there on the verge, witnessing. The abundant "nothingness" of Outer Space gives way to great mystery.

Outer space therefore is a mysterious darkness that, even according to contemporary science, is full of wonder and possibility. But Ra's interest doesn't rest in a scientific reading of outer space, but reaches for a deeper, more archetypal layer. This is myth-science, remember? Intending to overthrow all the negative associations of darkness that have been heaped up over time, he intends to restore the beauty and richness of a Black universe.

This is quite Egyptian. The ancient Egyptians had vast astrological interests, staring for thousands of years into a dark, starry expanse which was also the body of Nut, the goddess of waters and fertility. That the universe was a dark body full of light, containing untold mythic multitudes, feels appropriate to mention in terms of Sun Ra's Astro Black mythos. In his view, outer space's darkness is an immaterial material, a divine presence within which to inhabit. The Blackness of space—the body of that expanse—contains a symbolic richness that one could contemplate or be joined with. Blackness is symbolically "absolute color" which is "associated with primeval darkness and primal, formless matter" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 92)—an ancient *prima materia*—while for humans "darkness is our first reality" as ARAS's *Book of Symbols* puts it: "the looming riddle of our becoming…[as] our microcosmic being, quickening in the womb, is enveloped by the dark matter and dark energy of our ancestral inheritance" (100). As a symbol, darkness is the most basic and "absolute" state: the primal origin from which we spring, full of an infinite possibility. In a cosmic sense, we're all the stardusty children of

Nut's dark belly—the primal Taoist *yin,* the Buddhist *Shunyata*. We are therefore the fruits of outer space's ancient, symbolic generativity.

And yet if one looks into the symbolic nature of Blackness it's hard to spot anything "positive" i.e. connected to life and liveliness. Throughout the ages, not just in Christianity—although that is where the phenomena is most apparent—Blackness is aligned with death, shame, grief, melancholy, pessimism, sorrow, misfortune, sin, repentance, guilt, renunciation and a host of other sharp-edged emotional epitaphs (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 92-93). It's no wonder that this symbolism has been weaponized to embolden racism.

But for Ra Blackness, as the defining quality of outer space, is immediately granted a superior position, and these cultural associations are dithered away on the Earth-plane. As he says "everything…comes from outer space" (*Joyful* 00:35-01:00). Outer space as the kingdom of darkness and Blackness is the ultimate provider. Hence Blackness is restored to a generative symbology. It's revealed as a "symbol of fertility [as] in ancient Egypt and in North Africa, being the color of rich earth and…rain clouds…the treasury of hidden life…the great fertility goddesses, ancient Earth mothers…[and] Black Madonnas" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 92). A rich, warm, feminine ritual quality is uncovered. As Chevalier & Gheerbrant go on to tell us though, in the mystic teachings of Mevlana Jalāl-al-Dīn Rūmī's Islam and the world of his Whirling Dervishes, Black was not essentially an earthly quality, but rather one of ecstatic ascent. "Black…was the absolute color, the point to which all colors lead, like so many stairs to reach the highest level of beatitude when the godhead manifests itself to the initiate and

ravishes him" (93-94). Blackness here, as in Ra's mythos, is the mythic destination *par excellence*. A spiritual elsewhere that is somewhere *above.*

It's also worth mentioning in this aspect that the planet Saturn—Ra's planet of origin—is associated in alchemy with the color Black and also with the *Nigredo*, a stage of ego decomposition and transformation allowing darkness to take on its role as the "precinct of transformation" (ARAS 102). The *Black Sun* is another symbolic, celestial figure in Alchemy—also associated with the Nigredo—which, acting as a "dark material fire…divides spirit and soul from the putrefied body" (Roob 227). This does not sound unlike Ra's concept of *transmolecularization*—a sci-fi update to an ancient symbolism. The Black Sun, as Chevalier & Gheerbrant write, is also the sun in its "nightly transit"—as in Egyptian myth—"when it leaves this world to shed its light upon another" (950). They also add that this image appears not only in alchemical literature but in Aztec and Mayan myth as well (950). The symbolism of these Black and Blackening celestial images implies transformation and transcendence: a moving outward, beyond. Into the realms of Black myth.

Black Myth

Astro Black incorporates ancient Black symbolism to supercharge a future mathematics that could provide transport to outer space. For Agaric, Astro Black is "black from the point of view that it's still got the darkness of myth" (148). Blackness, for Ra, implies myth inherently. In this sense, having a phrase like "Astro Black Mythology" is intentionally pedantic and implicitly revolutionary. As if to say, "this is a language that you don't necessarily understand, but I'm willing to teach you, for your

own good and mine." It's for Black people, but…it's something else, too. As artist David Hammons puts it "Sun Ra's music…[is] so beyond blackness, it's so beyond whiteness. It's just beyond all of this. That's beautiful. I can get to that space if I decide to let loose some of this baggage, this cultural baggage that I've got. I've got to get rid of it if I want to grow" (qtd. in Elms 75). That expansion is indicative of what Ra's myth really is and really *does*. Myths are orientational, initiatory—organizing symbols that affect the lives of a community and its members—creating a connection to the divine, the universal, the transcendent. Cultural baggage dissolves on the verge of the infinite. Growth can mean enlightenment, *satori*, ecstasy, joy—total rebirth.

Astro Black aims for this kind of unmitigated alteration, in story and sound, song and poetry, mystery and magic, performed via myth science. Astro Black can literally transport, change, alter. When the cultural baggage falls away, what's left? Ways of living become limitless and life is full of meaning, what you do is worthwhile. Space is the Place. Songs like "Friendly Galaxy," "On Jupiter," "Lights on a Satellite," "Love in Outer Space," "Blues on Planet Mars," "Saturn Moon," "Outer Space Plateau," "Pleiades," "Theme of the Stargazers," "East of the Sun," "Kosmos in Blue," and "Plutonian Nights," ensure that if the blast off that Astro Black promises goes off without a hitch, travelers aboard Sun Ra's ship will be treated to a new life truly resplendent and interstellar. "Some might call this black science fiction" says Szwed "focusing on the interplay of the themes of freedom, apocalypse, and survival; or maybe 'afro-futurism' where the material culture of Afro-American folk religions are used as sacred technologies to control virtual realities" (Szwed 137). But Astro Black is no virtual

reality, it's more of a healing modality. A way to modulate Blackness to transform the whole universe, to free and to transmogrify.

For Sun Ra, Black people being connected to Egypt, are innately mythic—coupled to an ancient source of wisdom. But, importantly, he also says that they are *myths* themselves. In *Space is the Place* Ra visits an Oakland rec center—his golden space boots appearing first before his body is Star Trek-style energized into the place—and lectures a group of Black teenagers about their place in the world. "Greetings black youth of planet Earth. I am Sun Ra. Ambassador from the intergalactic regions of the council of outer space" (*Space* 23:30-23:50). When the teens question him about whether he's "real" and not just "some hippie off of telegraph" he replies

> 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 seeking 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: myths. I came from a dream that the Black man dreamed long ago. I'm actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors… I'm gonna be here till I pick out certain ones of you to take back with me. (*Space* 24:00-25:10)

That Black people are myths gives them a sort of super power; that they are not recognized by society and are instead associated with myth lends them access to an unrestricted potential. Myth empowers. For the teens at the youth center, Sun Ra's presence is proof of myth's power, embodying a deep connection, ensuring the magic of an ancient Black ancestry. Not existing, his potential and theirs becomes unlimited.

Oppression grants access to mythic consciousness via negation. To be unseen, without status, unreal, makes one a cult member of a mythic reality—one that *actually* tells the truth, which is limitless.

That Black people are myths also encourages an inevitability built into the equation Ra is building: if myth is unlimited and the Blackness of outer space is the playground of the infinite, the place of the immortals, then Black people must seek such untrodden terrain. It is their destiny. It is an ancient dream that's come to fruition. To be "unreal," mythic, means that this world, which only entertains the deadly "possible," is not worth participating in. Hence, Astro Black is the righting of a symbolic wrong that's been carried out through the ages. Blackness was ever *out there*, in the cosmos. Earth was never the true home for Black society. It was always the stars. It was always the outer regions.

The literal image of the Black community leaving the planet should also give those of us who are not Black a deep moment of pause. What have we created here on Earth that is so detrimental, so degrading that would inspire such an exodus? This is a meditation Sun Ra urges implicitly.

At the closing of *Space is the Place* Ra does spirit some members of the Black community to another world—though its rumored that in an alternate cut of the film there were some white Earthlings that were invited, too—charging up his ship with wild synthesizer sounds and taking off from Earth. This is the literalization of Astro Black, rejoining Blackness to Blackness—making Earthliness, and Black Earthlings members of the Myth-Science Arkestra's interplanetary brood. It is also the creation of a new community, in sound, and in myth—in outer space.

Listening to the studio recording of "Astro Black," (1972) we get a picture in sound of what it is like in Ra's ship in the moments of takeoff, leaving Earth's orbit, and the galaxy for the far reaches. We hear the metallic pulse of the ship's engine—a godly-throbbing, distorted Moog synth pulse—suggesting the heaviness and girth of the ship's movement through the air; the bopping of congas, and other earthen drums played by Arkestra members meditatively enjoying the futuristic ascent; a tense, upright bassline, articulating the intensity and gravity of this journey in repetitive phrases, anticipatory, foreboding; other jagged keyboard whirrs and screams, insinuating the vast array of technology being pushed to its limit to break through the stratosphere; cymbal washes and tom drum flourishes to ensure the drama of flight; space-harmonized horn sections piercing the low-key cacophony of the cockpit, like voices calling out into infinity; other horns hollering out freely, in highly swirling shrieks, as though in argument of the destination; and finally June Tyson's eminent voice incanting the equation-poem that partly powers this mythic mounting of the stars: "Astro Black mythology / Astro timeless immortality…" This is flight powered by an ancient math, primordial poesis, the authority of an antediluvian and endowing sound, propelling the band and their guests headfirst into a mythic unknown—toward re-potenialized nothingness, the bottomless pit full of the most divine improbabilities.

The sound is unsettling to say the least, a yawning and premonitory incantation made of pure night, moving with grandeur and a heavy, ancient-feeling warp. In the theater of Astro Black we're gathered into this eminent darkness, a mythic realness full of texture and heft.

Astro Black delivers us to this place, or at least suggests its verge. Most myths begin in darkness, but this myth intentionally enters *into* darkness. Many myths test the unknown, subjecting their protagonists to myriad trials and ordeals, but in so many the hero returns to their origins, largely unchanged. Few intend to bathe in that mystery *forever*—making it the final destination. For Ra, that commitment to the unknown, to the other world, is the whole point. Astro Black is true initiation into myth. Like peering into the craterous absence of the unseeable Black hole, like feeling the vast mystery of dark matter pervading the galaxy all around us, we are transported into the ancient benevolence of outer space at the beginning of a great and influential journey; and feel the foundations of the building of an incomprehensible and life-giving society in Ra's beyond.

Arkestra

Before this chapter concludes it's important to talk about the way Astro Black was carried out via Sun Ra's band—the Arkestra. Created in the style of the classic big bands with an ever-shifting membership, Ra lead the group from the fifties up until he left the Earth in the early nineties. The Arkestra's performances—recorded and live—are the central way that Astro Black's message is transmitted to Ra's listenership. This part of the chapter discusses how this mythos was transmitted through sound—what Ra called *tone science*—as well as the performative ritual that accompanied the Arkestra's musical concerts, called the *Cosmo Drama Myth Ritual* or simply *Cosmo Drama*. These aspects of Ra and the Arkestra's works remain a novel expression of a living mythos carried out via artmaking; they are sonic and ceremonial modes of mythic transmission, borrowing

from ancient mysticism, modern dance, classical cult-like mystery thought; contemporary, unusual and primeval means of musical composition, bardic poetry recitation, mantra chanting, religious healing practices, and African American Baptist-style sermonizing. As Agaric puts it, via the Arkestra, Sun Ra "led comprehensive rituals…to seduce and propel humanity out from the repetitious death-trip of *Geschichten* (history) looming over us, and help each individual attain *escape velocity*: launching oneself into the cosmos via music or—teleporting the cosmos into oneself via the profundity of apprehension" (147). The Arkestra's music, their science in sound, and performance style can make the new-ancient Black universe real in the people receiving the transmission.

As Szwed has quipped "the Arkestra was, as the French would say, a rich text" (336). The carriers of a living mythology, the band had a purpose beyond what others might. Their goal was not merely entertainment, but full-force cultural and psychic transformation. By embodying a series of ever changing symbolic epitaphs, the band was able to express a greater and more metaphysical purpose. Szwed makes an almost exhaustive list of the Arkestra's various names including

> the Myth Science Arkestra, the Solar Arkestra, the Solar Myth Arkestra…the Intergalactic Research Arkestra…the Blue Universe Arkestra…the Cosmo Jet-Set Arkestra, the Omniverse Arkestra…the Disney Odyssey Arkestra…the Atlantis Odyssey Arkestra…the Intergalactic Splendors of Love Arkestra, the Outergalactic Disciple Arkestra, the year 2000 Myth Science Arkestra…the Omniverse Ultra 21st Century Arkestra…. (95)

and dozens of others. The constant changing of names, according to Szwed, suggests the "secret knowledge" (95) that was part of the group: the information kept alive in their midst like the esoteric philosophies embodied by a secret society. For Ra, these names were indicative of "the dimension [I am] currently involved in…it all depends on what I write and what I'm thinking about" (qtd. in Szwed 95). Like signposts on the intergalactic highway these names could steer onlookers toward the dense array of mystic thought at the core of the Arkestra's musical practice—toward the myth.

The Arkestra's protean name, which always linked up with the particular repertoire of mythic music that they were playing, is a reflection of the inner work of the band was constantly doing in their lives and home space—their shared household, lived in collectively by the band—which to this day sits in the Germantown neighborhood of Philadelphia. The Arkestra is firstly a community, and Sun Ra ran the house and the band like a cult of antiquity, creating an environment of personal, collective, and spiritual growth. There were rules—for instance, no drugs, no drinking, and no sex. As Yahya Abdul-Majid, tenor sax player for the band, has commented "[Ra] demanded that [his] musicians should give up their earthly lives and their earthly ways and their earthly desires" (qtd.in *Brother* 40:30-40:40). Ra also "maintained that everyone should be vegetarian and eat natural foods and large quantities of fruits and fibers" (Szwed 98). As Trumpeter Michael Ray has quipped "we actually lived like monks" (qtd. in *Brother* 40:00-40:05).

But most centrally, music, and an ever present mysticism, were the nourishment in which everyone partook. And they would partake of them at almost any time. As Danny Thompson relays in *A Joyful Noise*, band practice could be called at "four in the

morning, it might be six in the morning, it might from six in the morning to twelve at night. You know it might be any time…you just have to be ready." (33:00-33:20). The band practiced near constantly with Ra at the helm, steeping his musicians in a deep music full of mythic resonances. As Szwed tells it

> rehearsals were exhausting but exhilarating ordeals, half musical instruction, the other half teaching, prognostication, and spiritual and practical advice…he lectured them on personal discipline; on the history of black people and their role in the creation of civilization; on the use of music in changing the world; and on etymology…numerology, on astronomy and astrology. (Szwed 97-98)

This endowed the members of the Arkestra and the music they were making with mythos: they became carriers of Sun Ra's story and his belief system. Living together in this cult-like environment bonded band members to each other and Ra. When Thompson was asked if the constant practicing got in the way of a social life he replied incredulously "social life! No, there's music. Folks go out to hear music right? Now that's that social life, right? Well, I'm getting my social life here. We got music all night." (*Joyful* 33:20-33:38). For Thompson, the music itself was a fulfilling social experience. John Gilmore expressed similar feelings, and tells how the impressive music that Ra composed had an almost magnetic effect, bringing him into the group and the orbit of Ra. When asked why he, as one of the most respected saxophone players in America, stayed with Sun Ra and the Arkestra for so many years he replied

> well, [Sun Ra] was the first one to introduce me to the higher forms of music…I played on an off with him for about six months…any music that

> he showed me I could read it pretty well, but I didn't really understand it…then one night I heard it!...I really heard the intervals this one night and I said "my gosh this man is more stretched out than [Thelonious] Monk!" It's unbelievable that anybody could write any meaner intervals than Monk or [Charles] Mingus. But he does…his knowledge of intervals and harmony, very highly advanced, you know. So when I saw that I said, well, I'll make this the stop. (*Joyful* 26:50-28:00)

Ra's genuinely sophisticated understanding of music bonded the members of the Arkestra to him and to the music itself. It was a communal experience with utopian purpose: a higher calling. And it was Ra who guided his musicians toward this call—he was a friend but he was their teacher, too. As Szwed relays, Ra

> sought to make his musicians…a community he would recruit and train, who would live together and devote themselves entirely to his music and teaching, musician-scholars who he would tear free from outside interests and worldly distractions to be on twenty four musical and spiritual call. (97)

The Arkestra were like devotees with a spiritual teacher: musicians with a purpose, sonic inventors of a forward thinking zone, myth-scientists with a vision to make real, guided by a genuine virtuoso of sonic revelation. With Ra as their teacher, says Gilmore "we're like pupils with the master" (qtd. in Szwed 116). He could teach things that no other pedagogue could transmit: things beyond. As Marshall Allen has said "Sun Ra taught me to translate spirit into music. The spirit makes no mistakes" (qtd. in Szwed 111). In Ra's

band spirit was guide, and Ra the master of its translation into a prophetic music of true vision.

The Arkestra was not just any band and Ra was not just any band leader. Ra symbolically embodied his solar namesake, and the members of his group circumambulated like planetary bodies around a star as the title of his album series *the Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra I-III* alludes. Sun Ra was a living myth and his band a vessel engineered to transmit the most potent version of that mythos. As Szwed says, a cosmology is modeled in the Arkestra's performances, and even their way of life. "The universe can be constituted from the interaction of the musicians…in which aesthetics takes a back seat to the ethics displayed in the interplay and representation of the music" (114). This ethics is one of the "universal language which reached the emotions directly" (Szwed 114). Hence the transmission of the Arkestra as an entity, their sound and their exposition, can have an emotional, human impact. A cosmological image enacted by the group can transmit "the purest form of expression" (Szwed 114). A direct mythic communication and a way of life modeled by the group. Their presence alone could demonstrate an alternative model for society: a band of outsiders orchestrating an absolutely transcendent form of music, borne of a communal life in which togetherness, purpose, spirituality, discipline, and an otherworldy devotion to a genuine sense of human progress was centralized. This could be a map for a better way of life, a better tomorrow. The Arkestra, in the way they lived, performed, recorded, could induce a different state of mind. Moreover, they could carry you away to a more nourishing locale, somewhere far away in space.

While Ra would often remark that "Arkestra" was just the way "people in Alabama pronounced the word 'orchestra'" (Youngquist 65), their name itself betrays that this group was more than a musical entity, but a mythic vehicle—a chariot to an uncanny, mythic locality. In Sun Ra's myth the band travels through the cosmos in a spaceship which is powered by music. This ship has its precedents in other mythic vehicles—Ezekiel's chariot, the Chariot card of the tarot, the Persian magic carpet, Helios's sun-car of old Greek mythology, and most importantly Ra's Ark, his solar boat, of Egyptian myth. Sun Ra's yellow spaceship, which Lock points out "looks like a pair of giant eyes" in *Space is the Place* "is perhaps intended to evoke the eye of Horus, symbol of divine judgement in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics" (*Blutopia* 68). Ra's ship is one that transports via the science of myth, and us with it. A symbol from an ancient Black past that transports into the future. In this sense the Arkestra, and their mythic vehicle, may portend something that the Nation of Islam also believed: that "the era of white dominance was coming to a close…ended by means of the Mother Ship, an enormous aircraft…built by…originating Black scientists" (Szwed 132). The ancient sun god's Ark returned to aid the work of the solar messiah, retrofitted with a futurological sonic magic, from a mythically high-tech past.

Tone Science

Importantly, as its been mentioned several times already, Ra's spacecraft runs on music. The Arkestra and their music *were* the Ark: the transport to another, mysterious landscape. Their musical method to achieve this kind of conveyance was called *tone science*. The innards of music, its secret, myth-scientific contours, they believed, could

create psychic changes in individuals and maybe even society on the whole. Tone science has to do, says Youngquist, with the "spiritual register of sound" (82)—how the underlying mathematics of music can be used to induce changes in reality, and in the souls of people. "Tone," continues Youngquist "exceeds material reality and opens 'the final sum of what we call being,' namely spirit" (84). Youngquist channels the Jewish-Austrian musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl here who—among other concepts that link him to the sound-world of Sun Ra—believed that tones carry within themselves a nondiscursive "dynamic symbol" (69). The dynamic symbol is a "supermaterial…force" (69) translating a nearly mythic vibration to the personal psyche of a listener, linking the "tangible" world with the "invisible" (71) i.e., the material with the mythic. Sound, therefore carries a mythic mark in its very fabric. The tonal symbol, as Zuckerkandl writes in *Sound and Symbol*, allows one to "hear forces" in them much like the "believer" who "apprehends his god in the symbol in a direct perception" (69). Sound is a direct transmission of subsomatic proportions: something that communicates unconsciously with the beingness of a person. In it we can receive something akin to a vision: a spiritual force infusing its near-godly presence.

For Ra sound, and its symbolic structuring force, tone, converses on the deepest level. Because of this "music might achieve what politics and religion could not: a wholesale change in the way people live that opens reality to wisdom and beauty" (Youngquist 64). Bringing an awareness to the most subtle aspects of the musical language could render it reality-shaping. According to Szwed, Ra thought that this process began in the body "as an individual instrument sympathetically vibrating to music—thus linking the body to the celestial, the harmony of the spheres, the experience

of the flight of music, the hovering of music in space" (383). As quoted earlier Ra says "you're music too. You're all instruments…in this vast Arkestry of the cosmos" (*Space* 19:30-19:45). Like the ancient musicologists discussed in a previous chapter, Ra believed that the performance of music could affect the "music" of a person, creating a harmonically spiritual vibration. In this, parts of a person could be reached that could not be otherwise. "People have two harps in their head, their ears, just like a harp" he wrote, reminding us of his consistent Pythagoreanism "they hear by the strings in their ears. If I play something very strange, then some strings that never vibrated before will vibrate. The whole nervous system will become alive" (qtd. in Agaric 149). That the nervous system would be altered says something very interesting about Ra's understanding of the symbol-tones he was sharing with listeners: music—sound—could alter a person's *way of perceiving the world* at a primal, healing depth. Ra's feeling for music, on this level, writes Szwed

> especially instrumental music—was the most immediate means for engaging…with a higher reality. Music could provide a metaphysical experience through which one could enter the sublime, and come to know the cosmos. He understood music to be…something akin to religion. Music could convey more than feelings about phenomena, it could express its essence, and thus could disclose secrets of nature not available to reason, secrets which reveal the true nature of the world. (383)

These secrets of nature, held both in the overarching qualities of the music itself and in its scientifically structured tones, express the quintessence of reality: which for Ra is

inherently mythic. It deciphers reality beyond "truth": something so *beyond* that ordinary semantics, and the familiar modes of music, cannot express it.

Tone science, as practiced by the Arkestra, as their sonic vehicle for transformation began in the playing of Ra's song arrangements. In hearing the intervals, the clusters of sound upon sound, often as composed chaos, one could genuinely hear something *new*. One could witness a whole cosmos in the way that the sounds of Arkestra rubbed up against one another, collapsed and reemerged, generated dissonances, or altogether novel sounds. The Arkestra could swing and it could unnerve, faithfully recreating a Fletcher Henderson tune or unleashing warping synth space noise, annihilating drums, or the cacophonous blast of every musician onstage playing freely from their own planet. Tone science could exist in the subtle—the distances, weird harmonies, and interplay of the different musicians' parts. Or, taking the band's sound as a whole, one might feel an uncanny transportive feeling. As Jazz historian Phil Schaap has commented "the music was wild. Things would go off and you would say 'it's not only out on a limb, its *suspended in space*'" (*Brother* 27:12-27:20) [my italics]. Tone science in this regard is transportation. Sinclair corroborates this noting that

> players were instructed to improvise without regard for conventional tonal centers; modal pieces with no fixed harmonic structure; superimposition of one chord over another; and songs played in multiple keys. His works wove a musical tapestry of unusual rhythms and colors, swinging like crazy at will or moving entirely out of regular time to project a musical environment evocative of outerspace. ("Sun" 7)

This complex, cacophonous—though highly arkestrated approach—was intended to induce an altered state, an alternative dimension. Space on Earth. Or as Agaric describes during an Arkestra concert one heard

> sheets of sound falling like snowflakes from all quarters. A rainbow phalanx of languages unleashed, crashes of cymbal upon symbols waves or rhythm running. Throwing sound and image onto the mind…the energy runs straight and direct to the unknown *sens du mystere*, the hidden and secret cervices, somewhere else, out, way out beyond language but made of languages. (149)

That this language—or panoply of languages—runs straight to a person's faculty for sensing mystery implies once again that tone science communicates on a mythic level. It is myth held in living breathing sonic-symbol, wielded by a community and performance apparatus who understood the magic of delivering such a thing.

Or as Ra's poem "The Outer Bridge" from 1980 puts it "In the half-between world, / Dwell they: The tone scientists……. / In notes and tone / They speak of many things…….. / The tone scientists: / Architects of planes of discipline. / Mathematically precise are they: / The tone scientists" (*Immeasurable* 293). This grants the Arkestra, the tone scientists, the gravity of an invisible, mythic order, lingering like shades somewhere between this world and the other, speaking a language of music and tone, architecting the world precisely. From this mythic vision comes a literal practice of myth making in sound. Or perhaps this is Ra's vision of what the Arkestra was literally doing by carrying out his mythic program through the rigors practice and performance—in disciple and precision. Tone science teaches in sound what Sun Ra wanted us to understand about the

world, its tremendous self-imposed limitations. By attempting to revise it with music's inner magic he alters reality and implants myth, leaving a sound mark that bears an unmistakable, if challenging wisdom.

Cosmo Drama Myth Ritual

But Sun Ra was not content with his concerts being about musical repertoire—though precision, and an impressive musicianship were essential to the success of the group. Concerts should instead be dazzling, all-encompassing performance apparatuses. Tone science was key but it wasn't necessarily *visual* outside of the imagination. Sound could carry people to outer space but vision, he thought, could potentially keep them there. For this reason in the seventies Ra inaugurated a performance style he called the *Cosmo Drama Myth Ritual*. The music would be complemented by wild, spiraling dancers, light shows, psychedelic slides, the unleashing of strange blinking robot toys, poetry recitation and prophetic sermonizing, space chants, extended, free-wheeling percussion interludes, and the descending of the band into the audience, breaking the fourth wall to play and sing confrontationally into the bodies and faces of audience members. As Szwed says "to [Ra] poetry, dance, and music were linked together as arts of the highest order, and music…" (383) was the root note, the spiritual architecture, holding it all together.

To deliver the myth they would use these intertextual forms of expression, different modes of art to present themselves in such a way that Ra's mythic program became unavoidably sensual and overwhelming; challenging, joyful, colorful, even disturbing. They'd often start with a huge, blasting space-chord, with endless rattling

hand drums, dancers flinging themselves in every direction. “Ra liked to open performances with a shock, hoping to drive out the hopeless and awaken the rest” reports Szwed (259). Those who would stay—the adventurous, the curious, or the true believers—were treated to a feast.

The band dressed for “high theatricality” placing themselves “far outside the limits of [classical Jazz] tradition” (Szwed 172-73) covering themselves in elaborate homemade, heavily sequined outer space themed costumes, with huge, golden replicas of the *Usekh* collars that were worn by ancient Egyptian elites. Each member of the band would come out glistening in their own color, decorated in layers of fabric bedazzled with moons, suns, and ancient symbols. They would don elaborate headwear that further intimated Egypt—a pharaoh’s *Neme* or a golden covering made of chain-male, beads dripping over the forehead into the eyes. Ra once wore a cap with a large diorama of the solar system jutting out of it, wagging on long, metallic strings; or another time a black, hand-sewn fabric cap with a large golden sun stitched to the front in such a way that it obscured Ra’s vision, giving him the look of a tiresian diviner.

Clothes, Ra claimed, were an essential part of the presentation. “Some people may not be able to accept this music,” he said “but in fact they don’t need to listen to the music; they just need to look at our clothes because I have incorporated music in them too.” (qtd. in Szwed 173). Clothes *are* music. They too could communicate the myth at the core of Ra’s world, through the eyes if the ears were not amenable.

The costumery he devised for the band was inspired by myth and mysticism, imbuing them with an otherworldly power. “He had been reading into the lore of color among the Egyptians, Greeks, and Tibetans,” tells Szwed “and he knew something of

color therapy, so as he thought through the…band's productions he began coordinating the costume colors by mystical principals" (Szwed 172-73). Clothes were music and so was color. Ra "became notorious…on tour for insisting on seeing the color of each room before he assigned individual players to them" (Szwed 172-73). Ra wouldn't want his musicians exposed to vibrations that might obscure their body music and the Arkestra's vibrational strata. The band's music, and its performances, relied on the sanctity of the communal—"that is part of his meaning of 'precision'" clarifies Szwed "an emergent form in which even a mistake will be corrected by the group" (383). And so their moves, on stage and off, in fashion or lodging, must be attuned to a more subtle, cooperative rhythm.

And so the myth rituals Ra and the band undertook were part of a larger practice, a communal style of presenting the universe to the audience. Hence they would, as Amiri Baraka describes "put on weird clothes, space helmets, robes, flowing capes…[perform] rituals, evoked lost civilizations, used strangeness to teach us open feeling as intelligence" ("Sun" 3). The drama itself was about difference—a different kind of community, enacted by very "different" people, in which *this* kind of performance *can happen*. In this sense "[Ra] believed that performance can model, maybe even effect social change" (Szwed 231) and that something as supposedly profane as "entertainment" can potentially "become a vehicle for radical activism" (Youngquist 64).

The band's way of doing things, crystalized into an particularly intense form of performance, could be a map for doing things differently. That is partly why Ra called it a *ritual*: it was meant to induce alteration and alternative modes of conception. Hence the band would come into the concert hall in a ritualistic way, revealing that the ceremony

itself may have already been underway before the show had even begun. As Szwed explains, in the documentary film *Sun Ra*: *Brother from Another Planet,* while the band was living in New York, Ra would "rehearse the band in the afternoon and very often they would walk down the street playing, continue the rehearsal right into the performance" (14:58-15:05). All rules of ordinary concert conduct would be shaken, and a different order of operations instituted. "By the fall of 1972" writes Sinclair

> Ra and the Arkestra were operating at full strength. Now Ra was able to reveal the full extent of his compositional genius and utilize the Arkestra to unveil the cosmic philosophical underpinnings of his music, presented in a swirl of brightly colored costumes, leaping dancers, exotic percussion choirs and space vocal chorales, daring instrumental excursions and precisely executed ensemble passages. ("Life is" 69)

The Cosmo Drama was a full blown performance engine—a performative ceremony of ecstatic, avalanching sensuousness—delivering not only communal energies and vibrations for social change but its deep, mythic underpinnings. The Arkestra would often leave the stage and descend into the crowd like a New Orleans drumline, spiraling the concert hall in a circular motion, while clapping and singing one of their myth-laden space chants including "Space is the Place" or "We Travel the Spaceways," encircling the concertgoers like an ouroboros, truly cutting them off from the ordinary, outside world. The Arkestra itself was now the container, the spaceship, the Ark and mode of psychic transportation. This direct confrontation with the audience was shocking for some, ecstatic for others, and always drove the meaning of the show home: there is a philosophy behind this music and a narrative, the parade intimated. There is something you need to

understand and *be* with, it would say: this is philosophical sound, musical performance art as initiation.

That initiation could be frightfully physical as Szwed recounts. “Sun Ra would actually wade into the audience at some points, like a preacher, and pick up people, because he was physically strong, lift them off the ground, and scream into their face ‘are you willing to give up your death for me!?’ And people would say ‘Yes! Yes! Put me down.’” (qtd. in *Brother* 29:35-29:50). Others report being blasted by a group of horn players surrounding them until completely overwhelmed, or have had members of the Arkestra—even Ra himself—unexpectedly whisper pieces of space poetry into their ears. This kind of provocative engagement expresses Ra’s belief that art was not a “private experience, the artist alone, cut off from other[s]…[instead] art is capable of constituting a community which mirrors the universe, an artist’s vision of the black sacred cosmos” (Szwed 383). Moreover, in breaking the fourth wall, sonically and philosophically harrying the audience, he was welcoming them into his world—a better world. They had been initiated, through sound and ritual, into the orbit of Ra, into a container that afforded them ancient wisdom and futuristic healing sonics. They had been cordially ushered onto the launch pad which could inaugurate them into a new future. What generosity.

Astro Black, Cosmo Drama, tone science, ancient Egypt, outer space: these psychic locales and mythic visions, cosmos-songs of communal shift, then portend a new type of societal structure, and a mythos borne of an imagination set on a powerful type of communal liberation. They indicate a new kind of being—and a new kind of *being together*—that could be more holistic, generative, ancient and yet forward looking, wisdom-bound and expansive. Perhaps there truly is no limit to what we can be. As Ra

once said “involve your spirit in the creative process,” you might “defeat the destructive elements on Earth” (qtd. in Szwed 111). If Ra, the Arkestra and an Astro Black mythos can teach us anything, it’s to trust in that dark creative sublime, to toss away malfunctional myths, and to embrace one that might be greater than the so-called truth. Blacker than fact and more efficacious. This kind of myth can offer direct admission to a place where the “living waters of the inexhaustible source,” (*Masks* 5) as Campbell calls it, still run.

Encircled in sound, wound into the belly of an intergalactic ark, a secret society of transcendent space-musics, we might find our own humanity—and our own dissatisfactions with a society we’ve been forced to surrender to—amidst others, and that it exceeds our expectations, and theirs too. We might find ourselves alive in our own otherness, blasted into the unknown. We might find ourselves seeking there for *something else* and on the very verge of witnessing it as *real*. We might hear, truly hear, the tones of so called “nothingness” vibrating our most sympathetic and subtle senses, initiating us into another order of being.

CHAPTER FIVE
SUN RA, THE LIVING MYTH

I am inside the great dreams of the night…My aura is mystery of life.

Clarice Lispector

People have the right to make their own destiny.

Sun Ra

Emergence

We come to the final chapter of this dissertation and the final of Campbell's mythic functions: the psychological. This last function is the one that ties the rest of them together, for it places myth in the individual. It is the "most vital, most critical" (Campbell, *Creative* 7) aspect, allowing a person to understand themselves in relation to everything else in existence. As Campbell says it is meant "to foster the centering and unfolding of the individual in integrity, in accord with [themselves]…culture (the mesocosm)…the universe (macrocosm), and…that ultimate awesome mystery which is both beyond and within [themselves] and all things" (7). In essence, for a person to feel at one with the "unfolding of life" (Campbell, *Thou* 5) as reflected by story, the culture they are living in, and the cosmos that is built of that mythic landscape. It is the way that myth teaches *belonging* in a particular place and time.

In Sun Ra's myth the idea of belonging, or lack thereof, is perhaps the key component. It may even be the inspiration for his embodiment of mythology. In Campbell's view this final function of myth is intensely personal: it takes place in an individual's body, in their life, their soul, in the core of their being. In that place, a personal mythology might be born, an individual sense of story in the world. In the

modern era, a psychic landscape lacking traditional mythological guidance, mythos is found within. Our pains living in cultures that don't support our personal ways of being stimulate other kinds of mythic thinking. We might crush ourselves with cultural expectations that don't apply to us. We might live someone else's story: we might live a lie. In contrast, we might find the story that speaks to us, resonates at the foundations of our beingness. Our own fantasies, dreams, desires, and brushes with the unknown can become personal mythologies, a powerful, private mythos, which can support us through the wilds of being alive in a harsh, technologized, and narcissistic world.

Ra, in opposition to the unsympathetic world he found, discovered that personal myth could validate his sense of selfhood, and put him in touch with loftier forces, align his soul with ancient wisdom, great mystery; allowing him to inhabit a limitless and spiritual cosmos. The Earth's populace was controlled by the obscurant ideologies of history, bad truth, an accepted, brutal racism, and a normalized love of war that he found absolutely abhorrent. These were the outcomes of a lack of connection, a lack of guidance. These were the "realities" that society had conjured in their ignorance. The world needed his story, his myth; not history's ignorance or time's cyclical disaster. "They say that history repeats itself, but history is only his story. You haven't heard my story yet. My story is different from *his* story, my story is not part of history. Because history repeats itself, but my story is endless" (*Joyful* 11:00-11:50). In Ra's own being he could feel deeper vibrations, the flexing of occult wisdoms, and a new myth borne from his own experience and vision. It was a personal myth that could teach, and Ra felt he could be an example of how to live. A superior way of life: another order of being borne from one person's deeper understanding of the cosmos. From Ra's personal world

a new myth could become manifest; from a personal myth the world revised. "Every song I write" he said "tells a story. A story humanity needs to know about" (*Joyful* 10:30-11:00).

Sun Ra's story then—as an emergent, personal mythology—could offer something that he believed was desperately needed by the people of planet Earth. From his own psychological understanding of his place in the universe, a guiding mythos could come forth. But he wasn't merely a storyteller, an academic mythologist, or a folkloric sharer of tales. He *embodied* myth, becoming it fully, in body and spirit, to the point that he would, as Szwed submits, "deny his own past…deny that he'd ever been there…deny his name…deny he was born" (*Brother* 4:00-4:05). Ra did not resonate with and could not stand to inhabit an earthly personage. His soul was too mythic for that. Instead, he proclaimed himself a living myth, changed his name to Sun Ra, and lived according to the music of his own spirit, totally and fully. In my view, this was not a denial but an inhabitation of something more deeply and truly felt for Ra. To embody myth meant to occupy a more spiritual mode, in coordination with his own spirit and experience. His was a personal journey of self-discovery, coming from a place of having been psychically disembodied within racist American culture to a place of belonging within himself and his work.

To chart this personal development the structure of this chapter is built around four "I am" statements that Ra made in his life indicating how his personal mythology was embodied: "I am an alien"; "I am an angel"; "I am the Living Myth"; and lastly "I am the Alter Destiny." This final declaration represents the ultimate goal of Ra's work. Through his music, his philosophy, and ways of being—even his very presence on the

planet—he believed the world could be given a second chance, changed, put on a path to a better tomorrow. In this way, Ra felt humanity's life which "depends upon the unknown" (*Joyful* 00:45-50) could be wrenched from the jaws of total destruction and an alternative future implemented. The section titled "Alien" explores Sun Ra's visionary abduction experience and how it sheds light on the concept of belonging in his life and work. "Angel" ruminates upon how this sense of belongingness was connected to music, ancient mysticism and archetypal imagery, and the personal right to create. "The Living Myth" questions what it means to embody myth, and the effects of such a way of being. "The Alter Destiny" concludes this dissertation by exploring how Ra's becoming of a living myth could potentially bring about a large scale, metaphysical alteration to reality.

The New Comparative Ra

Ra's detractors, even fans of his music, would often disparagingly comment on his philosophy and persona—as though it was a distraction from the wonderful music he was making and not a central facet of it—as Phil Schaap did when he said "you may not have believed all the mumbo jumbo [of Ra's philosophy] but there was something going on" (qtd. in *Brother* 1:25-1:35). The comment suggests that Sun Ra's story is not to be believed; using the standard rational apparatuses of conception, we cannot possibly buy his myth. But Ra had an uncanny ability to win over those who actually spent time listening to him: hearing his myth.

In an attempt to remain open to this conjuring, I've availed scholar of religions Jeffrey Kripal's method known as *New Comparativism.* Fundamentally this mode widens the field of what can be compared in the study of religion, allowing for the anomalous

experiences of individuals, which as Kripal points out have often been the root of burgeoning religious culture, to be included. Kripal sees the experiences of abductees, psychics, telepaths, precogs, clairvoyants, and others' having "unexplained but extremely powerful perceptions" (3) (i.e., ones that cannot be "replicated and controlled in a laboratory, and measured" (Kripal 14)) as legitimate and worthy of study even when these experiences are not considered to be "real" by a dominant, materialistic reductivism. Because, as he says, "we know of no religious experience, scriptural text, or revelation that did not come through a human being or human community" (8) and so, why discount some based on a seemingly contradictory and self-defeating modus? Moreover, in his view it would be irresponsible from a scholarly perspective to ignore some of these voices who are bringing forth novel and nascent religious images for study. Hence the contents of their experiences should be taken seriously and compared to similar images and accounts from various spiritual, religious and, I would add, creative traditions. This contextualization reveals mythic undercurrents of human experience in the contemporary, visionary anomalous, showing them to be meaningful and essential. We can learn from this approach what might be brewing in the basement boilers of the human psyche and how they might be part of the growth of culture.

In short, Kripal says this is a highly developed scholarly tool "with which to make sense of impossible things" (80). Learning from the impossible can provide burgeoning wisdom and unveil what might be a prophetic spiritual insight. "I'm talking about something so impossible," chimes Sun Ra "it can't possibly be true. But it's the only way the world's gonna survive, this impossible thing" (qtd. in Corbett *Extended* 311). Using Kripal's mode, which means observing Ra's personal myth with openness, as it is

important to this dissertation and the study of myth in general, I read Ra as telling a meaningful life story which has implications for the future of the study of mythology. Not to mention that it may have implications for the future of the planet.

Furthermore, as Sinclair argues "if you listen to him and study the music and titles and the interviews and the liner notes, as those of us who were fanatical about Sun Ra did, you found an incredible consistency and seriousness" (qtd. in *Brother* 47:56-48:17). Ra's constancy in telling his own story reveals the depth and gravitas therein, even if it was often delivered with "an incredible sense of humor" (Sinclair qtd. in *Brother* 47:56-48:17). Recontextualizing Ra's personal myth then unveils inflections of truth and a deep wisdom worth reckoning with. If we truly follow him to the outer spaces he invited us to tread we might find that welcoming his myth with understanding isn't so difficult. R

Peering deeply into Ra's personal myth, and mythic persona, allows us to see how the psychological aspect of his mythos—his own way of being and conceiving of the world, reality, and the cosmos—were engineered to induce change on the individual and collective levels. His "provocative personage [which] generated considerable myth" (Sinclair, "Visits" 5) contained its own innate transforming power. Not only that, it made something unreal, even impossible, a reality. "By living his myth," writes Lock "by willing himself to be reborn and renamed as a myth, he made it come true" (Lock, "Right" 33). In a sense, Sun Ra, was a *real* myth. Elsewhere Sinclair concurs "he was a very complex individual: man, myth, alien, and angel I would say" (qtd.in *Brother* 55:27-55:33).

Alien

Throughout his life Ra unflinchingly professed that he was from the planet Saturn, an alien sent to Earth to improve life here and potentially take some humans away to a better place far away in space. He was of extraterrestrial origins himself. As Lock affirms, "the claim that he was not of this planet was not incidental to his music, but one of its foundations" ("Right" 29). Alienness is essential to Ra's oeuvre not only as a metaphor for otherness—which I'll touch on shortly—but was also fundamental to his identity as revealed by his own life experience. During his college years, while in a deep trance, Ra discovered his own extraterrestrial nature when he experienced an alien abduction of intense visionary proportions. It would change his life, clarify his identity, and reveal his fate as a musician and person. As he tells it:

> I did go out to space through what I thought was a giant spotlight shining on me…I had to go up there like that (imitates a mummy), in order to prevent any part of my body from touching the outside…so this spotlight—it seemed like a spotlight, but now I call it the energy car—it shined down on me, and my body was changed into some beams of light…and I went up at terrific speed to another dimension, another planet. (qtd. in Lock, "Right" 32)

Elsewhere he names the planet. "The last planet I remember is planet Saturn…I'm from there…but I didn't go by myself, some other type of beings took me, and they taught me a lot of things. They got little antennas over their eyes, and little antennas over their ears…something like Spock" (*Night Music* 13:55-14:30). These Spock-like creatures

"revealed certain facts about his future [in] which he would be a teacher of all humankind" as Szwed relays (qtd. in *Brother* 3:53-4:00).

Ra found himself on a stage with the aliens and they told him that "when it looked like the world was going into complete chaos, when there was no hope for nothing, then I could speak, but not until then. I would speak and the world would listen." (qtd. in Szwed 30). He was then suddenly back on Earth with the beings, being covered in a new kind of robe, and shown the throngs that he would speak to. To Ra they looked angry, but the abductors assured him that the people were only confused, bewildered. That's why they needed him. He also saw thousands of spacecraft hovering above the Earth and was told that he could call on them to land at any time. He then came out of the vision.

As Szwed says "he told this story many times, unembarrassed, ingenuously, and with remarkable consistency of detail" (30). It was perhaps the key moment in the creation of his identity, which told him who he was and could be. It was the call to adventure, the anomalous core of what would become a life-long myth-making expedition. "In another age," writes Szwed "it might be called a visionary tale, a story in which unacceptable ideas are placed within the framework of a benign account of an angel or some otherworldly beings" (30). In other words, this might be seen as a novel religious experience, something that Kripal would tell us is very much worth examining in detail and relating to correlated mythic and symbolic imagery.

This event as Lock points out "reportedly took place in the 1930s, well before the first officially documented claim of alien contact in 1952" (Lock, *Right* 32). This makes Ra the carrier of a burgeoning collective vision; a communal fantasy of the collective unconscious which Jung says in *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of things Seen in the Sky*

"soars beyond the realm of earthly organizations and powers into the heavens, into interstellar space, where the rulers of human fate, the gods, once had their abode" (25). Ra may have been the first person to publicly admit to such an experience of "technological angels" (Jung *Flying* 26) in the modern era. As such, he is the transferor of something novel, and simultaneously connected to a host of archetypal "alien" images—whether of chariots or flying gods or both—which stretch back through mythic history. The *Annanuki,* gods of the Mesopotamian creation myth the *Enûma Eliš,* fly to Earth to mine for gold and then enslave humanity to do their work (I imagine Ra being very interested in this provocative myth); there is Ezekiel's chariot, which is partly made of metal and piloted by the bodies of otherworldy angels and propelled by a violent storm cloud; and the enchanted airborne cars of the *Ramayana* in which the gods traverse heaven and Earth. The images stretch into the fringe scholarship and literature of modernity. Some have speculated that "Ancient Sumer's 4000 year old tablets' depictions of gods were actually…portrayals of alien overlords" as Matthew Kassorla mentions in a piece in the *Cornell Daily Sun* while "the earliest known written account of alien life is Lucian of Samosata's *Vera Historia*, written in 200 AD" (Kassorla). Kassorla also lists these other literary examples of technological gods visiting Earth: "the Japanese *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* from 900 CE, Voltaire's 18th century *Micromégas*, and eventually…H.G. Wells' popular *The War of the Worlds* in 1898." But perhaps the most enduring of these types of works to tantalize the contemporary imagination, and one that thoroughly blends a fringe "scholarly" and mythic approach is Erich Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* from 1970 which "suggests that extraterrestrials gave technology and culture to the Egyptians, Mayans and other ancient civilizations" (Kurutz). The book

has spawned an entire subculture, huge conventions—nearly a cult—around the idea, leading to blockbuster shows with influence like the scientist-abhorred *Ancient Aliens*.

Ra seems to wink in the direction of these theories, and bolster his mythic persona, when he says "I'm very interested in names, and 'Ra' is older than history itself. It's the oldest name known by man to signify an extraterrestrial being" (Szwed 86). If myth was here before history, why not aliens? Why wouldn't they still be here, visiting and probing the imagination? And why wouldn't Ra's namesake be extraterrestrial, too—an ancient alien, a descending god? In claiming the extraterrestriality of the ancient god which is his namesake Sun Ra not only admits his own relation to this long lineage of alien mythologizing but suggests that he is in fact one of the aliens himself. His own abduction becomes the proof of this.

Szwed and Lock both link abduction imagery to Afro-Baptist conversion testimony, its own type of mythic storytelling, which comes out of personal visionary experience filled with Christian symbols. "The experiences that these testimonies describe," details Lock "many of which involved being abruptly transported to a strange place, identified as heaven, and encounters with beings dressed in robes, identified as angels…flying through the air or by traveling along a very narrow path" (*Right* 31) were experiences which invariably changed the life of the person experiencing it. "Alien abductions and conversion experiences" Szwed agrees "both result in ontological shock, a revelation that there are forces at work larger and more direct than had been imagined" (31). But while abduction often leaves the victim "traumatized" (Szwed 31)—as in images from a variety of popular sci-fi TV and film, like the *X Files* or *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—"conversion…connects the chosen with the African-American sacred

cosmos, and gives rebirth by awakening an inner self" (Szwed 31). Ra's abduction, as both authors suggest, is more akin to the latter.

Ra's abduction experience was indeed an inner awakening, a type of conversion which, in the Baptist tradition, was known as "a common form of spiritual rebirth into a new identity" (*Right Place* 32). Abduction, in Ra's case, fulfilled this quality. For him it clarified not only his purpose in life, in art, in music but also told him who he was. "It made me be *me*" he explained "instead of being what somebody else's image was…it made me really be true to myself instead of being programmed or oriented to something else…and because I didn't, I can help others to not be a part of the program-thing" (qtd. in Corbett *Extended* 310). As Szwed confirms, in a sense Ra's "encounter with God" which was actually "a trip into space with aliens" was "both prophesying his future and explaining his past with a single act of personal mythology" (31-32). His earthly past, as a Black person living in the segregated United States in the first half of the 20th century and the painful othering he experienced there, and his cosmic future, embracing an innate sense of selfhood which was in part brought on by visionary experience. In this visionary-initiatory process he was freed into his own myth, and which established his identity as someone forward looking, creative, beyond. His alienness like his Blackness becomes an inheritance of something ageless and potent, futuristic and empowering.

And Otherness

For Ra his extraterrestrial experience was an affirmation of something he'd always known: that he was different—another kind of being—and not just because he was Black, although that was central to understanding his own sense of difference. But

the visions he had also reminded him that he was of an extraterrestrial makeup himself, and that his way of conceiving, of thinking, being, and creating were always otherworldly. As he explains:

> I've never been a part of the planet. I've been isolated [as] a child away from it….them troubles people got, prejudices and all that, I didn't know a thing about it, until I got to be about fourteen years old. It was as if I was somewhere else that imprinted this purity on my mind, another kind of world. That is my music playing the kind of world I know about. It's like someone else from another planet trying to find out what to do. That's the kind of mind or spirit I have, it's not programmed—from the family, the church, from the schools, from the government….I know what they're talking about but they don't know what I'm talking about…they've never been in the midst of what has been impressed upon my mind as being a pure solar world. (qtd. in Szwed 11)

Being of this kind of cosmic-utopian consciousness did truly make Ra different, and while it gave him an unadulterated, prophetic vision, it also came with the consequence of a visionary's seclusion; an alien's solitude, as the song "Space Loneliness" divulges. With its almost drunken, bluesy swaying, over which Ra plays an almost frantic and neurotic piano part, the song paints the picture of someone searching the night in a dark city for a place to surrender an aching and tireless sorrow. Ra's identity was as full of burden as it was inspiration and spirituality. Many times he's quoted as saying that he didn't want the responsibility of being a visionary, a teacher, a prophet, a leader, but that the universe pushed him into it. Forces beyond his control—perhaps his alien abductors

who elsewhere he refers to as his "guide[s]" (qtd. in Corbett *Extended* 311)—obligated him to do it, to admit his otherness and to charge it with myth, to become empowered in story, in Self, in creative action. He was forced to admit that he was alien, and that something within that identification could affect others' lives, even the whole world.

His recognition that he was of extraterrestrial consciousness—concealing a pure solar mind, and metaphorically in not belonging in Earth society—therefore caused him to take up a nearly surreal persona, and to leave behind the ordinary in search of something miraculous. In light of this realization he says, "I left my family, I left my friends, I left *for real*. I left everything to be me, 'cause I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white, not like Americans. I'm not like nobody else. I'm alone on this planet" (qtd. in Lock, *Blutopia* 38). Beyond the human, the racial, the national, he harbored a singular, utterly distinctive and solitary perception. For a visionary of such capacity, embodying this aloneness meant answering the call of the unknown, becoming the leader, the quixotic truth teller, the shamanistic sound-physician, even if it was lonely.

He was forced to step into an unlikely and strange seat of power as an individual to tell a story that few would believe, to wield powers that few would understand. "I've been to some other planets, I've talked to some other beings. I've seen some dances that you've never seen, I've heard some music you've never heard" ("Possibility" 26:40-26:49). Hearing the music of other worlds and translating it to the Earth-plane was Ra's specialty, his gift to humanity. This alien music born of an alien self, was transmitted altruistically "a singular vision that brought neither financial reward nor critical acclaim" (Lock, *Blutopia* 7). Ra didn't do his work for notoriety or money, he did it because he had to. When asked by one of his musicians in *Space is the Place* if they could take a

break following four straight days and nights of rehearsal—which, you may remember, was in preparation for a concert to potentially save the world—Ra cryptically replies "well, perhaps, but forces have been set in motion, forces that none of us can control" (55:10-55:24). Ra's work and personal myth was propelled by unknown forces, alien forces, that he was aligned with.

The considerable myth that his alienness engendered, a sort of transforming persona, projected "a discourse on otherness" (*Blutopia* 62) as Lock says, forcing those who came into contact with him to check their own unabashed belief in limited-ordinariness, to look past race, culture, history towards the unknown. This discourse celebrates "alien-ness…[offering] a way for African Americans to turn the dehumanizing 'alien' status imposed on them by slavery and racism into a new and positive mythic identity as 'another order of being'" (Lock, *Blutopia* 63-64). This positive new identity, carried by Ra as a stand in for all Black "aliens" then could work its wonder in person, projected outward by Ra himself. The otherworldly, extraterrestrial vibrations Ra emanated—in his visage, dress, and mytho-cosmic declarations—could entrance the people around him. Ra's presence alone, as its reported, could induce altered states. "[Ra] could capture you with his eyes, there was something going on" (qtd. in *Brother* 1:25-1:35) reports Schapp. When he'd start speaking, telling his own story, the spell could go deeper. "I've sat for eight hours, literally," relayed Sinclair "and listened to him talk, and people would come and go, and he had the same conversation, it kept going and extending…remarkable" (qtd. in *Brother* 43:58-44:22). Even for those who came to Ra ready to dismiss his cosmos he had a way of ingeniously making sure his interplanetary myth was heard even if it wasn't believed. Baraka relays an example: "there was this

German guy…interviewing him. He said, ‘Come on, Sun Ra, now tell the truth. You've never been to Saturn.’ Sun Ra said, ‘Yeah, you're right…but I have been to Jupiter!’ He wasn't going for any kind of literal interpretation of what he was saying” (“Transcript”). This remarkable retort, an act of storytelling in itself, could act as a pedagogical tool even if on the surface it appeared as witty subterfuge. Underneath it, lived a mythic wisdom that could communicate something true about not only Ra himself, his own otherness, but the actuality of the future as held by alienness. In a literalized way, space—the place Ra wanted us all to reach for, literally and metaphorically—was the landscape of the alien and so the alien, as in his own abduction scenario, is the guide to the future. Therefore, as Baraka explains,

> everything that [Ra] says, even those things that sound way out are really kind of explained in a kind of evolutional science. When he talks about "we travel the space ways, from planet to planet" there's no kind of law that says we will not immigrate to another planet. They've already got all these space probes and spaceships, they've been trying to get to mars for hundreds of years, and so forth…what he was saying in that regard was pretty scientifically possible. (“Transcript”)

Ra’s way of teaching this myth-science—which was not so far from a burgeoning factually scientific actuality—even to the uninitiated, was then received like the transmission of a sage or of an ancient philosopher and was meant to expand consciousness. As Marshall Allen explains “that was…to build…a greater conception of the music…if your mind is tied in a box, you’re not going anywhere” (qtd. in *Brother* 44:38-44:51). Hence, an othered alienness—carried out via mytho-scientific

storytelling—becomes a force of liberation. Alien myth becomes a path for humanity to tap into the "unknown that they need to know in order to survive" (qtd. in *Joyful* 52:53-52:57). The future is granted by attaining mental release, by allowing expansion, and integrating the alien into so-called reality, which adds to it a mythic potency, filling it with possibility.

The effect of Sun Ra's alienness then is potentially redemptive, a personal myth with a rejuvenating influence borne of personal experience and creative elucidation. From the anomalous comes a mythic reality which transforms and alters. But what did it mean for Sun Ra to continue to maintain his truth that he was an alien himself, to admit to abduction, to consistently encourage the expansion into outer space from such a personal location? As Lock says, it couldn't have been easy. "Anyone claiming to be from the planet Saturn will be the subject of continuing ridicule no matter how irrefutably out of this world and truly prophetic their music is" (Lock, *Blutopia* 13). Did his embrace of alienness affect his own sense of belonging? Was he truly alone on this planet? It may be that by embracing an alienness true to his being he was able to answer a calling, to adopt a persona that could free him from the shackles of the earthly, lend him a tremendous sense of purpose, and free others as well. Despite his detractors, he inspired belief all along the way. As trumpeter Archie Shepp commented, Ra's alien-personhood was not so far from some other more acceptable mythic pronouncements. "Man might've come from God, why couldn't he come from Saturn? I don't think it's an altogether outlandish position" (qtd. in Brother 46:20-46:35). Or as Yahya Abdul-Majid, tenor sax player for the Arkestra confirms "he convinced a lot of people—he convinced me—that he's definitely from somewhere else, in the form of a human being." (qtd. in *Brother* 55:00-

55:10). According to these two musicians Ra was truly not out on a limb in claiming what he did for his own mythic persona. In doing so he was pointing out that myth is all around us, perhaps it's so ubiquitous that we don't even realize it until someone picks an individually discovered, and deeply unconventional myth to inhabit.

In its inhabitation Ra staked a claim of extraordinary potential. From a zone truly individual he found a sense of self in otherness, alienness, proving that

> whether Sun Ra's trip to another planet was physical or psychic, visionary or imaginary its significance perhaps lies more in the way he represented it…as a science fiction scenario, as if to signal…that the only way to define a personal identity, to experience a form of rebirth…[is] by embracing a future in which…"the space age is here to stay" (Lock, "Right" 33).

In this sense, it was the myth that Ra cared about, and its transcendent potential. It was what he wanted us to receive, on a deep level; beneath logical barriers and enlightenment rationalities in hopes that we'd sense that the alienness he espoused was not as unfamiliar as we might imagine. Or as the lyrics to a recent Big Thief song advocate "When I say celestial / I mean extra-terrestrial / I mean accepting the alien you've rejected in your own heart" ("Spud" 2:58-3:11). Embrace of the alien in Ra's work is key, maybe even essential for the alter destiny he projected to come to be. "I am not of this planet," writes Ra "I can tell you things you won't believe. Twenty years ago I told them…men would walk the moon. And they told me, 'That's ridiculous.' But it happened. And they still say it's ridiculous. I was only trying to get them to see the coming age" (*Immeasurable* 460). As Kripal affirms, those who've had brushes with the alien, especially abductees, are

often granted "real world superpowers…telepathic gifts…precognitive abilities…clairvoyance…even, believe it or not, apparent literal floating or flight (levitation)" (5). Ra's gift of flight took place in myth, music—born of a profound personal otherness, a visionary experience of mythic proportions—and had a potency that could transform reality. "[Ra's] music," as Youngquist concludes "reaches other worlds. Maybe it takes an alien to change planet Earth" (9).

Angel

While the extra-terrestrial remained at the core of Ra's mythic identity he would often refer to himself as an angel as well. As Szwed writes "he said he was not a man, not a mortal, but part of the angel race, the dark spirit/angel race…a different order of being" (313-314). As is clear from the previous section the connection between aliens and angels remains quite strong in the collective imagination. The "technological angels" of the UFO mytheme, already palimpsested over eons of archetypally charged imagery of the aerial divine "have become a living myth" as Jung says (*Flying* 26-27). It is not so much of a stretch for Sun Ra to adjoin this other airborne mythic aspect to his personage. But why an angel? What did it have to do with the story he was trying to tell and why was this other mythological inhabitation important to the construction of his spiritual persona?

Aliens in the popular imagination are mostly disastrous, dangerous, sometimes libidinal, sometimes technologized creatures of a repellent nature, especially in recent years. Consider the massive, slimy, murderous insectoid of the *Alien* film franchise, or the psychopathic, warring drones of *Independence Day*, or even the skull-faced conspiracy secretly running the veiled capitalist machine in *They Live,* which, as in Sun

Ra's myth, is only overturned if people change the way they interact with reality. In the case of the latter film, by putting on glasses that wipe the doors of perception clean, a la Blake. But in Ra's myth, it's about a different mode—a mythic means—promoted by a mythic person. If that being appears as challenging, like an alien, everyone might not be able to get on board as easily. But in America, a Christian-dominated landscape, angels are deeply revered, seen variously as cute and helpful, radiant and full of grace. Despite their description in certain parts of the Bible appearing as multi-faced spiraling wheel-creatures in Ezekiel's vision or as lightning and torch-faced bronze bellowing humanoids in Daniel, angels collect a generous amount of acclaim. They are often imaged as shining, white beings.

For Sun Ra, adopting an angelic veil could allow him access into a very interesting and racially charged zone. As mentioned in a previous chapter he aligned African Americans with Lucifer, a "dark," fallen angel paradoxically symbolic of light. On a personal level, he saw himself uber-connected to these mythic figures of the Christian tradition. "I'm very well in tune with the angel of death…and Lucifer…and whatever you got" he claimed "they're all my friends" (qtd. in *Blutopia* 38). To be among angels, even to be a dark angel amidst their orders, allows access to a world accepted by white people and white Christian culture. Largely angels are depicted as light-skinned, and retain a symbolism of purity. For Sun Ra to infiltrate this revered archetypal landscape means to threaten its white-washed appearance—in effect, suggesting that *all* Black people might be angels—and to claim, in yet another mythic frame, that Blacks deserve the divine value they've had stripped from them. To claim angeldom for African Americans is also to challenge all the stereotypes that paint Blacks as anything less than

divine. In fact, Ra's greatest afront to these stereotypes comes with his claim that "angels managed to enter the country through slavery…because blacks were taken in through the Department of Commerce rather than Justice…therefore mixed up among humans you have angels" (Szwed 314). The confrontational speculation that white people may have at one point enslaved angels, when read as a condemnation of slavery itself, becomes a poetically searing testimonial.

He took this point in a different direction when he suggested that all great jazz musicians—especially ones he had worked and found a musical home with—were angels as well. "He even went so far as to suggest that Fletcher Henderson and Coleman Hawkins were not men but angels" Lock affirms (*Blutopia* 25). His community of fellow creators was chock full of angels, the progenitors of an American music that Ra was now at the vanguard of. Some of the Arkestra even picked up on this, with June Tyson at one point declaring "I'm an angel, I ain't got nothing to do with no woman" (Yahya Abdul-Majid qtd. in Brother 40:00-40:20). To be an angel for Ra meant to be superior to the human and to be capable of more supernatural happenings. As Ra told a baffled interviewer in the mid-80's

> I'm really not a man, you see, I'm an angel. And if I was a man I couldn't do anything because man always fails you know, he's so limited. He doesn't have the right to do things to make a better world. But angels are not up under the same code as a man. As an angel I can do a lot of things…but it doesn't make no difference, if you're an angel, you're a little a step above man. (*New Visions* 2:05-2:40)

Being an angel means not only to recover Black value, and to be of a superior creative community, but gives one the power to change things on Earth. Angels like Sun Ra himself come from another world. “I am another order of being” (*Immeasurable* 460) he frequently claimed. Angels like Sun Ra are something totally different from humanity; they possess a “code” that affords access to types of power not known in the human realms, for purposes not guessed at by humans. “There are different orders of being,” Ra maintained “for each order has its own way and weight of being, just as each color has its own vibration” (qtd. in Szwed 313).

The orders of angels possessed some very inspiring characteristics for Ra. While briefly teaching at Berkeley he assigned Geoffrey Hodson’s *The Brotherhood of Angels and of Men* in which angels were taxonomized as “those of power, of the healing arts…of nature…beauty and art, and of music, angels of music are god’s instrument: they glow with the color of their song” (Szwed 313-314). These angelic orders, full of color and vibration, music, power, capable of healing, and possessing the natural instrumental: the orders of angels are a perfect mythic pattern for Sun Ra to charge his own myth with. On a spiritual level he naturally belonged among such company. Angels for Ra are mediating musicians with transcendent powers. They’re linked to the beauty, art and vibrancy that he also found in Egyptian culture. Being god’s instruments, angels are also part of the Creator’s band, which Sun Ra was leading on Earth.

It’s important to note that angels, in the way Ra engages them, stretch back in their musical, transformative capacity into the ancient world, all the way to the Pythagorean musical structure of the universe and the “spiritual beings” which are responsible for moving the “celestial bodies” (James, *Music* 71). These “heavenly

Intelligences, which motivated the cosmic spheres in [ancient belief]…are transformed in the Christian era into angels" (James, *Music* 71). By the sixth century these "celestial hierarchies" consisted of "nine choirs of angels, each triad being assigned to a part of the trinity" (Roob 40) producing "divine music" (Roob 91). By the time of Thomas Aquinas, as James tells us, these ancient musical figures of myth, reconfigured as angels, were still thought to be conducting the universe—which remained to some degree a musical place. As Thomas wrote in a letter to a friend "if we admit that the angels move the spheres, no official source, that is, no saint could deny this proposition…therefore the conclusion is: everything that moves in nature is moved by the Ruler; the angels transmit the motion to the spheres" (qtd. in James 71). The belief is carried out in the Renaissance imagination, at which point, as James says, it begins to become an "underground" (113) or creative cosmology, something carried on by artists and mystics rather than the scholastic clergy or enlightenment science.

By inhabiting this cosmos, in essence, embodying the musical angel, Ra inherits this rich tradition, and takes on all the powers of the angelic orders—he aligns himself with ancient forces which control the structure and function of the universe through sound. Ra as a "different order of being" reveals himself as one of the "orders" of musical angels, able to wield powers that alter and shape the very cosmos: to make a better world. He places himself among the orders of the angels in order to substantiate his own transformative and initiative authority—a divinization which could allow him to transmute humanity and life on Earth. But not from an earthly plane, from a heavenly locale, from the resonating rung of a crystal sphere. Ra, darkly angelic, might descend with his "band of angels"—as the famous Black spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot"

says—and begin "coming after" humanity. Ra's own sounds might accost his listenership, blasting the music of the spheres into the ears of unsuspecting humans, making their own bodies resonate with a sympathetic music—*music humana*—and come alive. A difficult, cosmic music for a more awakened humanity. As Ra explains:

> they haven't heard but maybe about four strings in their head vibrated. All the rest of the strings up there all these years—nothing happening. Now, suppose I play some new sounds, it's gonna make those strings in their ear vibrate. It might hurt their head at first, but then that's 'cause they haven't used their ears! They haven't heard these sounds. But the instant that string vibrates, then that's another string that's alive. Let's pull all these strings, hit a chord and make them all vibrate. Then the person will be more alive than they've ever been. (qtd. in Corbett *Extended* 311)

Angelic musicianship opens people, by way the mystic concordance of their own bodily instrumentation to a whole cosmos of sound and being. Ra then embodies an original definition of the angelic archetype, from "the Greek *angelos*, denoting 'one who announces or tells, a messenger'" (*ARAS* 680). Angels in this sense are "intermediaries" (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 22) between the divine and the human realms, granting access to "supernal regions of knowledge and information" (*ARAS* 680). With Ra's music comes an ability to spirit otherworldy experience directly into a person's soul, instigating what might be called "angelic encounter," an experience that the writers of ARAS claim is of profound "numinous insight or immediate, portentous intimation of possibilities [that] consciousness scarcely comprehends" (682). In short, a run in with an angel could mean

an ecstatic awakening or be "potentially annihilating" (*ARAS* 680) as the poet Rilke translated: "Every angel's terrifying. Almost deadly birds / of my soul" (13).

Ra, as a Luciferian harbinger of a better world through angelic music and presence, then brings this kind of supernatural challenge to the fore. His stimulating sound, potentially obliterative, might "trumpet us to…creative awakening; herald…psychic unfolding" (*ARAS* 682). To witness Sun Ra as an angel and to hear his music might be an opportunity for personal transformation. "We've reached the end of the road," he said "there are superior forces" (qtd. in Corbett *Extended* 314). As one of these superior forces Ra felt he had been granted a "right and authority to change the planet. Every nation on the planet, to change it for the betterment, because they don't know what to do themselves" (qtd. in Corbett *Extended* 317). Angels operate under a superior code and can institute vast changes to reality. Sun Ra, in his bearing as angel, in his eminence as a divine musician of the spheres, is able make changes to the way things are simply by being angelic. This might lead towards personal and collective transformation.

Angelic Rights

Despite the empowering quality of an angelic embodiment, being an angel still comes with a tension for Ra. While a more universal power is instilled in him, an authority to shape cosmos and Earth, the question remains—can angels garner the respect and support they rightly deserve in society? Angels—as a code for Black Americans, artists, and anyone else not readily accepted into ordinary societal schemas—also symbolize a sense of strangeness, dissimilarity, beauty, and spiritual superiority in Ra's

persona cosmos. Part of an angel's exceptionality means being "other" and othered—celestial, skyward, not of this world. Angels, like aliens—being representative of the outcasted, the scapegoated, the feared—lack respect, a place, and a positive identity on planet Earth. As Ra told an interviewer in 1971 when asked what could be done to save the planet he explained:

> the human race has always looked for freedom, they set up rules and all kind of standards for humans and they never passed any kind of rules or a constitution for other type of beings. For instance if another type of being comes on the planet then he hasn't got any rights. But I don't suppose they ever thought about it….say that there are other beings in the universe, and what country do you have that would give any body any rights if they land?...but on this planet according to a lot of ancient scriptures and philosophers…not only do you have humans on the planet, you have angels on the planet. So now you don't have a government in the world that would give angels any rights although they're teaching it in churches and other places—"there are angels"—yet I don't know of any country that has any rights for angels. ("Helsinki" 3:50-5:50)

In a sense, Ra is cryptically stating that critical aspects of his own personality, his state of being—his Blackness, his creativity, his visionary quality, his connection to a more mythic, invigorating cosmos—are actively outlawed. His very beingness is shadowed, refused by governments, countries and citizens alike; angels are not part of this world, not welcome here.

Angels are aliens, in the most earthly sense of the word. “Rights” for angels then translates as acceptance, respect, and the welcomeness. Ra’s challenge to us—and to the world in general—is to learn to accept otherness, even celebrate the gifts of the other, consciously incorporating this alien generativity into the fabric of a renewed destiny. What would this mean for humanity’s life if the Black-mythic-alien-angel spirit were genuinely recognized on Earth? What would it mean for an “unhuman” artist-angel like Sun Ra to be celebrated? It would mean nothing less than a total spiritual rebirth on Earth and rescue from destruction. It is humanity’s lack of acceptance, our collective villainization of the “dark” and strange—our demonization of those different than ourselves—which has conjured our own destruction. Our love of angels, an obsession of pure whiteness, has made us demonic, and unable to witness the deeper presence of the angelic symbol, which for Sun Ra, is complex and personal.

The angel is therefore a symbol of oppositional conflict and potential healing, incorporation—a joining of inverses into a totality, a whole-making. “When angels speak” writes Ra “they speak of cosmic waves of sound… / In opposition outward bound… / Synchronizing the waves of darkness / Into visible being / Blackout! / Dark Living Myth-world of being” (qtd. in Szwed 199). The sound of dark angels synchronizes, pulls darkness into light, joins the inner and the outer, makes what is too dark bright, and that which shines, dim. Ra’s angel-music equalizes, balances—it is the symbolic sense of justice in mythic practice.

It is angels from the other world, like Ra, who come with this aligning capability, as another poem describes “I call you friends / Angelic brothers / For of the world of / That which is not the world / The unknown-twin dimension-being. / Are you as I am

Other Eternal To Be" (*Immeasurable* 69). The symbolic sense of the angel as identity is revealed in these words, for angels represent what is "to be." Angels are a state of becoming, in personhood. They are "other" and "eternal," mythic, bringing that other world into this one. What is that other, more mythic world, like? What do angels carry with them that could be offered to humanity? As Sun Ra writes it is the indescribably "delicate mystery of love" (*Immeasurable* 69) that is native to the angel. Angels, surprisingly, are for Ra linked with love as the album title *When Angels Speak of Love* further suggests. Otherness then, the alien-angel message, is care, acceptance—connection. This may be what he meant when he wrote that the human world needed a "Comprehension response" (qtd. in Szwed 315) to the world of the angelic. A heart reception.

While Ra's angelic plea for a deeper understanding of the other began as a racial cipher, and to some degree always remained that way, it moved outward towards a call for transcendent acceptance—a cosmic welcoming of the ordinariness of the mystical in each individual and their resonance as an instrument of the cosmos. As he told a stunned crowd during a concert in 1988 "my measurement of race is rate of vibration—beams, rays…in the scheme of things even the least of the brothers has his day, and when you realize the meaning of that day, you will feel the presence of an angel in disguise" (qtd. in Szwed 313). Those who seem to be unimportant, ordinary, cast aside, may contain the power of heaven and those who appear to be full of power, value, and strength may be weak and false. Race cannot be a lens for understanding the world. Think deeper: light, sound, vibration, symbol. The divine is with us in person. For Ra to inhabit that cloaked seraph, to take the chance on stimulating a sense of understanding in those he spoke to

and played for; to attempt the conjuring of an incandescent love in his listenership and the world at large, risked the possibility of instituting that other, angelic order of being on Earth. The beams, rays, sounds, and songs he brought with him could express that kind of love, potentially granting Sun Ra himself "his day"; his chance "to be" in active transmission of his supernatural message.

In this Ra may have truly been stepping into a Luciferian role, having fallen to Earth, to illuminate "the paradoxical association between rebellion and the fall into consciousness" (*ARAS* 680). While rebelling against Earth's incomprehensible lack of sympathy and understanding, Ra offered love, radiance, and an opportunity for new, mythic state of becoming. Rather than explaining this sublime aspect of his persona he inhabited it, fully. Maybe angels don't even have to speak of love: sunbursts speak in dark disguises. From an unexpected place emerges a whole other map for living, a different kind of spirituality, a new kind of sun rises from the heart of a deep, dark cosmos. In bringing these mythic qualities to the fore Ra was able to stake out further ground for his mythic personhood, claiming another powerful mode of creation and presentation. "Angels are pure spirit," writes Szwed "they don't make mistakes" (314). For Ra to dwell in such an ethereal, spiritually united state allowed that otherworldy love to stream into reality with the force of the divine itself. As Szwed confirms, the "light and sound of [the angel] is an echo of God's voice and eyes" (Szwed 314). Another order of being indeed, which Sun Ra allowed to shine throughout his life, showing us yet another way to embody myth on Earth.

The Living Myth

"I am the presence of the living myth," Ra claims in *Space is the Place* (17:15-17:25). This assertion resides at the very heart of Sun Ra's program—a key to the personal mythos he was generating. With this claim Sun Ra stakes an even more abstract and transcendent privilege than he does with either his alien and angel personas: he claims to be the embodiment of myth itself, on Earth. Myth, as you will remember, is the antithesis of history, of the "bad truths" propagated by mainstream religion and white culture; the racist and war-obsessed ethos of the so-called Western world, which only ends in destruction. That reality is no good. "Those who live by reality are slaves of truth," says Ra "it's a kind of narcotic" (qtd. in Szwed 317). To become *the* living myth—an archetypal title if there ever was one—instead channels the unknown, the enigmatic, the impossible and makes it real, in action and in person. It is a living force in opposition to reality, which can be inhabited; a dynamism which contains vast swathes of secret knowledge, nourishing wisdom, lineages of magic and prophecy. To live myth grants access to humanity's entire storehouse of hidden power, the arcana of unconscious and occulted knowledge. "Knowledge is laughable when attributed to a human being," Ra alleges (*Joyful* 00:50-01:00). Real knowledge is born out of the unknown—the mystery of the universe and of the mythic regions of story and vibration that echo from beyond time. To embody myth itself granted him access to the force of myth, resting in the latent regions of the human psyche. It could take him, and us with him, beyond reality into a space more nourishing, and supportive than is commonly offered. It could potentially replace the bad reality that most of us are mired in, and controlled by. It could make a new world from a better, more honest, magical source. Myth could touch reality,

altering it permanently. And Sun Ra could be a part of that by channeling myth avidly into this reality, in his music, but perhaps even more importantly, with his presence and as a key aspect of his identity.

As we've seen Sun Ra viewed himself more like a holy ghost, a demon, an alien, an angel, and a spiritual being, than a human. His personhood was a mythic zone, a fluxing state of becoming, which maintained a bearing beyond this world, even while living in it. From the vantage of these other mythic personae it is only a small step—well, maybe for someone as expansive as Ra—to claim *all myth* as an element of his being. From the embodiment of various mythic and archetypal figurations to the power of myth itself. To step into a vast region in which one contains the entire spectrum of mythologies is to become truly transcendent. To become utterly mythic might even grant the ability to transform the planet and all of its people: an "impossible" task. When asked about his sense of personal responsibility for the planet, Ra answered "I like challenges…I'm a Gemini, so that means I'd be quite pleased to do the impossible" (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 316).

Therefore, instead of merely teaching myth, telling stories, becoming a scholar or academic teacher, Ra makes myth the basis of his very personhood. Sun Ra, in a truly ingenious turn, *becomes* myth. He vibrates at the frequency of mythology. He dissolves an earthly identity and institutes something bigger, stronger, more ancient, and more futuristic in which to live. This acknowledges that story itself, borne of unknown sources, deep psychic awakening, is something that an individual can access, a sort of storehouse—not unlike Jung's collective unconscious—that anyone might gain entry to, with the right ritual procedures. And it's something that a modern person can *live,* as the

ancients did for thousands of years. Moreover, as Campbell says, myth is inherently personal: "what myth does is provide a field in which you can locate yourself" (*Pathways* xvi). Myth is about self-discovery and can even induce individual awakening.

For Sun Ra, personal myth is life: his identification with myth—and his own myth—was total. He followed the route of personal mythic discovery that Campbell suggests. "The way to find your own myth is to determine those traditional symbols that speak to you and use them…as bases for meditation. Let them work on you" (*Pathways* 97). Ra collected symbols from all over the world, most obviously from ancient Egypt, pan-African traditions, ancient Greece, medieval and Renaissance Europe and made them part of his personal spiritual practice and creative ritual life. As we can see from his private library which appears in the indices of *The Immeasurable Equation*—cataloged by Szwed and James Jacson following Ra's ascension from the planet—a plethora of texts touching on a wide diversity of religious, occult and spiritual traditions are present. Sun Ra's cosmos of symbolic knowledge was thick and vast. From H.P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, to Martin Buber's *Moses*, Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*, Khalifa Abdul Hakim's *The Metaphysics of Rumi*, Hilton Hotema's *Ancient Tarot Symbolism Revealed*, Jung's *Psyche and Symbol*, Gareth Knight's *A Practical Guide to Qabalistic Symbolism, Vol. 1*, *The I Ching*, *The Quran*, Derek and Julia Parker's *The Complete Astrologer*, Edouard Schuré's *From Sphynx to Christ, An Occult History*, which represent "only a small fragment of Sun Ra's lifelong reading itinerary"—as Klaus Detlef Thiel annotated in 2005 (*Immeasurable* 481)—he gathered a scholar's worth of information for his own uses. But unlike a stalwart scholastic he did not shy away from something as pseudo-academic as Robert Temple's *The Sirius Mystery* which, as Thiel

summarizes, claims that "the Egyptian, Sumerian, and Dogon civilizations were founded by aliens from the Sirius star system who are now ready to return" (qtd. in *Immeasurable* 481). This is all to say Sun Ra's search for the symbols was ceaseless and, to some degree, boundless. He actively combed the spiritual traditions for symbols that could be a part of his mythic program, ones that lit up his own life, and incorporated them in such a way that the symbols could resonate anew. As he writes "the things I do and say are of necessity a magnification and at the same time a nullification of calculated myths and vicar-images" (*Immeasurable* 467). In a sense, from the wilds of historical myth he dismantled and remade myths and their symbols in his own image, to engage "NATURE…INTUITION… [and the] LIVING SYMBOLS OF DISCIPLINE" (*Immeasurable* 467).

These symbolic entities appear in his work and life in interesting and enigmatic ways. He would integrate ritual African dance forms in the Cosmo Drama, inscribe the protective runic *Vegvisir* on cymbals, and would don himself in animal skins in the imitation of Shamanic practice. He included a hooded mirror-faced figure in *Space is the Place*—which appears earlier in Maya Deren's seminal film *Meshes of the Afternoon*—invoking a mirror's symbolic "ability to [magically] communicate with nature, as well as a tool used in shamanistic practices to communicate with gods" (Yeo Reum 49). Album covers would be decorated with images of parading Thoths, pianos bedecked with shining *Ankhs*, collaged obelisks, psychedelic pyramids, metallic, homemade sun-ray amulets, and the blazing eye of Horus. Images of Lucifer and other devils and angels appear too, as well as snakes suggesting both the serpent of the garden of Eden and of kundalini yoga. The inclusion of these symbols and countless others that will go unlisted

here created a world around Sun Ra, fashioning a "mythically inspired" (Campbell, *Pathways* 89) space to inhabit. He dissolved his own reality to be contained by myth.

His name joined the outward symbolic decoration of his life and work with the inner inhabitation of a mythic beingness. For "Ra" was not merely the Egyptian sun god for Sun Ra but a sort of spiritual personage found in the phonetic equations of language, which then granted him a name of symbolic power. As he claimed, to be "Ra" meant to be aligned with the authority of religion. "Religion," he asserted "is…on my side…I mean aside from the fact that the creator is a music lover…'cause look, the letters R-E, why that's just another way of saying RA, my last name…so you see that religion is just the legion of RA…it's a peaceful thought" (qtd. in Szwed 86). "Ra" even connected him to the Abrahamic religions by way of language. Doing a bit of rogue charting of cross cultural religious syncretism he riffed "it's very interesting to note that there is 'ra' in the middle of 'Israel': Is-ra-el. Take away the 'ra' there is no more Israel. It's very interesting. And there is 'ra' in France as well" (Szwed 86). "Ra" moreover is not only the syllabic building block of a national identity but a spiritual one too, which undergirds a "Western" religious identity at its base. For Ra this was key to his identity as an individual and myth maker. His name gave him the license to dismantle an earthly identity and be reborn of his own endless story, which spans all of cultural and religious history. In a rare turn, he admitted to an interviewer that his name had originally been Herman Blount, but then morphed that name to reveal his true identity as that of Sun Ra, as he explains

> Herman' reversed is "nam(e) reh" ("Reh" with a silent h is one of the variant spellings of the name of the god Ra). "Herman" is also "Armand"

> in French; "Armand" (silent d) reversed is 'nam(e) ra," or "permutated," "Man Ra" (which also suggests Amon-Ra, the patron god of Thebes), and in fact for a while he considered calling himself "Armand Ra." (Szwed 86)

Even his Earth-given name reveals a mythic undercurrent if put through equational machinations.

As we've seen, Ra's entry into a mythic personage began with a visionary experience—an extraterrestrial initiation, which revealed to him an innate mythic identity and responsibility to the planet. For Sun Ra, the grappling with the mythic was deeply personal and essential. As he once explained, he felt his own life was the field of cosmic struggle: "there are forces trying to hold me back. And other forces trying to help me onward. And I'm the battleground!" (qtd. in Szwed 373). The call to myth, for him, was persistent and unending. An active engagement with the creation of new myths, he was told, could produce "happiness for and from the greater universe" (*Immeasurable* 467). A personal myth borne of natural, intuitional study—a deep engagement of the symbolic realm—built for collective transformation on the largest scale. "I've been told by these [superior] forces that it can be done" he maintained. Having had an initiation into the mythic realms via psychic experience—a mythic "seizure" as Campbell calls it—Ra instinctually instigates the creation of a "mythic world" (*Pathways* 91). He inhabits the realm of the visionary "gripped by [myth's] calling" (Campbell, *Pathways* 89) making him someone who will "sacrifice even his life…[to] give himself entirely to his myth" (89). For artists this goes even deeper giving their realizations the "force of living myth" (*Masks* 4). Living myth is a calling and a destiny for Ra in this vein, and also the key to what he wanted to project in person and performance.

Mister Mystery

Living myth, in Sun Ra's work, as enacted in performance, shows how all these symbolic strains fit together in a ritual context: the ceremony being an Arkestra concert. In a previously described performance that takes place in *A Joyful Noise* Ra, having been declared "the living myth" in song, strides out bedecked in flowing ritual garments and begins to affirm his mythic identity using a poetic incantation. Each pronouncement is echoed by the band in a call and response fashion. "I have many names / names of mystery / names of splendor / names of shame / I have many names / Some call me Mister Ra / some me Mister Re / you can call me Mister Mystery" (4:13-5:46). This speech gets at the idea of a "true" or secret name, a mytheme that shows up in Egyptian myth, in which the Egyptian Ra's name—the source of his power—is kept hidden. In one story Isis, wishing to rule the universe alongside Ra, discovers his name by way of subterfuge and magic. Nearly every mythology features divine figures who entertain an assortment of designations, names, and personae—in worship and story names superimpose or reveal certain kinds of power within a god. Sun Ra plays on this, taking on the formal—and very funny—"Mister Ra" which in a creative turn becomes "Mister Re," suggesting the alternative spelling of the Egyptian Ra's name as well as being a homonym of "mystery." Sun Ra's hidden name is therefore mystery itself, couched in the formality of his divinely-shared appellation. Mystery means myth in Ra's world, and so being "Sun Ra" is another way of claiming the mythic basis of his persona.

In *A Joyful Noise* the performance continues with June Tyson and Sun Ra parading around the stage arm in arm as the band launches into the song "Calling Planet Earth" which is a springboard for further clarifications of Ra's personal mythic power as

he chants "calling planet Earth! / calling Planet Earth! / I am a different order of being / I will be coming your way soon…planet Earth / … I represent a different kind of horizon / another kind of sunrise / another kind of sunset / the same sun is shining that was shining then" (9:20-10:35). With this evocation of an ancient Egyptian sun and its alter-planetary motion, offering a singular kind of illumination, Sun Ra prophetically invokes his own transformative, mythic presence, urging planet Earth to answer the call. Further, with these proclamations he enfolds other aspects of his mythic identity: the angelic, the alien, the ancient and the futuristic. With it he creates a ritual of mythic invitation, incorporating the wholeness of his mythdom, which is for the entire planet to partake. "A ritual," writes Campbell, is "the dramatic, visual, active manifestation or representation of a myth. By participating in the rite, you are engaged in the myth, and the myth works on you—provided that you are caught by the image" (*Pathways* 97). By activating his own personal myth in sound, song, poetry—in essence, chanting it to the whole world—Ra actively manifests his mythos, attempting to engage all of us with an image of a different kind of myth maker living a different kind of spiritual reality. In this he attempts to bring mystery to life through himself and his art.

This is living myth in action, one example of a continuous telling of a personal mythos, ritually invoked. And this is a key factor in understanding Ra's course as a living myth. He never ceased telling his own story, constantly keeping it alive. "My story is endless" (*Joyful* 11:00-11:50). Even when engaging a mainstream audience, as when a New York City interviewer for a prime-time NBC news piece asked him how he got the name Sun Ra, he replied "well the Creator gave it to me. He said that was the only name that would be able to help this planet. That one only." When the interviewer pushed

him—"that's on your birth certificate? Sun Ra!?"—Ra shot back "I don't have a birth certificate. Some kind of way it just disappeared" ("1983 Interview" 00:40-01:00). He protected the sanctity of his own myth with more myth-making, in a ceaseless and unassailable supplication. Ordinariness could not disturb it, and moreover it was central to Ra's intention, in the face of disbelief, to double down on the myth-science that he practiced. Confronted by the façade of a skeptical world's probing doubt Ra would implore a sense of wonder, his face breaking into a wry smile, he would speak his own truth with a naturalness that might come off as facetious.

But, indeed, Ra was never really joking, and his personal myth was far from a put-on. It was the way he conceived of himself on a deep level: a reflection of his true beingness. To be *the* living myth implies a truly titanic sense of self and an immense sense of accountability. There is gravitas in Ra's personal myth, that comes from the calling that he received. The Creator, his extraterrestrial guides, the angel-spirits of jazz that preceded him, and the visionary inspirations that urged his art-myth onward, were the bases of his life's creation and the part he felt he had to play in this world. He was not unlike other mythically oriented artists in this way. Like the poet and artist William Blake, whose vision Youngquist says "most closely approaches Sun Ra's," (54) Ra "responded to a reality of rationalized confinement with a vision of creative excess" and also like Blake used "art as a means of transforming the world, turning death into life" (Youngquist 54). I would add that both, importantly, had visionary experiences that verged on what we might call *psychic*—witnessing non-ordinary phenomena which then inspired mythic imagery in their artworks. From a non-ordinary psychic space both visionaries were able to witness a mythic zone within themselves, which could be

transmitted, shared with readers and listenership—inducing spiritual precincts wherever their work might tread. They both channeled angels and demons, gods and spirits, humanity's plight and the sanctity of the heavenly realms in their works; each did this to such a degree that it pervaded their beings. In short, both embodied myth so that it might be embodied by others. Their prophetic opuses still resonate deeply into the world.

We might also compare Ra to someone like Hilma af Klint, the late 19th century Swedish artist and mystic, who created paintings based on images she received from powerful spirits while conducting Theosophical séances. Like Sun Ra the entities that she channeled told her that she was to make works for the future, to create paintings "to convey the spiritual world" that would comprise a "temple" (Bashkoff 20). Like Ra af Klint's works, and specifically those she made as part of the series known as *Paintings for the Temple*, signify "a radical effort…to find visual expression for a transcendent, spiritual reality beyond the observable world" (Bashkoff 19). She has become known as one of the first European artists to use abstraction in her work. That this abstraction was born of a variety of spiritual interests also links her with Sun Ra. Her "idiosyncratic mix of religious and occultist beliefs, scientific concepts, and other intellectual trends of the day, which she drew from Christianity, Rosicrucianism, Buddhism, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, Theosophy…and…spiritualism" (Bashkoff 17) show her to have a sponge-like curiosity and connection to the spiritual realms that vies with Ra's. Her deep study and visionary experiences also led her to create a space of living myth. Her temple paintings could have titles like "Primordial Chaos," "Evolution," or "Altar Piece" were composed to abstractly reflect "the life of man" (Af Klint qtd. in Bashkoff 23). Like Ra her works were engineered to potentially improve life on Earth, using visual imagery.

These pieces, showing perfectly spherical egg-like auras swimming in a sea of darkness, geometric ladders ascending to a spiraling golden orb, a rainbow mandala ornamented with astrological symbols, or huge squiggling lines playing in a field of pastel pinks and greens, intimated a spiritual language and a totally new way of looking at reality itself. Also, in tandem with Ra, these were works not for her own time, which she felt could never truly receive them in their essential gravity, but for a forthcoming era in which they would change the consciousness of the world. Af Klint herself had this to say "the experiments I have conducted…that were to awaken humanity when they were cast upon the world were pioneering endeavors. Though they travel through much dirt they will yet retain their purity" (qtd. in Bashkoff 18). While the Earth itself could not receive her works in her lifetime they now speak to a new generation of art lovers and mystics interested in the transcendent message that was her calling to transmit. The myth she was termed to live lives on without her, generating spiritually electric effects in our current century. The same can be said of Sun Ra whose works continue to gain intergalactic steam in the post-modern era.

It's also worth briefly mentioning that many of Ra's album covers resemble Af Klint's paintings, both of which contain abstract images incorporating a variety of spiritual symbols and centralizing spirals and other circular shapes that gyrate and swirl, suggesting wind and other forms of natural and supernatural motion. Both Af Klint and Ra have the unique capability to absolutely bathe participants in their respective artworks—immersing them in a world very unlike the one that is supposed to be materially absolute. With their creations they actively instill an alter space which comes through their own beings first, a space suffused with living mythology.

A final artist to compare Ra to is Yves Klein the French conceptualist whose work was engineered, like Ra, via a more spiritually aligned form of art-making. His goal, also akin to Sun Ra's, was to instigate a different kind of Earth, and to do this he spun a personal myth of color and flight. As Rebecca Solnit writes, to illustrate this Klein "painted a globe his deep electric blue…[making] a world without division between countries, between land and water, as though earth itself had become sky, as though looking down was looking up" (168-169). Solnit quotes art historian Nan Rosenthal as saying that "Klein used color…as though it could be an explicit and overtly political tool for ending wars" (169). Sun Ra's social activism was also made in the conception that violence could be halted through art. "Actually," Ra claimed "I could stop a war by getting' up above with a spaceship and playing some of my music. And they'll stop fighting…that's all you need. Sounds!" (qtd. in *Extended* 311). Klein and Ra both saw ascension as a tool of mystic transformation, for themselves—in their own art-life stories—and for the world.

Klein's most famous piece is a work of proto-performance art entitled *Leap into the Void* from 1960; a photograph which shows Klein ascending from a Paris building ledge and into the sky, "leaping as though he need not even think of landing…as though he were entering the weightless realm of space" (Solnit 170). This image encompasses Klein's mystical interests, as Solnit writes, with "the dissolution of the rational mind…and entering the void of pure consciousness" (170). It is also a triumphant artwork of personal mythologizing. The photograph was printed in a local newspaper accompanied by the headline "A Man in Space!" (Solnit 171). The article that followed detailed Klein's regular yogic study of levitation and how he meant to follow one of his

most beloved sculptures—"an aerostatic sculpture of 1001 blue balloons which…escaped from [an earlier] exhibition into the sky…never to return" (Solnit 171)—into outer space.

Klein's enactment of personal flight into space is an uncanny corollary for Ra's journeying among the stars, although it might be mentioned that Klein only intimated preparation for space flight while Ra travels back and forth from space with regularity and ease. But what's most important about them is that both considered their personal exoduses to be artworks of transcendence action. These are mythic moves carried out in creative practice. As Solnit confirms, the concept of leaping into the void is often interpreted as "a Buddhist phrase about enlightenment, about embracing the emptiness that is not lack as it seems to Westerners, but letting go of the finite and material, embracing limitlessness, transcendence, freedom, enlightenment" (172). Wrestling with these core mystical tenets and the symbology—contained in the image of outer space—of the unlimited were key to both Klein and Ra. They saw the void as home and destination, an initiatory mirror for the ridiculousness of earthly materialism, and a personal amulet holding together each of their personal mythologies.

Also like Ra, Klein invited others to join him in outer space as he once wrote "Come with me into the Void!...You who like me, dream / Of that wonderful void / That absolute love…" (qtd. in Solnit 172). Sun Ra's invitation into outer space also contains the possibility of attaining connection with transcendent love, as I mentioned earlier, and further affirmed by the lyrics of "Love in Outer Space" from *Night of the Purple Moon* which promises "love in its splendor…for everybody" (2:00-3:50). These personal myths of Ra and Klein each offer the deliverance into a heavenly, divine ardor—an ancient mysticism unveiled in a modern artistic context.

These comparisons reveal how an artist with an otherworldly personhood can potentially alter expectations and perceptions of reality while instilling their own lives with a deep sense of meaning and purpose. Ra, like these others, was moved by a calling to embody a personal mythology, and even further, to encompass myth itself, in hopes of inducing personal and collective transformation—remaking the world according to myth. To become the keeper of myth, of mysticism and of mystery, and to make it the core resolution of one's being, implies a liberatory potential. For Ra the possible had been tried by humanity, and it had failed. As he professed:

> With all the churches and all the schools you got, all the governments you got you're supposed to have a better planet than this. Well then, man has failed, spiritually educationally governmentally, he's failed. Well then, he should be a good sport and say 'I give up. I need help.' Well, I'm right here as a bridge for them to get help. And they could listen and see, what am I talking about? They'd get a surprise cause I'm talking about equations that in their books: books from way back in ancient Egypt, in Greece, and Rome and their philosophers been talking a touch of everything I'm talking. (*Joyful* 8:35-9:17)

Not only did Ra know and contain ancient knowledge, but in his embodiment of it he affords planet Earth the connecting bridge between what's been tried and the access to the omniverse age, the eternal, immortal realm of all-encompassing myth in an ever-expanding universe. As Sun Ra claimed earlier "all that's left now is the myth…It's potentials are unlimited" (*Joyful* 22:45-23:00). His personification of myth was the "gift" he claimed he had to "offer this planet" and his music merely "one of the bridges to the

treasure house of it" (*Immeasurable* 471). "I am doing what I am supposed to do, I am being what I came here to be," (*Immeasurable* 471) he wrote. To be the living myth means to blot out the bad truth and replace it, personally, with "the neglected mathematics of MYTH" delivering the "equation differential potential impossible…otherness alter-isness" (*Immeasurable* 469). His own myth could convey this, a prospective vice future in the making from the generative depths of his own othered self. He was already an alter-being, carrying forces borne of the impossible, to dispense to humanity. In this sense, to be a myth makes the impossible possible, simply by being it. Personal myth can change the course of history, even reshape reality, as was his ambition.

The Alter Destiny

This dissertation began by talking about an apocalypse, a re-creation story that Sun Ra wanted to tell—a way of reinventing a bad world from scratch. It ends with the elaboration of a sister concept: that of the *Alter Destiny,* making this writing somewhat of a closed loop, an ouroboros—a non-linear container for holding one person's endless story—an accidental intimation of infinity. This dissertation ends in an equation which is about remaking the world according to myth. We are after the end of the world again, where Ra's endless story finds its initiatory point of departure.

In this vein Ra's myth was never just about his private world—the flashing of the images and symbols of his own soul—it was about how that inner knowledge, given to him in visionary experience, might affect the outer, "real" world, changing it permanently. It was about his experiences on Earth, and history's dangerous

machinations which needed to be overcome. To effect a repair to society on the whole therefore requires a creative response far from the ordinary. "If…history," writes Lock,

> largely shaped by the "obscene adventure" of slavery, has made the vision of a better future that much more necessary as an aid to survival, its particular horrors also must have made such a vision harder to sustain, requiring an optimism-against-the-odds (and a means of expressing it) that might be regarded as impossible. (*Blutopia* 3)

Sun Ra's myth and his music, therefore inevitably lead towards the alter destiny—the necessary change that could come out of an engagement with the metaphysical fluctuations of living a mythic life. Perhaps life could be transformed on Earth and a new future made if humanity were willing to employ this prospect. Ra's personal myth exemplifies this possibility. Sun Ra experienced a different order of being and actively sought to do the impossible in his own life and work. He had made a cosmos for himself so dissimilar from the ordinary that it did in fact alter his community, creating an alternative universe that traveled with him and his band, effectively changing the lives and exploding the minds of people his art reached. In the culture that his music instigated an alter destiny *is* realized, for Sun Ra, his band, and his fans.

To be a living myth delivers on metaphysical improbabilities—in the face of the "programming" of collective normality, absolutist materialism, insidious racism, and the other entrenched isms of the "possible," making the mythic real: apprehending the incredible within reality. A personal perspective, a self-contained myth, which effects the collective realm. Myth, because "truth is not malleable, whereas myth can be shaped. The future people are talking about is no good; we need to do the impossible" (Szwed 315).

The impossible is made possible by way of myth, it is the machinery of collective transformation. “I believe,” Ra posited “that if one wants to act on the destiny of the world, its necessary to treat it like a myth” (qtd. in Lock, *Blutopia* 61). To treat the world’s story—reality’s supposed confines—as a myth implies its flexibility, and that every bit of history up to this point has, in some sense, been an act of storytelling undertaken by humanity. If they were humans with misguided power, their influential rendering of the world is delivered through a skewed lens. Their narratives have been guided by unfortunate beliefs: by limited, white sciences; philosophies based in a primitive sense of how we should treat one another and the planet; and by a small group of dominant religions distributing hazardous lies, creating a potentially disastrous so-called existence. As the song “Discipline 27-II” mockingly queries “do you really think *this* is life!?” (2:40-2:45) But Ra felt he saw to the heart of the problem, as he explains:

> I’ve studied different philosophies…religions, and different people, and…have acquired a conviction that something is lacking in most cultures, in each country, in each religion, in each philosophy…I discovered the flaw. These people are never in tune with nature. And when these people are in power and have responsibilities and need to act, well, of course…nothing is going to work. (qtd. in Szwed 309)

This creates a “society of mediocrities, which is what he would describe it” comments Baraka (“Transcript”) and a disempowered mish-mash of “civilizations” with no recourse but to live in the half-baked “truths” imposed upon them (Baraka, “Transcript”). They have no myths which could nourish and guide them, only false stories which instill pain and generate deception.

Like Campbell, Ra believed that humanity had come unstuck from the actual guiding forces of the universe—and their own souls, a natural phenomenon. Earthlings, Ra said, have "no music that is in coordination with their spirits. Because of this they're out of tune with the universe" (qtd. in *Space* 42:50-43:05). We are guided, or mis-guided, at best, by mediocre ideas and at worst disastrous ones. But it's possible to change things, and myth has the power to do it. Nature, intuition, and connection, can be reinstated. Myth can offer frameworks for better living, and a guiding light for realizing a dissimilar trajectory. "All they need is something they know is true," Ra prophesied "but they don't have anything to hold onto" (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 313). Humans, he felt, need a deeper, more spiritual lens with which to view their world. If they had this it could reveal that "people have the right to make their own destiny" as Ra proclaimed (qtd. in Henderson 43). With the proper escort, someone aware of the pitfalls and mythic mathematics of achieving such a task, a change in fate becomes conceivable: people's right to play a part in the unfolding of life in the universe becomes obtainable. Myth is an empowerment for a more transcendent human agency in the cosmos.

Sun Ra conferred access to this sense of mythic possibility. In *Space is the Place* he broadcasts "*I am* the alter destiny…the presence of the living myth" (17:15-17:25). Not only does Ra consider himself to be a myth incarnate, but he feels he contains its inevitable, mutating dynamism encompassing "the mathematics of an alter-destiny…the pattern for the spirit of man!" (Ra qtd. in Youngquist 223). In this his personhood attempts to constellate the necessary, mythic equations in the flesh, that can alter reality and history.

To be the living myth and to deliver an alter destiny he saw as his own calling, *his* destiny—an unavoidable responsibility. The "forces," of the universe, he maintained, referring to his abduction experience, "have told me that it can be done, a substitute future, a vice-future…an alter-destiny can be developed, a substitution in an equation, for the future, too, is an equation'" (qtd. in Szwed 315). He carried this knowledge because of his extraterrestrial contact: he had been shown the way and he had been lent a cosmic map for instituting it. Moreover, he believed, the force of altering myth was contained within himself. "I'm dealing with things on a very meticulous basis," he told Corbett:

> because my job is very difficult—impossible. My job is to change five billion people to something else. Totally impossible. And that's why I've played the low profile. Because it can't be done but I have to do it. I'm told by superior forces: 'It has to be done, and you can do it.' So who am I to doubt it? Everyone else can do the possible things, why should I waste my time with that? Everything that's possible's been done by man; I have to deal with the impossible. And when I deal with the impossible and am successful, it makes me feel good because I know I'm not bullshittin'. (qtd. in *Extended* 313)

The lack of doubt in this statement is telling. His calling was genuine, born of a mythic reality but also, in a certain sense, factual and plain. There was something he had to do, and it was beyond what we ordinarily think of as "possible" according to present-day physics. But in Ra's myth-science, a metaphysical art practice, as in many scientific concepts native to Black, mystic culture, "there is little distinction made between science and the spiritual" as scholar Jayna Brown tells us (166). Moreover, he'd been transmitted

a sense of confidence in the efficacy of the alter destiny. Something about it was literally real to him, his myth somehow made it function—he had been told by the forces it could work. Vision makes it certain. Some secret magic had been activated within his story, and he had witnessed it come to life. The alter destiny in this regard, as Brown explains, is a "science" which searches for "innovative ways of knowing" in order to conjure "new forms of existence…[expanding] into the magical" (167). Ra takes the pattern for the spirit of humankind, a new design born of myth, and awakens it for the future, taking something that was never possible and making it an indispensable imperative. Sun Ra's myth makes the impossible *happen*.

When Ra says that myth's "potentials are unlimited" (*Joyful* 22:30-23:00) he is speaking to the fact that humanity has not met its potential, but that it still might, if they can see into the malleability and empowerment of story itself. They could adopt this mytho-magical prospect, incorporating it into their own beings, as Ra had, and become "gods…they have to realize that they are gods" (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 312). As he implores "wherever you came from you were made by an impossible being that has always been…you the products of that kind of creator…of something that great…you most certainly supposed to be doing better than you are on this planet as intelligent people…you got all these walls, all this destruction and that doesn't seem right for intelligent people" ("Possibility" 28:15-29:05). With this statement Ra entreats the people of Earth to a sense of awe at the incredible mystery of the universe and their own innate connection to it. This should inspire a striving for something better. Otherwise "man has no fate but to die and be in a box" (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 312). Alternatively engaging "another kind of code…you [can] move onto eternal things, and not be just *passé,* back

there in the past" (qtd. in Corbett, *Extended* 312-313). The alter destiny therefore aligns people with their own power—beyond earthly conceptions of life and death, born from notions of the possible—and allows them to *build* the future in the present, aware of their own godliness and connection to the mystery of being.

As the emissary, the living embodiment of this practice, Ra came to teach people that through his own magic—the myth he lived—a choice was available to them. He felt he had a part to play directly, on an almost telepathic level with his listenership, delivering alter-invocations, as he detailed

> I'm in a sort of psychic contact with people and I play what they need. Rather than sometimes what they want I play what they need, cause this planet needs a lot of things. It's practically terrifying to think you got something to offer to five billion people, but that's the way it has to be. Because you see…there's something that's facing people…and that's nuclear warfare. So then the way the forces are, it has to offer something else better for them. But they have to choose. This is a matter of choosing. Judgement day meant that people on this planet got to judge what is better for them, what they need. ("1991 Interview" 6:50-7:00)

His responsibility therefore was total: there was no going backwards to find an answer. Instead, Earth needed this alter destiny. Obliteration or transformation, those are the options humanity had gleaned for themselves. The human race must choose—must take part in the alteration.

Ra needed humanity to witness their folly and make the conscious decision to move in a different direction because the destiny humanity currently has, as Ra put it, is

"spelled D-O-O-M" (qtd. in *Possibility* 25:30-26:05). Moreover he reminded that its "impossible…to get out cause there's such a thing as karma. So then what must you do? You must appeal to god's impossible department because…the truth cannot save you" (Ra qtd. in "Possibility" 25:30-26:05). Humanity's actions had created the imminently imperiled world we see today but their own actions, their own thoughts could free them destruction. Referring to Earth he said "it's a magic kingdom here. People think certain thoughts and they start coming to be. Sickness and death and all that…if they believe they die and go to hell, undoubtedly they do. But it ain't real. It's all fixed up according to their imagination" (qtd. in Lock, *Blutopia* 60). Reality is in part invented by human conception, our beliefs, what we *think* is real. Myths reflect this back to us, instantiating our imagined realities. Therefore, humanity needed to think bigger: gather the transcendent image of outer space and make it a visionary destination.

In this regard the alter destiny is explicitly about personal and collective transcendence. He maintained that he was sent here to help this planet. A messiah of sorts, yes, but also the presence of something stranger. Myth itself. Ra came to grant the tools of authorship, the implements for rewriting the world story. A big-hearted, pedagogical offering for replacing the broken narrative with a natural, future-visioning sight. "The precepts of…truth," he writes "must be equationized and balanced / And understood. / Or else, it must be abandoned / And another truth placed in its place. / This is the idea of the greater age" (qtd. in Szwed 322-323). The greater age comes from rescripting what's been penned incorrectly. From the locales of broken reality through the paradox of the impossible conjured, change which must be instituted. Sun Ra's myth

posits transcendence as the gateway, the alter destiny as the blinding light of a supernatural abduction into another order of being.

His music which could reach "across the border of reality into the myth" (Ra qtd. in Szwed 329) was the prime means for delivering the alter destiny. Ra felt that in the sound of his music, his inner mythdom was transmitted to the listener, instituting a psychospiritual shift, as another poem indicates "The mirror of pure sound is a negative field / feel that photographs / The image-mind impression soul and psychic-self even the / potential / immediate alter-destiny / destinies" (qtd. in Szwed 323). As in the dynamic symbols of tone, à la Zuckerkandl, the alter destiny might be constellated just by people *hearing* Ra's music. By accessing it, humanity could be successful in "throwing off what he called a 'manufactured past,'…to embrace the future" and partaking in the "mental emancipation that he felt was necessary for…African Americans" but, at its core, needs to be acknowledged and embodied by "black and white alike" (Lock *Blutopia* 5). Because in Ra's view "the entire planet needs help" (Szwed 311) and there's no way around it.

Ra's goal with the alter destiny is then to prove to humanity that "what we accept as real is only a partial and subjective version of what is and could be" (Lock, *Blutopia* 60) and then to instigate the constellation of that insight, in music and in person. Ra's own being, a living myth, carried the blueprint for a new world, and his music delivered it to listeners on an unconscious level. But sometimes, in his songs, he would explain the need to leave the old behind and to vision a new conception of what could be. As the lyrics to "Somebody Else's Idea" make plain:

Somebody else's idea of somebody else's world

Is not my idea of things as they are

Somebody else's idea of things to come

Need not be the only way

To vision the future

What seems to be need not be...

For what was is only because of

An adopted source of things

Some chosen source as was

Need not be the only pattern

To build a world on (0:37-1:00)

This ebullient song—somewhere between bopping exotica and a swinging, new-age sing along—shows the shift from "somebody's else's" conception of reality to Sun Ra's: a mythic "pattern / To build a world on" (1:14-1:22). From history's degradation which belongs to the world, to Ra's sense of mystery, this song contains a transcendent opportunity for change. An "adopted source of things" is not the way to build a better world, instead Ra's myth contains the true means—a story containing metaphysical magic aligned with nature's eternal cosmic song.

On a very personal level, to initiate this impossibility through himself was Ra's way of finding belonging in a world that wasn't made for him. Rather than giving in to "the confusion and disorder which wastes the potential for beauty and happiness in our world" (Szwed 383) he instigated a better one through his own experience and work, "gaining the capability…of witnessing for all the peoples of Earth" (Szwed 383). Witness and magician of fate, Ra demonstrated that, in Kripal's words "both society and self are

stories" (223). As such anything is possible, reality is flexible, and all futures are myths to be made from the inside out—an alter destiny activated in the here and now.

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