

"My Music is Words" – The Poetics of Sun Ra

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues for a critical examination of the published writings of Le Sony'r Ra, also known as Sun Ra, a groundbreaking jazz musician and philosopher of the 20th century.

Recent redistribution of Sun Ra's musical output, which includes hundreds of releases on many record labels from the 1950's onward, has prompted a critical renaissance towards his influence on jazz orchestration, band management, do-it-yourself ethics, and structured improvisation. In spite of this resurgence of interest in his music, his written corpus has failed to produce a comparable level of criticism or discussion. It is my firm belief that it is the body of work's relative scarcity in print, not its value as literature, that has kept the material underground for such a lengthy period of time. With the recent republication of Sun Ra's daunting body of poetry and prose, the discovery of early manuscripts, and the surfacing of relevant critical essays, the time has come to analyze his poetic position within the context of African-American philosophical thought.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to the living memory of Le Sony'r Ra, whose home was not of this world.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The written corpus of musician and cosmo-philosopher Sun Ra, born Herman Poole Blount, illustrates a relationship to buried histories and folk forms that places him within a rich history of African-American intellectuals, despite his widely accepted cultural status as fringe artist and campy futurist clown. What connects Ra to such figures as Elijah Muhammad and Amiri Baraka is both his vast knowledge of world histories and a creative, poetic synthesis of these histories' myths, legends, and belief systems. I argue that Ra's writing is the clearest example of Ra's recombinatory philosophy, a body of work that moves from street-corner polemic handouts to concrete-romantic poetry in order to stress an alternative past and future for African-Americans.

The historical and social context of Ra's coming-of-age provides the lenses necessary to understand just how his apparent kookiness finds its root in traditional practice. A brief look at some key events during his lifetime provides a better understanding of his poetic references. His transformation from Birmingham-born Herman Poole Blount to space-bound Le Sony'r Ra in 1952 illustrates his place in the African-American spiritual continuum, a tradition where names are given through contact with the divine. Graham Lock identifies just how Ra affirms an African-American renaming tradition while simultaneously assuming the name of a non-Christian deity in order to distance himself from that same tradition (49-50). Ra's sense of divine inspiration is mirrored in a statement by Sojourner Truth regarding the importance of her renaming. "I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name [and] the Lord gave me Truth, because I was to declare truth to the people" (qtd. in Lock 49). Though the exact details of how Ra came by his spiritual moniker remain contradictory, he once told Ira Steingroot that "the Creator spoke to me one day and called me that" (qtd. in Lock 51). While Ra shares the renaming tradition with Truth, a paragon of the slave narrative, his embrace of the more ancient belief system of Egypt, combined with his dogged assertion that he was never born, is proof of his active attempt at using pieces of history and culture to build a personal belief system.

The decade immediately following his renaming was largely spent in Chicago, where he divided his time between musical practice and multidisciplinary research, largely in the area

of Biblical scripture and African-American history. Newly discovered manuscripts from this fertile early period of Ra's life provide new insights into exactly how he used a Baptist upbringing combined with Biblical study to launch a street-corner campaign that forwarded his unique scripture interpretations. The evangelical bent of Ra's rhetorical performances focused on Afro-centric readings of scripture in light of current events, as well as ambitious readings of popular clichés and maxims. Ra's lexicographical and numerological *bricolage*, which ranged from humorous limericks to Cabala-influenced auto-recombination, contributed to his overarching message – while the Bible held the key to man's happiness on earth, it had also been misinterpreted and used for unjust purposes. According to Ra, African-Americans were descendants of the ancient Egyptians, a people slandered and misunderstood as a result of inaccurate readings of the scripture.

In his introduction to the anthology of these unearthed manuscripts, John Corbett places Ra firmly within the continuum of what he calls "African-American grassroots intelligentsia," particularly in relation to his contact with the Nation of Islam. By using his writings and public declarations as pathways into the greater intellectual conversation already in progress among his peers, Ra was able to forward his unique readings of scripture, philosophy, race relations, and nationalism as responses and rebuttals to heated arguments that were already underway. I argue not only that, as Corbett points out, "Ra's declarations were in direct dialogue with those other figures of affiliated African-American intellectual life" in Chicago, but that that this association legitimizes Ra's work, rooting its more unbelievable elements in socially active and historically important revolutions of thought (5). Almost all serious study of Ra fails to include analysis of this intellectual exchange among Ra's group and the Nation of Islam. Despite the fact that they have been, for the most part, critically ignored, the newfound availability of Ra's missives from the heart of his philosophical activities prove without a doubt that his readings of tradition and culture as codes to be broken were embraced by the immediate peer groups surrounding him.

Ra's musical labors in Chicago eventually led him and his band, the Arkestra, to New York in 1961. It was during the turbulent 1960's that Ra's focus of study turned from Egypt to outer space. This shift from hermeneutics of the ancients to a philosophical inquiry of physical and metaphorical outer space was reflected in a similar change of writing style, one far removed from the didactic prose of his earlier years. Despite the airy abstractness of his

'60s poetry and his reluctance to fall in with the more standard sound-dependent poetry of his peers, Ra found an intellectual support system in New York just as he had in the windy city. I argue that this fellowship with other African-American intellectuals proves how his more esoteric, universalist approaches to black thought were embraced by more historically resilient figures and movements. That much of Ra's writing from this period has been as similarly ignored as his Chicago material seems to be more the result of Ra's self-aware otherness and ambivalence towards self-promotion than the content of the writing in question.

John Szwed's exhaustive Ra biography, Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra, delves into the meeting of minds between Ra and Imamu Amiri Baraka, Obie award winner and infamous '60's East Village poet and playwright. Baraka's activities and keen sense of networking brought him a grant through Lyndon Johnson's Operation Bootstrap, which he used to open the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School uptown in Harlem, and it was here that Ra and his bandmate-philosophers mingled with the more culturally fashionable members of radical black politics. Szwed makes the connection between Chicago's South Side and this northern center of "competing philosophies, religions, and politics," where "Garveyites, the Nation of Islam, the Communists, the Christians" and others held court (210). Baraka thought so highly of Ra that he asked him and the Arkestra to provide the live music to A Black Mass, a retelling of Elijah Muhammad's Yacub myth. What can we make of Baraka's decision, hiring an artist steeped in a universal philosophy that failed to fit neatly into the tenets of the black Muslims? "Even though we were entering a deep nationalist phase," Baraka reminisced, "Sun Ra understood it in terms of his idea of angels and demons at play...Sun Ra had a larger agenda" (qtd. in Szwed 210-211). I argue that this "larger agenda" deserves and demands the kind of critical research that has been afforded to figures like Baraka, and that Ra's poetry that blossomed after his move north is the greatest entry point into exactly how he played disparate elements of his surrounding culture.

In fact, Baraka was one of the first to realize that the apparent weirdness of Ra's poetics offered a unique message refracted through the lens of black nationalism. After the decline of the BART/S school, Baraka published *The Cricket*, a magazine of poetry and essays contributed by prominent black musicians and writers. Ra's contributions to the publication, which include the poems "The Outer Bridge" and "There," read like minimalist proverbs of

hope compared to the more verbose, polemic, and concretely political entries. Baraka's introduction to the volume claims that "the true voices of Black Liberation have been the Black musicians...the history of Black Music is a history of a people's attempt to define the world in their own terms" (qtd. in Hayes, 38-39). Baraka certainly saw Ra as someone who defined his world in terms that were utterly unique. Yet even when Ra speaks of "the half-between world" where "mathematically precise...sound scientist[s]" dwell, as in "The Outer Bridge," he is still reaching forwards towards the same goal of a self-reliant, self-defining people while looking backwards towards the same traditions that inspire his peers. The "endless energy force" that Mtume invokes near the beginning of the volume, the criticism of Pharoah Sanders' composition "Upper and Lower Egypt" near the volume's conclusion – these examples illustrate just how closely Ra was able to fit in with the more earthbound fringes of African-American creativity (2, 64).

Perhaps the most stunning non-written evidence of how Ra's ontology of the other met with the concerns of the politically active African-American is a scene from Space is the Place, the "part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic" directed by John Coney. Discussion of the film's overall merit aside, the scene in question opens in a community center for black teens. Ra suddenly appears in their midst, dressed lavishly and holding a crystal gem. When the flabbergasted teens ask him if he's "for real," he replies:

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 a myth. because that's what black people are, myths. I come to you from a dream that the black man dreamed long ago. (qtd. in Lock 60-61)

Implied in this declaration is a bitterness towards white erasure of black history that was not only a focus of Ra's 1950's broadsheets, but also a heated point of argument for many black activists. "If we continuously allow white people to define our space as artists," argues Mtume in the same aforementioned *Cricket* piece, "we don't deserve to occupy that space as artists" (1). Ra looks at this argument through the lens of metaphysics and history, labeling the black race as "myths," and by doing so simultaneously calls for political unification and a rethinking

of how African-Americans define themselves. After all, myth is a positively charged term in Sun Ra's universe, and the focus on erased history and tenuous future shared by Ra and his peers, I argue, is not the gap that many critics would like to place between the two.

This brings me to the critical work done on how Sun Ra's unique, but not peerless, conception of multiple histories, the byways of culture, and the promise of the future really works. In a broad sense, this work falls into two categories: that which analyzes Ra's philosophy by dissecting his music and life, and that which does so through analysis of the writing. Studies which connect Ra to cultural touchstones without explicitly tackling his written material approach the subject as a larger-than-life personality, whereas I intend to focus specifically on the writing only, excising their most salient points regarding Ra's interests and ways of perceiving the world.

Graham Lock's Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton successfully links Ra's "Astro-Black Mythology" to alternative biblical interpretation and a reconfiguration of spiritual redemption tales. It was Lock's study, which tackles the subject respectfully but with a keen critical eye, that brought my main inquiry into focus: how does Ra actively engage with elements of culture, whether it be elements in his environment or buried histories found through his study? Lock identifies the slave spirituals, Baptist conversion rites, Egyptian myth, and Biblical scripture as sites that Ra found ripe for mining. Yet as convincing as Lock is in arguing that Ra reconfigures the myth of a chosen people bound for a promised land, the fact remains that his source material lies mostly in the content of interviews, song titles, and on-stage declarations. I hope to strengthen Lock's argument with analysis of Ra's poetry and broadsheets, furthering my own argument that such signs of culture-digging and rearranging is best found in the written works. These were places where Ra was able to use the template of Christian myth as a tool not just as a foundation for an alternate spiritual vision, but also as a criticism of Christianity and world leaders whom he saw as misinterpreters of the most popular ancient text known to man (Ra always insisted that "The Good Book" was a misnomer – it was actually "The Code Book!").

John Corbett, who is responsible for the publication of the newly discovered Chicago writings, is also the author of a curious essay entitled "Brothers From Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee "Scratch" Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton." This piece, unlike the

introduction to the broadsheets compilation, addresses none of Ra's poetry or prose. Instead, the essay finds Corbett arguing that all three of the aforementioned artists use "the overarching idea of insanity liberally in their work" (15). I find this to be a flagrantly inaccurate claim, one that seems to ignore the fact that Ra, unlike Perry and Clinton, never claims to be "mad" or "insane." In fact, Ra stresses that his ontological alternatives are sane choices in what he sees as a backwards world. While I agree with Corbett that Ra "takes the disempowerment of slavery and turns it into a creative situation where in which the absolute identity of African Americans...is unknown to anyone but African-American themselves," I find it a troublesome error to attribute this kind of philosophical exercise to madness (17). I will refute Corbett's claim by investigating written material that focuses on alternate realities as sane and necessary philosophical exercises.

I will also investigate and interrogate several shorter essays that approach Ra's world-making from various angles. For instance, Nabeel Zuberi's "The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: *Space is the Place*, Sun Ra, and Afrofuturism" approaches the film as "a molecular milestone in a black music tradition that engages with separation, escape, and otherness through the tropes of Science Fiction" (78). He argues that the film approaches prophecy and leadership with ambivalence, portraying Ra as the extraterrestrial visitor sermonizing through music while parodying mass media outlets as tools that disseminate, but also ultimately distort, his space-age message of hope and discipline. A bizarre piece by Stathis Gourgouris titled "Adorno after Sun Ra" posits that "if [Theodor] Adorno had 'a jazz mind,' he would have 'been' Sun Ra" (199). It is a fascinating and ambitious piece, but I have trouble agreeing with his philosophical connections between Ra and Adorno. His most convincing connection is between Adorno's distaste of metered jazz improvisation and Ra's radical re-imagining of improvisation in a big-band context, but what is really of value in the piece is Gourgouris' investigations into why Ra's achievements have failed to enter the history of greater jazz criticism.

Early essays by LeRoi Jones, before he became Amiri Baraka, approach Ra first as "modernistic faddist" before becoming transfixed by the spectacle of Arkestra performances (96). By 1966 Jones was a disciple, approaching Ra as a mysterious and awe-inspiring subject, yet one whose performances and philosophy acknowledged ancient traditions as much as they charted unknown territory. What these shorter pieces have in common is the

way in which they use Sun Ra as a tool for an outside argument, a sort of comic jester that is ripe for interpretation but ultimately not worth studying in any detail. I plan to excise their investigations into Ra's otherness and view them solely through the lens of Ra's writing in order to show that their points would be better proven by studying primary materials.

Hartmut Geerken and James Wolf's collection of Ra's poetry and prose, The Immeasurable Equation, features several introductory essays that all fence solely with Ra's writing. Unfortunately, all of these except an essay by Brent Hayes Edwards make only broad statements concerning how the work speaks back to the influence of multiple histories and cultures. Geerken's critical contribution, "His majestic insignificance," claims Ra turned his back on the Western world, but never dips into the writing to show us how. His claim that Ra uses "myth as a means of experience...towards a holistic explanation of things" is spot on, but he never goes to the text to show where Ra does this (10). Wolf's essay broadly sees Ra simply as someone interested in "undoing" in the Derridian sense. His two writing-specific claims, that Ra uses almost no concrete nouns while he "undoes" common oppositions are pointed only at Ra's hope for "something more" (4, 5).

Sigrid Hauff contributes "Thought is a Mental Force," in which she paints Ra as a philosopher within the African spiritual tradition where the power of the creative act can bring about real, physical, and cosmic change. Like me, she sees his writing as "the essence of his knowledge and the basis of his own view of life," yet like the other contributors to the volume, she refuses to cite the primary materials! I will argue that Ra's connection to Africa that Hauff highlights was mediated through his studies of alternate histories as seen in his broadsheets. Her observation that Ra mines the African spiritual tradition in which words words "can create...destroy...and render the impossible possible," would be stronger with direct references to appropriate poems, such as "Words And The Impossible." I will approach Hauff's observations through the lens of this poem to illustrate just how Ra twists ancient ideas of the written word's mythic power. Hayes' "The Race for Space: Sun Ra's Poetry" deals directly with the writing in ways the other contributors don't, synthesizing other studies and arguing that Ra's poetry consciously references "black visionaries" while asserting difference and impossibility as a metaphor for outer space.

Sun Ra's contribution to African-American artistic thought was the active, purposeful recombination of cross-cultural historic and mythic material with modern folk forms, creating

an alternative past and future for African-Americans, one that was attainable through the cultivation of a disciplined inner space and the physical movement to outer space. Furthermore, I argue that Sun Ra's writing is the greatest resource available to those wanting a close look into exactly how Ra combines and toys with these disparate elements of culture. To prove my claim, I will first investigate several early broadsides that have remained critically ignored, synthesizing their content with the findings of other scholars to prove without a doubt that Ra reconfigures redemption tales into a re-conception of myth and possibility. I will also use specific examples from the poetry anthology to reveal not only how Ra reinterprets Christianity and Egyptology as a way of looking at the past and a space-bound future, but also how these poems fit into the larger artistic picture of African-American poetry. Lastly, I will argue that study of these two periods of writing demand that Ra's work be considered within the canon of African-American outsider literature by virtue of its clear, consciously encoded references to folklore, history, and current events. Ra mined much of the same territory as his peers, yet he synthesized his findings in radical ways, heading in a direction that has yet to be seriously studied. The time to change that is now.

Chapter 2 – Chicago & Early Broadsheets

In his introduction to The Wisdom of Sun-Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcorner Leaflets, John Corbett posits that the "imaginative...angry reinterpretations of scripture" and "powerful analysis of racial epithets" forwarded by Ra in the newly discovered manuscripts are "amazing, sometimes shocking" (6). In this chapter, I hope to illustrate that the idiosyncratic style of Ra's early work both relies on and responds to culture (immediate and historical) by reshaping already existing social touchstones, thereby situating the work within a continuum of fringe African-American thought that isn't quite as "shocking" as it may first appear. I argue that Ra's writing, including these fiery pieces from the 1950's, are the site where his reconstitution of Christian myth, topical socio-political concerns, and African-American folk beliefs is most evident.

One of Ra's most recognizable and persistent themes from this period of his development is Christianity and its complicated history. His studies in buried cultures, hidden etymologies, and numerology led him to believe that the Christian Bible had been misinterpreted; self-serving religious leaders had used its teachings to mentally enslave the black race by urging them to accept salvation through death. Ra's response was a uniquely conceived synthesis of historical revisionism via Egypt with a prophetic promise of a utopian future in outer-space. In Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton, Graham Lock calls this philosophical and ontological exercise "Astro Black Mythology." Cribbing a term from the Sun Ra composition "Astro Black," Lock specifies that his term refers to "Sun Ra's conscious creation of a mythology" which encompasses both "the Astro of the outer space future, and the Black of the ancient Egyptian past" (14). I will focus now on this second facet, the "Black" of Ra's myth making, as a strategy for giving African-Americans a sense of identity of hope that served as an alternative response to the apocalyptic and socially conservative viewpoint put forth by the Nation of Islam.

The Corbett anthology includes a piece entitled "THERE ARE TWO ETHIOPIAS," in which Ra argues that African-Americans are descendants of the founders of Egypt, who in turn are descendants of Indian Hindus who originated in the "EASTERN ETHIOPIA." Unlike

some of the other manuscripts, which include Biblical citations as defense of his historical arguments, most of this piece implies a knowledge gained through obscure research and word games. Ra playfully inverts "ETHIO-ETHIOPS" into "SPOIHTE-OIHTE," bragging that "DRINKIN' WINE SPOIHTE-OIHTE is a favorite negro song...It positively identifies the American negro as SPOIHTE-OIHTE." The sole biblical reference contained in this piece references "ISRAEL is my son" from Exodus 4:22; Ra transposes "son" to "sun" before equating "JUDAH" with "ETHIOPS" through a confusing series of substitutions and associations (qtd. in Corbett 81).

This kind of argument, which moves the history of the African people eastward in an attempt to uncover buried truth, is not at all unique to Ra or African-American intellectualism. Lock notes that "a small number of African American writers, including W. E. B. DuBois, had previously broached the topic of ancient Egyptian civilization" (Lock 16). He quotes from The World and Africa: An Inquiry into the Part Which Africa Has Played in World History, where DuBois states that "it is one of the astonishing results of the written history of Africa that almost unanimously in the nineteenth century Egypt was not regarded as a part of Africa" (qtd. in Lock 17). Lock also claims that it was 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, that first "comprehensively challenged" accepted historical assumptions regarding ancient civilization, though Lock admits that Ra was already deeply into his studies on the subject by the time Stolen Legacy was published (16-17).

Lock asserts that James' work "had a considerable impact in African American circles," and I would argue that Ra's work in this field, much of which chronologically predates James' study, had just as much of an impact in his immediate community of black intellectuals in 1950's Chicago. In fact, some of Ra's greatest contributions to the intellectual discussion taking place around him were drawn from a rich tradition of African-American folk traditions. For instance, the aforementioned word games on "ETHIOPS," and the convincing etymological argument contained in the piece "JESUS SAID, 'LET THE NEGRO BURY THE NEGRO'," fit into the same belief system that is forwarded in Zora Neal Hurston's anthropologically rooted Mules and Men. Lock quotes from Hurston's definition of what she calls "by-words," which "'all got a hidden meaning' just' like de Bible. Everybody can't understand what they mean. most people is thin-brained. They's born wid they feet under

the moon. Some folks is born wid they feet on de sun and they kin seek out de inside meanin' of words'." (qtd. in Lock 19).

In "JESUS SAID, 'LET THE NEGRO BURY THE NEGRO'," Ra teases out what he sees as a hidden meaning in the Bible, substituting "Necro" for "Negro" in an attempt to convince his readers (or listeners, as was often the case) of the dangers inherent in accepting the burden of eternal suffering:

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 worlds of Jesus also reads, Let the Negro bury the Necro."... In the present day language , the sentence just quoted reads: "Let the dead bury the dead."... If you like death and like being of the living dead then call yourself a Negro and continue to be rejected by the world as firstclass citizens...[one can stop being a Negro] by the simple act of studying and understanding true life-giving wisdom...And also...your history and the history of other nations. (qtd. in Corbett 66)

It should be briefly noted that, despite the apparent dismissal of African-American heritage in this quote, Sun Ra does not reject his or others' black identity (elsewhere in the piece, he calmly suggests that African-Americans should identify themselves as "Niger" since "Niger means black"). I argue that this stress on questioning accepted histories is a pointed response to the Afro-centric actions of the Nation of Islam, whose members were among the throng of black intellectuals who met regularly in Chicago's Washington Park. In an interview with Lock in 1990, Arkestra alumnus and tenor saxophone legend John Gilmore claims that Elijah Muhammad and his followers were greatly influenced by Ra's philosophy, among them the Negro/Necro claim. Lock includes excerpts of this interview Chasing the Vibration: Meetings With Creative Musicians, where Gilmore paints a picture of Ra as a sort of teacher-of-the-people. "The Muslims got a lot from him," he argues. "Every time they would see Sun Ra, they'd crowd around and try to find out what he was about...They would sort of antagonize him, in order to get him to talk...They got a lot from him, like a Negro being a dead body" (qtd. in Lock 160).

The discovery and publication of Ra's Chicago missives postdate both this interview and the publication of Blutopia, which would explain why Lock fails to incorporate their

material into his argument for Ra's place in the African-American intellectual continuum. Gilmore's account and the remembrances of others, when combined with the newly discovered manuscripts, prove that Ra was playing on existing folk tropes while engaging in the intellectual discussion of the time – what was the common identity that linked African-Americans? Ra's vision of the future differed greatly from that of the Nation of Islam, and more material from "JESUS SAID, 'LET THE NEGRO BURY THE NEGRO'" provides the best insights into exactly what these differences are. Much of the handout follows a question and answer format, where the author/speaker provides a pointed question to be answered. In response to "Is the White Race going to be destroyed by God?" Ra offers this, a focused response to the Elijah Muhammad's unabashed future vision of racial cleansing: "No. Instead they are going to be sent a teacher to teach them the real truth and if they reject him, he will be sent to Russia and Russia will then become the center of the new world" (qtd. in Corbett 66).

Ra does not specifically name the Nation of Islam in this passage because this was a direct response to their belief system, a response that was given orally as well, performed amongst other intellectuals in an already ongoing debate. Ra's claim is one rooted in nationality, not race. This focus on earthly borders would change when his obsession with outer space as both metaphor and physical destination took hold, but in this passage he bluntly denies the Nation of Islam's belief that a holy sky-bound vessel would deliver judgment onto the white race. Lock quotes Black Nationalist scholar Essien-Udom, who stresses that Muhammad insisted on the impending rain of "bombs, poison gas, and fire" dealt from a "man built planet" (48). Appropriately enough, Lock also excises a passage from Muhammad's "What the Muslims Believe" which proves again that Ra's search for the hidden meaning in words was hardly unique. "We Believe in the truth of the Bible," Muhammad writes, "but we believe that it has been tampered with and must be reinterpreted so that mankind will not be snared by the falsehoods that have been added to it" (qtd. in Lock 47).

Clearly, Ra and Muhammad differed in their interpretations of ancient texts and saw "falsehoods" in far different places. One particular area of radical difference lies in the way each uses Biblical images of suffering and salvation as methods for understanding current socio-political realities. Essien-Udom argues that the Nation of Islam looked towards the Old Testament, using Abraham as the "patriarch of the Asian Black Nation" (qtd. in Lock 48). Ra,

on the other hand, reaches back to the Baptist tradition that uses the tale of Moses' liberation of the Israelites from the Pharaoh of Egypt as a story of hope for oppressed African-Americans. Yet Ra, instead of championing Moses as a liberator and symbol of freedom and holy redemption, interprets Moses' act as one of selfish hedonism!

I'd first like to quote excerpts from Lock's interviews with Ra on this subject before referring to the newly published texts, which illustrate a more difficult and damning interpretation of scripture than even Lock realizes! Here is Ra in 1990, stressing the importance of Egypt as a site of historical origin, even while turning common interpretations of Egyptian myth upside-down:

Everything started in Egypt...Other nations had their religions and all that, but Egypt 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 it's proven that the world's in the condition it is today because of Moses, not because of Pharaoh. (qtd. in Lock 20)

This stress of culture over religion is another pointed attack at the socially and artistically conservative strains of Afrocentric thought that Ra found himself surrounded by in the 1950's and 60's, as well as a dismissal of the conservative politics of the '80s and early '90s. One needs to look no further than another interview with Lock from '83, where Ra laments the advances in culture that were "cut off by Reagan." "If people would base what they done on culture and beauty," he told Lock, "they would immediately because part of the nation of the world that knows beauty is necessary for survival" (qtd. in Lock 24).

Yet it is this radical comment from the encounter in 1990 that speaks back to Baptist dogma so harshly while also recasting the lines of good and evil in a myth that encompasses both Christianity and the '60s interest in looking eastwards to Egypt:

Moses said, fear the Creator. Why should a person fear the Creator, be afraid to express themselves? They talk about Hitler, the worst dictator was Moses... They call him a wise man – what's wrong with them? That man was a murderer, a liar, and a deceiver. Moses wasn't good for this planet, I don't care who sent him. The Egyptian government, they contributed so much to humanity – he ain't left no art, no beauty, no alphabets. Nothin'. All he did was go out there and kill people ... He was a magician. He learned magic along with the Ra priests and then he took it and

used it against them. Bit the hand that fed him. Turned against Pharaoh. He was a thief too, he took a book out of the Bible, the Book of Jason. I researched it, 'cause I'm a scientist (qtd. in Lock 21).

What is immediately clear from this attack on Moses is Ra's value system, which places artistic value and scholarship over militaristic gains, even if such violence is in the name of a nebulous greater good. There is a focus on the value of textual artifacts here. His comparison between the violent Moses who obscured a book of the Bible and the Egyptians who left "alphabets" takes direct aim at both Christian fundamentalists and socially conservative African-Americans. This attack, therefore, is not unfounded and most certainly not a byproduct of insanity, as John Corbett offensively argues (an argument I will investigate more closely in Chapter 3).

What Lock takes from this is that Ra's biggest disagreement with Christianity lies in the hero-worship of Moses. "By causing African Americans to identify with the Old Testament stories of the Israelites," he argues, "it has trapped them in a false history and, in doing so, cut them off from their true historical legacy, the black civilization of Egypt, which first gave beauty and culture to the world" (Lock 21). However, I argue that the manuscript entitled "SOLUTION TO THE NEGRO PROBLEM" shows that Ra wanted African-Americans to identify with the Israelites, but also to realize that they followed a false prophet. In this piece, Ra rallies against what he calls the "ETHIOPIAN SALVATION DOCTRINE," which teaches that suffering and sorrow is the way to eternal, spiritual salvation. Ra's stress on the importance of art and beauty, as I have pointed out, stands in stark contrast to what he sees as a uniquely Christian embrace of death. It is this doctrine, Ra argues, that fuels African-American Christians along the path of "DISHONOR, SORROW, SUFFERING, AND SHAME," therefore preventing them from gaining "THE EVERLASTING FRIENDSHIP OF ALL NATIONS ON THIS PLANET" (qtd. in Corbett 113-115).

This indictment of Christian dogma is a response based on reinterpretations of folksong and Biblical scripture, a strategy that is unique to Ra's writing. When Ra demands that the reader/listener "LISTEN TO THE WORDS IN THE SONG 'THE OLD RUGGED CROSS'," he is directly addressing his influences and antagonists in a way that simply does not crop up in song titles, liner notes, or on-stage proclamations. Lock can be forgiven for not

addressing this in his scholarly work, simply because he did not have these valuable primary resources available to him. Yet there is evidence in these sources that Ra's equation of African-Americans with Israelites is even more scathing than Lock imagined. "SOLUTION TO THE NEGRO PROBLEM" includes a lengthy explanation of Moses' folly and the racial origin of those whom he led to supposed freedom. In short, Moses "TOOK UPON HIMSELF THE NAME OF GOD" in order to lead the Ethiopian race on a mission to exterminate all other nations of the world. As we have seen, the way in which Ra traces African-Americans eastward is not unique to him, but the word games he plays in this piece in order to prove that African-Americans are also the "TRIBE OF JUDAH" are definitely Ra-specific.

According to Ra, the Ethiopians "DWELT IN A PLACE CALLED GOSHEN OR CUSH. TODAY, THE WORLD GOSH IS USED AS AN EXCLAMATION OF ASTONISHMENT OR DISGUST." This is one of the first intimations in the piece that his interpretation of his Israelite ancestry is not one to be proud of. What a difference from the Nation of Islam! As the piece proceeds, his argument becomes more explicit and even more unique. After transposing "GOSH" to "GOSHEN" to "GOSHER" to "KOSHER," he declares angrily that "THE BIBLE ITSELF IS AN INDICTMENT AGAINST THE PEOPLE WHO WROTE IT, NAMELY THE ETHIOPIAN RACE OF PEOPLE." Another manuscript entitled "THE GOD OF ISRAEL" is even more explicit in its linking of Jews and African-Americans, though this same piece also stresses that they are "THE CHOSEN PEOPLE OF GOD," even while "Negroes are in the exact condition that Moses and all the prophets foretold concerning them" (qtd. in Corbett 110-114).

What are we to make of Ra's rhetorical strategies here? Is he, as Lock argues, attempting to liberate African-Americans from a false, prescribed history? I think that he is, but not in the way Lock assumes he is. I disagree that the Baptist stress on the Israelite redemption tale is what Ra is fighting. As I have shown, he is responding to the particular Christian focus on suffering in an emulation of Jesus Christ. These early papers see the younger Ra supporting a link to the Israelites – not in a symbolic Christian manner, but through a series of historical observations and mystic word associations in order to prove a physical link with eastern lineage. His fiery accusations towards his own race, while ultimately leveled in the name of uniting his listeners in a shared quest for true knowledge, are far removed from the more directly empowering tactics of the Nation of Islam. As John

Corbett states in his introduction to the volume, the papers "were in direct dialogue with those other figures of affiliated African-American intellectual life" (5). Yet, neither Lock nor Corbett address that his arguments mined the very same influences. This is what I find to be one of the most important revelations in these manuscripts – Ra's philosophy was only unique insofar as it went in radically directions from his peers while also synthesizing the same raw materials that his peers were using to draw vastly different conclusions. These are historically rooted missives; "amazing" documents, but hardly "shocking" when viewed in terms of their component influences (6).

We've seen how Ra entered a topical conversation by incorporating ancient texts and antiquated folk forms in order to recast a historical identity for African-Americans. This aspect of his work displays how attuned he was to the cultural experiences and stories that he and his peers shared, as well as how he was able to use these texts in fresh ways. However, this era of Ra's development as a writer and thinker also saw the young autodidact confront immediate issues of national security and leadership. It is these themes which I'd now like to address in order to show that Ra's form-gobbling found manifestations in issues both old and new, despite the fact that his interest in current events and matters concerning earthly borders would wane as his obsession with outer space became more and more ubiquitous.

Two early manuscripts are of particular importance here. The first, entitled "UNITED STATES AT THE CROSSROADS," is especially unique in its synthesis of two rhetorical strategies: argumentative response leveled at the Nation of Islam (which we've already seen) and nationalist scare-tactics. Ra's invocation of Russia in a select few of these manuscripts is wholly unique to these papers; he would never again engage in such narrowly defined political discourse. I argue that the sense of politically-based urgency found in these manuscripts is a direct result of Ra's surroundings. The intellectual conversation he found himself embroiled in was one hinged on immediate social change, and this change was in turn reliant on immediate political realities. Once Ra moved to New York and spent the majority of his time rehearsing and recording his Arkestra, the political edge and sense of social dialogue left his writing to be replaced by more abstract philosophical concerns.

"UNITED STATES AT THE CROSSROADS" sees Ra calling for immediate action in response to what he perceives as the West's inability to make a firm decision on how the Bible fits into modern society. "THE BIBLE IS EITHER THE TRUTH OR IT ISN'T," he chastises.

'YOU HAVE PUSSYFOOTED LONG ENOUGH" (qtd. in Corbett 111). Like the actions of countless other political activists in Chicago, Ra's concerns are not so much poetic as they are pragmatic, even if their manifestations as hand-typed handouts fall somewhere between public service announcement and performative map. In John Corbett's interview with Alton Abraham, Sun Ra's most dedicated patron and co-founder of Thmei Research, Abraham stresses that their actions in the 1950's were intended to "help black people...to wake them up, wake them up" (qtd. in Corbett 227). For Ra to chastise his reader/listeners on matter of spiritual worth is no doubt a tactic to incite reaction and controversy.

When Ra brings Russia into his argument for absolute dedication to the secrets of the Bible, he does so in a way that implicitly chastises other arguments against a militarized foreign power. In other words, Ra's framing of the conflict between the two superpowers does not base its argument on matters of weaponry or hostile takeover. Instead, Ra attempts to use the specter of Russia's as a placeholder – a nation conveniently ripe with political implications that may beat out America in the race towards "WISDOM OF THE ENLIGHTENING KIND" (qtd. in Corbett 112). While Corbett dives briefly into the content of these papers, and while Lock interrogates song titles and interviews to pinpoint historical influences, neither go to the earliest primary materials to investigate exactly how Ra uses subject matter of current events to support his own agenda. The above quotes prove that Ra's urgent momentum in his formative years were not as solely reliant on solitary epiphanies as scholars like to insist. Instead, they're best seen as responsive in nature; Ra's attempts at Red-scare rhetoric illustrates his willingness to mine immediate cultural tropes, even if he recasts them into his own militarily ambivalent argument.

In his provocative essay "Adorno After Sun Ra," Stathis Gourgouris posits that Ra's role as an "experimenter" within folk culture and "his 'use' of" folk forms lies behind his absence from critical history (205). While his comparisons between Adorno and Ra are less than convincing, he effectively argues that Ra's ability to synthesize disparate folk elements into a unique vision follows from what he sees as a crux in folk culture. To wit, African-American exclusion from mass American culture "is precisely what ensures the indefinite mutability of the forms of...expression, what continuously feeds [its] resilience and seduction" (206). Ra's unique position as a pacifist embroiled in violent race politics, when combined with his position as Bible scholar, insisting that almost all interpretations of the Bible have been

wrong, allows him to actively play with Russia's cultural weight to fit his own terms and arguments.

Another manuscript in Corbett's collection, "WHAT AMERICA SHOULD CONSIDER," casts the conflict between the United States and Russia in similar terms. To Ra, the greatest danger Russia poses is not attack via nuclear weaponry. Instead, he co-opts the socially rich image of Russia to shock his audience into an urgency for education reform! He writes, "WHILE AMERICA SLEPT, THE ENEMY FOUGHT ILITERACY (ILITERACY) AMERICA IS THE RICHEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD, THERE IS NO REASON WHY THERE SHOULD BE EVEN ONE ILLITERATE PERSON WITHIN ITS BORDERS" (qtd. in Corbett 65). This piece also combines this condemnation with a somber statement that is yet another pointed attack at the Nation of Islam's conservative attitudes towards artistry. "The only thing which distinguishes man from a beast is beauty and art," writes Ra in one of the only instances of standard capitalization in the entire piece. "America even at this late hour is neglecting to [put] art and beauty in its proper place" (qtd. in Corbett 65). Yet Ra, like the black Muslims, strengthens his argument with the hint of apocalypse by invoking a "late hour." Ra is playing on the cold-war fears of nuclear attack in response to fundamentalist Christians, Black Muslims, and a more nebulous, embryonic youth counterculture.

"UNITED STATES AT THE CROSSROADS" also contains Ra's few explicit connections between current religious figureheads and international conflict, placing a spin on the word "ANNIHILATION" that is no doubt aimed at black Muslims. This quote in particular could be pointed at no one else:

WE HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF NARROWMINDED RELIGIONS WHICH TEACH DESTRUCTION FOR ALL RACES EXCEPT THE SEMETIC RACES. REALLY IT IS TIME FOR THE WORLD TO WAKE UP. ANY BOOK WHICH TEACHES THE DESTRUCTION OF PEOPLE ACCORDING TO RACE IS PREJUDICED. (qtd. in Corbett 112)

Ra follows this damning and urgent accusation with a clever re-appropriation of Red-scare tactics and the terms that were commonly used in conjunction with such tactics. "RUSSIA IS PREPARED TO MOVE FORWARD IF YOU DON'T RECOGNIZE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRUTH AND A LIE...THERE IS NO OTHER WAY BUT TOTAL ANNIHILATION

OF ALL WE KNOW AS CIVILIZATION," he writes. This invocation of a "SPIRITUAL WAR," when combined with the pacifist message encoded within his dismissal of Muslim dogma, paint a picture of a man consciously employing hyperbole and the shared cultural vocabulary of fear to build a homespun rhetoric of spiritual anxiety amongst African-Americans. This separates Ra from the stereotype of the zany "street-corner religious zealot" that Corbett invokes in the introduction to his anthology (6).

In addition, there are moments in these manuscripts of scathing indignation aimed at governmental and spiritual leaders that suggest a very personal motivation. In his biography Space is The Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra, John Szwed covers a period of Ra's early life rarely addressed in critical discussion of his work: his draft-dodging and dedication to conscientious objection. In this case, his personal experiences strengthened his ability to tap into the heated discussion on pacifism and military power that was occurring all around him. As a result, I find it necessary to engage with this period of his life which is often overlooked by scholars including Lock and Corbett.

While the particulars of Sonny's protest could serve as the foundation for a study in itself, a few choice details should be pointed out in order to illustrate Sonny's moral certitude and dedication to music in the face of appalling conditions. Sonny received his draft notice in 1941, addressed to "Sonny P. Blount (col.)." Frustrated with the loss of local musicians as a result of the draft, and with a feeling of solidarity catalyzed by his familiarity with anti-war periodicals, he met with the Fellows of Reconciliation, a Protestant pacifist group. They convinced the young idealist to request a hearing with the draft board, which Sonny did with some gusto.

His arguments, which ranged from complaints over his physical condition, stemming from an untreated hernia, to audacious frustration regarding his mistaken age on the draft letter, were somehow considered. Amazingly, he was granted a 4-E classification as a conscientious objector and duly asked to be placed in a Civil Public Service camp. After failing to appear at the camp in Marienville, Pennsylvania on December 8th, Sonny was arrested and jailed in Jasper, Alabama. After a series of pleading, pathetic, and harrowing written pleas to the U.S. Marshall, he was sent to a Civilian Public Service camp in Kane, Pennsylvania before being released for good on March 22nd, 1943. As Szwed notes, Sonny "had joined the ranks of a very small number of African-American pacifists which included A. Philip Randolph, St.

Clair Drake, C.L.R. James, Bayard Rustin, Jean Toomer, and 200 members of the Nation of Islam" (Szwed 39-40).

These biographical details are only necessary here in order to illustrate the kind of personal motivation Ra may have had for his attacks on what he saw as blinded leadership. In a piece entitled "HUMPTY DUMPTY," he includes a brief tirade on man's inability to see past selfish motivations:

NO LAW PASSED BY MAN MADE GOVERNMENT CAN BE
CONSIDERED AS THE TRUTH WHICH WILL FREE MANKIND
BECAUSE ALL LAWS THAT MAN MAKES ARE PREJUDICED IN
THE INTEREST OF THOSE WHO MAKE THEM...THE
AVERAGE NEGRO LEADER IS WHOLLY MATERIALISTIC IN
HIS VIEWPOINT NOT REALIZING THAT SUPERIOR
INTELLIGENCE CAN OPEN DOORS THAT NO LAW CAN OPEN.
(qtd. in Corbett 120)

I argue that this attack on systematic bureaucracy is aimed at a variety of exterior sources, among them the U.S. Military, the Baptist Church, and the Nation of Islam. Ra no doubt took issue with the strict dress code and elaborate moral codes set in writing by Elijah Muhammad, yet the two figures also had much in common when it came to their personal and universal philosophies.

Neither Lock nor Corbett engage this antipathy in Ra's philosophy – how could a figure so dedicated to education and discipline be so opposed to man-made order? The answer, of course, lies within the "man" modifier. What I've already illuminated in Ra's early work is his distrust of man-made decisions and interpretations. His frustration over misinterpretation of history and ignorance towards artistic expression ultimately manifests itself in a misanthropic tone throughout the entirety of his early works, even when that misanthropy fuels his ultimate wish for friendship among the peoples of earth, regardless of color.

What I hope to strike home here is that this misanthropy and urgency is largely a response, not an initial plea. In "HUMPTY DUMPTY," when Ra recites the poem of the same name and bluntly equates the poem's protagonist with "THE AMERICAN NEGRO," he's obviously drawing on folk and popular culture to strike a familiar chord with his audience. When he writes that "LAWS ARE JUST LIKE WALLS WHEN THEY DO NOT TEACH WISDOM, [IT] IS NOT ACCIDENT THAT WALL IS LAW BACKWARDS," he's also obviously

drawing on both African-American and ancient forms of wordplay. However, I also stress that it is just as important to acknowledge the immediacy of these papers and their delivery. Corbett is absolutely correct to suggest that many of these pieces contain "a performative dimension, as if they were both pamphlet and script" (6). Ra was not only mining shared cultural touchstones for use in his own vision, he was also directly aiming his arguments towards an audience whom he could see, hear, and touch. In other words, these were not the carefully preserved poems and record albums meant to reach a wide, cross-cultural audience. They were missives from the heart of a heated discussion, and I argue that their content proves without a doubt just how they relied on shared experience and rhetorical immediacy.

In Chapter 3, I will be investigating another outlet of Ra's philosophy: his more obtuse, abstract, yet still culturally rooted body of poetry. Unlike the pamphlets from the 1950's, these pieces have an air of permanency and timelessness; they are poetic in a self-aware way that the fiery, frustrated writing from Chicago never was. I hope to show that while Ra's fascination with ancient civilization was still prevalent, his soon-to-be all consuming passion with outer space reflected trends in two separate webs of cultural play: the mass culture he found himself excluded from and the African-American avant-garde that would look to him as an elder figure. With the re-publication of Sun Ra's shorter works, several critics have published interpretations of their content. I argue that equally as important is an investigation into what contextual pools Ra draws from and how he concocts philosophical cocktails that continue to baffle the most devoted space-age astral travelers.

Chapter 3 – The Immeasurable Equation

The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose of Sun Ra opens with several critical essays, each attempting to introduce and welcome the reader into what James L. Wolf calls the "bravely and unabashedly un-poetic" universe of Ra's collected writings (3). It is these introductory essays that I would like to use as a launching pad for my own argument regarding Ra's poetry. Unlike Hartmut Geerken, I do not believe that Ra "freed himself of everything not having anything to do with the infinity of outer space," nor do I accept that Ra's "only refuge was in not recognizing any human and worldly things" (9). Instead, I side with Brent Hayes Edwards' assertion that the poet's stress on seeming abstractions "is not the result of an a-historicism...he roots his sense of *myth* and the *impossible* precisely in the history of US racism and segregation" (31, italics Edwards).

I also argue that Ra's transmutation of social histories does not limit itself to African-American culture, but also incorporates topical social concerns, cross-cultural poetic touchstones, and traditions of bibliographical mysticism. Many of the commentators featured in the poetry anthology admit to Ra's pan-generic form-gobbling (to lift a wonderful term from Byron Coley), yet almost none draw from the source that their essays precede. Even Sigrid Hauff's "Thought is a Mental Force," one of the only pieces to rightfully identify Ra's poetry as "the essence of his knowledge and the basis of his own view of life," fails to quote even a single line (20)! Regardless, Hauff is absolutely correct – Ra's unique philosophy, which begins with a far-reaching knowledge of "human and worldly things," finds its best outlet in these poems. My goal for this chapter is to synthesize the more salient observations from these and other Ra scholars with my own observations drawn directly from the new poetry anthology. Ra's written legacy is not only the clearest window into his conception of the universe, it is also a body of work that demands a place in the poetic and philosophical continuum of 20th century thought.

Like the earlier broadsheets, Ra uses his poetry as an outlet for reinterpretation of Biblical scripture. Among the scholars who tackle this body of work exclusively, few acknowledge the obvious similarities between Ra's call to "leave this goddamn planet Earth" and African-American Christian belief systems of redemption, salvation, and ascent to a

heavenly afterlife (qtd. in Thiel 25). One poem in particular, "Of The Cosmic Blueprints," illustrates how Ra could adeptly incorporate Christian myth and conceptions of suffering into his own unique take on spiritual redemption. When read as a response to such myths, which accept earthly suffering as a price to pay for future redemption, "Of The Cosmic Blueprints" hardly seems so abstract:

If it was not slavery---
It was rather complete service to humanity,
Unstinted humble-effort
Foolishness to the world
But bolder and braver
Than any of history's warriors

If it was not slavery---
It was the activation
Of the Cosmic-blueprints
Sowing seeds of cosmos rare
Casting ever down to ever lift above.

If it was not slavery
It was the freedom not to be
In order to ready for the discipline-plane
From other-greater-worlds.
(270)

Lock's study on Ra's relation to Christian folk forms, despite its lack of poetry analysis, nonetheless offers some of the best analysis regarding Ra's re-conception of the African-American as extraterrestrial. The key to this dehumanization of the black race lies in Ra's creative interpretation of the slave trade, which in turn finds precedent in African-American intellectualism in the first half of the 20th century. Lock quotes southern educator Thomas P. Bailey, who in 1914 argued that "the South [is] being encouraged to treat the negroes as aliens by the growing discrimination against the negro in the north...does not the South perceive that all the fire has gone out of the Northern philanthropic fight for the rights of man?" (qtd. in Lock 62). Lock and I assume that Bailey's use of "aliens" in this instance is invoked as an ontological contrast to "man," highlighting a basic discrepancy of rights instead of actual extraterrestrial origin. Observe how Ra speaks back to this idea in "Of The Cosmic Blueprints," contrasting the unnamed black race against "humanity." I argue that the "activation / of the Cosmic-Blueprints" and this hushed invocation of earthly difference stems from the same intellectual continuum that fueled Bailey's analysis.

What makes Ra's activation of this theme unique is his conflation of aliens with angels, providing an explicit link between his historical analysis and his interpretation of scripture. In an interview with Rich Theis, Ra plays the word "alien" into a more spiritual realm that shines a different sort of light on a poem like "Of The Cosmic Blueprints:"

You have to realize this planet is not only inhabited by humans, its inhabited by aliens too...So, in mixed up among the humans you have the angels. The danger spot is the united States. You have more angels in this country than anywhere else... Never in the history of the world has there been a case where you take a whole people and bring 'em into the country in the Commerce Department... It happened here... It was possible for aliens and angels and devils and demons to come into this country. They didn't need no passport. So then they'd come as displaced people. (qtd. in Lock 63).

At its core, what Ra is doing here draws directly from Baptist dogma – explaining suffering through metaphor: the poetic distance between a God's chosen people and space-age alien-angels is not as large as one might first assume. In both cases, a myth is employed as a system of empowerment. In "Of The Cosmic Blueprints," we see Ra acting out this synthetic myth-making in more explicit terms than anything Lock or others cite in their studies. Using slavery as an event to be reinterpreted, he invokes a meek fortitude originating from outside the Earth's boundaries – "the discipline-plane / From other-greater-worlds."

This particular declaration also holds a unique place within the Ra canon as one of the few pieces to be published side-by-side with his more overtly political poetic contemporaries. "Of The Cosmic Blueprints" was included in the Umbra Anthology, published by the Umbra group, an association of African-American poets living in or around the East Village of New York in the mid-1960's. Ra's association-by-inclusion with such historically resilient poets and thinkers as Lorenzo Thomas, Henry Dumas, and Amiri Baraka undoubtedly places Ra within a larger intellectual continuum. Nonetheless, it's difficult not to see the differences between Ra's universal musings and those of the nationalist polemics of the poets he is bundled with in the aforementioned anthology or Baraka's The Cricket: Black Music in Evolution.

There's no need to argue for Ra's worth and influence within this community of fringe thinkers; Ra's poetry opens the Umbra Anthology, signifying him as an artistic paragon whose

cross-cultural knowledge and innovative musical practices marked him as a seminal figure for disciplined Black art. Edwards' essay, "The Race for Space: Sun Ra's Poetry," contains one of the more insightful inquiries into how Ra fit into the poetic landscape of his politically-charged peers, even if his conclusion consists of little more than the following truism: "When Ra is mentioned at all in the few existing histories of the black downtown poetry scene in the early 1960's, it is the shock of his theatrical otherness that stands out, not his poetics" (36). While I agree that there is a certain functional difference between Ra's works and those of his peers, I feel that a closer look at the pieces included in Umbra Anthology and The Cricket reveals a common pool of influence. The issue at hand here is similar to the critical ignorance leveled at the early broadsides: it's a simple thing to interpret Ra's extra-textual gaudiness and performative extravagance as sheer entertainment, and it is simpler still to extend such a reduction of method to his writing as well.

Edwards' posits that Ra's general admittance into a much younger and much more fiery group of intellectuals rested on his status as a "multidiscipline [sp] artist...a spectacular elder figure who had been melding art, poetry, music, theater, esoteric philosophy, and communal living on his own terms since the late 1940's" (37). Yet, as earlier essays by Amiri Baraka show, these terms were not always embraced by the quick-to-judge New York scene. Black Music, a collection of Baraka's essays from 1959 to 1966, contains several telling observations that foreshadow the wave of flabbergasted critical response to Ra and his methods of myth-making. Baraka's evolving opinion of Ra acts as a greater illustration of two points. Firstly, it proves Edwards' assertion that Ra's overpowering sense of difference dominated his audience's initial impressions. Secondly, and most importantly, it represents and highlights exactly what aspects of Ra's philosophies would eventually take hold of the greater New York contingent of thinkers, writers, and musicians.

Thanks to Black Music, we are able to track Baraka's impressions chronologically. In a 1963 piece entitled "New York Loft and Coffee Shop Jazz," originally published in Down Beat magazine, he muses on the spectacle he was unable to attend at the Playhouse Coffee Shop. "Though I didn't hear him," he writes, "a great many people I respect told me that weird Sun-Ra (whom I had always thought of as a kind of 'modernistic' faddist) had gotten a really swinging group together..." (95-96). Three years later, in another piece for Down Beat, Baraka speaks of Ra as a towering giant, melding philosophy and music in ways other

musicians have not yet dared. It is this piece, which devotes much of its space to Ra and his Arkestra, in which we begin to see the qualities that Ra and other black intellectuals had in common. "More black music of our time. The Sun-Ra Myth-Science Arkestra," declares Baraka:

All the concepts that seemed vague and unrealized in the late '50s have come together in the mature and profound music and compositions of this philosopher-musician...Sun Ra wants a music that will reflect a life-sense lost in the West, a music full of Africa...[his] music in this term presumes it exists everywhere. All Nature. (128-129)

A glance at other Baraka missives from 1966 demonstrate his willingness to embrace Ra's discipline as one compatible with his own. In one piece, he fawns over the artist while using Ra's own poetic terms, proving without a doubt that Baraka was already familiar with his written material. Ra "knows something of the Wisdom religion," he admires. "[He] speaks of the actual change...the higher principles of humanity" (137). In another piece, he is in awe of Ra's do-it-yourself business sense, an autonomous impulse for change that would become a guiding principle for a variety of groups in Baraka's immediate orbit. "Sun Ra has been doing this for years," he writes, as if anyone who is anyone should be aware of the musician's innovations. "Saturn hovers above all of us. Sun-Ra, who is the modern master. The orchestrator" (140).

Baraka is lauding values that will manifest themselves in the work of poets such as Norman Jordan and Haasan Oqwiendha Fum al Hut, whose contributions to The Cricket are not as distanced from Ra's world-view as Edwards wants to believe. As I hope to show, the biggest difference between Ra and the other poets of this era lies in the form of the delivery and the application of the message. Edwards is mostly correct when he claims that Ra "never writes in *folk forms*, or attempts to *transcribe* oral culture or the particularities of black speech onto the page," though Ra certainly did such things in his earlier street-corner material (37, italics Edwards). Edwards is also correct to assert that much of Ra's empowering message is nestled within a more "universalist discourse" than his peers, though Ra has his fair share of poems with seemingly Afro-centric messages (30). I now want to take a closer look at two Sun Ra poems included in the The Cricket collection, comparing their form and content to two other poems in order to prove that his influence in the greater scheme of

African-American intellectualism was more immediate and recognizable than many scholars would like to believe.

The collection ends with a piece by Ra entitled "There," accompanied by a black and white photo of the author, dressed in extravagant garb but wearing a pensive expression:

There is a land
Whose being is almost unimaginable to the
Human mind.
On a clear day,
We stand there and look farther than the
ordinary eye can see.
Far above the roof of the world,
We can encompass vistas of the worlds.

There is a land
Where the sun shines eternally . . .
Eternally eternal:
Out in outer space
A living blazing fire,
So vital and alive . . .
There is no need to describe its splendor.
(qtd. in Baraka 70)

As Edwards notes, the contemplative form and tone of a piece such as this illuminates a curious distance between the overtly theatrical "cosmo dramas" incorporated into Arkestra performances and the more reserved, philosophical tone of the written poetry. "Although his writings are not unconnected to his musical performances," he writes, "his poetry is simply not written to be theatrical, *ritualized*, or *jazzy*" (41, italics Edwards).

Yet such a difference in delivery did not prevent Ra and his message from heavily influencing other artists in his orbit. It was easy enough for the more fervent nationalists to absorb the history-affirming dramatic spectacle of Arkestra performances; they provided musical accompaniment for Baraka's 1966 production of his own play, A Black Mass. If we accept the obvious solemnity and philosophical bent to the above-quoted poem, certain other poems from The Cricket seem quite compatible in tone and intent. For example, Haasan Oqwiendha Fum al Hut's "Say Be And Behold It Is" reads almost like a prayer, acknowledging a super-human state of peace and energy that falls right alongside Ra's uplifting vision of mental and physical liberation:

The agony of it all is a blessing
The blessing of it all is blackness
The blackness of it all is a spirit
The spirit of it all is cosmic
The cosmic of it all is energy
The energy of it all is Allah
Allah is Allah, Allah is all
Allah is
(qtd. in Baraka 23)

Obvious thematic connections arise in a comparison between these two pieces. Both tackle a source of hope and energy as outside of the physical, human realm. For Sun Ra, this is the metaphorical "land / Where the sun shines eternally," for al Hut it is a more fundamentally focused spiritual center of cosmic energy. This piece, like Ra's "Of The Cosmic Blueprints," attempts to offer a possible spiritual explanation for African-American suffering. Whereas Ra recasts slavery as "the activation / Of the Cosmic-blueprints," al hut similarly portrays the entirety of black suffering as a "blessing," also cosmic in origin. I disagree with Edwards' stance towards Ra in the context of his peers; it simply does not seem to me that his work sets him "askew in the midst of the Black Arts" (41). What a close reading of these two poems demonstrates is their shared reliance on energies and forces beyond the realm of initial human understanding. Indeed, this was one of the main forces behind the music of the African-American avant-garde in the 1960's – sound as a vessel for both cosmic energies and primal feeling, manifesting itself as the sound of the ecstatic truth.

Mtume, in his introduction to The Cricket volume, addresses this explicitly, stressing that this energy must be harnessed in order to gain greater control over the terms by which their work is judged. He writes, "We must view our music and the world through a Black perspective, an endless energy force, which will lead us to the establishment of a criteria from which to judge the merits and shortcomings of our music" (2). Certainly, Baraka, Mtume, and others saw Ra's ideology and philosophy of ancient Blackness as right in line with their quest for a unified identity. These artists were able to discern Ra's predominantly African sense of forces and energies, what Sigrid Hauff identifies as the "telling force" in her essay "Thought is a Mental Force." To Hauff, Ra's poetry embodies a crucial tenet in African art – the ability of art to create immediate change. When she identifies one of Ra's central concerns as "the step-by-step overcoming of the restrictions of the human spirit," she is also aptly describing the spiritual devotion of a poem such as al Hut's.

Ra's second poetic contribution to *The Cricket* is "The Outer Bridge," a paean to the "half-between world" of the forward-thinking artist:

In the half-between world
Dwell they, the sound-scientist
Mathematically precise.
They speak of many things
The tone scientists
Architects of planes of discipline.
(qtd. in Baraka 19)

Compared to a piece such as Roger Riggins' "Scenes/Basic Makeup of the Music," featured in the same volume, this poem undoubtedly approaches the subject of artistic merit from a more contemplative stance. But is this difference, as Edwards asserts, one between the "nationalist framing" of his peers and Ra's "ultimate extension of poetics...articulating what is presently *impossible* or *unsaid* in words alone?" (39, italics Edwards). I argue that the base message in Riggins' polemic against artistic apathy strikes a similar, ringing chord to the intent of Ra's piece. When Riggins demands that "musicians / gotta start / keep'en up / with what / their / music / implies," he's arguing for the sense of wholeness and focus of intent that Ra is already lauding in his offering to the disciplined musician. In other words, the largest difference between the two pieces in question lie in their rhetorical point-of-origin; where Riggins begs his readers to "carry / the weight of / trane & eric / whip the skies / with the glory / of cosmic spiritual / vi/ bra/ tions," Ra simply informs his readers that those who carry such a weight already exist on a plane straddling the concrete and abstract in a perfect mathematical harmony (qtd. in Baraka 13-14).

Such observations make it difficult to readily accept Edwards' notion that Ra was a "misfit, askew in the world of Black Arts" (41). In the same study, he asserts that Ra's "continual vigilance towards the impossible, the un-thought, [and] the un-conceived" places him within a continuum of fringe African American artists, including Nat Turner and Marcus Garvey. Yet it seems that if one is willing to use the binding characteristic of what can essentially be boiled down to "hope" as what connects Sun Ra to a figurehead of slave resistance, then one must also allow that same characteristic to link the poet with the other more historically resilient artists of his time. Edwards' finest moment is when he rightfully isolates the crucial difference between Sun Ra and the poets with whom he found himself associated with: Ra's deeply held belief that "certain operations of language are essential to

any approach of the impossible, to any delineation of myth" (34). It is this focus on the action of text, the meaning and promise of words arranged on the page, that I would now like to investigate further. I hope to illustrate that Ra's belief in the spiritual core of the written word is not an acceptance of "madness," as John Corbett argues, but rather an extension of a literary history rooted in bibliographical mysticism.

In an interview with Jean-Louis Noames from 1965, Sun Ra freely discussed what he perceived as the world-changing power inherent in words and their organization. His language here reflects the sort of empirical slant seen in "The Outer Bridge," portraying the artist (in this case the poet, in particular) as a scientist manipulating and synthesizing raw materials. To Ra, such endeavors stand on equal footing with the contributions of a certain world-renowned physicist. "If you mix two chemical products you produce a reaction," he told Noames. "In the same way if you put together certain words you'll obtain a reaction which will have a value a value for people on this planet...Einstein said he was looking for an equation for eternal life...I'm sure he was right. To put words together...would change the destiny of the whole planet" (qtd. in Szwed 319-320).

Such a scientific-mystical approach to the written word is by no means unique to Ra. Szwed asserts that Ra was familiar with Sidney Lanier's The Science of English Verse. Lanier, a 19th century poet and musician, gave lectures at Johns Hopkins University on the body as a musical instrument, able to embody the sound of language on the page (Szwed 319). On another occasion, Ra simultaneously proved his knowledge of African-American poetic traditions while disavowing their form. On the subject of Paul Laurence Dunbar, he casually remarked that he wasn't influenced by him. "He was a sentimentalist," he claimed. "I'm a scientist...I take the position of a scientist who comes from another dimension" (qtd. in Edwards 46). Edwards does a fine job of teasing out the differences between Lanier's conception of words as sound and Ra's more sight-oriented poetics. Whereas Lanier saw "no division between speech and writing" as references to sounds and silences, Ra actively interrogates the discrepancy between grapheme and phoneme to activate "the impossible" that "occurs in the interstices of that discrepancy" (Edwards 35).

A poem entitled "To The Peoples of Earth," originally included on the LP sleeve of the classic Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy, lays out Ra's mission in no uncertain terms. The form of the piece, with its free meter and declarative directness, owes more to the rhythmic

flow of prose than to poetry. Even within the context of Ra's poetry, which often sacrifices metrical conventions for a more proverbial tone, "To The Peoples of Earth" stands out as a singular plea for the reader to meet the author on his own terms:

Proper evaluation of words and letters
In their phonetic and associated sense
Can bring the peoples of earth
Into the clear light of pure Cosmic Wisdom.
(390)

I argue that these first two lines are a consciously planted guide to understanding the poetic intent behind much of Ra's work. The "phonetic" sense referenced can be seen in the way that Ra permutes words into homonyms to tease out alternate meanings and interpretations. The "associated" meanings waiting to be drawn out of words refers to the more complicated and involved word games that rely on sight and organization on the page.

Among the scant scholarship on Ra's poetry, a scarce few trace Ra's reverence for wordplay back to traditional spiritual practice. One obvious connection is to the practice of Cabala, an esoteric Jewish tradition where hidden truths are uncovered through an ecstatic textual manipulation of holy works. Szwed and Edwards acknowledge Ra's debt to this tradition, in which the text of the Talmud held words powerful enough to either destroy the world or reveal the true name of God (depending on the reader's adeptness with lexicographical play!) (Szwed 103). In their catalogue of Ra's personal library, Szwed and James Jacson list no less than three texts dedicated to Cabala, in addition to a Hebrew/English dictionary and a Hebrew printing of the Holy Bible (Geerken 481). This helpful appendix to The Immeasurable Equation allows the Ra scholar a glimpse into the variety of the poet's influences, though Klaus Detlef Thiel is quick to mention that "the 170 entries...are by far only a small fragment of Sun Ra's life-long reading itinerary" (Geerken 481).

One particularly curious entry in this library catalogue is a text entitled God-Man. The World Made Flesh, a collection of pamphlets in which Dr. George Washington Carey and Inez Eudora Perry argue that the Bible consists of 66 books written by 66 separate authors describing the physiology of the human body (Geerken 484). I'd like to use this as an entry point into a specific poem of Ra's that clearly draws influence from this Biblical reference while referencing his respect for lexicographical traditions. "The Flesh," which originally

appeared in the first volume of The Immeasurable Equation from 1972, is a prime example of Ra's cultural debt to both Christianity and more esoteric spiritual practices:

The word that was made flesh was made fresh
It is the new, the new test .. the new tester, the test-tester-
testament
The testament new
Words, words, words
Made fresh, made again
The recreate, the recreation . . .
The word was made fresh
Thus is the cosmic reach
Dark meanings brought to light
See the mystery
Hear the sound duplicity
The double opposite parallel
Hear the sound duplicity
The double opposite parallel
(171)

This piece illustrates both the phonetic and spacial (or "associative") trends in Ra's poetics, which I argue references a variety of "worldly things," even if Geerken doesn't agree (9). Ra's transformation of "flesh" to "fresh" is a prime example of the high premium he places on sound similarities (or "sound duplicity"). In an interview with Ira Steingroot in 1988, he refers to this very permutation as one of divine origin. In fact, this same interview shows just how willing Ra was to cross cultural and historical boundaries. As Edwards notes, "Ra's practice differs in that it is multilingual, willing to make *equations* between different languages" (47, italics Edwards). "They worship the Son of God but they don't understand. In French, Son's equal to 'sound,' so, 'sound of God.' They've got it wrong," he told Steingroot:

They say the word was made flesh. It's really about sound – and it wasn't made flesh, it was made fresh. All these things the creator told me in Alabama. I'm dealing with words that can prove themselves – that can prove themselves to be correct.
(qtd. in Edwards 47)

When Ra expands "test" into "testament", or when he allows "recreate" to bloom into "recreation," it's with an assured purpose that goes beyond the seeming playfulness of the poem itself. These "associative" wordplays are a manifestation of his claim that words are "Made fresh, made again." In a poem entitled "Words And The Impossible," he extends the power of words to conflate two seemingly disparate notions: "reality" and "the impossible."

Note how he again mines a Biblical trope to phonetically throw into relief the active nature of words:

The elasticity of words
The phonetic – dimension of words
The multi-self of words
Is energy for thought – If it is a reality.
The idea that words
Can form themselves into the impossible
Then the way to the impossible
Is through the words.

The fate of humanity is determined
By the word they so or approve
Because they reap what they so
Even if it is the fruit of their lies.
(431)

Edwards is right to argue that a poem such as "Words And The Impossible" is as much "sight poetry as sound poetry;" the transformation of "sow" to an active "so" is lost to a listener unaware of the change on the page. In addition to this observation, I argue that the import of this piece proves how central poetry and the written word was in Ra's philosophy, despite the fact that almost no in-depth studies of his writing exist. The second stanza warns the reader that words can either bring about humanity's salvation or drown us in our own infidelities.

In other words, when one digs below the seemingly abstract surface of Ra's poetic philosophy, what is revealed is a dogmatic lesson on discipline and responsibility. As we have seen, this falls right in line with his view of science and its connection to art. I simply cannot agree with Geerken in his dogged insistence that Ra "touches on worldly things for the sake of negation" only (9). Like the broadsheets, the poems synthesize and interrogate traditions from around the world into a philosophy that places its ultimate subject outside of earth's boundaries. Of course, in the earlier material, Ra's influences are not quite as broad and his goals more rooted in an immediate cultural environment. Yet even in his more space-bound poetry, the rhetorical move is always from a here to a there, relying on progress as a continuous process.

I argue that this sort of peculiar philosophy-poetry was written with a clear purpose in mind, and that his exhortation to embrace the impossible and the symbolic as a sort of artistic salvation was consciously derived from a variety of influences and sources. Geerken claims

that Ra wrote "not...because he wanted to communicate thoughts but because he cultivated particular vibrations and frequencies from which the texts emerged more or less automatically and spontaneously" (14). While I agree that some of his word transformations display an air of improvisational association, I cannot accept that his rich synthesis of learned and absorbed histories resulted spontaneously. There is simply too much clever thought behind a poem such as "The Heaven # Three" which slyly invokes a handful of disparate images and themes, including Medieval cosmology, shifts between letters and symbols, and references to musical terminology. This is not ecstatic and automatic textual experimentation; Ra wants the reader to achieve a state of enlightenment, but this does not mean that the texts were created in such a fervor. There's a care put into these works, care that Sigrid Hauff traces back to African tribal customs where art functions on a level separate from entertainment. "In his texts," she writes, "he makes use of words in the same way as a medicine man makes use of his herbs and a chemist his chemicals. He expects a reaction which can change the world" (20).

John Corbett, in a mystifying essay entitled "'Brothers From Another Planet: The Space Madness of Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton," wants his readers to believe that placing such power in words is an explicit embrace of insanity. I'd like to close this chapter with an investigation into Corbett's claims in order to prove without a doubt that Ra's philosophy was rooted in an otherness derived from tradition. Corbett's conflation of such a sane philosophical choice with self-admitted insanity is not only a misinterpretation of Ra's poetics, but also a reductive insult by means of wrongfully associating three artists on the basis of a weakly articulated thesis.

Corbett's claim that the three artists included in his title "all...utilize the overarching idea of insanity liberally in their work" seems strange when one considers that he provides almost no evidence that would place Ra in such a group. Corbett quotes George Clinton's embrace of the role of court jester, a "fool" who is "neutral all the time...without ever looking like I'm out of my bag" (8). He also rightfully points to Lee 'Scratch' Perry's "I Am A Madman" piece as that artist's embrace of insanity's connotations (13). Yet, as far as I can tell, Corbett only references one element of Ra's artistic universe that he perceives as an embrace of madness – the title of Ra's 1963 album Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy. How is this relevant? If anything, Ra's title points to sound's power to heal minds, not drive them into psychosis. All that is left in Ra's philosophy for Corbett to mine is the artist's questioning of

reality and history, a philosophical imperative that both Lock and I argue is quite different than engaging with accepted notions of mental health.

In Blutopia, Lock questions Corbett's conflation of reality and sanity in order to argue that Ra was much more interested in questioning concepts of the former than in toying with the latter. Corbett is correct when he argues that all three artists present themselves as being extra-terrestrial, just as he is correct in pointing out that this assertion of other-worldly origin can be accepted both physically and metaphorically. Unfortunately, his interpretation of what he terms the "E.T. metaphor" suffers from the aforementioned conflation of concepts. This metaphor, Corbett argues:

may indicate the *insanity* of its maker, [but] it also cuts back [in] the other direction, suggesting the fundamental *unreality* of existence for people imported into New World servitude and then disenfranchised into poverty. Thus Ra, Clinton, and Perry may force us not just to question *their* sanity, but to question our own. *Is it sane to believe them? Is it sane not to believe them? Is it "reasonable" to believe that they are from space? Is life on this planet not an unreasonable, otherworldly existence in itself?*
(8-9, italics Corbett)

What's especially frustrating in Corbett's argument is that he also pleads that all three figures "are great thinkers who deserve respect and suspended disbelief" (8). Yet on the same page he fails to acknowledge that the poetic act of interrogating history is wholly separate from notions of madness or insanity. Are we to believe that Corbett finds philosophy an act of madness? Lock takes him to task on this point, correctly claiming that "Ra did not represent himself as being mad...though he does make frequent recourse to the language of myth, dream, and fantasy...where...he could affirm a status or identity of his own" (59). Unfortunately, Lock provides precious few concrete examples from Ra's writing. He does quote a chant from Ra's "Somebody Else's World," where the conductor somberly intones:

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.
(qtd. in Lock 60)

Here we can see that Ra is interested in interrogating and recasting "ideas" as a point of entry for questioning our accepted notions of history. Frankly, Ra was not interested in toying with

tropes of madness, and I'd now like to investigate several poems that illustrate this further.

A piece entitled "Points of the Space Age," given to Egyptian musician Salah Ragab in 1984, posits that the artist of the future will be a testament to "skilled beautifulness, aim, and care." Again, Ra uses the learned connotation of science and mathematics to invoke a mentality that is a far cry from the sort of wacky mad-hatter image that Corbett presents. Ra writes, "The greater future is the age of the space prophet / The scientific airy minded second man." For Ra, one who is "airy minded" is one dedicated to art and beauty: "Art is the lifeline because art is the airy concept / Of greater living. It is the airy foundation of the airy / Kingdom of the future" (qtd. in Geerken 308).

What we're seeing here is a relationship between sanity and distance that is at odds with Corbett's argument regarding metaphors of madness and outer space. He claims:

In the tropology of madness, one is "close to the edge" or "out of one's mind." The mind, and more specifically the *reasonable* mind, is configured as a terrestrial zone, as earth; sanity is the "ground," from which one departs in "flights" of fancy...Tradition = earth; innovation = outer space. In the language of black music, madness and extraterrestriality go hand in hand.
(16-17, italics Corbett)

Certainly Corbett's claim proves correct for artists such as George Clinton, who embraces the space-jester image in favor of portraying a cosmic party always in effect. Yet a poem such as "Points of the Space Age" illustrates Ra's connection between the outer (in this case, "airy") and refined aesthetics. The above quote from Corbett also finds him conflating "innovation" with "madness," which is an equation that Ra never addresses. To him, the ascent towards the stars, both physically and mentally, represents the greatest refinement of artistic intent. In turn, this focus on aesthetics is the ultimate mark of a society's worth. In the same poem, he declares that "skilled culture is the new weapon of nations, / The new measure of determination as to whether a nation / Is ready to be a greater nation of art. / A nation without art is a nation without a lifeline."

Lock takes particular issue with Corbett's connection of "madness and extraterrestriality" in African-American art, stressing that the language and philosophy of Christianity takes the exact opposite approach. The narrative of so many spirituals, in which the ascent to heaven whisks the subject away from a cruel and arbitrarily judged world,

represents an escape to a poetically charged site of greater sense, logic, and sanity. He quotes from Paul Radin, who similarly asserts that "the slave desired...a status that he himself had ordained, not a fictitious one imposed from without. Such a status he could only secure in the realm of dreams, fantasies, and visions" (qtd. in Lock 59).

Ra attributes a similar status to his own realms of the impossible in the poem entitled "Trancendence." The title hints at the higher state of concentration one can assume when he has reached "the celestial reach eternal," courtesy of "the express lightnin' bypass." Ra uses the metaphor of outer space not as a signifier of mental incapacity, but as an escape from the finite, flawed laws of earthbound life. In this way, he mimics the tone and intent of Baptist spirituals in his own language of science and music:

To bypass the annihilative "life"
Tuned out of tune and harmonized accordingly
To project the tunes and tune of
What they call their inevitable demise
(396)

I argue that Ra's intent here is to create a poetic autonomous zone, one where he is able to define (however abstractly) his own difference from a world in which he draws so much influence. Even the use of "harmonized" and the travel upward into "transient light" references Medieval cosmology (Ra was well versed in this field and even wrote a poem entitled "Music of the Spheres"). Most of all, the poem refutes Corbett's fallacious claim that Ra engages with the concept of madness "liberally" (15). Ra never even begins to engage with this, and Corbett's argument becomes all the more frustrating when one considers the salience of his other arguments.

For instance, in regards to Ra's relationship to history and myth, he writes:

For Ra...the possibility of this impossible alternative futurity rests on reconfiguring the past, on the construction of vast, transformative, science-fictional mythologies, on looking back at the end of history – not a romantic terminus, but the historical truncation endemic in the whole "uprooting" of black African civilizations. (22)

He's absolutely right, though he offers no proof to support his claim. The closing stanza of "Trancendence" approaches this theme, placing a positive spin on this "terminus" while referencing his documented disapproval of Christian redemption myths. In response to the

dogma of salvation through death, Ra offers this message of possibility (or what Corbett would smugly render as "impossible"):

As if that had to be the/a foreordained end.
It is not the end to deify
It is taboo to seek such blasphemy . . .
It is not celestial accepted fate.
There are other greater ends
For the ultimate greater end
Is the leastness of end
Endlessness.
(396)

There is absolutely no embrace, acceptance, or even acknowledgment of insanity in this poem, nor is there such a trend in his philosophy of possibilities. What is evident in this passage is what Corbett identifies as an "alternative futurity" which "rests on configuring the past." In this case, that past is the history of Christian dogma and its acceptance of death as a final salvation. It is disheartening to accept Corbett's simple reduction of this philosophy of hope and difference to "insanity," especially considering his other contributions to Ra scholarship. In the introduction to Pathways to Unknown Worlds: El Saturn and Chicago's Afro-Futurist Underground 1954-68, he observes that Ra's conceptions of discipline and freedom are not mutually exclusive (7). Why can he not see that Ra's conception (and reconfiguring) of reality and the future impossible are also two equally viable sites of investigation?

This basic truth – that Ra could imagine metaphorical and physical sites of freedom, discipline, and hope – while accepting and recasting the traditions that he found himself engaged with, is what I hope to have illustrated successfully. In the next chapter, I will investigate the current state of Ra's legacy in the hyper-media-saturated 21st century, especially in regards to the newly reissued edition of Space is the Place, Ra's most enduring film artifact.

Chapter 4 – Legacy

"What is the legacy," asks John Szwed, "of a musician who thrived on paradox and mystery, and made contradiction an art form?" (209). There's a sense of wonder in this obituary for Sun Ra, included in Crossovers, his collected essays and shorter pieces on a variety of music related subjects. As Szwed expands on this "contradiction" in Ra's character, marveling at his devotion "to the written score" while also reintroducing "collective improvisation into free jazz in the 1960's," he also touches on Ra's wide-reaching cultural influence – a force that reached beyond poetic and music influences and into the world of film. Is it absurd to acknowledge the similarities between Spielberg's Close Encounters of the Third Kind and Space is the Place, the 1974 blaxploitation Sci-Fi parable in which Ra plays the space-age prophet of black redemption? Ra claimed that elements from Space is the Place were re-appropriated in Spielberg's box-office smash. In fact, he argued that the melody intoned by the spaceship in Close Encounters was directly inspired by the theme to his composition "Lights on a Satellite" (Szwed 333). As a conclusion to my study of Ra's recombinatory poetics, I'd like to briefly investigate this newly reissued and misunderstood film as a site of intriguing generic *bricolage* that continues to inspire and influence artists in the 21st century.

In an interview with Graham Lock in 1990, Ra commented on his ability to straddle disciplines in order to claim an autonomous artistic space. "They don't know how many places I'm supposed to be in," he bragged before claiming that he wasn't where he was "supposed to be, in black society or in white society, and I planned it like that" (qtd. in Lock 153). Such a disavowal of rhetorical relation reads strangely when one considers Space is the Place, which not only incorporates Ra's now-familiar pool of influences, but also interrogates media culture while blending film genres in unique ways.

Nabeel Zuberi tackles these aspects of the film in "The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: Space is the Place, Sun Ra, and Afrofuturism." Zuberi argues that Space is the Place "is a molecular milestone in a black music tradition that engages with separation, escape and otherness through the tropes of Science Fiction." While I agree with his stress on the traditions mined by Ra and filmmaker John Coney, I would also argue that the spoken

performances in the film, particularly Ra's prophetic declarations, create more of an immediate impression than the film's music. It is this music that Zuberi claims "*is the primary special effect*," and indeed – Ra states this much near the film's opening (78, italics Zuberi). In response to an unseen interrogator asking "What is the power of your machine?" a similar Ra answers simply and directly: "Music" (qtd. in Zuberi 77).

Then again, this is an artist for whom "My Music Is Words," to quote one of Ra's more infamous prose pieces. When Zuberi re-asserts that "music is *the* special effect that can transport black people into a higher state of consciousness and being," I feel that he is not taking the aforementioned Ra equation into account (92, italics Zuberi). For this viewer, one already familiar with the developmental arc and functional purpose of the artist's music, the brilliant instances of space-philosophizing in Space is the Place outshine the too-few sonic examples of Ra's artistry. Furthermore, it is these instances that have resurfaced in the most interesting ways, finding curious homes in 21st century music.

Ra's opening monologue is given from the sole visual example of a space-bound utopia, portrayed as a lush jungle resonating with alien bird calls and mysterious floating life forms. The sheer physicality of this extraterrestrial site, an oddity in a film that almost entirely takes place on planet Earth, strikes home the idea that Ra's philosophizing reflects not only a quest to open minds, but to move the vessels of those minds to a land of new beginning. Zuberi uses this monologue as a signpost towards Ra's musical goals, highlighting the sounds featured behind the speech as symbols of a greater yearning. I think the words themselves are a greater reflection of the function which art held for Ra; I quote the speech here in its entirety in order to demonstrate the poetics of pragmatics at play:

The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like Planet Earth. Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration. There will be no one from Planet Earth we could talk to who would understand. We'll set up a colony for black people here. See what they can do on a planet all their own, without any white people there. They would drink in the beauty of this planet. It would affect their vibrations, for the better, of course. Another place in the universe, up in the different stars. That would be where the alter-destiny would come in. Equation-wise – the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We'll work on the other side of time. We'll bring them here through either isotopic teleportation, transmolecularization of better still, teleport the whole planet through music. (qtd. in Zuberi 83)

While Ra is pointing towards the power of his music as a literal liberating force, I argue that the conversational yet serenely confident delivery of his intentions resonates the most within the context of the entire film. This is not to downplay music's role in the film's narrative – several crucial scenes rely on sound's physical and mental forces as a catalyst for radical change. What this particular monologue highlights is the physical and functional aspects of art. Just as Sigrid Hauff finds this historically African attribute in Ra's poetry, Paul Youngquist sees a similar force in the sounds of jazz – sounds which also have the power to affect political change. In his essay entitled "The Space Machine: Baraka and Science Fiction," Youngquist approaches the science fiction tropes approached in the works of both Sun Ra and Amiri Baraka, arguing that both men see jazz as "much more than either entertainment or even art. It becomes a vital force that participates directly in the material transformation of space and the power relations that sustain it" (338).

One of Zuberi's more astute insights is how the political edge of Sun Ra's sound and message manifests itself in Space is the Place as a subtle critique of media-saturated culture. While I agree with Zuberi's claim that the film "ambivalently [acknowledges] the power of radio, television cameras, newspaper and magazines to disseminate Sun Ra's subversive message," I would also add that the instances of mediated speech and communication are framed in such a way to highlight the contrasting social import of Ra's few instances of vocal declaration (87). Hyper radio announcer Jimmy Fey serves both as the voice who disseminates much of Ra's information to planet earth and as a representative of the greater media babble that obstructs such information. Zuberi points out that the back-to-back portrayal of these two media roles is illustrated in a scene near the opening of the film.

After Jimmy Fey announces with ecstasy the arrival of the spaceship and the exit of its passengers, he receives a strange helmet from Ra that is soon placed upon his head. Ra proceeds to play a keyboard that "produces several electronic tones that dissolve into white noise" which in turn "leaves him unconscious." Zuberi argues that this sudden shift in the power of news media is balanced by the following scene, in which Fey is driven to the hospital while the voice of an anonymous radio announcer uses the medium as a forum for an explicitly racist warning to terrestrial whites: "Today a party of Negroes claimed to know the secret of space travel, threatening to undermine both the economy and social structure of the strongest nation of Earth and destroy our way of life" (qtd. in Zuberi 87).

I mention these aspects of Space is the Place, along with Zuberi's pointed observations, in order to demonstrate two discrete points. Firstly, Ra's few instances of speech within the admittedly convoluted narrative of the film prove that his philosophical bent reached far beyond vague song names and record album titles; his opening remarks regarding a black utopia in the equally black outer space subvert the Science Fiction genre conventions in ways that suggest conscious knowledge of such tropes. Instead of a story featuring invading aliens bent on planetary takeover, we are presented with the possibility of earthly rescue! In this scenario, the fantastic conventions of the unknown in Science Fiction melds perfectly with Ra's poetics of the impossible. Ultimately, the film transcends the boundaries of the Sci-Fi nail-biter or the dynamic concert film, and I argue that the Ra's opening declaration reinforces his reverence for a consistent philosophy that can exist in several mediums: music, writing, and film. The newly reissued DVD edition of the film finds curious prescience in this millennium of post-modernity in which information is everywhere and genres are continually broken down and remixed.

My second reason for incorporating Space is the Place into this study is more tangential, if only as a means of spotlighting a prime example of how Ra's written messages have endured and inspired artists in the 21st century. I've shown how Ra plundered a variety of sources (both written and oral, both sacred and profane) in order to fuel a philosophical vision as unique as it was indebted to the works of other radical thinkers. Yet modern hip-hop innovators such as Otis Jackson Jr., who in this case performs under the name of Madlib, perform an aural brand of plundering that re-broadcasts the words of Sun Ra to a new generation of synthesis-friendly listeners.

Jackson collaborates with Daniel Dumile on the album Madvillainy, a collection of hip-hop miniatures that samples sound sources from a vast range of recorded material. The centerpiece of the album is a track entitled "Shadows of Tomorrow," a piece which not only samples most of Ra's opening declaration from Space is the Place, but which also features Jackson reciting the Ra poem from which the track draws its title! The significance of such a critically acclaimed and prolific artist such as Jackson re-appropriating Ra's words, as opposed to simply lifting bars of recorded music, lies in the continuum of influence that runs directly through Sun Ra and continues unabated in a new generation. When Jackson, rapping under the pitch-shifted pseudonym of Lord Quas, recites lines such as "my point of view is the

thought of a better, untried reality" or "the rule of the past is the law of injustice and hypocrisy," he is explicitly aligning himself with Ra's very own philosophical concerns (qtd. in Geerken 339). He even switches between his own voice as interlocutor and the sampled voice of Ra himself, speaking from within Space is the Place. There effect is almost ghostly as the prophetic voice from the beyond discusses different vibrations with a new generation of mixers, shakers, and synthesizers.

Of course, there are countless other instances of artists from the 1970's onwards digging into Ra's written legacy and finding fragments that resonate with their beliefs, just as Ra dug into the hidden libraries of the world's written record to find voice for his poetics. Jazz-funk bagpiper (!) Rufus Harley obviously cribbed heavily from Ra for the notes to his Re-Creation of the Gods album, first released in 1972. Within the commentary for the track entitled "Etymology," he muses on the nature of love for The Creator, noting that "love spelled backwards is evol." It seems like wordplay across cultural boundaries was not unique to Ra! More recently, improvising musicians Tom Carter, Robert Horton, Lisa Cameron, and Lee Ann Cameron released their Sky City album, featuring tracks with titles indebted to the imagery within Ra's philosophy. My favorite track, of course, would have to be "It's After The End of The World."

I only bring forth these two other instances of influence in order to demonstrate the lasting power of Sun Ra's words and speech, which are becoming more and more accessible with the re-release of his written material and recorded declarations. The hyrda-headed and morally vacillating media parodied in Space is the Place has become an invaluable resource for those in search of Ra's message, with the nooks and crannies of the internet and independent record distribution distributing information in ways that the artist himself would have wondered at.

Where does this leave us? Can we answer Szwed's earlier question on the legacy of Sun Ra? Szwed writes that he prefers to view him as "the last of the great Romantic composers," an emotional behemoth who connected threads from the Pythagoreans to Helena Blavatsky (210). While I can't quite swallow such a definitive and constricting statement (after all, we've seen Ra reject sentimentality in name of science), I can work with another one of Szwed's final statements in his touching obituary. He writes that "Afro-American aesthetics" was his primary "culture-synthesizing principle," yet I would even go a bit further. I hope to have

illustrated in this work that Sun Ra, the philosopher and poet, was not simply interested in working only from the basis of a rich race-specific history. There is no doubt that his words were meant to empower and unite; his early diatribes and some of his more pointed poetry bears out his awareness of racial politics. What I hope to have proven is that Ra's mind reached far beyond topical African-American concerns by touching on early slave spirituals, African artistic customs, and Egyptian myths. He could just as easily become influenced by strains of European and Eastern thought, all while tying their strands back into a view of blackness that was both ancient and cosmic.

Sun Ra was not writing out of thin air. His writing is a vital component in understanding the myriad influences of 20th century African-American thought. In his 1968 essay entitled "My Music is Words," he states with confidence that he has "a gift to offer this planet and music is one of the bridges to the treasure house of it. I am doing what I am supposed to do, I am being what I came here to be" (qtd. in Geerken 471). If I may perform my own equation, Ra's words are bridges to the treasure house in which we can see how an artist can consciously create a unique philosophy out of shared experience. With the re-publication of his word-music, there's never been a better time to cross those bridges than the present. After all:

The past is a dream
A fictitious fantasy devised
By some sardonic kindly mind
In the hope that we might see
The meanings of today and all it's possibilities
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