Saturn’s Ark: The Improvised Archives, Politics, and Performances of Sun Ra

by

Brian J. Lefresne

A Thesis
presented to
The University of Guelph

In partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of
Doctor in Philosophy
in
Literary/Theatre Studies in English

Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

SATURN’S ARK: THE IMPROVISED ARCHIVES, POLITICS, AND PERFORMANCES OF SUN RA

Brian J. Lefresne
University of Guelph, 2018

Advisor:
Professor Ajay Heble

This dissertation examines the relationship between Black experimental performer Sun Ra (and his ensemble known as the Arkestra) and the archives of Black expressive culture. The archive, both conceptually and physically, provides a theoretical approach to understanding the cultural and social influences present in the musical performances, social practices, and politics of Ra and the Arkestra.

In Chapter One, I detail how Ra’s elaborate concert spectacles known as “myth-rituals” should be understood as an act of archival preservation and intervention. Within these concerts Ra was able to maintain traditions of Black sacred and secular performance cultures that provided a performative grammar to ward off the commodification of jazz and other improvised musics within formal settings.

In the second chapter, I shift my attention towards Ra and the Arkestra’s clothing and fashion. I argue that these sartorial choices may be seen as an “alternative archive.” The materiality and style of Ra and the Arkestra’s clothing function as an archival repository that captures the heterogeneity of, and often competing, discourses around Black visual and embodied identity politics of early 1970s America. Moreover, I suggest that Ra and the Arkestra’s dress is in dialogue with Black diasporic traditions of dandyism and tricksterism.

The final chapter shifts towards the historical moment of the Space Race. In this chapter I suggest that Ra’s sounds, words, and visual identity from the years 1969-1972 must be seen as part of a wider movement of Black diasporic cultural actors whose works form what I call the Black counter-archive of the
Space Race. I contend that Ra and his contemporaries produced cultural artefacts that can be positioned as part of an archival repository that critiques the mainly American and wholly white archive of human-powered space travel and exploration.

In my conclusion, I examine how Ra’s persona and his performance practices (in tandem with the Arkestra) confound conventional approaches to archives and archiving. This discussion is followed by a brief coda where I explore the ways in which the practice of engaging in archival research might itself be seen as an improvisatory act.
Dedication

To Kim
Acknowledgments

This project would have never seen the light of day without the guidance of my sagacious advisory committee: Drs. Ajay Heble, Daniel Fischlin, and Christine Bold. Thank you for reading every word of this document and providing an untold amount of advice and guidance relating to this project and my studies.

To Jade Ferguson, it seems like only yesterday I was asking you to sign the waiver in to your seminar. Thank you for the numerous conversations, professional guidance, and fellowship over the years.

To Brent Hayes Edwards, thank you for reading this document in its entirety and your generous feedback and suggestions for future directions to take this project.

This dissertation could not have been completed without the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Province of Ontario, the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, the African American Intellectual History Society, the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice Research Project, the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, the University of Guelph. I must single out the Robert L. Platzman Fellowship from the University of Chicago. Without this award, many, if not all, of the previously mentioned sources of funding could not have materialized.

An enormous amount of gratitude is extended to Christine Colburn and Barbara Gilbert of the Special Collections and Research Center of the University of Chicago and Sally Conkright and Adam Vida of the Experimental Sound Studio in Chicago, Illinois. Without fail all of you rose to the occasion and assisted with matters pertaining to your collections. This project is stronger because of your contributions and insights.

It would be irresponsible of me to not mention Marshall Allen, Danny Thompson, and Knoel Scott. The three of you were more than generous with your time and your knowledge over the course of two days in 2013 and planted the seeds for what this dissertation ultimately became. More importantly, you are keeping alive Sun Ra’s unique manifestation of a joyful noise.

Like my atypical journey through graduate school, the people that I need to thank is wide-ranging, diverse, and representative of various phases of my life and academic journey. First and foremost I have to thank Tamara Levitz. Your generosity and support during a time when the mere thought of talking about the possibility of writing a dissertation seemed like a far-fetched idea made this moment possible. Your act was my first exposure to radical pedagogy and what mentorship inside and outside of the academy should look like.

To Elaine Chang, Julie Cairnie, Michelle Elleray, Jennifer Schacker, Mark Lipton, Paul Salmon, Steven Powell, Danny O’Quinn, and Ann Wilson, much gratitude for the various professional tips and personal advice throughout the years. To Justine Richardson, Liz Jackson, Rachel Collins, and Kim Thorne of the ICASP/IICSI office, most importantly thank you for your friendship, but also thanks for your assistance and support with this project and various offshoots over the past six years. To my esteemed colleagues, peers, and friends Alec Follet, Kimber Sider, Mark Kaethler, Greg Fenton, David Lee, Mirali Almaula, Paul Watkins, Cynthia Ing, Margot Beckmann, Leslie Allen, Hannah MacGregor, Nick Loess, Alessia Ursella, Mark Laver, Erin Bustin, Mark V. Campbell, Rebecca Caines, Harald Kisiedu, Meagan Troop, Tom Zlabinger, Vilde Aaslid, Chris Wells, Alicia Levin, and Allison Portnow Lathrop, thanks for accompanying me on this journey and listening to my bevy of hot takes. I must also thank the staff of SETS: Olga Petrik, Yvonne Yates, and Phyllis Reynen. All three of you rose to the occasion when need be. Along these same lines, I must thank various faculty and staff members of SOFAM, SOLAL, and History at the University of Guelph who have offered support from the sidelines over the years.

I also must acknowledge Eric Porter, Imani Owens, Sherrie Tucker, Monica O’Connell, Paul Steinbeck, Aria Halliday, Lauren Jackson, Brandy Monk-Payton, Keith Cartwright, Kristin Moriah, Martyn
Bone, Jim Watkins, Zachary Vernon, Michael Bibler, Alex Corey, Daphne Carr, Claudia Carrera, Ali Neff, Josslyn Luckett, Marcel Swiboda, and Lauren Mueller. All of you offered insightful feedback and commentary about this project alongside camaraderie at meetings of the American Studies Association, the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, and the Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium and I thank you for that.

Shoutout to the SnapSquad! The non-ephemeral nature of this document prevents me from truly expressing my gratitude and a host of other superlatives to the two of you, but here is a feeble attempt: 🐐🔥💎.

To my parents Wilf and Kay Lefresne, and my brother Pete Lefresne, thank you for everything over the years.

To Emily, Ellison, and Quinton, you have provided an untold amount of joy in my life and have kept me grounded throughout this entire process. I was able to complete this project because of the energy the three of you emanate.

And finally, to Kim. There are no words. You have believed in me through thick and thin and have been a greater champion of me than myself. The completion of this degree is a testament to that. The sacrifices that you have had to make over the past six years are innumerable and can never be properly repaid. Thank you for everything, I love you, and this work is dedicated to you.
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Preface

Influential jazz musician, poet, composer, and bandleader Sun Ra continues to maintain his status as the ultimate outsider within jazz performance. Embracing a cosmic persona, mixing composed music with free-improvisation, and integrating theatrical elements into his performances, Ra’s life and music straddle geographic borders, stylistic categories, generic conventions, and conceptions of humanity—especially with regard to racial politics. In Saturn’s Ark, I build on recent work from the fields of improvisation, race, gender, archival, and performance studies to critically assess our understanding of Ra within musical, theatrical, political, and intellectual performance traditions of the Black diaspora and the American nation-state. Starting from Black working-class performance culture of the late nineteenth-century to mass entertainment of the twenty-first, Saturn’s Ark explores how we can garner a better understanding and appreciation of Sun Ra’s life and works through the prism of the archive.

Placing the relationship between Ra and the archive at the fore allows for a greater discussion of how Ra engaged with and manipulated the archives and traditions of Black expressive culture. My work generates space for a larger discussion about the nature of and the relationship between Black diasporic peoples and their cultures and the knowledge warehouse that is the archive. What this study will show is that Ra’s concert spectacles, his clothing and fashion, and his engagement with key events of the Space Race suggest the need for new conceptions and configurations of what constitutes, what is contained in, and what is considered an archive.

1 Throughout this dissertation I have chosen to capitalize Black when I refer to peoples and cultures of African descent and to follow recent trends by Black scholars and scholars active in the wider field of Black Studies. For more on this topic see Tharps.
Indeed, approaching Ra’s life, music, words, and visual appearance in relation to the archive unveils that he was more engaged with earth-based racial and social politics than he is given credit for, and that he was more concerned with ideas of cultural memory and the historical record than has been previously considered. In turn, Ra’s probing and remixing of various archives of Black expressive culture forces us to ponder new considerations and approaches to conducting archival research and the archiving practices of Black expressive culture.

But before any discussion of Ra’s musical practices and the notion of archives can commence, one must have a clearer understanding of who Sun Ra was and what his musical practices and philosophical aesthetics represent. As John Szwed writes in his biography of Sun Ra, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, “at the heart of everything that Sun Ra did or said was the claim that he was not born, that he was not from earth, that he was not a man, that he had no family, that his name was not what others said it was” (5).\(^2\) This claim of non-human existence was a recurrent topic in numerous articles about and interviews with Ra. In a short article with Harriet Choice that appeared in a 1972 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*, Ra refers to his earth name as “just a name to gig around with” as if to imply that his earth name was just a label to wear so he could blend in on this planet (Choice). In other instances, Ra would assert that he was a “being from another dimension” (Farris). What becomes clear throughout interviews, articles, and essays is that Szwed’s description of Ra as an extraterrestrial life form was not an exaggeration. Ra really did believe that he was not of this world and he would take any and every opportunity to remind audiences and critics alike of this point.

\(^2\) For a more thorough and complete account of Ra’s biography and especially his early years see Szwed, *Space* 1-50.
Ra’s claim of extraterrestrialism complicates the importance and primacy of archival documentation to one’s existence. Refusing self-entombment in the historical record of documents and forms may come as a shock to some, but this denial of human existence fits within the larger story of Ra’s life. Arriving on earth on 14 May 1914 under the earth name Herman Poole Blount, Ra spent his formative years under the care of his aunt and his grandmother in Birmingham, Alabama, where he began his earliest musical training. As a nascent, post-Reconstruction hub of steel manufacturing and rail transportation, Birmingham during the 1920s and 1930s was emblematic of a new, modern South, though one still regulated by the strictures of Jim Crow. Because of Birmingham’s economic influence and sizeable Black population, the city was a frequent stop for Black entertainers such as Ida Cox, Duke Ellington, and Bennie Moten. Ra was a routine visitor to the concert-halls and stages that hosted these performers, and, as I will show in this dissertation, these visits proved to be a source of inspiration for his staged musical performances later in life.

After graduating from high school, Ra, still going by his Earth-name Blount, attended Alabama A & M with the intent of becoming a high-school teacher, but he dropped out to pursue a full-time career as a professional musician. After several years out on the road, Ra received his induction notice for selective service in the United States military as part of the nation’s military buildup during World War II. Ra, ever the non-conformist, declared his conscientious objection to the war and served in a Civilian Public Service camp in rural Pennsylvania. Upon release from the camp and conclusion of the war, Blount moved to Chicago, Illinois in 1946. It was here that he began to explore Middle-Eastern infused forms of Black spirituality and mysticism and read

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3 For more about the racial and social politics of Birmingham see McKiven.
texts by Black authors to learn more about the history and culture of people of African descent in the Americas; these influences led to the foundation of his research collective Thmei.

What Blount discovered, just as members of the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple of America did, was that the history, accomplishments, and achievements of African Americans and the Black diaspora had been downplayed or in some cases even erased from the annals and archives of history. Ra, like many other Black South-side Chicagoans, would congregate in Washington Square Park to share his beliefs at public speaking forums or he would distribute broadsheet leaflets that contained a mix of poetry, word, and number permutations that purported to reveal the true meaning of the Bible, with original prose by Ra. The self-publication and distribution of content in service to Ra’s aesthetics and beliefs became a hallmark of his professional career and his life. It was also during this period that Blount began to publically declare his alien identity and formally changed his name to Sun Ra.

The other significant development in Ra’s career trajectory that transpired at this time was the founding of El Saturn Records. A wholly and independently owned entity, El Saturn Records provided Sun Ra and the Arkestra and Alton Abraham a platform to produce, record, and distribute their philosophical message of Black historical achievement and future potentialities. The venture, as Paul Youngquist writes, “was a do-it-yourself organization for reinventing reality” (Pure 105) that Abraham managed and operated out of his apartment.

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4 For more about Ra’s broadsheets and the discovery of their existence see Corbett, “one.”

5 Various materials in the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra attest to the independent nature of El Saturn Records. Throughout are examples of purchase orders for blank record sleeves, uncashed checks for mail order purchases, and hand written requests for catalogues from national and international locales. For more about the DIY qualities of Sun Ra and El Saturn Records see Corbett, “sun ra in chicago.”
A phrase that Ra and Abraham included in the publicity materials for the label was “Beta Music for a Beta people for a Beta world.” This phrase perfectly captures the ethos of Ra and El Saturn Records. Through lexical wordplay, Ra imparts to us that the music is unfinished (Beta). It instead exists in a preliminary stage, available for people who have not reached full political and social consciousness on a planet that is not fully ready to enter the galaxy. The syllabic structure of the Beta Music slogan can also be heard as “Better Music” for a “Better People” for a “Better World.” In this sense, Abraham and Ra’s record label offers as better music than what was currently available and those that were listening to El Saturn Records were a “better” type of people than those that were not listening to Sun Ra’s records, which would also advance the development of a “better” world than the current one available to listeners. El Saturn Records was a self-financed and wholly-owned subsidiary, allowing Ra and Abraham to cultivate and publicize their blend of ancient Black achievement and futurist imagery and sounds. By controlling the means of production and distribution, Ra spread his gospel of intergalactic salvation to a wider audience.

Ra would use this idea of non-earthly alignment to fuel an artistic and philosophical vision that became known as Afrofuturism. Blending Ancient Egyptian iconography with Futurist imagery and tropes, this aesthetic resists the easy categorization of artistic genre or medium. More succinctly, this form refuses entry into the archive or the canon by the very nature of its multitemporality and its mixture of the sonic, visual, and performative. Combining this performative philosophy with his stance that he was an alien leaves us with an individual and a musical practice that simultaneously evokes and denies the past while propagating a future-oriented vision with new time structures and physical geographies beyond the realms of the
earth. In this way, the unique “objects” produced by Sun Ra serve as archival materials and make use of archival artefacts in unique ways.

To champion this narrative of alienness, altered pasts, and futuristic modes of existence, Ra began to incorporate into his concert performances theatrical props, spoken-word monologues, and space-inspired clothes. Alongside these extramusical aspects, Ra also expanded his ensemble, which he dubbed the Arkestra, to include multiple percussionists, hand-made instruments, and electronic keyboards. Additionally, Ra supplemented the Arkestra with male and female dancers. Underwriting these concerts was a theme of salvation and rejuvenation sanctioned through space travel.

The sonic, textual, and visual ingredients of Ra’s aesthetics and performances were distilled in the 1972 film *Space is the Place*. This film, which blends a fantastical and realist narrative circulating around Oakland, California is, to date, the most well-known example of Ra’s aesthetics (and for many the entry point into Ra’s paradigm). As the synopsis makes clear, this film clearly articulates Ra’s belief that humanity can choose to “tune into the frequencies of the cosmos through his music or choose the Overseer’s way of life and death on planet Earth” (“Synopsis”). The film reinforces that to adhere to the narratives and timelines of earth history was to remain trapped in a vicious cycle of subjugation and marginalization. Through the power of Ra and the Arkestra’s music, humanity could conceive and envision a mode of being that allowed for different forms of existence.

In the years following the release of the film, Ra began to incorporate traditional swing numbers into his performances to the point where some nights the majority of songs on his concerts were taken from the catalogues of Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson. By the mid-1980s, Ra began to scale-back the size and scope of his performances, primarily because of
financial resources, but also caused by the dwindling pool of musicians skilled enough to play swing numbers with a high-level of precision and to freely improvise. In the late 1980s Ra began to feel the effects of a series of undiagnosed strokes. These ailments hampered Ra’s ability to lead the Arkestra in performances or take the band on extended tours. In the following years Ra suffered a series of strokes that in January 1993 forced him to relocate to Birmingham to live with his estranged sister. On 22 May 1993, Ra departed this world and returned to Saturn.

The relationship between Sun Ra and historical, performative, and material archives has received little attention. This dissertation hopes to rectify this situation. To appreciate Ra’s engagement with and understanding of the cultural practices and material artefacts of the Black diaspora, we must ponder new modalities and types of archives. In turn, I aim to show that Ra’s working with these historical performance traditions greatly contributes to his performance aesthetics and social messages—messages of inclusion, diversity, and celebration of the subjugated—that are perhaps more relevant now than ever.
Introduction

The civilizations of the past have been used as the foundation of the civilization of today. Because of this, the world keeps looking toward the past for guidance. Too many people are following the past. In this new space age, this is dangerous. The past is DEAD and those who are following the past are doomed to die and be like the past. It is no accident that those who die are said to have passed since those who have PASSED are PAST. Sun Ra, “The Dead Past”

Appearing no less than five times in the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra, the largest singular repository of archival documents dedicated to Ra’s life and music, this text underscores the myriad of cultural, social, and intellectual questions that arise when one interrogates the life, art, and legacy of Sun Ra in relation to the conceptual and physical manifestations of the archive.

The term “archive” derives from the word “ark.” An ark represents a symbolic container holding guidelines from a higher deity or a vessel to preserve human and non-human beings with which to rebuild society in the wake of a cataclysmic event. An ark preserves items and species from the past so as to build new futures. The imagery of the ark also suggests a sense of mobility and movement that projects a message of forward motion and of escaping a sense of fixity or geographic permanence.

Sun Ra believes that any turn towards the past or towards arks that hold the past as an inspiration or model for the future is a false premise. Since the past has already passed, and is therefore dead, to turn towards the past sets one on a trajectory of repeating past events and social structures. Instead, what Ra proposes in “The Dead Past” is that we consider untold, undocumented, unwritten pasts, ones on and outside the margins of history, to build new and
unprecedented futures. Following Ra’s dictum, *Saturn’s Ark* examines the numerous ways that one can engage with multiple forms and variants of the archive, both conceptually and physically, as pathways to a richer and more varied critical assessment of Sun Ra’s life, music, and words. In turn, this dissertation asks what the archive of an individual from Saturn would look like. More importantly, in *Saturn’s Ark*, I examine how the idea of archives, archiving, and archivization needs to include space for multiple forms, genres, and styles of documentation that reside within and alongside established archival forms and practices. These repositories, which have been labelled as performative, alternative, counter, subversive, emotional, or rogue archives, are not meant to replace more traditional and established forms of archiving. Rather, I suggest that non-traditional forms of archiving need to exist alongside, inform, and complement those more orthodox spaces; however, I also argue that the multiple valences of the term ark and archives must account for a sense of fluidness and adaptability.

This dissertation, therefore, is a study of Sun Ra and the archive. In fact, I see, hear, and read in Sun Ra a figure whose artistic practices and aesthetics put into motion larger conversations about the politics, histories, agendas, and realities surrounding archives and Black expressive culture. More importantly, Sun Ra serves as a synecdoche for examining archives of Black expressive culture, Black political thought, and Black social history. In particular, the notion of the archives is important in relation to Black political thought. As Cedric Robinson makes clear in *Black Marxism*, Black political thought was and is just as concerned with archives and history as it is with securing political liberation in the present. Robinson sees radical forms of Black political thought emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century as a way to combat the erasure of Black contributions and achievements from white dominant narratives of history. From the perspective of Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James, the only
way to overcome these historical deficits was to construct new archives and histories for future generations to peruse, but also to carve out space for the histories of the Black diaspora within commonplace narratives. For these two scholars, the archive was an implement that aided in the enslavement, exploitation, and marginalization of people of colour. For this reason, a discussion of the archival histories of these Black epistemologies is useful in relation to Sun Ra. This dissertation will not be a retelling of my own excursions into the material archives of Sun Ra; rather, I view the idea and the reality of the archive as a critical runway via which to propel new discussions of the life and legacy of Sun Ra within the context of the long civil rights era and the politics of the canonization and archivization of jazz music. “The Dead Past” then serves as the ultimate jumping off point from which to begin an exploration of the intersections between Ra’s choices and archival practices.

The Dead Past

“The Dead Past” is a short prosaic piece that exhibits poetic qualities, not the verse Ra is more well-known for. In this work, Ra urges those living in the present to look away from the past for intellectual and aesthetic models. He asks us to consider new modes of social existence and political thought with which to build new worlds. In Ra’s estimation, if the then present-day civilization continued to model its actions and its social and political structures on “The civilizations of the past,” it was doomed to fail. To build a society emblematic and representative of the ultra-modernity and futurity of the space age, society must cease “looking toward the past for guidance,” a past that in Ra’s words “is DEAD,” and conceive new and energizing social

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6 It should be noted that Robinson contributes to the refashioning of the archives of history through his own engagement with documents and materials that preserve Black achievements and contributions.
constructions and knowledge bases. Indeed, beyond the poem in question, Ra makes his desire for the unsuturing of humanity to the Earth in the penultimate scene of his 1972 film *Space is the Place*, where the planet earth blows up with Ra and the Arkestra jetting off to deep space in their amorphous and teardrop shaped spaceship.\(^7\)

Stylistically, “The Dead Past” fits into the category of what Gene Andrew Jarrett describes as an “anomalous” African American text, because the work does not directly address the lived experience of “African American life” in its content (“Introduction” 11).\(^8\) As Jarrett notes, non-representational or non-realist art is often expunged from official documents, narratives, and archives of Black literature and culture. In his poem, Ra tackles the social experience of people of African descent through an abstract play of language and imagery that opposes the dual intellectual and cultural streams of societal integration and/or separation, doubling down on the politics that would exclude such writing from a canonical positioning.

Material manifestations of “The Dead Past” reinforce the malleable and dexterous nature of Ra’s print artefacts and also call attention to the fraught relationship between the archive and Black expressive culture. Originally included in two El Saturn Records, this poem also appears on the jacket cover of the 1969 pressing of his album *Atlantis*, only to disappear from the

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\(^7\) In his recent work, *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye makes a similar argument in suggesting that to construct new humanities-based scholarship we must turn away from epistemological frameworks built upon ideas of racism and sexism.

\(^8\) While at a broader, more abstract level Ra’s poetry does address the social alienation of African Americans and Ra’s verse is heavily featured in the movement-defining anthology *Black Fire*, Ra’s works do not fit easily within the conventional parameters of African-American poetry. For more see Jarrett.
packaging of the subsequent 1973 Impulse! Records reissue. In the same year, the poem reappeared on the back cover of the album *Discipline 27-ii*. The work also appeared on an undated 11” by 11” piece of paper with poems and essays by Ra. The multiple appearances of this poem across print media and contexts call into question notions about officialdom and permanence that percolate around the idea and physical space of the archive. The multiple instances of “The Dead Past” in the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra demonstrate how an archival repository focused on an individual such as Sun Ra must accommodate numerous types and forms of documents, media containers, and formats, incorporating those media that exist on their own and those that directly conflict with other documents.

The print publications and form of “The Dead Past” seemingly reinforce Fred Moten’s notion that the improvisatory and transgressive nature of Black expressive culture falls outside the normative limits and descriptors of western aesthetics and exists in what he labels the “break.” Within the break—this liminal, in-between space that Moten articulates as that moment between thunderclap and lightning—Black cultural producers animate their objection to the abjection and objecthood western society has placed upon them. “The Dead Past” does not fit within a verse/prose binary and suggests a social moment not tethered to the past and that exists in an undetermined future. Through the generative act of performance, Black performers eschew objectivity and self-fashion their own subjectivity. As Moten succinctly notes, “The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist” (*Break* 1). Playing with Marxian

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9 Impulse! Records was active from 1961 to 1976 and prioritized the marketing and distribution of recordings by leading-edge jazz musicians such as John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Sun Ra; for more see Kahn.

10 Based on the size of paper and the nature of the texts included in the document, I believe that this document was produced with the intent of being included in the inner jacket sleeve of records.
analysis, Moten argues that the status of objecthood impressed upon Black bodies is false. As he demonstrates throughout his book *In The Break*, Black life and culture constantly demonstrate self-actualized agency through a resistance of categorization and commodification. The print manifestations and content of Ra’s poem reinforce Moten’s argument. Both in material form and in content, “The Dead Past” suggests that western-based epistemological frameworks that depend on fixity, linearity, and conformity might not be the best archival approach for Sun Ra’s materials. I argue instead that, for a conversation centered around Sun Ra and the archive, we must adapt, include, and engage with multiple archival forms, which can include non-textual forms of cultural memory, material items and artefacts, and archives that react to and comment upon accepted or established collections.

The poem’s presence on and subsequent vanishing from the packaging of one album and inclusion on another provokes investigation of Sun Ra’s discography, which encompasses well over one hundred official sound documents in addition to numerous bootlegs and unauthorized recordings. To complicate matters further, official recordings often include numbers taken from multiple recording sessions with different players than those listed as the personnel for that particular session. Others have undergone numerous remixes, edits, and format conversions. What remains is a corpus of recordings that resists a prevailing logic within the barony of jazz studies that prioritizes and fetishizes official, definitive, and authoritative recordings. Instances of “The Dead Past” among these recorded objects highlight how archives must and should be

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11 Amidst my critique of jazz studies and official recordings, it should be noted that an attempt to document the complete recordings of Sun Ra has been undertaken by Robert Campbell. Campbell’s work was an invaluable resource for this study, but as he notes in the prefaces, the intent and act of documenting all of Sun Ra’s recorded output is next to impossible; for more see Campbell. For more about the prominence of discographies in jazz studies see Rasula.
able to accommodate unofficial and official narratives within the same collection and allow for multiple timelines and histories.

“The Dead Past” as a Black object of resistance becomes amplified when considering my exposure to material manifestations of the work. The act of encountering this poem, which calls for a discarding of the past, within an archival setting calls attention to the archive and its symbolic and real links to power relations. Michel Foucault, in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, positions the archive as a site that regulates the “law of what can be said” (129). The archive, for Foucault, is the disciplinary apparatus that not only controls what is allowed into history, but also functions as the gatekeeper to what can be said about history. In other words, the archive governs what becomes history and what will be said about history in the future. To this end, Foucault also calls attention to the idea that the documents contained within the archive are organized in “accordance with specific regularities” (129). The archive(s) of Sun Ra, as appearances of “The Dead Past” have shown, must recognize that all archival documents are not in “accordance with specific regularities.” Physical archival sites and conceptual configurations of Sun Ra’s archive need to include alternative types of archival documents spread across multiple forms of media.

The presence of and my interaction with a material example of “The Dead Past” highlight both the constructed nature of the archive itself and the implications of invoking the term “archive” and investigating material and sonic archives of an individual who claimed to have no past or, in Ra’s own words, who had “never been part of the planet” (Rusch, “Sun Ra” 3).

On a broader scale, the trope of the archive becomes useful in a study of Sun Ra when considering Ra’s deep knowledge of and respect for Black intellectual and performance histories. Ra’s interest in and engagement with the performative, material, and intellectual repositories of Black culture and politics allow one to view him as an archivist himself. Paul D. Miller, aka DJ
Spooky, takes a similar approach in his autoethnographic manifesto *Rhythm Science*, where he describes his acts of sonic explorations as those of an “archivist of sound, text, and image” (16). Miller’s sonic collages and sound mixes come about through his explorations of previously existing media forms and texts to construct his art. While Miller’s oeuvre is wholly new and unique, his creative process rests on utilizing material, sonic, and cultural artefacts to create new work. Sun Ra’s penchant for integrating historical forms and styles of Black expressive culture and veins of Black intellectual thought into his own performances anticipates Miller’s own work. Centering Ra as an archivist creates a pathway via which to scrutinize how he manipulates Black archives in service of his message of intergalactic liberation. In turn, this consideration of Ra as an archivist puts forth the idea that we must consider different configurations and presentations of the figure of the archivist as well. Positioning Sun Ra as an archivist and his archives at the fore continues his work of taking other forms and stories of history to construct new futures and possibilities.

The archive thus becomes for me the connective tissue that ties together this multi-thematic study of Sun Ra. Using the figurative language and imagery of the archive allows me to simultaneously escape a temporally linear discussion of Sun Ra such as those found in John Szwed’s biography of Sun Ra, *Space is the Place*, and Paul Youngquist’s recent study of Sun Ra’s role in creating the epistemological and artistic framework of Afrofuturism. Indeed, highlighting and revisiting particular aspects of Sun Ra’s life and artistic legacy allow for conversations that forge connections between Ra and his peers while also shedding new light on
old topics and materials. Writing on the topic of African urbanity and urban centres, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall propose that if we wish to overturn narratives that describe Africa as rural or pre-modern then perhaps we should start “working with new archives—or even with old archives in new ways” to formulate new arguments and perspectives (“Writing” 352). In this sense, if we wish to overturn a narrative that positions Ra as disconnected from the realities of racial injustice during the twentieth century, we must engage with documentary evidence and archives pertaining to his life with new approaches and configurations to formulate new perspectives. This is not to say that there is a direct correlation between Sun Ra’s cosmic persona and, say, that of Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, but rather that traces, residues, and amplifications of Black histories, Black culture, and Black life are present within Ra’s own aesthetics. I situate my study theoretically by turning to scholarship produced in three areas: jazz studies, Black studies, and archival studies. This theoretical underpinning allows for a deeper and thicker contextualisation of Sun Ra’s life and legacy through the prism of the archive that demonstrates that despite the cosmological and fantastical aspects of Sun Ra, he was in tune with the vibrations of earth-based social and political life.

**Sun Ra and the Jazz Archive**

The first body of theory particularly essential to my dissertation involves work on the ephemeral nature of the archive. Indeed, the precarious nature of African American social life and culture in relation to the officialdom and sanctity of the archive is boosted when we hone in on the field of jazz, the domain with which Sun Ra is most closely associated. In addition to its inclusion in

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12 John Szwed’s recent work on jazz vocalist Billie Holiday highlights how such an approach attends to the gaps that develop around and envelop a specific figure. For more see Szwed, *Billie Holiday*. 

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discussions of African American life and culture, the study of jazz has its own internal tensions that highlight the issue of archives. Jairo Moreno, in his recent work on the relationship between jazz and American imperialism, describes the archives and history of jazz through the lens of Amy Kaplan’s idea of the anarchy of empire. For Kaplan, American imperial ventures and the ensuing exposure to foreign peoples, bodies, and contagions were reason to shore up investment in authentic and pure ideas about race, citizenship, and culture domestically. Moreno expands Kaplan’s ideas to the sphere of jazz. In his estimation, the world of jazz is imperial, not in the sense that it has been put into service to advance American power (though in certain instances it has), but rather, jazz is imperial in that it shores up its generic borders by reinvesting in the myth of jazz developing in New Orleans and travelling to northern, urban centres or prevents the incursion of foreign elements such as Latin rhythms and performative elements into its grammar.

One such apparatus that aides in the policing of boundaries is the archive. For Moreno, the jazz archive sustains a coherence that contributes to the fabrication of timelines and narratives that include as well as exclude (147-8). Moreno advocates that an archival, linear account of the history of jazz does not account for other timelines or geographic locations in this story, or to borrow a phrase from Dipesh Chakrabarty, for a “heterotemporality” of jazz. For instance, a smooth history of jazz would have great difficulty accounting for sound recordings made before the Original Dixieland Jass Band’s 1917 recording of “Livery Stable Blues,” which has been viewed as the de facto starting point of jazz history. Along these same lines, a stock history of jazz discounts the influence and exchange of musical and cultural ideas from across

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13 For more about the internal/external dichotomy of US Imperialism see Kaplan.

14 For more about “heterotemporality” see Chakrabarty.
Latin America and the Circum-Caribbean basin. Sun Ra, with his cosmic biography and his penchant for revitalizing and incorporating theatrical elements into his performances, suggests a form of social existence and Black musicking outside of the geographic and temporal boundaries that comprise the archives and history of jazz.

Ra’s idea that jazz was a mutable artistic form not married to a geographic space or a temporal moment is on display in an interview with Tam Fiofori in the 14 May 1970 edition of *Downbeat* magazine. When pressed about the relationship between Ra’s space music and jazz, Ra responds that the “best point about jazz is that the idea or being of jazz is based upon the spontaneous improvisation principle. Pure jazz is that which is without preconceived notion” (Fiofori). For Ra, jazz is an open-ended improvisatory act not reliant on pre-existing generic definitions or predetermined aesthetic or ideological frameworks. Ra’s views, which might seem aberrant to quickly solidifying ideas about jazz, point towards a more progressive notion and definition of jazz and its archives. Later in the interview, Ra states that he heard many of the bands and performers from his youth containing a “treasure of jazz that other people didn’t hear” (Fiofori). Though Ra never specifies the acts to which he is referring here, we know that during his formative years Ra was exposed to early swing bands and blues performers. From his statements, we can read Ra formulating a definition of jazz that refuses a generic stability and a version of the music that is in dialogue with historical styles of Black musicking that have been cast outside of the accepted narrative and archive of jazz.

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15 For two excellent studies on the power of the archive to exclude and include foreign elements or alternative timelines see Lewis, “Afrological” and Ake, Garrett, & Goldmark.

16 George Lipsitz makes a similar argument in *Dangerous Crossroads*. For Lipsitz, jazz privileges “relentless innovation over static tradition” (178).
Additionally, Ra’s geographical mobility within the United States and professional networks problematize accepted locales of jazz and public figures affiliated with the fight for racial equality in the United States. This idea of acknowledging and using an alternative history of jazz and improvisation to construct new critical narratives mirrors a core idea of Sun Ra’s Astro-Black philosophy: the “alter-destiny.” For Ra, “alter-destiny” was his idea that an alternative history and archive of Black accomplishment and achievement could fuel a new and radical existence free from subjugation.

In Ra’s estimation, the only way for African Americans to construct a narrative for themselves outside systems of political, social, and archival exclusion was to alter the sources and well-springs of their information. Instead of turning towards conventional ideas of truth and fact—epistemological approaches that too often erased the presence and contributions of people of colour—Ra espoused a view that African Americans should turn towards a mythological past rooted in Egypt as a generative force to construct an “alter”native future themselves, which in turn would fulfill a new and fantastical destiny. As he writes in the second stanza of his poem “Black Myth”: 17

A better destiny I decree
Such tales and tales that are told
Are not my myths
But other myths of black mythology
Radiate from beyond the measured borders of time. (7-12)

17 This poem and all subsequent poems cited in this dissertation come from Ra’s poetry collection The Immeasurable Equation.
From Ra’s perspective, alternative narratives exist in relation to, but outside of, the “measured borders of time” dictated by majoritarian tales of history. But, as he suggests, these stories endure in Black mythology outside the measured time of Western modernity.

By framing Ra as an activist-archivist, we can place him within a larger tradition of Black creative musicians as community-based intellectuals. The relationship between the community and musicians is one that is often fraught and filled with contradictions. Eric Porter, however, in his book *What Is This Thing Called Jazz*, argues that there is a long, and often contradictory, history of “African American musicians as intellectuals working both within and outside culture-producing institutions” (xiii). Porter singles out musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, and Abbey Lincoln whose words and activism are a form of intellectualism that occurs inside formal culture venues such as the concert hall and informal cultural venues like community centres or in alternative journals or publications. Musical performances and words by these artists can be seen as deep, community-oriented theorizations about African American social and political life. In this same way, I argue that Sun Ra’s refashioning of the archives of Black expressive culture should be viewed as another iteration of a Black creative musician carrying out the labour of community intellectualism that addresses pressing matters of race, class, culture, and citizenship.

In this study, I incorporate these theoretical constructs to allow for an exploration of how Sun Ra’s musical practice, performance aesthetics, politics, and persona engaged with multiple archives of Black performative and material cultures while simultaneously contributing to archives of blackness for future generations to peruse and ponder. In fact, if we follow Ann Laura Stoler’s argument that the archive is a tool of colonial power and its corollary that archives
are “technologies that bolstered the production of those states themselves” (“Colonial” 90),
then we can begin to see how the idea of Ra as an archivist begins to take shape. Parrying (and in many ways parodying) the formality of canons and archives, Ra manipulates the tool of the archive to champion his message of alternative pasts and futures. Ra’s interaction with Black cultural archives and his place in the formation of an archive are ways of countering the oversights and omissions of Black cultural practices and intellectual thought within genre-specific and national contexts.

Ultimately, Sun Ra engages with the invisible and undervalued archives of Black expressive culture as an intervention to preserve these performative traditions for future generations. Much like the improvisatory nature of these cultural practices, Ra adapts a style of archiving that freely borrows from traditions across lines of class and geography to construct new historical “documents.” While this practice might seem illogical and haphazard to some, what Ra’s actions suggest is an approach to archiving not restricted to a singular cultural practice, contained by a specific media format, or moored to a physical space. In this way, Ra puts forth new models and forms of community by his refashioning of established traditions in unique and fantastic contexts. And so, to explore the social, political, cultural, and intellectual significance of Sun Ra, we must follow his lead and turn towards alternative sources, oppositional timelines, and new epistemological frameworks—particularly those based in the work of Black studies—to fashion new pasts, new presents, and new futures.

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18 By states, Stoler means nation-states engaged with imperial and colonial ventures such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France.
Black Studies, Black Archives, and Archiving Blackness

The most significant and robust theoretical work informing this dissertation comes from the essential scholarship published by scholars of Black studies and the relationship between Black culture and archival practices. Shifting away from monolithic definitions of and approaches towards racial identity, culture, and citizenship, scholars have posited that Black social existence and culture are defined by ideas of mobility, displacement, and transformation. Paul Gilroy distills this point in his book *The Black Atlantic*, where he concludes that “the history of the black Atlantic yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade” (xi). In Gilroy’s estimation, fixed and essentialist approaches to race and culture do not attend to the lived experiences and social realities outside of the dominant mainstream. To this extent, we must also allow for and attend to archival documentation and practices that allow for mutability, change, and extemporaneity.

With specific respects to culture, Ra’s praxis embodies and makes evident Stuart Hall’s point about Black popular culture. Much like blackness itself, Black culture cannot be “simplified or explained in terms of the simple binary oppositions that are still habitually used to map it out: high and low; resistance versus incorporation; authentic versus inauthentic; experiential versus formal; opposition versus homogenization” (“What” 26). Attempting to place the improvisatory and process-based qualities of Black popular culture within these binary systems only allows for their reification, and, to borrow from Nathaniel Mackey, contributes to the conversion of cultural acts from verbs into nouns (*Discrepant* 266). Black cultural practices are not fixed, definable entities like a common or proper noun, but rather are processes implying action, constantly unfolding and changing. Moreover, these bi-nodal definitions as laid out by Hall do not allow space for Black cultural practices that bridge, alter, and extend these divides or
for social identities outside of clearly delineated conceptions of race, gender, class, citizenship, and sexuality. To this same extent, the archives of Sun Ra resonate with this idea of Black culture and Black life as always unfolding and not falling into strict binaries. Sun Ra’s archives are not wholly textual, visual, or sonic. Instead, Ra’s archives encompass all these mediums and the contents allude to an individual who claimed extraterrestrial citizenship while very much being in tune with the political, cultural, and social events of earth.

In a manner similar to Black studies, archival studies have also taken an inward turn and begun to ask how the internal structures of the archive can become sites of questioning disciplinary borders and essentialism. “The archive,” as Thomas Osborne notes, “is a useful focal point for bringing together issues of representation, interpretation and reason with questions of identity, evidence, and authenticity” (51). For Osborne, the archive becomes a physical and metaphorical location where absolutisms such as truth and authenticity can be unpacked and explored while also potentially creating space for alternative narratives and discussions of matters of race, gender, and social experiences. Osborne’s statements about the archive resonate with Ra’s own epistemological practices that call into question biological ideas of racial human identity and essentialist ideas about Black culture. Throughout his written works, Ra iterated that he was “another order of being” and argued that he stood outside the physiological constructs of humanness. At the same time, the three-dimensionality of Ra’s performances

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19 For examples of recent work in the field of Black studies that push against these boundaries and propose new intellectual frameworks see Reid-Pharr, Quashie, and Harper.

20 Marlene Manoff makes a similar point in her essay “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines.” She writes: “Archival discourse has also become a way to address some of the thorny issues of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge and artificial character of disciplinary boundaries” (11).
highlights their almost unarchivable nature while also raising questions about what forms and genres are allowed to enter the archive.

The performative, the aural, and the material offer an equal amount of, if not more, archival knowledge than information contained in documents, codexes, memos, and ledgers. If we want to engage with archives and their holdings and attempt, as Laura Stoler suggests, to go against the archival grain, then we must utilize and deploy material and embodied knowledge sources to dislodge what Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, and Graeme Reid identify as the textual biases of the archives. From their perspective, archives privilege text documents as acceptable forms of knowledge. For these three, “Literature, landscape, dance, art and a host of other forms offer archival possibilities capable of releasing different kinds of information about the past, shaped by different record-keeping processes” (“Introduction” 10). For an individual like Ra, an archival focused study, as well as an archival site, must be able to account for regular and irregular forms of archival documents across and within different forms of media.

Any study that marries non-majority peoples and their non-textual cultural practices with the idea and the metaphor of the archive must attend to and use archival artefacts that fall outside of the accepted textual purview of the archive. This can range from the kinds of moments of performance and oral transmission that Diana Taylor details in her study of performance cultures in the Americas, to the public and private archives of trauma that Ann Cvetkovich details in her book An Archive of Feelings. These performative and emotional moments evade the permanence of the archive because of their perceived ephemerality. The ephemeral nature of performance and its cultural enactors, in José Esteban Muñoz’s view, complicates academic discourse that prides itself on rigour and evidence. Muñoz sees rigour as “owned, made, and deployed through institutional ideology” (7), while the limits of evidence come to the fore when “we attempt to
describe and imagine contemporary identities that do not fit into a single pre-established archive” (9). While Muñoz writes from a Latinx perspective on queer performance, his words are useful in my discussion of Sun Ra and the archives. What Muñoz outlines is that non-majoritarian peoples and cultures do not fit in boxes placed on neat and tidy library shelves. In the case of Ra, we have an individual whose archival collections consist of audio, visual, and textual documents that are housed in multiple sizes and forms of boxes that run from the regular five by twelve inches to oversized boxes to accommodate items such as concert posters, 16mm films, and album jacket proofs. Artefacts of Ra’s work call attention to how the historical documentation of Black cultural practices require different modes and forms of documentation. In particular, Ra’s ephemeral performance style and his documentary remains openly repudiate any and all forms of conventional rigour, with one of these being the archive.

These issues become amplified when transporting this conversation over to the context of African American history and culture. Because of the institutional, social, and economic history of slavery, the lives, experiences, and culture of African Americans often fall outside the purview of the archive. When and where African Americans do appear in the material and historical archive, it is often as a means to reinforce these narratives of exclusion, subjugation, and domination. Saidiya Hartman makes clear in her study of the performative and material history of American slavery that to supersede these previously existing narratives and create new ones we must turn to “forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate

21 The range in size of boxes was for me often a point of discussion with the archivists at the University of Chicago.
objects of historical inquiry” (*Scenes* 11). Objects not considered legitimate range from oral stories and moments of performance to material artefacts such as clothing, mass publications, or pulp fiction. To attend to the oversights and exclusions of the archive, whether intentional or not, one must turn to alternative mediums and forms. To borrow a phrase from Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, and Graeme Reid, “Alternative visions require alternative archives” (16). For an archival study of an individual such as Sun Ra, then, we must turn towards alternative repositories to generate new stories, interpretations, and approaches.

My emphasis on the relationship between Ra and physical and conceptual archives demonstrates his affinity with historical pasts and cultural traditions. At the same time, my approach brings to the fore how Ra translates the long tradition of Black writers who, in Wendy Walters’s words, “allude to or cite archival documents in their writing” into the territories of the sonic and the performative (*Archives* 1). Black writers engage with the archive as a method to “revisit the past to posit alternative narratives of agency, humanity, and empowerment, as a supplement to the meager traces recorded in the archives of the slave trader, colonizer, or court room” (1). Walters identifies Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* and M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* as examples of texts that play with data in the archive to craft new narratives and histories. By digging through the archives of text, memory, and performance, Black cultural workers like Ra attend to the shortcomings and fallacies of the archive that omit, erase, and elide the presence of Black life and culture. Black cultural workers attend to these archival exclusions and gaps through their work. By working with and reimagining the contents of the archives, they highlight the power imbalances of archival creation and curation, but also demonstrate how history is

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22 For more about the challenges and rewards of working with African-American archives see Godfrey.
“infinitely open to interpretation” (Walters 3). Ra’s ventures into the histories and traditions of Black expressive culture constitute an act of cultural remediation, but they are also his way of constructing a past for future generations to use. Thus, the archive is not a site of knowledge or truth. Rather, for Ra, the archive becomes a location open to interpretation.

In this same way, I believe that Sun Ra’s refashioning of the archives of Black expressive culture should be viewed as another iteration of a Black creative musician carrying out the labour of community intellectualism that addresses pressing matters of race, class, culture, and citizenship. In Ra’s hands, the archive is a tool to suggest new futures, not to dictate passed pasts. At the same time, Ra puts forth new models and forms of community by his refashioning of these traditions in new and fantastic contexts. The intellectual and physical labour of Ra as an archivist fits within the trend of revisiting and questioning the nature and power of archives, and we must view his archivism as a mode of community-based activism and intellectual work.

In light of the historical and theoretical context, my approach to discussing archives in this dissertation specifically resonates with Ann Laura Stoler’s notion of the *archival turn*, a shift away from the “archive-as-source” to the “archive-as-subject” (*Archival* 44). Moving away from the act of information extraction and turning towards an ethnographic approach within the archives has led to queries of the ways archives are implicated in power structures of colonial imperialism and racialization—the preserving and cataloguing of documents do contribute to the preservation of history and stories. What Stoler and others are concerned with is how does the archive mediate these stories, who benefits from the creation of an archive, and who decides what is allowed in the archive? Entry and inclusion in the archive lead to forms of legitimacy and officialdom. But what about the stories, experiences, and cultural artefacts of peoples and
cultures denied access and entry into the archive? For this study, I focus on an individual often placed on the fringes of histories.

As Antoinette Burton has noted, archives have become affiliated with “legitimate subjects of history” (“Introduction” 2). An individual subject or social group that has an official archive achieves inclusion in the official pantheons of history. Conversely, for marginalized and underrepresented peoples, their lack of an official archive leaves them outside of official spaces and narratives of history. For the displaced and dispossessed peoples of African descent, the lack of official records and documents has been used as a means to justify their exclusion from history. This exclusion carries over to the archive as well.

Finally, the political and cultural act of archiving calls attention to the constructed and artificial nature of the archive. While placing an artefact into the archive grants that material and its creator or owner a place in the halls of history, the exclusion of an artefact, a specific cultural tradition, or social group from an archive creates a power imbalance that, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot outlines in his book *Silencing the Past*, silences their presence. Trouillot cites the slave revolt on Saint-Domingue as an example of such an event that has been silenced. Though the revolt led to the foundation of the first independent Black ruled nation, the historical significance and cultural impact of this revolution has been mitigated or sidestepped in majoritarian history and only now is receiving its due recognition for its significance to multiple trajectories of history. Trouillot equates this to the violent metaphor of a silencer on a pistol. To silence

\[\text{23 One such attempt at correcting these gross omissions from the pantheons of history is the Smithsonian Institute’s National Museum of African American History and Culture which opened in September 2016. For more about the founding, construction, and social moment of the opening of the Museum see Cunningham.}\]

\[\text{24 For recent scholarship on the impact of the Haitian revolution see Dubois and Glick.}\]
someone or something is an “active and transitive process” that muffles sounds or noise but does not eliminate the fact that the action or event took place (48). Sun Ra’s plunging into the depths of Black expressive culture is his way of removing Trouillot’s metaphorical silencer from the presence of these historical and cultural exclusions. Ra’s archival remediation resonates with Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s notion of the abyssal lines that divide critical thinking and society. From Santos’s perspective, Western thinking does not register epistemologies, cultural practices, and material artefacts that fall on “the other side of the line” (“Beyond” 45). By the other side of the line Santos means that knowledge forms outside of the continuum of Enlightenment-based thought or the geographies of Western Europe are deemed not worthy of consideration. A parallel exists in the world of archival studies.\(^\text{25}\) Thus, for people of African descent who have a history of displacement, oppression, dehumanization, and, as continental philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel noted in his *Philosophy of History*, hail from a place with “no history,” the archive operates as a tool to exclude the non-majority from sanctioned historical narratives. Ra’s reanimation of Black cultural practices, albeit it under a different guise, can be seen as his attempt to maintain the presence and experience of people of colour in the archive.

**Methodology**

*Why the Archive?*

I have two central reasons for framing my study of Sun Ra around the idea and the reality of the archive. These include the following: (1) the importance of the metaphor of the “ark” and the notion of preservation; and (2) my own engagement with Sun Ra’s archives. First, deeply

\(^{25}\) The idea that the archive is a tool of state power that is often used to exclude is a recurrent theme in scholarship on the archive. For more on this topic see Stoler and Burton. For more specifically about exclusion in the archive see Greetham.
imbedded in the musical and social practices of Ra and the Arkestra is “ark,” the root word of archive. An Ark, of course, carries deep religious meaning as a place of protection for the foundational holy documents or, in Christianity, the vessel that Noah built to protect his family and two of each animal species from a deluge of rain and flooding. Likewise, Salim Washington interprets Sun Ra’s musical performances as relying on “imagery of the orchestra as an Ark of safety/exile” (“Avenging” 238). Similar to the biblical tale of Noah and the Ark, Ra positions the Arkestra as an ensemble that safeguards and protects Black people from the structures of racism, but also as a performative location where the multimedia and multigenre qualities of Black performance can be preserved for future generations. The term “ark” also carries great significance in relation to a more substantive discussion of the archive. Jacques Derrida, in his highly influential essay on the archive as a subject of study, notes that the word archive is derived from the ancient Greek word *arkehe*, which has the double meaning of where history commences but also the device that commands history (“Archive Fever” 9). For Derrida, the archive is the place that makes history by its existence, but also the tool that we use to announce history. Derrida’s formulation of the archive finds an analogue in the musical practice of Sun Ra and the Arkestra. Their inclusion of historical musical styles fused with a futurist aesthetic makes space for a Black musical history that starts from blues-based swing numbers, but also announces the presence of a new epicenter that will dictate future discourse on Black musical practices and culture. To paraphrase, Ra and the Arkestra are a musico-performative archive of Black expressive culture.

John Szwed, in his definitive biography of Sun Ra, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, notes that Sun Ra’s name change pays homage to Egyptian sun deity Ra’s solar boat. Additionally, Szwed recounts how Sun Ra once told his road manager that he called the
band the Arkestra because “that’s the way black people say ‘orchestra’” (94). In addition to the name being a play on Black American English and a homage to Black southern vernacular elocution, Ra’s naming of the band highlights the fraught relationship between archives and Ra’s aesthetic experimentation. Befitting Ra’s formal and musical play, he would often alter and adjust the name of the Arkestra to fit the “spirit of the occasion and the different feelings he wished to express” (94). From night-to-night, one would hear Sun Ra accompanied by the Arkestra, the Solar Myth Arkestra, or the Omniverse Ultra 21st century Arkestra. Thus, every performance was by a different Arkestra and this, in turn, may be viewed as a larger metaphor for my idea that we must consider and include different forms and types of archives. Each night the message and the performance of Ra and the Arkestra would change to fit the venue of performance and the mood of the audience. The mutability of these concerts and their homage to the play and improvisatory qualities of Black performance presents another avenue to consider my larger argument of the archive in relation to Sun Ra and his performances. “Performance itself,” for performance scholar Laura Luise Schultz, “is a means of transferring cultural knowledge between bodies and thus a means of preservation and documentation” (203). What this means for my study of Ra and the Arkestra is that we must consider and esteem Ra’s performances as a medium to both continue and archive Black performance culture.

The idea of arks and preservation of the past also dovetails with the musical practices of Ra and the Arkestra. As Szwed and many others have noted, a musical performance by Ra was not a singular sonic manifestation of a particular idiom of Black music. Rather, a concert by Ra and the Arkestra would include a diverse array of Black musical styles with references and homages to the blues and swing as well as more contemporary fare, such as post-bop modal compositions and free improvisation. In relation to jazz, Ra’s engagement with multiple
historical styles within the same concert ruptures discourses around jazz performance that emphasize narratives of evolution and progress. Some artists do not adhere to this narrative; the potential cost of this is exclusion from these grand lines of history.

Ra’s play on ideas of archives and preservation was not lost on everyone. African American author Henry Dumas, a contemporary and close associate of Ra, visits the relationship between arks and Black social existence in his short story “Ark of Bones.” The story’s two protagonists, Headeye and Fish-hound, encounter an ark sailing down the Mississippi River that rescues the skeleton bones of deceased slaves. Headeye possesses a mojo bone, which, in his words, “is the keybone to the culud man” (17). The crux of the story derives from the Biblical story of Ezekiel seeing the reanimation of the skeletons of the People of Israel in exile. Dumas’s “Ark of Bones,” much like the practice of Ra, calls attention to the idea of acknowledging and revitalizing the past in service of redemption and liberation. For Ra and Dumas, this comes about through reimagining the archives of Black expressive culture not only to maintain cultural memory, but also to propose new subjective and alternative futures. The shared link between Ra and Dumas and their works highlights the currency of the idea of the archive as representing more than a repository of textual items in service of official histories.

The second reason for approaching the archive within this study is, as I noted earlier, my own rendezvous with Sun Ra’s archives. In this study, I draw upon textual and visual documents from the aforementioned Alton Abraham Collection and audio documents from the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection. These documents were collected and curated by Alton Abraham for his own

\[26\] For more about this topic see Gabbard, “Introduction.”
\[27\] Dumas’s and Ra’s relationship is worthy of note because Dumas’s work is one of two outside voices to appear in print materials tied to a record produced by El Saturn records.
The documents came to the public’s attention in 2006 when Chicago-based music critic and art gallery owner John Corbett revealed that in 2000 he was contacted by an anonymous individual about the possibility of purchasing a trove of materials relating to Sun Ra that were about to be left in a dumpster. Corbett, alongside artist Terri Kapsalis, intervened and purchased the remaining contents from Abraham’s ex-wife who did not wish to hold on to these items and began the process of finding a permanent home for what became the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra at the University of Chicago.

Materials held in this collection include newspaper clippings collected by Abraham, correspondence related to the day-to-day operations of Ra and Abraham’s record label, El Saturn Records, and publicity stills and concert photographs. The depth and range of this collection supply stunning insight and immediate access to documents and sources that would have otherwise taken years to locate and source. For example, I was particularly struck by John Corbett’s discovery of copies of the broadsheets that Ra distributed in Chicago’s Washington Park during the mid-1950s. The collection’s very existence, however, and its gaps speak to larger issues of conservation and access. Despite the depth of the collection, some moments are more thoroughly documented than others (for example, reviews and publicity materials from Ra

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28 Though we can never be certain about the reasons why Abraham compiled all these artefacts, it should be noted that his act of saving and preserving the history of Sun Ra and El Saturn Records calls to mind Arjun Appadurai’s ideas about the act of saving and collecting “outside the purview of the state” as an act of “intervention” (16). Attending to the perceived oversight and marginalization of Sun Ra’s career and achievements, Abraham’s act of saving speaks to the larger discussion of archival exclusion I have laid out.

29 For more about this exchange see Margasak.

30 For more about Corbett’s discovery of these broadsheets and reproductions of them see Corbett, “one” and Corbett & Elms.
and the Arkestra’s tours to Europe in the late-1960s and early 1970s), while documentation is less thorough in relation to the band’s relocation and residency in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the 1970s.

A physical and medium rupture exists within the collection itself. Amidst the printed and visual documents were also more than 600 analog audio recordings spread across multiple formats. These recordings document Ra and the Arkestra in rehearsal and in concert as well as interviews with Ra. For reasons of conservation and access, these tapes are archived in the Creative Audio Archive that is housed at the Experimental Sound Studio on the Far North Side of Chicago. Though these tapes have been digitally transferred and are now open to the public, the fact remains that these two collections are under the oversight of two wholly different governing bodies that face their own institutional pressures and are 27 kilometres apart.

In total, a significant amount of the archival documents in these two collections rest outside the conventional textual centricity of archives. Across these two collections we have examples of how performance can be a mode for Sun Ra to transmit cultural memory and racial identity; the power and capacity of visual imagery, moving image, and material artefacts offer an alternative resource to our understanding of Sun Ra; or how archival documents can help reconfigure our perspective of Sun Ra’s relationship to key moments and political movements. These two collections corroborate my belief that performative, alternative, and counter archives do not need to replace or discredit established archives. What I propose is that we need to use

31 The finding aid for this collection notes original recordings were in “open reel, cassette, and dat formats.”

32 In their words, the Experimental Sound Studio is a “non-profit, artist-run organization focused on sound in all its exploratory cultural manifestations, including music, sound art, installation, cinema, performing arts, sound poetry, broadcast, new media, and more” (“About”).
and incorporate these non-traditional archival documents alongside pre-existing archives and approaches to archiving.

While these two collections exist in official sanctified sites of documentary conservation, their existence and organization accentuate my main argument about Sun Ra’s performative, alternative, and counter archives. These atypical archives present an internal formalized rebuttal to the accepted understandings and regulatory power of archives. Their presence within these institutionalized contexts legitimize these documents as worthy of archival studies, while also calling attention to how archival sites and the powers behind them control and regulate what enters and becomes part of an archive.  

My three visits to the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra and two visits to the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection were enlightening and allowed access to a wealth of materials. My work will not be a “show and tell,” however, of what is in the archive. Instead, I call upon the documents and recordings held within these collections to supplement my own critical approach to the junction of Sun Ra’s cultural praxis and Black performative, material, and political archives. What I propose in my work is that despite their collation and housing within official archives, these textual, visual, and sonic documents can be used as examples in a larger discussion about alternative and non-traditional forms of archival documentation. Reconfiguring and contextualizing select items around the idea of performative, alternative, and counter-archives demonstrates that we must consider how archival documents can illuminate multiple, hidden, and or silenced histories (either individual or in concert with one another). My approach

33 The presence of performative, alternative, and counter archives alongside more accepted forms of archives echoes a recent discussion of how African authors’ practice of using words and phrases from African languages and dialects in english-language texts (as well as whether these authors should include glossaries) calls attention to the regulatory power of literary texts and conventions. For more see Serpell.
to Sun Ra’s archives reverberates with Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heterophony and polyglossia. As Bakhtin makes clear in his works, the study of language and culture must account for the intermingling and presence of multiple languages and cultural practices within a singular text or cultural moment. In this way, I contend that no singular form or site of archiving can dominate. We must account for the presence of, and interact with, a multitude of archival documents that capture a wide array of cultural practices, epistemologies, forms of knowledge, and media formats. By acknowledging the presence of Sun Ra’s performative, alternative, and counter archives alongside more traditional archives, we have a better understanding of his life and legacy as well as his subtle commentary about the nature of Black archives and its relation to white archival practices.

**Methodology**

Like Sun Ra’s artistic practice, which drew on distinct and discrete elements from Black musical cultures, vernacular sacred and secular stage performances, and integrationist and separatist Black political ideologies, my methodology will be interdisciplinary in nature and in scope. While no singular disciplinary approach is the primary critical apparatus, scholarship from the areas of critical studies in improvisation and Black performance studies will be the two bodies of knowledge prioritized throughout this study.

At the heart of Sun Ra’s performance practice and persona is an ethos of improvisation. Inflections of improvisation appear in the fluid and dynamic nature of his musical compositions, in concerts, in Ra and the Arkestra’s construction of new musical instruments out of previously existing materials, and in his theoretical notion that outer space is a zone of limitless possibilities and unconstrained movement. A salient example of this improvisatory ethos occurs in an
interview between Ra and two unidentified youth from circa 1972 held in the Creative Audio Archive. At one moment, the interviewer asks Ra where he was born or “came up?” After a brief pause, Ra retorts, “well you see that is one of the equations” (Sr077). Such an answer puts on display the improvisatory slipperiness that lies at the heart of Ra. Ra puts forth ideas of other forms and types of social life, ones not bound by specific cultural experiences or alignments under particular geo-political arrangements. What Ra seemingly advocates for in this answer, and this can be seen as an analogue to his musical performances, is a way of existence that is open-ended, fluid, and processual. Thus, critical studies in improvisation becomes useful in assaying Sun Ra’s archival ventures.

The cultural and social practice of spontaneity and extemporaneity is a useful guide in the study of an individual whose music, words, performances, and appearance incorporate elements of improvisation and whose life and art defy convention. “Improvisation (in theory and practice),” as Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble write, “challenges all musical orthodoxies, all musical taxonomies, even its own” (Other Side of Nowhere 31). Using critical work that has developed from the study of improvisational musics becomes instructive for a study of Sun Ra whose artworks and persona defy categorization and problematize previously existing definitions and understandings of race, gender, genre, and performance.

Another area of scholarly work informing my investigation of Sun Ra is that of Black Performance Theory. A nascent sub-field of Performance Studies, Black Performance Theory aims to investigate cultural practices of the Black diaspora, in the words of Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, “without deference to overlapping historical trajectories or perceived differences in cultural capital from an elusive Europeanist norm” (“Introduction” 1). Similar to studies of improvisation, which argue that various cultural forms and social practices must
account for their fungible nature, Black Performance Theory advocates that the flexible and
dynamic nature of Black expressive culture must be assayed on its own and not retrofitted into
previously existing analytical approaches. Additionally, venturing into the field of Black
Performance Theory allows me to incorporate discussions of staged presentations and
representations of race, gender, and citizenship into my own work. The inclusion of critical work
on Black theatrical performances into my dissertation foregrounds connections between Sun Ra
and Black performance. As this study will demonstrate, Ra’s musical spectacles owe a debt to the
cultural traditions and archives of staged Black performance, a connection that’s yet to be made
in Ra studies.

The other critical praxis deployed in this study is that of archival studies. As I suggested
earlier, this dissertation is another contribution to what Ann Laura Stoler has called the “archival
turn” in the humanities. As opposed to established formulations of the archive, which presented
repositories of documents as passive locations where truths and histories were made, recent work
has begun to position the archive itself as an object of study. Turning critical language and
discourse towards the archive allows for discussions of the social and cultural politics behind
archives and creates space for questioning what is an archive; what is omitted from an archive;
and which stories are propagated by archives. These questions become more urgent when framed
within a discussion of Sun Ra and the archives. What is at stake when we take into consideration
that we have two distinct archival sites to enter and engage with concerning the life and works of
an individual who denied any and all earthly bonds? While these questions can fill a study on
their own, my work proposes that the performative, alternative, and counter archives of Sun Ra
create space for a deeper contextualization and understanding of his performative aesthetics. In
turn, I suggest my work creates space for discussions of Black expressive culture and archives.
In addition to these three areas, critical insights drawn from the fields of gender, jazz, and African American literary and cultural studies appear throughout while work from performance, fashion, and spatial studies appears in relevant chapters. Scholars from each of these fields, both independently and in conversation with one another, have pursued questions of how to expand their field of study so as to account for individuals, social groups, historical narratives, and cultural practices that do not fit within, and more importantly, refuse to replicate hegemonic visions built on hierarchies of difference. In this dissertation I construct an analytic framework that attempts to account for all facets of Ra’s performance aesthetic, philosophy, and persona. In turn, I argue that this approach addresses the shortcomings of a singular disciplinary or limited interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, my work moves away from strict disciplinary fences that depend on racial and categorical difference and mirrors the praxis of disciplinary unlearning that Ashon T. Crawley and Denise Ferreira da Silva argue for in their works. On the whole, my methodology, much like Ra’s edict, no longer builds only on the past. Rather, my critical approach looks towards newly emergent and forward-looking ideas to create new paradigms to more fully assay Ra’s life and legacy.

The Long Civil Rights Era: New Temporal, Social, and Historical Frameworks

For this study, I have chosen to frame Sun Ra’s archival objects within the context of what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall describes as the long civil rights era: the extended period of social and political action for racial justice in the United States from the 1930s to the 1970s. For Hall, the

34 Both Crawley and da Silva argue that existing epistemological frameworks are heavily rooted in and indebted to Enlightenment based thought, which they argue relies on ideas of categorical distinction and racial hierarchies. To escape this logic, they implore individuals to pursue philosophical and intellectual praxes outside of epistemes based on racism and classification, and instead to learn new modes of thought. For more on this topic see Crawley and da Silva.
long civil rights era presents a “more robust, more progressive, and truer story” (1235) of African American struggles against exclusion and dehumanization. Conventional studies of the fight for civil justice focus on singular, messianic-type leaders or popular movements that occurred during the 1960s in America. The idea of the long civil-rights era allows for the inclusion of voices, movements, and sites otherwise omitted from its traditional narratives. Moreover, this transtemporal framework generates space for the discussion of moments of tension within and between the various factions of this movement while simultaneously highlighting the shifts and developments in political thought and action during this historical phase.

For Hall, mid-1960s America, which she labels as the classical phase of the civil rights era, has become enfolded, sanitized, and homogenized into the established American narratives of individualism and exceptionalism. Expanding the civil-rights movement to include moments and movements like the rise of Pan-Africanism from the 1930s and the double-V movement of the 1940s to the development of American-based Black power movements during the 1970s allows, as sociologist Nikhil Pal Singh suggests, for a means to discuss Black political movements that exceed “the sanctioned boundaries and brokered compromises of the established political order” (4). My approach to exploring Ra takes us into this territory. Placing his persona and his body of work into this transtemporal narrative allows for the discussion of the intellectual labour and contributions of an individual who transgresses the normative boundaries of race, citizenship, politics, and geography.

In so doing, I join my work with the transtemporal efforts already under way in cultural approaches to African American literary history. Indeed, Xiomara Santamarina, in an essay about the canonization and archivization of African American literary studies, champions a move
to a temporal framework that ruptures traditional borders. In her words, Santamarina proposes that “we might imagine constructing alternative periodizations, perhaps even comparative ones—intraracial, cross-regional, gendered, and even international—and forging new theoretical frameworks capable of generating new insights in the field(s)” (306). These alternative timelines and relationships are useful to a study of an individual such as Ra whose artistic and social practice often ran against sanitized and dominant narratives of the fight for social justice.

My positioning of Sun Ra within this temporal framework is not an attempt to unmask or undo his otherworldly persona and performance aesthetics. Rather, I argue that we need to acknowledge that Ra witnessed and was affected by the strictures of Jim Crow and institutional racism and that his music, words, and performances must be seen as a unique spoke within the hub of political and social activity known as the long civil-rights era. More importantly, as this dissertation will show, Ra’s life and work converge with and diverge from mainstream debates and cultural practices that surround questions of race, nation, and performance during this period. By placing Ra within this network, I not only create space for Ra to be considered as an agent within this historical moment, but I also expand the possibilities of the different individuals, artistic practices, and epistemologies that can be included within the bandwidth of the fight for social justice during the twentieth century. In his recent book, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, GerShun Avilez makes a similar point. He argues that while “State and cultural institutions might be oppressive or restrictive,” we must acknowledge that “they still inform personhood” (*Radical* 14). Despite Ra’s assessment that he was “a living, breathing myth” (“Here am I”), the ideology and apparatuses of American social politics shaped his personhood and aesthetics.
We find vestiges of American political rhetoric peppered throughout the artistic corpus of Ra, the two most salient examples occurring in an essay and a poem. In “Your Only Hope Now Is A Lie,” Ra details how the notion of American democracy is a myth through an elaborate metaphor of how the Liberty Bell was cracked by the “creator” as a form of punishment exacted on the nation’s founders for compromising democratic and human rights to advance their personal finances (114). Ra continues this play on American rhetoric in his poem “We Hold This Myth To Be Potential.” This poem plays on the opening line of the preamble of the United States Declaration of Independence that states “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” Instead of framing social existence within the notion of truth or following the decree for freedom written by a man who owned slaves, Ra proposes that myth is where true liberatory existence can occur. Though Ra was adamant that he was from Saturn, and this is a claim I am not interested in proving or disproving, we cannot ignore that he was influenced by, shaped by, and intimate with the institutions and rhetoric of the American nation-state. Despite Ra’s self-professed alienness and metaphysical existence, we must acknowledge that Ra was present on this earth, and because of his skin pigmentation, he felt the effects of United States-based racism and that his life and works take place within, and make reference to, the social and political structures of American life.

35 For another example of Ra and his play with the tropes of American elections and the White House see Farris.

36 Jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp once quipped that proving Ra was from Saturn was as “easy as proving the existence of God” (Lettts).

37 Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty makes a similar argument in his work on India’s relationship to modernity. For Chakrabarty, modern Indian political apparatuses such as the state and notions of citizenship “all bear the burden of European thought and history” (Provincializing 4). While
The idea of a transtemporal civil-rights era also becomes useful in a discussion of Ra’s life and works, given that both his terrestrial-based existence and his art intersect with and diverge from many of the significant moments, voices, and sites affiliated with the African American fight for social justice and inclusion. The justification for a transtemporal approach is simple and rooted in biographical realities—because of Ra’s age and location, he never fit within or found himself aligned with one particular political movement or geographic location at the right particular moment. Ra’s arrival on earth in 1914 and his upbringing in Birmingham, Alabama placed him as too young to participate in World War I. His physical location in a place that social historians describe as the most segregated city in America places him at a geographic distance from the burgeoning waves of political thought and art emanating from the dual movements of Black internationalism and the Harlem Renaissance. This also places him geographically within close proximity to what Robin Kelley describes as a unique manifestation of post-World War I Black radicalism (Hammer and Hoe 8).\footnote{For more about the intersection of race, class, and geography in Birmingham, Alabama see McKiven and Wilson.}

A second instance of where Ra diverges from the dominant narrative of the American nation-state occurred during World War II. With his conscientious objection to serving the nation, Ra “joined the ranks of a 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, Space 40). Ra’s objection to enlistment in the military serves as a confutation to American and African American rhetoric of the capacity of the crucible of war
to integrate minoritized subjects into the ranks of full citizens of the United States, but also shows a commonality between Ra and Black surrealist, integrationist, and radical intellectual thought. Ra’s stance on the Second World War aligns him with other prominent black intellectuals and their protest of the statecraft of the War and marginalization of black bodies within the civic structures of the United States. In addition to veering away from a pathway of citizenship through violence, Ra’s decision not to enlist placed him at odds with his artistic peers, such as his own bandmates in the Arkestra, Marshall Allen and John Gilmore, and John Coltrane, all of whom opted to join the military. Once again, Ra’s social and political stance brings to the fore an unrecognized node in the archive of the battle for racial equality but also provides another instance where Ra’s politics intersect with wider sentiments emanating from the black public sphere.

A third instance of transtemporal poignancy involves Ra’s relocation to Chicago, Illinois in 1946, a juncture where his politics collided with a phase of African American freedom dreams. Chicago, as many scholars and historians have noted, was a major terminus in the Great Migration. This mass migration of black people from the American South to major Northern US metropolises brought with it a multitude of black cultural practices and politics that coalesced into the formation of new forms of black political thought that had local roots and would eventually grow to national and international prominence. In his classic text, Black Nationalism, Essien Udosen Essien-Udom notes that the city became a hub for Black Nationalist groups, including Islamic faith-based groups like the Nation of Islam and the Moorish-American Science Temple.

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39 For more about the relationship between armed combat and African-American citizenship see Kaplan and Parker.
As John Szwed details, there would seem to be “much in common” between Ra and the Nation of Islam: their shared interest in the etymology of words; their belief that the dominant interpretation of history occluded black contributions; and their conviction that Blacks needed to be awoken from their state of rootlessness and disenfranchisement to forge new political and social realities (*Space* 115). Despite these similarities and the fact that both Ra and the Nation of Islam were located in the South Side of Chicago, however, no formal alliance or collaboration between Ra and the group is known to have occurred during this period. While the Nation of Islam’s politics fall outside accepted accounts of American exceptionalism and were an open affront to the American liberal ideology of inclusivity and acceptance, within the context of the long civil-rights era, this wave of black political activity enunciated an alternative form of African American social, political, and cultural enfranchisement. Like the previously mentioned black freedom movements, Ra’s politics and performances intertwined loosely with this particular moment.

A fourth professional moment that calls for transtemporal reflection includes Ra’s period of activity in New York City during the 1960s. At this time, he stood at heart of the free jazz and creative arts scenes. While much of the sonic and performance experiments Ra produced during this period were on the leading edge and much of the historical record places him as a crucial figure in this moment, his earth-age places him a full two decades older than many of his contemporaries. Moreover, Ra’s penchant for musical, theatrical, and literary experimentation places him at odds with some of his peers from these fields. Though Amiri Baraka, writing under the name LeRoi Jones, viewed Sun Ra as an *exemplar par excellence* of the “New Black Music” (Jones, “Strong”), critics and audiences alike struggled with how to discuss Ra’s music and his
performed within this moment, and thus, at times, he is treated as a freakish anomaly in the context of the burgeoning sonic and literary scene of this locale and period.

One final context that substantiates the transtemporal approach to my framing of Sun Ra within the long civil-rights era, and one that arises several times in this dissertation, involves Ra’s extended stays in Oakland, California during the early 1970s. During this time, Ra took up residency in a house owned by the Black Panther Party and filmed his influential movie *Space is the Place* on location in the city. Supplementing his activity during this period, Ra also taught a course entitled “The Black Man and the Cosmos” at the University of California-Berkeley. Ra’s sojourn to Northern California places him at the nexus of white and black countercultures, but because of his race, aesthetics, and political beliefs, he does not easily fit within either of these cultural paradigms. 40

Though this period of Black political activity, as Robert O. Self suggests, has become seen as another instance of “discredited radicalism” (18), the idea of the long civil-rights era allows for a recuperation and reinsertion of what James Smethurst describes as a vastly understudied area of Black political and cultural activity. 41 Ra’s appearance in American-based circles of Black Power and Black Nationalist activity is unique and buttresses my argument of Ra’s tenuous existence in forms of Black history. The significant point that Smethurst makes in his book *The Black Arts Movement* is that we cannot easily assess the ideology and activity of Black Power and Black Nationalism within a truly unified and cohesive narrative. Rather, Smethurst urges that we view this period as an instance of localized activity that addresses the

40 For more about the issue of race and counterculture in the San Francisco Bay area see Zimmerman.

41 For more about the historiography of the study of Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement see Smethurst, *Black*.
immediate political and social concerns of those communities or regions, such as the northeast corridor of the United States, the American South, or the state of California while also displaying a fealty to larger concerns of Black liberation.

In the case of Ra, his appearance and activity in three distinct hubs of Black Arts and Black Power activity (Chicago, Illinois; New York City, New York; and Oakland, California) are unique in that he is one of the few notable examples of an individual who was active in multiple scenes of this political and cultural moment. That is not to say that there was not mixture, exchange, or cross-collaboration amongst the various locations. Instead, what I am suggesting is that to contextualize Ra within a distinct geographical location or within the logic of what Smethurst calls a “sense of national coherence” at the level of institute, aesthetics, or ideology betrays Ra’s artistic dexterity and professional mobility (*Black 7*). Positioning Ra in dialogue with the later phases of the long civil-rights era allows me to address the politics of the local in dialogue with the national, while also avoiding an intellectual chassis that underscores the perceived homogeneity of this moment.

The geographic proximity of Ra to West-coast-based forms of Black Nationalist political activity and Ra’s place of prominence and exalted status within the circle of artists and performers associated with the Black Arts Movement would suggest a shared common ground. There were, indeed, some notions they shared, but there are an equal number of points of divergence. Ra’s politics of black identity and blackness beyond the strictures of the United States resonate with the Black Power movements. Also, Ra’s incorporation of instruments, forms, and iconography linked with the Black Diaspora suggests a shared sensibility with the Black Arts Movement. But Ra’s pronouncements of alternative forms of blackness, ones not based on essentialized notions of physical appearance and aesthetics, highlight the points of
divergence, and Ra’s incorporation of electronic instruments, non-traditional musical forms, and space imagery exceeds the cultural and political economy limits of the Black Arts Movement.

An archival object that highlights the manufactured connections between Ra and the active factions of the long civil rights era is the 1973 reissue of Ra’s album *Atlantis* with Impulse! Records. Originally released in 1969, *Atlantis* was part of Impulse! Records’ plan to reissue and market select titles from Ra’s back catalogue in the hopes of expanding his popularity and market reach. The tracks for this album were recorded in 1967 and, like many Ra compositions and performances from this period, mix electronic-keyboard solos by Ra, group improvisations, and extended solos. While at various points in the songs Black diasporic musicking practices like improvisation and polyrhythmic percussion patterns come to the fore, on the whole, the songs on this album do not evince a sonic aesthetic that clearly aligns with Afrocentrism. Three of the five track titles refer to mythological lost continents or cities (“Atlantis” and “Lemuria”) while the remaining two tracks are named after real-world geographic places with deep mythological or spiritual connotations (“Yucatan” and “Bimini”).

References to mythological geographic spaces or alternative names, as Anthony Reed notes, were a common practice of black creative musicians during this period. Much like the “cultural nationalist ‘Africa,’” these mythos-infused spaces are “black spaces outside or adjacent to history, interrupted, paused and awaiting some return or awakening” (“African” 363). A textual reading of the album would seemingly suggest that Ra’s music aligns perfectly with this

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42 Ra’s invocation of the Bahamian Island of Bimini provides another example of multiple narratives and discourses within the classical phase of the long civil-rights era. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visited Bimini in 1964 and 1968, and this was the location where he wrote the acceptance speech for his Nobel Peace Prize and where he wrote his speech in support of the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, which would be his last public speech before his assassination.
trend in Black diasporic musicking. Listening to the album, however, reveals that a smooth connection is difficult to maintain over its entirety.

Moreover, the artwork for the reissue of the album departs from the original’s black and white pencil sketch of a lily-padesque plant constructed out of eyes with what could be interpreted as sun rays or flames and signals to the consumer that this is an album of music with...
Black diasporic and nationalistic sensibilities even though the music and the artist do not necessarily reflect these aesthetic values. On the surface, *Atlantis* might seem to fit within the cultural and political milieu of 1970s Black Nationalism, but upon closer examination, one discovers such an alignment is difficult to maintain over the entirety of the sonic, visual, and lexical units of the album. Ra’s *Atlantis* demonstrates how cultural artefacts buttress or affront the dominant ideology circulating in the black cultural and political economy of the period.

Overall, the transtemporal framework of the long civil-rights era permits for a deeper contextualization of Ra’s life and works. This approach broadens the scope of Ra scholarship and heeds Paul Youngquist’s assertion that any book-length study of Ra “should eschew too tidy a linearity” (*Pure* 3). Focusing on the intersections and moments of divergence between Ra and the agents and forces of the later phases of the long civil rights movement through the critical perspective of the archives allows for the inclusion of Sun Ra’s voice within this constellation, an insertion that enlightens not only our knowledge of Ra, but also the cultural, social, and intellectual politics of this period.

**Chapter Breakdown**

In the first chapter, I examine Sun Ra’s concert spectacles known as myth-rituals in which he mobilizes the archives of black performance to present what bell hooks calls “sites of resistance.” By combining aural, oral, and performative elements from black theatrical and performance culture, not only does Ra resuscitate sacred and secular performance styles that contain within them embedded social and political critiques of race, gender, and culture in sonic, embodied, and extramusical form; Ra also presents them in a new and imaginative way that provides a commentary on the politics of genre and racial authenticity. Ra’s engagement with
theatrical and extramusical aspects, I argue, is an archival intervention to ensure the preservation and the continuation of these modes and styles of performance. In particular, in addition to detailing the traces and residues of historical forms of Black expressive culture in Ra’s myth-rituals, I will parse how the form and structure of these concerts are an open rebuke of the calcifying tomb of genre and respectability that had encapsulated the jazz concert. Following this, I turn my attention towards a specific moment of Ra’s concert performances—his improvised solos on electronic keyboards. In addition to these moments being a presentation in sound of Ra’s non-human subjectivity, I see this singular moment as an activation of historical tropes of black archives of performance that centred on theatrical prosthetic enhancement and human subject supplementation.

In chapter two, I focus on the clothing and dress of Sun Ra and the Arkestra. Framing the materiality of clothing as what Jean Allman calls an “alternative archive” affords us a new and distinct archival repository in studies of Ra (“Fashioning” 4). Utilizing Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins’s definition of dress, which they define as the supplementation and augmentation of the body through clothes and/or bodily and extra-bodily adornments, I argue that Ra’s exceptional mode of dress supplements his musical and textual critiques of social alienation and marginalization. To do so, I contextualize Ra’s clothing style within the matrix of Black diasporic dress and style practices. In particular, I suggest that Ra’s dress elaborates upon and transforms the Black cultural tropes of the trickster and the dandy. After this, I conduct a close reading of a scene from Ra’s 1972 film Space is the Place. The scene in question, I argue, presents an opportunity to discuss how Ra’s dress provides a rebuttal to prominent and essentialist notions about black bodily appearance in the late 1960s and 1970s. This angle allows
us to consider Ra’s relationship with and thoughts on Black Nationalism and Black Power and more importantly highlights Ra’s interaction with the materiality of Black expressive culture.

In the final chapter, I examine how Ra’s ideas and aesthetics extend and refract ideas emanating from white and black public spheres about space exploration from 1969 to 1972. This period, which overlaps with the later phases of the long civil-rights era and the Space Race, captures key moments of this era, both epoch defining and unheralded. In these three years, Ra was a witness to the landing of man on the moon, the cessation of the United States underwriting excursions to the moon, and the launching of a manned orbital space station by the Soviet Union. More specifically, I suggest that Ra’s works and that of other prominent black public figures form what I call a black counter-archive of the space race. I define counter-archive as an archival repository that presents an alternative set of facts or documents to an established event. The idea of a counter-archive resonates even more deeply when we consider how much of the curation and the creation of the archives of the Space Race were underwritten and controlled by the various nation-states themselves. This counter-archive exists in plain view, but occupies the periphery of the accepted national and international narratives surrounding this era. To construct this counter-archive, I place discrete sonic, textual, and visual documents by Ra and his artistic and intellectual contemporaries on this topic in conversation with one another. Along these same lines, it is in this chapter that I advocate that Ra’s response to the whitening and nationalization of outer space can be seen as an archival intervention to ensure that people of African descent appear in the historical moment and have a place in future narratives about space travel and exploration.

In the opening of this chapter I explain how racial discourse contributed to a social coding of outer space as a zone of whiteness and a tool to continue to expand racist discourses of
hierarchy and exclusion. Afterwards, I detail how to gain a better understanding of how the idea and the act of flight function in the Black diaspora as an allegory for freedom and liberation.

Much like my discussions of performance and dress, I argue that Ra’s ideas about space flight simultaneously build upon a rich Black cultural tradition while also transforming it to the technological realities of the space age. In the last half of the chapter, I document how Ra’s words, music, and visuals directly engage with the discourse and achievements of nation-state backed space travel from 1969 to 1972. The three distinct examples I examine in this chapter are Sun Ra and black responses to the Apollo 11 moon landing, the social and cultural critique of NASA in Space is the Place, and Ra’s thoughts about the Soviet Union’s space station Salyut 1.

What comes to the fore in this chapter is that despite Ra’s unrelenting claim of extra-terrestrialism, he was highly aware of the technical realities and implications of space travel for African Americans.
Chapter One

A Spectacle of Resistance: Sun Ra’s Sacred-Secular Stagecraft, Abstract Noise, and the Archive

In the introduction to *Space is the Place*, John Szwed recounts a concert performance by Sun Ra at Swarthmore College in the mid-1960s. Szwed describes an event that commences with the appearance on stage of an individual hitting “a six-foot carved drum” (xv) who is joined slowly by other members of the Arkestra. Those present on stage begin to play a collection of handmade and Africana derived percussion instruments that crescendo into what Szwed describes as a “polyrhythmic snarl” (xv). Afterwards, the musicians begin to play a thick and dense series of dissonant notes. This moment crescendos until vocalist June Tyson moves to the center of the stage to announce the arrival of Ra. Ra enters from the wings and sits in his “cockpit of electronics” (xvi), where, to quote Szwed, he “thrashes” his hands and arms around the keyboard. The subsequent portion of this performance, and Ra’s performances as a whole, was Ra’s invitation to audience members to join him in a concert experience shaped around a “rationale and a dramatic coherence drawn from mythic themes, Afro-American liturgy, science fiction, black cabaret, and vaudeville, yet strangely open to free interpretation” (xvii). The following portions of this performance, like most of Ra’s concert spectacles, included solos by Ra and other members of the Arkestra on their respective instruments, collective improvisation by the Arkestra, swing and post-bop-style numbers by Ra and other prominent Black composers

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43 The idea of Ra “inviting” people to join him on his cosmic adventures is most clearly articulated in his song “Enlightenment,” which closes with the couplet “Hereby, our invitation/We do invite you, to be part of our space world.”
such as Fletcher Henderson, commingled with dancers, visual effects, and spoken word. This was not merely a concert, this was a myth-ritual.44

The fusion of the sonic, the gestural, and the visual in Ra’s myth-rituals fits within the “excess of this era” (xvi-ii). While it would be easy to be overwhelmed by the multitude of elements and their “all-out assault on the senses” (xvii), Szwed takes care to note that there was something more to these events. Szwed sees these performances as an intervention by an individual who proposed a mode of performance that was more than entertainment and by a figure who probed questions of morality and ethics through his music, words, and performances.45 These performances created space for the questioning of cultural narratives, racial superiority, and the aesthetics of performance.

In this chapter, I argue that Sun Ra’s concert spectacles known as “myth-rituals” are not only a manifestation of what bell hooks describes as a site of resistance, but also are performative events that engage with the archives of Black expressive culture. Concentrating our attention on the intersection of the sonic, the extramusical, the corporeal, and the theatrical of Ra’s performances does not erase the presence of his Black improvisatory sounds. Instead, I soften our attention to the sonic aspects of these events in favour of focusing on the staged and the embodied. In doing so, I create space in this chapter to consider how Ra formulates subjectivity through the amalgamation of staged performance, the performing body, and improvised music. More importantly, I argue that Ra’s combination of the sonic and the performative foregrounds how the limits of material documentation hinder our understanding of

44 Szwed’s familiarity with the structure and events of a myth-ritual is unmatched. In fact, Paul Youngquist, in his recent book on Sun Ra, defers to Szwed’s words to describe the myth-ritual.
45 For more see Szwed, Space xvii.
these performances, which in turn, calls attention to the centrality of the archive, both in theory and in practice, to Ra’s aesthetics.

After explicating the form and content of Ra’s myth-rituals I will consider which features of these performances have antecedents in Black sacred and secular performance traditions. Recent critical work on these historical traditions has focused on the capacity of performances to propose new forms of being through the deeply engrained social commentaries within them. Modes and styles of performance such as this, therefore, provide a grammar that I read as possibly inspiring and informing Ra’s own performances. In the following section, I suggest that Ra’s reanimation of these traditions serves as a commentary on Black musical and staged performance in the late-twentieth century. This approach is particularly noticeable within the performance format and politics of the jazz concert. Placing these spectacles alongside critical studies of the history of Black staged performance helps contextualize and elucidate the underlying social messages and aesthetic commentary found in Ra’s elaborate concerts.

Following this discussion, I turn my attention to a singular moment in Ra’s myth-rituals that highlights the fusion of the theatrical, the embodied, and the sonic archives of Black expressive culture: his extended solos on electronic keyboards. These keyboard solos provide a localized instance where disparate threads merge to create a unique critical intervention. These solos provide a specific moment where Ra uses historical modes of Black performance to advance an aesthetic and social identity of alienness, and of forms and meanings of social existence.

In the closing pages of this chapter, I examine how, despite the centrality of myth-rituals and their attendant features in Ra’s aesthetics, these performances highlight the limitations of archivization and documentation. The limitations of recording media during this period
crystallizes my argument that archives and archival collections, to be truly definitive, must make space for the modalities and extramusical qualities of Ra’s performances in particular and Black expressive culture and the experimental arts at large.

The critical work in this chapter builds upon recent scholarship from the fields of Black Performance Theory and Black Feminist Criticism. Both of these areas have been at the forefront of investigating and theorizing how the corporeal and the performative contribute to the fabrication of Black identity and social existence, and more importantly, how incorporating theatricality and artificiality into staged performances subverts white western constructs of gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship. This chapter contributes to my larger argument that Ra’s aesthetics and archive(s) of performance offer a meditation and a commentary upon Black social existence and culture from the classical phase of the long civil-rights era to today. Placing Ra within this temporal space demonstrates how our understanding and frameworks of Black social justice in the twentieth century need to include figures that do not fit easily within and bridge temporal moments.

**Myth-Rituals**

The mixture of sound and extra-musical elements such as poetry, movement, film, and light in Ra’s concert spectacles shatters our assumptions about prevalent constructs of musical genre or theatrical form. These performances, as I’ve been suggesting, were not merely concerts, but rather, in Ra’s words, “myth-rituals” or “cosmo-dramas.” The myth-ritual was a venue for Ra to promulgate his Afrofuturist message by engaging with Black histories to animate new Black technology-driven futures. Improvisatory in nature, the concerts themselves took on, in Szwed’s words, “a distinctive texture, a feel to it that set it apart” from previous performances (Space is
the Place 258). From staging to staging, songs would assume a different timbre or tone and feature different soloists and arrangements; there was no guarantee when (or even if) Ra would entreat audiences to his signature tune, “Space is the Place.” Each and every performance would be unique and without precedent.

In a lengthy passage taken from Space is the Place, Szwed provides an accurate summary of the nature and tone of Ra’s spectacles:

If you first saw Sun Ra and the Arkestra live, you saw a multidimensional event, a performance which broke the laws of Northern European performance, and you were affected by it one way or the other. But when you heard them on record you heard myth without the ritual, and the words took on a weight that the multimedia had balanced and lightened. And if you saw them at an unconventional venue like the Maeght Foundation and then at a traditional theater like Chatelet you saw a different group entirely, one constrained by the limited space. (291)

Szwed describes a performance event that depending upon context, reception, and venue could be amended to fit the mood of Ra and the Arkestra or the audience, the physical space, or the medium of presentation. The myth-ritual served as a meta-improvisatory event, constantly unfolding. It upholds Tricia Rose’s idea that the traditions and cultures of Black performance

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46 Three 1971 concert audio recordings from shows in Helsinki, Finland; Delft, The Netherlands; and Paris, France provide sonic documents of the improvisatory structure and of a myth-ritual. The Helsinki performance is notable as it was recorded for radio broadcast and is the closest we have to a complete audio recording of one of these performances. For more see Sun Ra and His Intergalactic Arkestra, Sun Ra and His Mythic Science Arkestra, and Sun Ra’s Intergalactic Research Arkestra.
correspond to the constant flow, ebb, and movement of traffic—mutable in the hands of the cultural actor and responsive to the moment.  

As Sun Ra makes clear in an interview granted before a performance in Helsinki in 1971, an element as simple as the seating arrangement of the band was open to interpretation. In Ra’s words, “everytime I change someone on the bandstand, move from one place to another, it changes the placement vibrations” (Patrício). Whether this meant a new arrangement of the instrument sections of the Arkestra or the reseating of individual players within them, Ra saw the members of the Arkestra themselves as elements that could alter the sonic effect or the stage presentation of the performance as much as the song selection or the venue. While there were distinct moments that would more often than not appear at certain points of each show, such as the opening drum solo, Ra’s keyboard solos, or the band descending from the stage and marching in a counter-clockwise circle around the venue, each performance was unique and adaptable to fit the mood, the moment, and the concert site. 

From the performer’s perspective, the audience’s sense of chaos—witnessing the multitude of Black musicians and dancers dressed in astrological and Egyptian adorned clothes moving around on stage in tandem with a wild array of sounds and visuals—matched the performer’s own experience on stage. As Arkestra members Marshall Allen, Danny Thompson, and Knoel Scott informed me during an interview I conducted with them in 2013, Ra never made

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47 For more see Rose, “Foreword” vii.
48 An excellent example of this occurs in the recording of “Watusa” that appears on the concert album It’s After The End of the World, which was recorded at the Berlin Jazz Festival on 7 November 1970. In this performance Ra plays an acoustic piano and therefore is not able to play the short staccato rhythms that are a hallmark of this song. The acoustic instrumentation changes the tempo, rhythm, and sound properties of the piece.
a set list for performances. While there were pieces that were more frequently played than others and others that phased in and out of favour with Ra, he “never told the band what the next number would be” (Block 15). The Arkestra would take their cues from Ra, cues that he would offer by sounding out the opening four-bars of a piece. Once the players determined which piece they were playing, they would also have to determine which particular arrangement of the piece they were to use and shuffle through their large stacks of scores and lead sheets to find the appropriate piece of paper.

Ra’s praxis and presentation on stage is indicative of the historical and cultural moment to which he was both witness and a part of. Ra was an active participant in what was known as the Black Arts Movement. This cultural network of writers, musicians, painters, and artists was seen as the cultural branch of the Black Power and Black Nationalist movements that were in vogue at the close of the 1960s. The primary tenet of this movement was the development and promotion of a Black aesthetic that placed blackness and Black performance at the core. Ra was familiar with this aesthetic, and his concert spectacles were held in high esteem by primary figures of the Black Arts Movement. One such individual, playwright Larry Neal, argues that the combination of ritualistic drama, music, poetry and the visual arts was a fundamental trait of Black art and that these qualities marked the Black aesthetic (Neal 35). Neal advocates that Black artists must not ignore the influence of western aesthetics; rather, he suggests, Black artists

49 It is important to note that while there might not have been a setlist, specific pieces were more likely to appear at certain points in the performance than others.

50 In a video interview from 1986 with Peter Hinds, vocalist June Tyson corroborates this point by stating that Ra would whisper to her the lines he wanted her to sing and that she never knew what or when she was going to sing during a performance; for more see Hinds. For a video example of Arkestra members listening for a song and searching for sheet music during a performance see crownpropeller at the 24:38 mark of the video.
need to “bend them to suit our contemporary needs” (81).\textsuperscript{51} Ra takes the aesthetics of the concert hall and breaks these conventions to allow for the inclusion of the ritualistic mixed media aspects that, for Neal, are central to Black aesthetics and create space for the promotion and dissemination of Black art.\textsuperscript{52}

Also, the sonic, extramusical, and bodily elements of Ra’s myth-rituals were a synthesis of Black working-class sacred and vernacular theatrical performance cultures. Allusions and references to these historical performance practices within the myth-rituals include the homiletics and ring shouts of Black church services, vaudeville shows, tented circus shows, cabaret performances, and pre-World War II swing bands. Augmenting these performative elements was the inclusion of dancers, which in John Szwed’s words, made the “music more real” (Space is the Place 263), and circus performers such as fire-eaters, jugglingrs, and tumblers.\textsuperscript{53} Noted African American author and long-time Arkestra affiliate Tam Fiofori in his 1970 essay “Sun Ra’s Space Odyssey” states that Ra’s use of lights and props made it “so that the people can see as well as hear the sound-image-impression of everything” (Fiofori). The visual, for Ra, became a medium that worked in tandem with the sonic. These were not separate elements, but rather convivial parts that helped animate each other.

\textsuperscript{51} As both Kimberly Benston and James Smethurst make clear in their historical surveys of the Black Arts Movement, the Black Arts refusal of adherence to European and Western artistic forms and aesthetics is a crucial framework for understanding this movement and is a predominant theme in the writings that appear in the Black Arts Anthology Black Fire. For more see Benston; Smethurst; and Jones & Neal.

\textsuperscript{52} Amiri Baraka, in his essay “Bopera Theory,” conveys that “every element we know must work together for the revolutionary people democratic workers communist theater we envision. Lights. Music. Dance. Sets. Speech” (141-2).

\textsuperscript{53} For a description of Ra’s inclusion of circus-like elements in his performances see Johnson.
Without fail, reviewers of Ra’s concerts relied on vaudeville and minstrel shows as a guidepost to explain Ra’s performances to readers. Critical responses range from Ekkehard Jost stating that a myth-ritual was a “utopian minstrel show” (199) and Ray Townley’s description of the myth-ritual as the “family-sect-minstrel-show” to an uncredited 1980 review that describes a Ra concert adhering to a “circus/vaudeville/medicine-show format” (Townley; “Sun Ra’s Solar Jet-Set”). In the absence of a governing and recognizable concert form and structure, commentators, with a hint of condescension, used descriptors of performance genres from a bygone era to describe Ra’s myth-rituals. Through their writings, critics impart a tone that does not wholly dismiss the presence of performative and gestural aspects of Ra’s performances. The message they do convey in their concert writings is that a concert by Ra defies the expectations and conformity of a concert event. The audience would be entreated to a spectacle that extended beyond the sonic and also included gestural, embodied, and visual elements. Within this context, I view Sun Ra’s myth-rituals as tackling the politics of culture and race by re-animating traditions of multi-generic performance forms in Black expressive culture. By reinserting Black theatrical vernacular performance traditions into the vocabulary of the jazz concert, Ra undermines a performance practice that privileges a division between sound and extramusical performance and provides a counter to critical and political formulations that wish to restrict blackness and Black identity within rigid boundaries of sexuality, gender, and performance as well as the standardization of jazz performance. Taking the archive(s) of performance culture

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54 This is just a sampling of sources that use vaudeville or circus terms. Within the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra there are numerous other sources that use this terminology.

55 David Kerr, in his entry on Africa in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, notes that practices of theatre and theatricality form the fundamental core of historical and contemporary African performance cultures.
from the past provides the fuel for the construction of a Black future, one that accounts for the richness and diversity of Black diasporic culture and life.\textsuperscript{56}

Throughout his myth-rituals, Ra calls upon Black expressive practices “steeped in 19\textsuperscript{th} century black cultural traditions” (Lock, “Right Place” 31). Tapping into this repertoire of historical practices accomplishes two things: (1) Ra’s performances challenge the newly emergent and historicist-centred narratives of jazz and the jazz concert while also (2) bolstering his connection with the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement as laid out by Larry Neal. Underwriting these performances was a guiding ideology that the social, scientific, and cultural achievements of Ancient Egypt were part of a legacy shared amongst peoples of African descent. While this viewpoint did not serve as a teleological narrative per se, this particular history, one that was lost and denied for centuries, served as the central mythical theme, but not as a central storyline. Rather, the tone and shape of the concerts took on the shape of a ritualistic performance devoted to Black bodily and mental liberation.\textsuperscript{57} This lack of perceptible cohesiveness and shattering of concert conventions often left audiences and critics confused.

The audience’s reaction to these concert performances is particularly evident in a newly sourced film recording in the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra. Shot in 16mm color film with no sound, this film captures Ra and the Arkestra in concert at Les Halles concert hall in

\textsuperscript{56} The practice of Black vernacular performance mixing media from across genres was not a foreign idea to tenor saxophonist John Gilmore. In an interview with noted jazz impresario Bob Rusch, Gilmore recounts how one of his earliest paying, professional gigs was with the Earl Hines Orchestra. During his tenure with Hines's band, they would often play “behind a show like trampoline acts and jugglers, sort of vaudeville type of thing for the Harlem Globe Trotters basketball team” (Rusch).

\textsuperscript{57} For more about the social function of rituals see Turner 1982. For more about ritual performance in African diasporic cultures see Brown, Kuwabong, and Olsen.
Paris. The handwritten label on the archival canister dates the footage from November 1970 and corroborating evidence suggests that this concert was part of Ra and the Arkestra’s first extensive tour of Europe carried out in the fall of 1970. This approximately 20-minute film documents selected segments of a performance of a myth-ritual in color. In particular, the film features several shots of the audience and their reactions to Ra’s performance. At best, the faces of the French youth display a sense of bewilderment and awe in response to what they are witnessing and ostensibly hearing. This disconnect is most evident near the end of the film which shows Ra and members of the Arkestra leaving the stage. While we can presume this was at the end of the performance, the lack of sound or any other documentation makes it difficult to be certain. However, what is certain is that the audience members look at each other with a mixture of amazement and confusion and then proceed to clap, cheer, and raise clenched fists in the air.

This visually confused reaction to these performances was matched by critics’ literary reactions. Excerpted in Szwed’s biography, a group review by French critics of the Arkestra’s 29 November 1971 performance at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris continually refers to how the form of the music and the overall structure of the performance itself was too discontinuous for their liking.\(^{58}\) What emerges is a distinct contrast. Critics were intrigued but left dumbfounded by Ra’s performances. In comparison, audiences were equally confused, but grew to embrace Ra’s myth-rituals for its multisensual properties. It is the seemingly disconnected nature of Ra’s performances that invokes and plays with the archives and history of Black historical staged performance.\(^{59}\)

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\(^{58}\) For a more complete version of this exchange, see Szwed 288-91.

\(^{59}\) The discontinuous and asymmetrical nature of Ra’s performances mirror early minstrel shows, which Eric Lott describes as placing an emphasis on “spectacle rather than on narrative” (Lott
Moreover, the free-flowing and improvisatory structure of Ra’s myth-rituals rebuts the formalism of post-War jazz performance. Ra’s concerts would not adhere to a physical divide between performer and audience or follow the form(ality) of a concert with sets and the guarantee of hearing notable hits by the artist. While the sum of the parts may have left some members of the audience in a state of bewilderment, the constituent elements added some sense of familiarity. This sense of familiarity arises from the modes and traditions of Black expressive culture that Ra invokes in these performances, which became the backbone of mass entertainment and popular culture of the twentieth century. The combination of sound, movement, and vision in Ra’s performances gives voice to Black political visions that stress the possibility of Black social existence outside the domains of white supremacy and capitalism. Indeed, the political nature of these performances becomes more apparent if we explore them in relation to the formalization of live Black musical performances and recent critical work on the performative and extramusical aspects of Black expressive culture.

**The Jazz Concert: A New Tradition**

As John Szwed makes clear in *Space is the Place*, the myth-ritual does not seem out of place within the context of countercultural performances of the late 1960s. However, I contend that Ra’s mining of Black performance traditions and decision to give them prominence in his performances is part of a larger discourse about the nature and presentation of Black improvisatory musicking in staged concert settings.

One specific presentation mode that highlights the politics of genre and presentation within Black expressive culture is the jazz concert. Placing Sun Ra’s performance practice in

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144) and fall in line with Zora Neale Hurston’s ideas about the qualities of angularity, asymmetry, and adornment present in Black performance (53).
dialogue with jazz performance, a medium in which his own music has roots, highlights these tensions. As I detailed earlier, Ra did not refer to his performances as concerts, but rather as myth-rituals or cosmo-dramas. Ra’s self-fashioned concert title and its form, while seemingly innocuous on the surface, connects with the larger issue of the performance and presentation of jazz and other styles of Black musical cultures.

Since the emergence of jazz from the synthesis of performance cultures of dispossessed communities in the American South and of European musical styles and instrumentation, there has been a long and continuous fight to upscale jazz music into the spheres of upper-class and highbrow culture. One such path to this sacralisation of jazz was through the concert hall. Scott DeVeaux believes that the relocation of the live performance of jazz from the dancehall to the concert venue betrays the music’s working-class sensibilities. To overcome this tension and disconnectedness between the presentation of lower-class culture in a high-brow environment, performers, promoters, and critics worked to expunge the performative aspects of Black musical cultures, such as dance, humour, costume, gesture, and sonic extremes from the grammar and practice of concert hall jazz performance.60 “The concert,” as DeVeaux writes, “is a solemn ritual, with music the object of reverent contemplation” (“Emergence” 6). The formal presentation of jazz in concert hall settings presents the music as a holistic object worthy of serious study but comes at the cost of erasing the presence of extramusical aspects. The effacement of these performative qualities contributed to a narrative of uplifting jazz music to becoming America’s Classical music and refining the genre for the concert hall and the academy.

60 Zachary Wallmark, in his essay “Theorizing the Saxophone Scream in Free Jazz Improvisation,” details how John Coltrane's shift from a restrained style of performance to a more physical and dissonant style of playing transgressed the social code of appearing and sounding dignified in jazz performance.
This “demand for musical respectability” through concert hall conventions contributes to the erasure of Black vernacular performance traditions that placed a premium on theatricality and showmanship (Porter, *What* 87). To paraphrase, the theatrical aspects integrated into early jazz performance are the qualities that held back the genre from the realm of upper-class art. In Ra’s hands, by contrast, the ritual of the concert no longer circled entirely around the singular entity of the music, but also focused on the extra-musical aspects of visual cues and gestural movements.

Within this context, one begins to see a political undertone to the nature of Ra’s myth-rituals. Whereas jazz concerts contributed to an almost purely sonic presentation of the music, Ra demands that the historical and theatrical traditions of Black performance be at the fore. Ra’s reinsertion of physical cues and gestures nods towards the politics of canon formation, high-culture, and decorum that had enveloped early jazz performance. If we consider the critical power of the extramusical components drawn from these archives of Black expressive culture, we can begin to see the multivalent nature of Ra’s myth-rituals. These performances function as a site of resistance by their reinvigoration of the historical veins of Black expressive culture that violate the then nascent conventions of concert hall decorum. Surveying the historical antecedents present within Ra’s myth-rituals demonstrates how various elements from the archives of Black sacred and secular performance contribute to an overall aesthetic of resistance.

**Sacred-Secular Stagecraft: Historical Antecedents of Ra’s Myth-Rituals**

It is clear that Ra’s myth-rituals offer a rebuttal to the formalization of Black musical performance and the erasure of Black vernacular traditions. Recent critical work on the form and function of Black musical genres and styles that incorporate theatrical devices and bridge generic

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61 For another excellent discussion of the aesthetics of jazz in the concert hall see Laver.
boundaries provides us with the critical perspective to engage with the historical traditions of Black sacred and secular performance that Ra himself employed and manipulated. At the same time, we can also begin to see how in Ra’s hands these performative traditions function as tools to help advance his message of social and mental liberation. One example from scholarship that provides guidance in this discussion includes work on the staged qualities of early Blues performance.

Critical studies on the denial, elision, and erasure of performative elements in similar improvisatory-based forms of Black musicking prove useful in a discussion of Ra’s concert performances. Paige McGinley argues that singular, generic frameworks that emphasize a separation of and isolation between sonic, gestural, and visual elements limit our understanding and reception of a genre reliant on extramusical and theatrical aspects. To overcome the multiplicity of styles and genres present in the live performance of the blues, scholars, instead of trying to equally appraise the musical and extra-musical parts, have chosen to devalue and deemphasize the theatrical roots of blues performance, which in McGinley’s words, have been dismissed as “secondary, feminized, derivative, or affectively excessive” (9).  

62 Audiences and critics perceived extramusical components such as stage props or costumes as detracting from the music and inhibiting the reception of the genre on purely musical terms. Concert promoters and critics worked independently and together to expunge theatrical and excessive elements from the historical record while also firmly establishing the music within a hetero-masculinist discourse. While McGinley’s study focuses on staged performances of the blues, her ideas about the critical reception and denial of theatricality are instructive for my reading of Ra’s

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62 For a more comprehensive history of the term theatricality and biases towards it see Davis & Postlewait 1-39 and Barish.
performances. From McGinley’s work, we can position Ra’s concerts as a venture to recuperate the archives of Black expressive culture, but also as an explicit questioning of the formalism, decorum, and racial essentialism that had corralled jazz and other forms of Black music with origins in the blues.  

Ra’s reanimation of these performative tropes of excess and theatricality, qualities that at one time were seen, to revisit Paige McGinley’s work, as feminine, provides the impetus for a discussion of the cultural politics surrounding post-World War II jazz performance. As the preeminent form of Black musicking after the Second World War, this musical style became linked with what Eric Porter describes as a “masculinist ethos” (What 28). With this phrase, Porter means that discourses surrounding bebop specifically and jazz more generally, placed a heavy emphasis on male performers with a framing of the music as emblematic of the purview of the male creative genius and male virility. While Krin Gabbard is quick to remind us that jazz has a long and sustained history of offering alternatives to “conventional notions of masculinity and male sexuality” (7), the fact remains that the genre became a locus for hyper-masculinity. In the context of bebop and post-War jazz performance, masculinity became accentuated through musicians presenting an “assertive stance through dress, language, posture, and music” (Ake, Jazz Cultures 66), accomplished by musicians adopting a cool and indifferent public persona through clothing choices such as wearing sunglasses at night, adapting slang only known to

63 Despite Ra’s self-professed alienness, he was intimately familiar with the performative subversiveness of early blues performance. During his formative years in Birmingham, Alabama, Ra’s great-aunt would take him to see shows by early-blues luminaries such as Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, and Butterbeans and Susie (Szwed, Space is the Place 12). In a newly sourced interview that was broadcast on San Francisco radio station KPMX, Ra details how he held these artists in high esteem, and from his viewpoint, how they were in a position to inform Black people of, in his words, “things which no-one else could tell them” (Sun Ra and Arkestra, “SR073”).
fellow musicians, and placing a premium on musical signs of masculinity such as speed, complex chord changes, and longer, more dissonant melodies.  

Notably absent from these performances are the extramusical devices that could be read as feminine, such as props or physical gestures, or space for open acknowledgment of possible sexual and gender difference. The presence of any of these elements could undermine the hypermasculine persona of the performer or a positioning of the music as something other than an emblem of masculinity. Ra’s concerts seem to question this essentialist linking of the music to masculinity. 

Musically, Ra’s concerts featured music built around basic chord progressions in simple keys and often featured moments of rhythmic stasis that run against the masculinist traits of musical complexity. Extramusical elements, such as the sequined clothes of Ra and the Arkestra or the bodily gestures and motions of the band, counter the cool and indifferent masculinist stage presence that had become the standard for jazz performance in the latter half of the twentieth century. Instead of denying the presence of elements wrapped in charges of femininity, excess, and theatricality, Ra embraces these qualities of early twentieth-century Black expressive culture. 

Ra’s play with and reconfiguration of these sources contributes to the social critique and aesthetic commentary within the myth-ritual. What emerges, much like the meta-improvisatory

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64 For more about the linking of bebop to hyper-masculinity, please see Guthrie Ramsey’s chapter, “Making the Changes: Jazz, Manhood, Bebop Virtuosity, and a New Social Contract” in his 2013 critical study of pianist Bud Powell. 
65 For an example of an artist that questioned this masculinist ethos, both musically and personally, see David Ake’s chapter on Ornette Coleman in Jazz Cultures. 
66 This is not to say Ra’s concerts did not feature moments of musical complexity. What I am noting is that prominence was given to musical features that run against the trends of jazz performance in the last half of the twentieth century.
structure of these performances, is a meta-site of resistance to the social alienation and marginalization of people of colour but also a resistance to the erasure and de-emphasis of theatrical and performative elements of Black performance, which at their core, are fundamental and crucial to the culture of people of African descent.

*Black sacred conventions*

Numerous commentators have taken great care to note the moments of congruity between Ra’s music, performances, and aesthetics and those of Black religious practices in North America. John Szwed, in detailing the litany of artistic resonances within Ra’s performances, notes that “the atmosphere created in the latter part of the performance seemed church like, calling up to some people memories of Baptist pageants and Sunday services, sermons, hymns, the interplay of preacher, choir, and congregation which leads to ecstasy” (*Space is the Place* 260). Much like a preacher leading his congregation to salvation, Ra implores his bandmates and the audience to join him on his intergalactic voyages. A salient point of comparison between Ra and Black preachers is their role as a salesperson. John Giggie, in his essay “Buying and Selling with God,” describes the history of leaders of Black congregations of selling and endorsing products and how these individuals were viewed as a “reliable broker of information about the market” (203). The items that Black spiritual leaders endorsed and sold ranged from hygiene products to recordings of the preacher’s sermons or vocal performances. In essence, these individuals, in addition to offering the hope and promise of spiritual salvation, were also offering material goods to aid their social and spiritual uplift. Much like his performative gestures, Ra adapts this practice to fit his space epistemology. Instead of standing at a pulpit offering spiritual salvation,
Ra would sit behind his electronic keyboards and propose new freedom dreams through sonic improvisations and a message of interplanetary travel.

One particular moment during a myth-ritual that sharpens the connection to Black sacred performance culture is Ra and the Arkestra’s penchant for singing what Ra referred to as space chants. Often in call-and response form, these songs became a medium for Ra to play with the music and the themes of the Black church. In particular, Graham Lock views the space chants of Ra as a play, both musically and thematically, on Black spirituals. This takes shape by Ra interpolating the musical content and form of spiritual songs or altering the words of these songs to transform the ideas of the “Christian vision of a mythic future” into the “language and imagery of futuristic science” (*Blutopia* 41). Like his reanimation of Black secular stage performances, Ra turns towards the traditions of religion in the composing of new political and social futures.

In addition, a gestural moment that sharpens the connection between Ra’s performances and Black sacred practices is Ra and the Arkestra’s habit of closing performances with the band walking in a counter-clockwise circle interspersed with leaps as a direct continuation of the Afro-Baptist tradition of the ring-shout.\(^{67}\) Both Sterling Stuckey and Samuel Floyd in their foundational work on African American culture and aesthetics argue that the ring shout is a central tenet of Black sacred performance culture in the new world and derives from African tribal practices.\(^{68}\) The practice of members of the Black diaspora “resurrecting, renaming, rezoning, reactivating, and institutionalizing” African myths and performative tropes in new locales of the Black Atlantic strengthens the argument that we can view Ra as a figure who

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\(^{67}\) For a video example of this please see the end credits scene of Robert Mugge's documentary *A Joyful Noise*. For a textual description of the ring shout see Lock, *Blutopia* 39-41.

\(^{68}\) For more about the ring shout and Black sacred practices see Stuckey 62-3, 83-4 and Floyd.
archives performance, but also performs the archive (Kuwabong 9). While Ra was quick to
dismiss any earthly bonds, it becomes clear that he refashioned the archives and practices of
Black spirituality to advance his cosmo-futurist worldview. ⁶⁹

*Black secular conventions*

The invocation of and play with concert conventions extended to the arrangement of the concert
venue as well. Ra’s three-dimensional performances shatter any semblance of a formal schematic
or a divide between artist and audience. Ra and the Arkestra’s musical laughter, descending from
the stage (and at times climbing the scaffolding of the stage itself) as well as the mixture of blues
and swing numbers with organic and electronic instrumentation all contribute to the
carnivalesque atmosphere of the myth-ritual, and, more importantly, distort the implied and
implicit power structures between artist and audience, embedded within the conventional jazz
concert. Ra’s concert spectacles put forth a performative epistemology that calls for the erasure
of these boundaries.

Writing on the performances of present-day jazz artists Sex Mob, David Ake returns to
the conversation about the presence of working-class vernacularism(s) in jazz performance. For
Ake, the elevation of jazz to a serious art form comes at the cost of distancing jazz from its
vulgar roots. Ake points towards Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque as
a useful matrix for gauging the presence of the ribald and the performative in jazz and
improvised music. For Bakhtin, carnivalesque rituals critique social conventions through the

⁶⁹ George Lewis, in the closing pages of *A Power Stronger than Itself*, suggests that the
performance traditions of the church are unexamined sources of inspiration for Black
experimental music. For more see Lewis 486-8.
inversion, mocking, and derision of agents and symbols of officialdom.70 “A carnivalesque aesthetic,” as Ake points out, “persists to this day as a foil to modern jazz’s oftentimes severe, elitist, or solipsistic attitudes” (Jazz Matters 55). The presence of elements such as humour, movement, and fusion of audience and performer erode artificial boundaries and formal features of the jazz concert. Quoting Bakhtin, Ake takes great care to emphasize that modern-day jazz performers “know footlights” and have become entangled in a discourse of seriousness (Bakhtin, qtd. in Ake 55). In other words, the stage lights govern the aesthetics of jazz concerts with performers both taking up the spotlight and facing outwards to sound into a Black abyss of stagedness and artificiality.

The improvisatory arc and theatricality of Ra’s concert performances signal an acknowledgement and understanding of the rich history of Black expressive culture. This knowledge, however, is not limited to the frame of the twentieth-century. One such archive of aural and bodily movement that Ra invokes is that of early ragtime and jazz performance cultures based out of New Orleans, Louisiana. The carnivalesque and celebratory nature of early jazz was not welcome within the confines of the post-War concert hall; however, Ra mirrors many of these elements, and their inherent social messages, in his own performances. The ribald nature of early jazz performance, as Charles Hersch explains, provided a bodily way of “generating a particular way of being” (45) and a temporal escape “from the insistence of the everyday routine” (47). Ra continues this aesthetic through his myth-rituals. His performances, much like the aforementioned Harlem cabaret shows, construct space for the articulation of an alternative identity free from the temporal and bodily restrictions of Western modernity.

70 For more see Bakhtin.
Vernacular traditions function as an archive of sound and movement, and in tandem, these improvisatory embodied elements could construct new forms of cultural knowledge and production.\textsuperscript{71} Tapping into performance styles that evince heritage from Afro-Atlantic and Circum-Caribbean cultural performative traditions strengthens Ra’s links with Black diasporic cultures, but also demonstrates the breadth of the Black performative archives he calls upon.

Ra’s play with Black secular entertainment genres and styles was not restricted to examples drawn from the southern United States and Global South. Notable forms of urban, secular Black expressive culture from the early twentieth-century help elucidate our understanding of Ra’s performances as well. One such example is found in the asymmetrical concert arrangements of cabaret performance during the Harlem renaissance. In \textit{The Scene of Harlem Cabaret}, Shane Vogel details how the breaking of the “fourth wall” aided the power of cabaret performance to “imagine alternative narratives of sexual and racial selfhood” (3) and in turn allowed for cabaret performance to become embroiled in conversations of the moment about respectable (i.e. non-theatrical) modes of performance suitable for African Americans. Vogel determines that the merger of audience and performer within asymmetrical performance spaces presents a manifestation of Michael Kirby’s idea of a non-matrixed performance where there is no divide between performer and audience.\textsuperscript{72} The idea of non-matrixed Harlem Cabaret

\textsuperscript{71} For more about the presence of Black Atlantic elements in early jazz performance see Hersch 128-49. For more general discussion about “Africanisms in African-American Music,” see Maultsby.

\textsuperscript{72} Kirby believes that the “performer always functions within a matrix of time, place, and character” (5). The matrix governs that what the audience witnesses is separate and not part of the everyday world. Non-matrixed performances, on the other hand, function outside the criteria of the theatre and offer no barriers between the audience and the performer. Black Arts Movement author James T. Stewart invokes the idea of the matrix as a governing device that is notable for its presence in white art and its absence in Black art.
performance is an informative waypoint for re-assessing Ra’s myth-rituals. The form, structure, and content of his staged performances take cues from an archive of a Black musico-theatrical performance tradition that places theatricality and performance at the fore, but more importantly creates a social space where new forms and shapes of racial representation can occur.

In particular, qualities and traits of W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1911 pageant *The Star of Ethiopia* and Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey’s parades and public rallies manifest themselves in Ra’s myth-rituals. During the transitionary period between the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth-century, a performance tradition of staging large public pageants began to take shape within the United States of America. These large-scale stage works combined acting, music, singing, and dancing into a singular artwork around a central theme. “Pageants extolled the virtues of American history” through the lens of “cultural nationalism” and “melting-pot ideologies” (Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant* 85). The narrative backbone of these pageants was a historical and cultural rhetoric of American manifest destiny and imperialism in North America and the integration of non-white ethnic groups into the perceived homogeneity of the American nation. Clare Corbould, in her study of Black identity during the Harlem Renaissance, describes pageants as a performative opportunity where “Americans could smooth over the differences and disagreements provoked by the diversity of the populace” (58). Melting the quickly diversifying population of America into a common national dream and rhetoric became a way for white and non-white Americans alike to construct a “usable past” (58). Likewise, as we will see, Du Bois’s, and to a lesser extent Ra’s, staged spectacles also create a usable past for peoples of African descent in the Americas, but with very different social and political goals.73

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73 For a more comprehensive history of pageant performances and culture in the United States see Glassberg.
Much like his white contemporaries and their approach to history, Du Bois’s vision for *The Star of Ethiopia* was to present a theatrical narrative that celebrated the achievements and cultural monuments of Black diasporic peoples. Detailing the humanity of people of African descent in the Americas highlighted their contributions to American society and facilitated their integration into the fable of the United States. *The Star of Ethiopia*, as Rebecca Hewett writes, “sought to re-create thousands of years in African and African American history” and “to change the historical narrative assigned to African Americans in the United States during the Progressive Era and, by extension, to create a new cultural memory of African American history” (188). Du Bois uses an unacknowledged ancient past, in this case the historical idea of Ethiopia, to animate a multi-dimensional art work that questions perceived cultural understanding and to advance a new future for Black diasporic peoples within the American nation. In the same way, Sun Ra employs the cultural and technological achievements of Ancient Egyptians as the foundation for a cross-genre artwork that proposes an alternative mode of existence for blackness and Black identity. The important detail to note in connection with Ra and Du Bois is the mutability of source material to advance political and social causes. Du Bois makes evident within his own work that his primary concern was the promotion of racial uplift through adaptation and acceptance by African Americans of middle- and upper-class morals and culture. *The Star of Ethiopia* was Du Bois’s attempt to show that these aspirations were not out of reach by showing the cultural history of African Americans, but he does so within the context of Western artistic forms. Conversely, Ra takes the idea of an African homeland and the strands of Black expressive culture to promote not an agenda of integration, but instead a viewpoint of alienness and

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74 For more about the cultural politics of Du Bois’s work see Hewett. For more about aspects of historical memory in Du Bois’s work see Shor.
separation. Rather than alter the presence of working-class Black expressive culture to fit within a politics of racial uplift and respectability, Ra embraces these non-textual archives as a method for the writing of new social identities. 

Along these same lines, the elements and aesthetics of Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey’s public rallies and parades appear in Ra’s myth-rituals. Rising to prominence during a period of migration, economic crisis, and the blossoming Harlem Renaissance, Garvey was able to capture the imagination of working-class and poor Blacks who felt alienated from society “through pomp and ceremony, a resonant voice, superlative stage presence, and physical self-confidence” (Krasner 170). A key component of Garvey’s pomp and ceremony were parades through the streets of Harlem. These parades offered a mobile site for African Americans to form a compact of “social identity and national pride” (173). More importantly, Garvey’s parades, in Krasner’s words, offered a “theatrical scene that was antithetical to the drab and ordinary existence of overcrowded and mechanized urban life” (174). Garvey’s parades were part of a larger cultural action during the Harlem Renaissance of public parades through the streets that provided African Americans, in art curator Claire Tancons’s words, the opportunity to “entertain, educate, protest, pray, mourn, and celebrate, in silence and in music, in anger, sorrow, and joy” (“Taking” 63). Garvey’s parades offered the hope of coalescence around a unified national consciousness, whether real or imaginary, while providing a respite from the routinization of everyday life through the spectacular and the theatrical. Parades were, and still are, a key element in Arkestra performances. Most famously, Ra and the Arkestra marched in the parade up 125th

While we have no definitive link between Ra and Du Bois, and their works, it is worth noting that pianist Fletcher Henderson, who Ra worked with briefly during the 1950s, served as the pit pianist for productions of Atlanta University’s own pageant “The Open Door.” For more see Tucker 134fn3.
Street through Harlem announcing the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in 1965. More commonly, Arkestra performances, whether full stagings of the myth-ritual or more conventional performances, conclude with members of the band marching through the audience. This act breaks down the formalism of the concert hall, but also, much like Garvey’s parades, becomes an opportunity for Arkestra and audience alike to coalesce around the theme of possibility and intergalactic travel.

Ra’s staged performances, in a manner similar to those of Du Bois and Garvey, provide a counter to the dominant view of whiteness as the hub of culture, nation, and identity while also creating a performance space that provides relief from the daily actions of anti-Black racism and dehumanization. Moreover, one may view Du Bois’s pageants and Garvey’s parades as a cultural archive upon which Ra draws. I argue that the resonances between Du Bois, Garvey, and Ra are too great to ignore. Much like his ideology of how the past can animate new futures, in his myth-rituals Ra mobilizes the archives of African American political staged performances to construct a new artistic form.76

What comes to the fore is that Ra was an equal opportunist when it came to his inspirations. I see, hear, and perceive Ra’s performances as evasive of clear categorization because of his practice of borrowing freely from both sacred and secular realms of Black performance. Augmenting the sacred/secular divide, Ra’s concerts mix performance elements from working-class and middle-class worlds while also placing aspects of rural and urban

76 Despite the perception that Garvey and his Universal Negro Improvement Association were most popular and active in northern, urban areas, Mary Rolinson’s work on Garveyism in the American South reveals that this movement gained traction and received support in this region as well. More importantly, Rolinson reveals that there was an active chapter of the UNIA in Ra’s arrival city of Birmingham, Alabama. For more see Rolinson. For more about Garveyism in urban centres in the American South see Harold.
cultures alongside one another. Ra’s myth-rituals disrupt a smooth, linear history of Black performance and culture in the Americas—a narrative positioned around ideas of realism and racial uplift—but also posits a social existence beyond the dichotomy of sacred salvation or secular political emancipation. His disruption of these two pillars—realism and racial uplift—presents an opportunity to consider other social, political, and cultural possibilities of Black life.

By jamming the cultural and social logic of realism and respectability, Ra forces us to consider, to quote from Ashon Crawley’s recent book on the philosophy and theology of Blackpentecostal spiritual practices, “otherwise possibilities for thought, for action, for being and becoming” (Blackpentecostal 5). Instead of accepting versions of history that dictate a limited future, Ra advances different modes of cultural practices and social existence. The moment and space of Ra’s myth-rituals create what bell hooks has called both rites and sites of resistance. hooks views Black expressive culture as functioning as a “critical intervention, a rite of resistance” that creates a “site for the imagination of future possibilities” (“Performance” 211, 220). Black performance cultures not only address the politics of the here and now, but also formulate new visions of political configurations and social identity. The intersection of the sonic, the bodily, and the material in performance provides Ra with the lexicon and grammar to formulate his performative vision of Black life and politics in a new and fantastic format. Ra fuses Black sacred and secular performance conventions and traditions to create a performance event that is a ritualistic moment that presents an alternative possibility of social existence and

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77 The idea of Black performance creating a site of critical commentary and intervention has also been explored by Paul Gilroy in The Black Atlantic where desires for social freedom were uttered “in more deliberately opaque means” and was enacted on a “lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about” (37). At a generic level, Martinician critic Édouard Glissant advocates that Black aesthetics do no necessarily have to adhere to pre-existing forms of Black culture, but rather that new forms “must be shaped from these oral structures” (Caribbean 248).
options for the presentation of Black culture. The hybrid nature of Ra’s performances allows for an acknowledgement that any singular or traditional critical approach to his performances is insufficient. But more than that, Ra’s performances reinsert archives of Black performance onto the concert stage and reject the staid atmosphere of post-War jazz concerts.

From a more global perspective, the political power and critical commentary of Black expressive culture, whether musical, theatrical, or performative, has been an area of critical interest. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Fred Moten views the structure, form, content, and aesthetics of Black expressive culture as residing in what he defines as the “break.” Ra’s performances fall within this conceptual space: they do not align within a specific genre but contain aspects clearly drawn from and intermixed with different modes and styles of performance. Since the publication of Moten’s formulation, scholars have used his ideas as a starting point for discussions and analyses of the social and aesthetic possibilities of Black performance. More recently, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz, writing on non-musical expressions of the break, summates that “African American aesthetic practices consistently break open performative structures to imagine unprecedented possibilities” (32). DeFrantz suggests that Moten’s idea of the break must be expanded to include all forms of Black expressive culture. Ra’s myth-rituals, as I have shown, also exist in this liminal space, and in so doing suggest alternative modes of Black social life and existence free from racial subjugation and marginalization.

In a similar vein, Daniel Fischlin has argued that improvised music, a form with deep cultural significance to the Black diaspora, is “profoundly theatrical, not only for how it imagines a form of public commons driven by exploratory forms of expression, but also for the way in which race, gender, class, and other master narratives are made spectacular” (“Moments” 17).
Performers of improvised music, in Fischlin’s estimation, use physical and visual cues to enhance their sonic manifestations of identity, community, and politics. He writes:

improvisors [sic] engage the language of theatre in conjunction with their music as a way to unsettle assumptions about conventional relationships between content and form, with their stage practices complementing, informing, commenting, and sometimes providing a counter- or parallel discourse to the musician’s musical practices. (18)

The resistive nature and message of improvised music, in Fischlin’s estimation, is greatly enhanced by extramusical, theatrical, and excessive elements. These streams work together to put forth a social and artistic aesthetic that, in his words, “unsettles assumptions” about race, performance, genre, style, and content. With the case of a performer such as Sun Ra, we have an individual whose performance practice engages with the fusion of the musical and theatrical to explore and explode master narratives. What is unique about Ra and his myth-rituals, however, is that Ra engages with historical aspects and archives of Black expressive culture to make his pronouncements about social hierarchies and aesthetic categorizations. The synthesis of breaking aesthetic forms and creating new genres while also exploding master narratives comes to the fore in a definitive moment of Ra’s myth-rituals while also presenting another instance of Ra exploring the archives of Black expressive culture: his improvised solos on electronic keyboards.

Abstract, Joyful Noise: Ra’s Keyboards and Sonic Subjectivity

Ra’s keyboard solos provide a singular moment that captures the ethos and spirit of his myth-rituals. When Ra sits down and plays his electronic keyboards, he simultaneously activates the
archives of Black performance, suggests a new mode of music making, and puts into sonic form
a social position of alienation and an alternative modality of social being.

The most stunning visual example we have of Ra’s keyboard solos appears in a recording
of a performance broadcast on French television in 1972—a document I will consider in more
detail in this chapter’s conclusion.

Fig. 1.1 Ra Standing at the keyboards at the beginning of performance.

After leading the Arkestra in a conduction-led duet with dancer June Tyson, Ra walks over to his
keyboards that have been positioned on an elevated platform on stage. Here, Ra proceeds to play
a metrically free solo, rife with electronic distortion.
Fig. 1.2 Closeup of Ra manipulating the Moog synthesizer

During this sequence, Ra moves his body as if conjuring an idea from the great beyond and manipulates the keys of the Moog synthesizer while also adjusting the knobs that control sound elements such as pitch, wave form, and decay. Within these few minutes of moving image and sound, I believe we have a localized instance of Ra’s engagement with the embodied, corporeal, and sonic archives of Black expressive culture.

Discussions of Black performance breaking and remolding aesthetic forms have expanded to include the role of the performer on the stage suggesting new modes of existence. Writing about African American performers from the turn of the nineteenth century, Daphne

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78 For more about the Moog synthesizer’s interfaces and the user’s ability to manipulate sound see Pinch.
Brooks outlines how Black artists position their bodies within staged productions to create a site where they rebut dehumanizing conceptions of race and sex that circulated during this period. Labelling these performances as “Afro-Alienation acts” (Bodies 4), Brooks examines the ways that Black cultural actors “rehearsed ways to render racial and gender categories ‘strange’ and thus ‘disturb’ cultural perceptions of identity formation” and to “defamiliarize the spectacle of blackness” (5). For Black artists such as Henry Box Brown and Adah Isaacs Menken, their performances become a location to question and reconfigure racialized perceptions of their own bodies. They do so by proposing modes of blackness that rest outside essentialist and racist constructs of Western society.

This notion of an alternative form of Black existence is a foundational pillar of Ra’s persona and aesthetics. In an interview with Bob Rusch in the June 1978 issue of Cadence Magazine, one of the premier publications in the late 1970s and early 1980s dedicated to improvised and creative music, Ra makes this idea of different and non-routine forms of blackness clear. Asked about whether he saw himself as free, Ra responds: “I’m not a part of this, I’m just a test for humanity as whether they can accept something that’s different. They talk about freedom. Can they give somebody freedom that’s different? Can they tolerate other types of beings?” (Rusch, “Sun Ra”). Like the performances by Brown and Menken, Ra’s performances work as a site where he can fully enunciate and announce to the world a Black identity not married to a history of subjugation or non-human status. Instead, what Ra proposes is a Black existence that is part of a history of building cultural monuments like the Great Pyramids of Egypt or the chosen people of a higher deity. Ra enhances this message through the use of technology by challenging the accepted idea that Black identity is outside of modernity or not adept—by taking the stage and playing his music on some of the leading examples of
technological musical production. In Ra’s mind, Black people can construct a Black identity for the future by playing with and subverting racist tropes on the stage and in performance.

Indeed, staged and embodied performance such as Ra’s become a site where Black performers can trouble assumptions about their raced and/or sexed body and play with and propound new and different forms of embodied existence. Historically, the countering of public perceptions of Black identity was not localized within specific genres or styles of performance or enacted through distinct embodied actions or gestures, but rather through the excess of “layering aliases and costumes, devices and genres atop one another” that allowed performers to transgress and disrupt “conventional constructions of the racialized and gendered body” (8). Much like Moten’s notion of the break, Brooks posits that embodied Black performance can also rest in a liminal space that troubles assumptions about race.

The trope of Black staged performers proposing new musical forms is not limited to the close of the nineteenth century or, indeed, to Sun Ra. Francesca T. Royster, in her study of Post-Soul Generation musical artists such as George Clinton, Michael Jackson, and Grace Jones, examines how these musicians turn to eccentric musical performance styles and personas as a method to resist heteronormative and authentic notions of Black identity.79 What Royster sees and hears are performers who “blur categories of music genre, as well as race, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity,” performers who are “both forward and backward moving, navigating a set of reference points that include the past as well as the future” (Sounding 8, 12). In this mixing of genres and mediums, these performances offer an affront to the “idea of an

79 By Post-Soul, Royster draws on Mark Anthony Neal's idea of a generation of African-Americans who came of age in the wake of, and grappled with, social and political issues effecting the African American community after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. For more see Neal 2-3.
‘authentic’ Black sound” and the notion of “a stable black identity” (17). These alloyed genres and personas advance a position that argues that we must view Black identity as heterogeneous and fluid. To do so, performers turn towards historical forms of Black performance for inspiration and refute essentialist views of Black existence and culture.

Like his own philosophical belief that African and Africana peoples must look to the past to propel them to new futures, Ra cites, references, and remixes the archive of Black performance in service to the advancement of new social and political futures. When Ra approaches the Moog synthesizer in his sequined space clothes in the middle of a genre-defying concert spectacle he puts forth a form of Black identity that disturbs the audience’s expectations and proffers a mode of existence outside the constrictions of Western humanity. This moment is not purely an embodied or theatrical performance—it is also a sonic one. Accompanying this juncture in Ra’s myth-rituals are the sounds emanating from his keyboards.

The keyboards are not only instruments to generate abstract music, but also theatrical devices that enhance Ra’s socio-political message. The instruments realize what performance scholar Uri McMillan labels as “prosthetic performances” (11). Developed in relation to his study of the stagecraft of antebellum performer Ellen Craft, McMillan argues that Black female performers use prosthetic devices in their performances to enhance and supplement their bodies. Much like Daphne Brooks’s work on Black female performers of the stage from the turn of the century, McMillan’s work explores the possibilities of difference that can occur on stage when performers adapt strategies of embodied excess or theatricality. By accentuating their bodies through material objects, Black female performers tease out the tension surrounding the

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80 McMillan notes that “prosthetics, a term usually associated with a bodily lack, can also be a morphological surplus” (76).
social history of the treatment of Black people as objects, celebrating the possibilities of subjecthood through acts of self-realized body augmentation and supplementation. The construction of alternative forms of social existence through bodily supplementation in performance provides another instance of Ra’s invocation of genealogies of Black expressive culture. Within his performances, Ra’s electronic keyboards act as a prosthetic that extends and supplements his own embodied social existence of alienness. Unique about Ra’s prosthetic device is its ability to produce sounds, and, in particular, the types of sounds Ra coaxes out of them during these solos.

Much like the performance genealogies detailed by Daphne Brooks, Carla Peterson, and Francesca Royster, a rich tradition exists of Black performers destabilizing, defamiliarizing, and making blackness strange through bodily augmentation and supplementation. Tavia Nyong’o, in a review essay of recent texts by Alexander Weheliye and Julian Henriques, asserts that the work of artistic activists such as this requests “that we listen to the black body as a musical and technical instrument that resounds at frequencies that confound its routinized, racialized instrumentation” (Afro-philosophonic Fictions,” 174). In Nyong’o’s estimation, we must not survey— and hear—Black musical theatrical performances as a separation of embodiment and sound, but rather, we must think of the body and instrument(s) as two constitutive parts that contribute to the overall performance aesthetic. To rephrase, black musicians’ corporeality functions as a musical instrument to overcome an existence of certified objecthood. In this light, Ra’s embodied personhood works in tandem with his electronic keyboards as part of his larger message of social alienation and alternative ways of existence.

81 Performance scholar Hershini Bhana Young’s words see Black post-human performance as a tactic to confront a “liberal humanism that reinforces the objecthood of black bodies” (45) and gives voice, both materially and sonically, to a social existence of alienation and non-humanness. For more about Black artists’ use of prosthetics in performance as method of subject and identity formations, please see Young 2014 and Guins and Cruz 2006.
The act of expressing these ideas of social alienation through the mini-Moog synthesizer to create a new social identity clearly appears in the closing moments of an interview broadcast on the San Francisco radio station KPMX in 1973. The interviewer announces that the broadcast will close with Ra’s composition “Sun Thoughts” from his album *My Brother The Wind*. Before the start of the performance, the interviewer asks Ra to speak a bit about the Moog synthesizer. Ra describes how his keyboard was made specifically for him, and he speaks of the numerous sounds the instrument can produce. Indeed, Ra states that the keyboard can “express any emotion.” He follows this pronouncement with:

it’s the kind of instrument that I need, because I might want to tell some people about the infinity of the whole universe and concentrate it, now I need an instrument that can express anything, sounds they never heard before, with this instrument I can do it, I can express anything I want to this planet, it’s the only instrument that can bend, and be a really living instrument, that’s what this instrument is. (SR073)

The mini-Moog synthesizer provides Ra both the sonic palette and the tools necessary to express his positionality to the world. The instrument is not a separate entity, but rather the keyboard functions as a material extension of Ra’s self-embodied alienation. These sounds are for himself and audiences alike. What we can take away from Ra’s comments is that his sonic contortions are as much about his own relation to the world as they are about the potential to alter the audience’s perceptions of Black identity.

The electronic keyboard requires touch and contact with the human body to activate sounds. Because of the artificiality of these instruments and their connection with Ra’s body
during performance, the keyboard would seem to supplement Ra’s embodied alienation and serve as a material and sonic prosthetic that advances a political and social message of Black alterity and futurity. Ra’s notion of embodied alienness was a frequent topic in his poetry and is the main topic of his poem “Of Kindred Folk,” where he compares himself to a rootless tree looking for a forest in a concrete world. In effect, Ra extends his embodied alienness in performance by playing electronic keyboards that, on their own, materially and sonically, signal futurity and alienness to the listener. Paul Youngquist views the mini-Moog synthesizer as providing “the sounds to drive space music further than ever into outer blackness” and opening a “creative space as vast, seemingly, as the cosmos” (216). By their capacity to generate futuristic and abstract sounds, these instruments realize materially a viewpoint of alterity as well as becoming a tool to sonically project this philosophical stance. In other words, the electronic keyboards mediate the interior/exterior divide of Ra’s alienness. The mere presence of the instrument allows for a formal projection of otherness; when combined with the sonic projections and other extramusical elements in Ra’s performances, this presence contributes to an act of Afro-Alienation.

Turntablist Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, makes a similar argument about the role of electronic musical implements in identity formation and espouses that the needle attached to the stylus arm of the turntable “acts as a kind of mediator between self and the fictions of the external world” (Miller 36). DJ Spooky’s turntables act as a middleground that allows him to put forth his feelings and politics while also regulating how audiences and critics perceive his persona and his music. Likewise, Ra’s use of electronic keyboards translates his social alienation into a material form. By placing them prominently at the front of the stage, Ra signals to the audience that the artefacts and devices used in these performances do not fit into traditional
constructs of the concert. Ra’s electronic solos produce sounds that are abstract and non-realist. Thus, the very act of performing on these instruments presents a sonic blackness free of realist representation, free from the politics of essentialism, and free from notions of racial authenticity. Cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun posits that the “tone scientist’s role is to engineer new humans through electronics” (More Brilliant 161). The bleeps and bloops of the Moog synthesizer in the hands of Ra function as a tool to generate new forms of subjectivity. No longer bound to these codes, Ra and the Arkestra can propose new forms of Black social identity by routing the sonic archive(s) of Black expressive culture through electronics and amplification to put forth, in Ra’s words, “another order of being” (Immeasurable Equation 460).

*Noise*

As I noted earlier, Ra’s solo improvisations were cacophonous both in form and in sound. At a basic level, these solos could be best described as noise. The idea of noise, in its theoretical forms and actualizations, is vital to understanding these highlighted moments. As John Szwed makes clear, noise was a common word invoked by critics when discussing Ra, but as Szwed notes, the word is “easy to use, but hard to justify objectively” (Space 230). Because of its perceived disorganization and dissonance, noise becomes racially coded and aberrant to the order of western art music. By the 1960s, artists and performers began to embrace and incorporate noise into their performances to explore the limits of musicking and to comment upon the aesthetic and social orders of the era. Sound studies scholar David Novak accentuates the social and political connotations of the term by writing that “noise is the ‘voice’ of the subaltern

82 For more about the discursive and imperial implications of labelling sounds as “noise” see Radano & Olanyian and Cruz.
identity on the margins, where ‘bring the noise’ is not accidental but an expressive practice and a deliberate act of subversion” (131). For performers and artists of colour, noise functions as a sonic apparatus to advance a social politics outside of the dominant norm.\textsuperscript{83} When taken into consideration with extramusical performative elements and electronic instrumentation, we begin to see and hear how the noise of Ra’s keyboard solos resonate with Daphne Brooks’s notion of layering aliases, genres, and devices upon one another in turn of the century Black performance. All of the devices in Ra’s myth-rituals—clothes, props, persona, and electronic sounds—unite together to form a larger performative site for the creation of new ways of being and social navigation. Crucial to this intersection is the idea of noise.

Noise serves as a metonym for discussions of sounds that do not fall within the spectrum of white racial orderings of sound or markers of auditory authenticity, and becomes a code word for racial and technological otherness.\textsuperscript{84} As a concept and as a sonic event, noise disrupts Manichean orderings of sound and grants performers a piece in their repertoire to comment upon social and political alienation. Within the context of Black sonic production, performance, and identity politics, sound provides a pathway for “black agency—including agency to imagine alternative futures” (Wald, “Soul Vibrations” 675). Wald’s work is important as it highlights a shift away from music as a praxis of Black liberation and a move towards the more inclusive and expansive concept of sound. Under Wald’s framework, black agency can arise from distorted amplified electronic sine waves just as much from a gospel song or a 12-bar blues. Considering

\textsuperscript{83} For more about the relationship between artists of colour and noise see Heble, Landing esp. 73-8.

\textsuperscript{84} Jacques Attali’s monograph, Noise: The Political Economy of Music, provides a more substantive analysis of how noise offers an evasive alternative to capitalist systems of categorization.
this formulation, the noisy, sonic eruptions of Ra and the Arkestra become another prong in their multi-media performance of Black liberation. This idea of presenting alienation through sound becomes even more explicit when we turn our attention to Ra’s noisy keyboard solos. Through the medium of sound, I argue that Ra’s keyboard solos present a concentrated example of the musical voicing of a social identity that has been marked as the other, while also providing the opportunity of constructing a new social, racial, and political identity through sound.

Ra and the Arkestra’s expression of a new social existence through noise is evident in Robert Mugge’s 1980 documentary on Sun Ra and the Arkestra, A Joyful Noise. The title of the film refers to a recurrent phrase in the Book of Psalms that asks worshippers to engage in sound-making as a sign of devotion and celebration of a higher deity. In the film, Ra recounts how a police officer interrupted a rehearsal in response to a noise complaint at the Arkestra residence. Ra’s response to the officer was “I wasn’t playing no music, I was playing a joyful noise and that’s what the bible said; it says ‘make a joyful noise to the lord’” (Mugge). Ra interprets this phrase, “a joyful noise,” which has been widely interpreted as a call to devoted followers to make music to celebrate their religion, to literally mean to make abstract, formless noise, which we see in the subsequent scene of the film.

The next shot in the film shows Ra playing one of his “noisy” keyboard solos. Diverging from the metaphorical interpretation of the phrase “a joyful noise” to simply make music in praise of God, Ra construes the passage to literally mean to make discordant sounds. Ashon Crawley describes joyful noise as “fundamentally a critique of the given world, a political economy of austerity and exploitation” (Blackpentecostal 144). The act of reveling in noise-

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85 In Black Pentecostal Breath, Ashon Crawley relays a similar story of Los Angeles police being called to investigate the sonic disturbances caused by a meeting of the Pentacostalists. For more see 145.
making not only functions as a criticism of the aesthetics of the known world, a world built on hierarchy, subjugation, and difference, but also functions as a means to create self-fashioned subjectivities. Ra’s extended keyboard solo and embodied playing technique of spinning in place while playing the keyboard concentrates Crawley’s idea of “joyful noise” as critique and assessment of the known world. Simultaneously, this moment captures Ra engaging with historical traditions of Black performance through theatrical bodily movement layered with excessive sonic properties.

To pursue this notion of noise and politics further, consider that in the introduction to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Jack Halberstam elucidates the idea of noise as a means of achieving political and social consciousness. Citing Moten’s work in the text, Halberstam positions noise as offering an alternative to harmony:

> The disordered sounds that we refer to as cacophony will always be cast as “extra-musical,” as Moten puts it, precisely because we hear something in them that reminds us that our desire for harmony is arbitrary and in another world, harmony would sound incomprehensible. Listening to cacophony and noise tells us that there is a wild beyond to the structures we inhabit and that inhabit us. (7)

As Halberstam makes clear, the governing logic of harmony and the listener’s response is arbitrary. Where some might hear order and meaning, others might hear overbearing classification and restriction of freedom. Conversely, where one might hear chaos and disorganization, some may hear a sonic analogue of their social existence and an auditory space
that finally makes sense. The system(s) that supposedly provide order and meaning are not true for Ra. For him, the practice and sonics of improvised noise are where he finds social existence and meaning. Noise creates a zone for Ra where he is free not only from what Kofi Agawu describes as the “prisonhouse of diatonic tonality” (338), but also from the governing societal conventions that normalize his own non-existence. The metaphor of harmony equating to identity does not hold for Ra and the Arkestra. The improvised cacophony of Ra’s keyboard solos operates as a way for him to take control of the archive of Black expressive culture and steer it on course to a place where he can “remake music to his own specification” so that genre, form, and order are no longer the governing logic (Heble, *Landing* 125). Once the shackles of harmony and musical form have been removed, Ra, through his keyboard solos, is free to construct a soundscape that buttresses his textual and performative posture of alterity.

These instruments and their ability to make abstract and inorganic sounds suggest a future free from technological essentialism and contribute to Ra’s aesthetic of Afro-Alienation. This particular act of Afro-Alienation arises from Ra’s use of electronic keyboards as a theatrical and prosthetic device which takes on more weight and urgency when considered in relation to particular archival strains of Black expressive culture.

"Abstract planes of sound and sight"

The noisy characteristics of Ra’s keyboard solos are heightened by their abstract nature. A key attribute of Ra’s keyboard solos, and his music more generally, is its improvised and abstract form and nature. His 1965 album *The Magic City* provides an excellent example of how the idea

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86 For more about the relation between logistics and blackness see Harney and Moten’s chapter in *The Undercommons* entitled “Fantasy in the Hold,” 84-99. For more about the cultural politics of noise and dissonance within the practice and praxis of improvised musicking see Heble.
of abstraction relates to Ra’s sonic and aesthetic practice. Gary Kurtz, Jr. in his review of the recording, describes the self-titled first track that takes up the entirety of side A of the record, as “simply out of sight, really indescribable unless you hear it for yourself” (Kurtz, Jr.). Indeed, the album’s abstract artwork hints towards the sound contained within.  

87 Like the album *Atlantis, The Magic City* was reissued by Impulse! Records in the early 1970s with artwork that blended psychedelic and Black diasporic elements.
Fig. 1.3 Album cover of 1966 version of *Magic City*

The B side of the album closes with two pieces entitled “Abstract Eye” and “Abstract I.” I, like John Szwed, view these two pieces as a metaphorical play upon the idea of an abstract eye, or
form of vision, and the idea of an abstract self. These two song titles speak to Ra’s ideology of alienness and not fitting within the realist, representative order of Western logic. By plying his musical craft within the realms of the futuristic and the abstract, Ra suggests a form of Black musical practice and social existence not weighed down by histories, but one open to freedom.

For Ra, abstraction becomes a zone of solace from the rigors of identity and genre politics. Throughout his poetry and prose, Ra constantly refers to abstraction and the abstract. Within the realm of abstraction, he is able to construct his new social identity and freedom dream. In his poem “The Far Off Place,” Ra states that space is where he will be able to “build a world of abstract dreams” (Immeasurable Equation 164). Throughout his corpus of verse, the idea of the abstract serves as a metaphor for a place where Ra can question and eschew social strictures placed upon his existence. The abstract solos on electronic keyboards expand this rhetoric into the realm of the sonic. This specific moment in performance aids Ra’s overall message of anomalousness. By plying his trade in a theatrical musical form with synthetic instruments and unreal sounds, Ra singularly declares his own alienation from Black aesthetics and social identity, and humanity more generally.

As Ronald Radano explores in Lying up a Nation, the connection between Black musical performance and realist forms of performance developed around a central narrative of racial uplift with very little regard to historical or social context. The strength of this narrative polices the boundaries of Black musicking, and consequently, forms or styles that do not exhibit this “depth of feeling’ or realness” run the risk of being classified as non-Black or not Black enough.

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88 For more see Szwed 245.

89 For a selection of poems that highlight Ra’s invocation of abstraction see “Another Fate,” “Energies,” and “The Image Nothing” in Ra, Immeasurable Equation.
(xii). Juxtaposed against the constructed standard and demand for authenticity in Black performance, these artists are sometimes perceived as less racially real or authentic because of their transgressing of musical genres, incorporation of extramusical elements, and playing with heteronormative constructs of gender and sexuality. In the case of Sun Ra, when he plays music that is abstract in form and nature, he runs the risk of falling outside of the canonical coding of what is socially and aurally acceptable in the sphere of Black musicking.  

Abstract Black visual, material, and sonic art, as Brian Phillip Harper details, disrupts connections between artistic Black identity and realist forms and interpretations that reflect the social and political context of their creation. In turn, these artists may have their work, and themselves, viewed with suspicion, running the risk of being deemed “not properly black” (Harper 2). Ra’s homage to early-blues and jazz performance mixed with his alien identity teases out this tension. Harper suggests that Black music exists in a duality of being perceived as the “quintessence of black culture” while at the same time being heard as the “epitome of aesthetic abstraction” (Harper 10). Ra falls into this aesthetic break. He plies his trade in the artform most linked with racial authenticity—music—while also integrating abstract aspects that call into question his racial authenticity. Much like Daphne Brooks’s work demonstrating how

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90 For more about realness and Black staged performance during the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century see Krasner 2011. For a specific example of a Black artist whose musical practices have been seen by some as not “authentic” see Ronald Radano’s book on Anthony Braxton, *New Musical Figurations*, and Graham Lock’s *Blutopia*.

91 In her recent monograph on sound and race, sound studies scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoever posits that performers who transgress the raced boundaries of sound are crossing what she calls the “sonic color line” (3). For more about the strictures surrounding Black culture, genre, and nation see Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

92 For more about Black visual artists and abstraction see K. Jones. For more specifically about Black music and abstraction see Ramsey, “Free Jazz.” For more about issues surrounding Black art and representation, see English.
Black performers from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century used layering and excess to defamiliarize blackness, we can see and hear similar qualities in the abstractions of Ra’s keyboard solos. Playing music beyond the spectrum of acceptable forms of Black musical practice—real and authentic—Ra’s keyboard solos work alongside the form and narrative of the myth-ritual to advance new modes, forms, and types of Black social identity.

This competing ideology of realness and abstraction becomes evident when Ra plays his synthetic and abstract sounds on his electronic keyboards. In these moments he places on full display the centrality of improvised musicking to Black culture, while also extending these musical performances to the point where connections with the Black community can become obfuscated through extreme abstraction, both in musical form and through the medium of electronic keyboards. If we consider these performances within the context of Black Power and Black Nationalism at the close of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, when premiums were placed on authentic forms of Black music and embodiment, then concentrated moments within the myth-ritual carry greater significance. Ra’s engagement with the theatrical, the artificial, and the bodily elements of historical Black performance are distilled in a singular recurrent moment in Ra’s myth-rituals. Sun Ra’s explosive improvised solos on electronic keyboards such as the Moog synthesizer and the Farfisa organ are a recurring element in his myth-rituals that synthesize the idea of activating the archives of Black performance in a spectacular setting so as to forge new futures.

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93 For more about the synthesizer and its ability to broadcast alternative forms of subjectivity see Rodgers.
Conclusion—An Archive of Destabilizing Excess: The Limits of Archiving Blackness

Given the centrality of Ra’s myth-rituals to his performance-based aesthetics and philosophy, and the numerous critical issues about race, genre, and performance that these spectacles broach, why have these moments received so little critical attention? The overabundance and layering of sonic, performative, and theatrical gestures in Ra’s myth-rituals exceed the conceptual, material, and cultural limits of performance and the archive, and speak to what Jennifer DeVere Brody describes as a “certain excess associated with black performance” (*Punctuation* 65). These excesses can range from extreme volume to bodily movements and can include presentations of alternative racial or sexual identities or the combination of differing musical genres and styles. A central tenet of Ra’s improvised and theatrical myth-rituals is a rebuke of racial and artistic essentialism that wishes to contain or translate Black performance and Black identity into a formal and stable code that can be properly catalogued within conventional archival containers. But the excess of Ra’s performances defies the limits of formal documentation and disturbs quickly solidifying narratives surrounding Black expressive culture that rely on exactitude and specificity.

Writing about musical performances in *Space is the Place*, Anthony Reed points towards this idea of music, sound, and performance to create new worlds and identities. In Reed’s words, “Theatricality and music thus become the media through which time is made thinkable, no longer subordinated to person, persona, or history; it uncouples world—the possible and calculable—from Earth—that which peeks out through the voids of Ra’s ‘equations.’” (“After” 131). Within the seams of his performances, Ra is able to undo the intellectual project that is the Enlightenment and creates a geo-spatial zone where new realities are possible. Yet Ra’s performances simultaneously oppose cultural politics of anti-blackness and resist the
sequestering of Black genres and styles of performance within a linear, Western narrative for which the archive is designed. One hears and sees this in Ra’s improvised keyboard solos. One sees this in his musical choices, in his references to Black spiritual traditions, in his incorporation of dancers, in his subjugation of the concert hall. The keyboard solos in particular and the myth-ritual in general demonstrate how Ra’s performances align and engage with the historical traditions and archives of Black expressive culture. By taking these disparate threads and updating them for the present day and the future, Ra reveals a deep and continuous performative genealogy and preserves these traditions for future generations.

In this way, I consider not only Ra’s relationship to modes of Black performance, but also his role as an archivist conserving various styles and genres of Black expressive culture. His cultural and interventionist archaeology destabilizes the performative genealogies of Black performance while also demonstrating how the ephemeral sonic and performative remains of improvised culture fall outside the conventional narrative of archives. Ra’s performances, in their production and staging, call attention to the discursive limits and practices of documentation and archiving. Through the mixture of sound, body, and performance Ra advocates for an ancient history and a fantastic future that remonstrates stable classifications of race, performance, and the archival containers that attempt to hold them.

In the case of Sun Ra, then, we lack a complete, traditional archive that fully captures and documents one of his performances in the traditional sense. Verne Harris describes disconnected archival documents that only represent a fraction of a historical event or a social history as archival slivers. Though Harris coined this term in relation to his work on the obfuscations and erasures in the state archives of apartheid-era South Africa, his formulation of archival slivers highlights numerous issues relevant to our understanding of the process of archiving and
documenting Ra’s concert performances. Indeed, in the case of Sun Ra, what remains extant are just that: slivers, discrete and complementary archival documents that when pieced together can provide us with new information. These documentary slivers include abridged sound recordings of performances, a video recording of an unstaged myth-ritual performance, and textual recollections and responses to these shows. Connecting these scraps into a conversation allows for a more in-depth analysis of Sun Ra’s performances.

More specifically, in terms of audio documentation, Sun Ra’s myth-rituals demonstrate the limits of audio formats to document improvisatory and experimental music, and especially those performances that integrate extramusical and theatrical elements. Paul Youngquist describes a sound recording of Sun Ra as a “multi-media infinity machine that coordinated the force of recorded music with visual art, musical promises, and technological pronouncements to transform reality” (Pure 111). What these records do not document, however, are the three-dimensional qualities of Ra’s performances. Within the historical context of Ra’s spectacles, the long-playing format record was the predominant form of capturing sound. This format offered jazz musicians the space for extended song forms and improvised solos; yet, the record only provides a document of distinct sonic moments, not of the whole performance. The amount of time recorded per side was, and still is, limited to approximately twenty-two and a half minutes. Various recording techniques and musical aspects such as using the extreme upper and lower limits of sound alter the available temporal space per side of vinyl. Dense and sparse instrumentation, mixing, and mastering also affect the available recording time on a slab of vinyl. Thus, for an artist such as Sun Ra, whose performances could last upwards of five hours,

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94 For more on “archival slivers” see Harris.
and which featured moments of extreme sonic improvisation and extramusicality, the medium of sound recording cannot fully capture the three-dimensional qualities of these performances.

David Grubbs makes this point explicit in his study of the relationship between sound recordings and experimental music of the 1960s. Grubbs advocates that “sound recordings register as an odd, counterintuitive object of study” (ix). Sound recordings do not fully account for some of the hallmarks of experimental music, which include new sounds, instrumentation, and form. A recurrent theme of Grubbs’s text is how composers and performers viewed the medium of sound recording as a hindrance to the critical and public understanding of their musical practices and performances. The transference of experimental performances to the vinyl record format deletes the presence of extramusical aspects and unique sound events, and thus provides us with an incomplete document of these artistic events. Writing about the Art Ensemble of Chicago, contemporaries of Sun Ra who also integrated extramusical elements into their performances, Ekkehard Jost acknowledges that sound recordings provide only what he labels as “acoustical extracts” and could not capture performative and extra-musical aspects (Free 172). Additionally, the majority of audio recordings that document Ra’s myth-rituals from this period of the late 1960s and early 1970s are bootleg concert recordings. While some of these bootlegs are at or near professional quality, a considerable number of these are of sub-optimal quality or of questionable provenance; the fact remains that audio recording technology from this period could not document a myth-ritual in its entirety.

Augmenting the lack of proper audio documentation is the lack of a video recording. Because of the limits of video recording technology and film archival practices during this period.

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95 For more about the relationship between the performance of experimental music and sound recordings see Grubbs’s chapter on John Cage.
period, no video recording of a complete performance of Ra’s myth-rituals exist. The only surviving document that captures the sound, movement, and visual elements in sync of Ra’s concert practices from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s is an in-studio television recording of Sun Ra and the Arkestra broadcast on French TV in January 1972. The physical confines of the studio limit the physical and spatial dimensions of the performance; however, many of the constitutive elements of the myth-ritual laid out by Szwed and other critics are present in this performance. This includes a section featuring dancers performing to a battery of percussion instruments from and inspired by the Black diaspora—prominence given to the Arkestra’s homemade drum known as the “Infinity Drum”—an extended section of Ra using bodily gestures to lead the Arkestra in free improvisation, and an extended keyboard solo by Ra.

In terms of archival documentation, Ra’s performances become an object lesson in the myriad issues surrounding the documentation and preservation of improvised cultural practices and experimental multimedia artforms. Within the context and the milieu of Ra’s contemporaries and the Black Arts Movement, James Smethurst, in an essay recalling the editorial and curatorial questions that arose during the assembling of an anthology of Black Arts Movement primary sources that he co-edited with John Bracey, Jr. and Sonia Sanchez, asserts that the limits of literary and visual documents hinder the reception and study of this movement that, at its core, “was multimedia, multigenreic, and oriented toward performance” (“Let The World” 182). The only way to present, and “accurately capture” (184), the Black Arts Movement, would be, in Smethurst’s view, to include a digital media accompaniment that contained Black Arts poets

96 For more about this drum see Szwed 266-7.

97 The two key elements of a myth-ritual notably absent from this document are the performance of a traditional jazz number and Ra’s monologues about outer space and life on earth.
reading their work, examples of choreographed dance and poetry readings, and Sun Ra in concert. Smethurst arrives at the conclusion that containers holding archival documents and the formats of audio and/or visual media often exclude significant aspects of experimental and intermedial works of art. In the case of artists affiliated with or seen as sympathetic towards the Black Arts Movement, the material limits of archival containers drive the power and narratives of the archive.98

Though he is writing about Danish experimental art from 1965, Morten Søndergaard’s work on how experimental and intermedia artistic practices complicate notions of archives and archiving is useful for a discussion of the multigeneric aspects of Ra’s performances. The media and modes deployed in experimental art run against the textual-centric and generic formalism of the archive. Complicating the tension between performance art and the archive is the question of how best to capture and preserve these practices. Experimental art forces one to ask, in Søndergaard’s words, “what archive formats are needed to ‘store’ the unheard avant-garde” (“Flexowriters” 314). In other words, the diverse array of media that experimental and performing artists use within their own performances often cannot be archived in a singular document format such as print or audio recording. The partial documents of Sun Ra’s performances highlight this conundrum.

Overall, we are left with a dismembered archive of Sun Ra’s concert performances. What these archival slivers suggest is that we must consider new forms and modes of archiving to fully assess Ra’s multimedia and multisensuous concerts. To fully capture these performances we need an archive that is heterogeneous and polytextual; an archive that can accommodate

98 For more about the tension between textuality and performance in works from the Black Arts era see Crawford.
established forms of textual documentation and paraliterary forms; an archive that has space for
text, sound, and moving image; an archive that allows for multiple timelines and perspectives.

Despite these archival shortcomings, critics did acknowledge and attempt to engage with
all of the performative elements in their concert reviews and articles. Writers would invoke terms
such as vaudeville, minstrel show, and circus as a means to convey the extramusical and
performative qualities of Ra’s concerts. However, what becomes evident in these documents is
that these terms are invoked to translate Ra’s concert performances into a language
understandable to readers. Within the context of the standardization and formalization of the jazz
concert, critics’ invocation of these terms became a critical tool in cementing Ra’s outsider
position to jazz performance. In actuality, I argue, Ra’s use of Black working-class sacred and
secular aspects within his concerts was a continuation of a specific history of the live
performance of improvisatory-based musics.
Chapter Two

Sonic and Material Weaves: Sun Ra’s Alternative Archive of Dress

Fig. 2.1. Sun Ra, John Gilmore, Kwame Hadi, and unidentified member, c. 1972

Taken from a series of publicity photos for Sun Ra’s 1972 film *Space is the Place*, the above image provides a snapshot of Ra and three of his bandmates in a moment off stage, but in full concert dress. Standing on the sidewalk of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge alongside Arkestra members John Gilmore, Kwame Hadi, and an unidentifiable individual, Sun Ra, with eyes closed, positions his head as if looking off center and downwards. Ra and his colleagues wear their metallic tinged smocks adorned with space imagery. Peeking out from the collars and the bottom hem of their smocks are shoes and pants emblematic of clothing styles and dress
popular in the early 1970s. Their heads are covered. Gilmore, Hadi, and the unidentifiable member wear knitted skull caps made of natural fabrics. Ra, as is his mode, sports a head covering of metallic chainmail that in the outdoor light of the sun glows radiantly. The combination of pieces of clothing from the past, the present, and the future suggests these four individuals see themselves as outside the constraints of Western liberal and modern forms of representation and identity.

This singular and newly uncovered image from the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra calls attention to the oft-invoked, but seldom analysed aspect of clothing in Ra’s performances.99 Throughout the Alton Abraham Collection numerous concert reviews remark upon this aspect of Ra’s myth rituals. An excellent example of this commentary occurs in a concert review by John Burks that appeared in the 19 April 1969 issue of *Rolling Stone*. Burks attests that a witness of one of Ra’s concert spectacles should be alerted to two things. One, the number of instruments on stage, and two, in Burks’s words, “great Jesus, look at the costumes” (Burks 16). Burks’s cover story makes it paramount that the visuality of a Ra performance was an intrinsic element of the show. A constitutive element of his staged performances, the clothing and dress of Ra and the Arkestra put into material form Ra’s philosophical stance of alienness and alterity while also providing a physical equivalent to his improvisatory musical performances. In the only single-subject monographs dedicated to the intersection of fashion and music, Janice Miller argues that these two fields, the material and the sonic, work in conjunction to give voice to individuals of non-dominant social constructs of sex, gender, and race. In her words, “music performers perform, via fashion” (161). For a musical performer like Sun Ra, his sonic message of alienness

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99 I will unpack and explore the embedded politics and discursive power of the terms clothing, costume, dress, and fashion. For now, I will use these terms interchangeably to refer to material items that lay on top of the skin of the human body.
could just as easily be imparted to us through his cosmic infused, bricolage dress. Along these same lines, Ra and the Arkestra’s dress demonstrates how a material item can exceed and call into question the parameters of the archive. The sartorial choices of Ra and the Arkestra work as what historian Jean Allman designates an “alternative archive” (*Fashioning Africa* 4). Examining and treating Ra’s dress as an archival repository opens up a host of new possibilities for analyzing and contextualizing Ra’s life and works, but also bears witness to the politics and discourse of what constitutes (and what is permissible within) the archive. Likewise, surveying Ra and the Arkestra’s sartorial choices augments my argument that much of the performance practice of improvisatory and black experimental music eclipses established formats of recordkeeping such as written documents or sound recordings. In other words, a material element like clothing can function as an archival repository with its own embedded meanings.

In this chapter I argue that Ra and the Arkestra’s dress is an “alternative archive” that reinforces, supplements, and communicates his social, cultural, and political message of alienness. In turn, focusing on this singular aspect affirms a material approach to the pliable and heterogeneous nature of black identity and Black expressive culture. In the opening section of this chapter I provide a concise definition of the term “dress” followed by a brief discussion of the politics of studying clothes in the academy in relation to issues of gender, race, and music. Following this, I detail the utilisation of dress by people of African descent to exercise what Carol Tulloch calls “style narratives” within historical and cultural contexts (*Birth* 4). In particular, I will examine how Ra’s sartorial appearance intersects with and builds upon two Black diasporic traditions: the trickster and the dandy. Within these two cultural tropes, one finds a material analogue to Ra’s musical and performative processes that in turn heightens his own outsider status. In the closing frame of this chapter, I will read a scene from Ra’s 1972 film
Space is the Place to demonstrate how Ra’s sartorial sensibilities offer a direct commentary on and refutation of the style politics of 1970s Black Power and Black Nationalism movements. This chapter is an intervention that demonstrates the crucial role of dress in Ra’s performances and persona, and that shows how articles of clothing and practices of body supplementation can function as an alternative archive subject to scholarly inquiry.

**Clothing, Costume, Dress, Fashion: The Politics of Terms**

For purposes of clarity and cohesion within this chapter I have adopted Joanne Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins’s definition of dress as the guiding term for this study as their definition is inclusive, and eschews internalized and categorical biases. Eicher and Roach-Higgins define dress as an “assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992 and Eicher & Roach-Higgins 1992). Dress allows for the discussion of clothes that cover the body, but also the inclusion of modifications and supplements to the body. Transformations and augmentations to the body like the styling of hair, perfumes, body piercings, scarrings, rings, earrings, headwear, and canes all fall under the rubric of dress. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, items such as headwear will play into Ra’s cultural and performative politics, thus the term dress seems particularly appropriate for this study.

In addition, Eicher and Roach-Higgins outline how the term dress overcomes many of the internal deficiencies of terminology utilized in studies of clothing. While scholars and critics often use the terms “costume,” “fashion,” “style,” “dress,” and “clothing” interchangeably, each of these terms carries its own connotations and internal biases. For a more recent discussion of the incorrect metonymical use of the terms style, fashion, and dress see Carol Tulloch’s 2010 article “Style—Fashion—Dress: From Black to Post-Black.” For
Higgins argue, only takes into consideration articles of clothing that directly cover the body, which leads to the omission of aspects such as hair and jewellery. Likewise, Eicher and Roach-Higgins suggest that terms such as “attire,” “garb,” or “costumes” limit the agency of the wearer of the clothes (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 13-4). With regards to costume, the term designates a sartorial ensemble only worn for a performance on the stage or for entertainment. To label Ra and the Arkestra’s clothing as a costume signals that these items are to be only worn for performance and not linked to the wearers’ social identity or acknowledgment to cultural contexts.\textsuperscript{101} Burks’s quote from his concert review demonstrates the political power of the term costume. For Burks, the clothes were merely an element of Ra’s performances and not given credence as anything more than visual decoration for the performance.

Along these same lines, terms such as “adornment,” “decoration,” and “ornament” reveal one’s “own personally and culturally derived standards to distinguish the good from the bad, the right from the wrong, and the ugly from the beautiful” (14).\textsuperscript{102} Fashion, the most common term in studies of clothing, for Eicher and Roach Higgins, is too broad and has acquired multiple levels of meaning across various artistic mediums. Moreover, the term fashion has become inextricably linked to and embedded within narratives of white modernity, progress, and capitalism. Thus, articles of dress that fall outside of this paradigm become instilled with a lack

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\textsuperscript{101} For an example of the discursive power of the term “costume” in the context of Ra scholarship, see Corbett, \textit{Extended Play} 11.

\textsuperscript{102} The racial and political implications of ugliness and beauty, especially within the context of the African Diaspora, form the basis for a collection of essays edited by cultural theorist Sarah Nuttall that queries how these two terms have been employed as a tool of western bias and how they have enforced a top-down aesthetic judgement of cultural and aesthetic values.
of currency and fashionability. Along these same lines, fashion, as Roland Barthes argues, symbolizes the excesses of Western capitalism. Dress allows for the discussion of supplementations and augmentations of the body while not allowing for the insertion of aesthetic or value judgements into the conversation. My study discussing Sun Ra’s dress in relation to performance is important as this is the first attempt to assay Ra’s sartorial choices as a material archive and to account for the various ways that Ra and members of the Arkestra would supplement and augment their bodies to amplify their aesthetics and social positioning. Dress, as outlined by Eicher and Roach-Higgins, is the most inclusive of these terms and allows for a discussion of Ra’s pants, shirts, capes, smocks, headcoverings, facial hair, hair, hair dye, baubles, canes, and/or jewellery.

**Fashion Studies: The Politics of Studying What We Wear**

While studying clothes, dress, fashion, and costumes is now commonplace within the academy, this was not always the case. Valerie Steele, in her editorial in the inaugural issue of *Fashion Theory*, describes how, at that moment in time (1997), a scholar’s declaration of “I study fashion,” was akin to uttering “The F-word” (1). Serious inquiries into the social codes and meanings of what we wear were viewed as “frivolous, sexist, bourgeois, ‘material’ (not intellectual), and, therefore, beneath contempt” (1). Today, the study of dress has become commonplace and is a recurrent topic in fields such as American Studies and Black Studies. Despite these inroads, the study of fashion is weighed down by racial and geographic schisms. Critical examinations fall into a dichotomy of the “West versus the rest” that privileges Western exceptionalism and denies any non-Western agency in the development of fashion” (Hansen 1). Hansen illuminates a key point: similar to the fields of music, art, theatre, and literature, the
study of dress reinforces a dichotomous relationship that places value and emphasis on White Euro-American clothes and styles and diminishes the importance and role of dress to cultures of the Black diaspora. My investigation of the Africanist and futuristic blend of Ra and the Arkestra’s clothing shows that dress is a viable archive and allows for a more nuanced discussion of Ra’s aesthetics and performances. Tellingly, this approach also creates space to analyze further the interwoven nature of Ra’s visual appearance and his musical performances. As social and gender historians Barbara Burman and Carole Turbin write:

> Historians of dress and textiles have learned to mine the meaning of material objects, visual and tactile culture, not as a substitute for verbal sources when these are unavailable, but in order to reveal dimensions of political and social transformations that cannot be discerned in observed social behaviour or verbal and written communications. (375)

In other words, dress utters the unspeakable. Ra communicates his social positioning and aesthetics through the materiality of clothes that fuse astrological and egyptological iconography within a cultural climate that prioritized specific items of clothing or a particular hairstyle. These items, while unique, must be treated with the same level of inquiry as has been paid towards the musical and performative aspects of Ra’s artistry within the historiographies of jazz and Black expressive culture.

A close reading of Ra and the Arkestra’s dress forces us to consider what other possibilities can be proposed through the materiality of bodily adornment and supplementation.

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103 For more about the majority/non-majority, cultural, and racial divides in the study of clothing, dress, and fashion see Allman; Rovine; Hendrickson; and Allman and Niessen.
In turn, interrogating these items creates space for a consideration of ways of being and existence other than what has been dictated by more conventional societal norms and values. Surveying these items brings to the fore what forms of cultural practice and types of cultural knowledge are engrained in material artefacts of non-dominant cultures that have historically been excluded from the archive.

This trans-medial approach to documentary materials falls in line with Anne Cvetkovich’s work on trauma and archives in relation to gay and lesbian cultures. Much like the exclusion of non-textual and performative forms of knowledge from the archive, which are often the cultural practices of the non-majority, the officialdom of the archive has also excluded the documentation of gay and lesbian cultures. In the absence of material and sanctioned forms of history, Cvetkovich turns toward memory as an archival repository. Cvetkovich acknowledges that memory cannot serve alone as source for recuperating and amending the elisions of history. Rather, she views memory as a “valuable historical resource” that can be situated alongside “ephemeral and personal collections of objects” and “documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge” (Archives 8). Ephemeral moments like memory or outsider artefacts like posters, handbills, or flyers can be used in conjunction with and alongside dominant archives and forms of archiving to supplement, amend, and or expand the established archive and streams of history. In this chapter, the alternative archive of Ra’s dress exists alongside the accepted archive of the visual appearance of Black Nationalism and Black Power to expand our understanding of the contradictions and fallacies about Black embodied and visual appearance that circulated during the close of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. My framing of Ra’s clothing as an alternative archive allows me to treat these items as a source for knowledge and as stories that can alter existing histories and sew new ones about his social
existence during (and his relationship to) the politics of this era. Moreover, working with visual presentations of Ra and the Arkestra’s clothes augments our understanding of their relationship to Black expressive culture and bolsters my argument of Ra as an archivist, which in this case he accomplishes through a sartorial-centric curation of Black history and social life.

My study of the dress of Ra and the male members of the Arkestra also expands areas of discussion with regards to gender, clothing, and black creative musicking. The study of clothing and dress has tended to focus on female fashion and dress at the expense of the study of the dress of and dressed male bodies. Fashion scholars Andrew Reilly and Sarah Cosbey call attention to the paucity of scholarship on male fashion which, they argue, stems from a lack of male scholars to the perception that male fashion and dress is not as interesting. This perception contributes to a “distortion in our understanding of men’s relationship with dress and appearance” (xi).

Another key factor in the neglect of male fashion stems from the long history of the “restricted character of men’s dress” and the fact that “clothing was almost unavailable as a visual means for men to express other sides of their personalities” (Davis 39). In relation to Sun Ra and the male members of the Arkestra, the above statements are dubious at best. For Ra and his fellow male bandmates, dress was a means to express their personalities and reinforce their social position of alterity. Moreover focusing on the dressed male bodies within the greater Arkestra collective contributes to the broadening of the field of fashion studies.

The study of gender and the various forms and modes of black creative music tend to focus on the recuperation of and the insertion of female voices and experiences, but at the

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104 Peter McNeil and Vicki Karaminas echo this sentiment with their assertion that “insufficient attention has been paid to men’s dress within fashion history, as in the social imagination women have been more closely equated with the consumption of fashion in the West, certainly in twentieth-century life” (1).
expense of the same critical interrogation of the social and political assemblages of masculinity. In the case of Sun Ra, we find an example of how the critical focus of the masculine oriented historiography of jazz and the feminine dominated field of fashion studies can conjoin to abate the aesthetics and practice of these individuals. The forms of masculinity projected by Ra and the Arkestra through their dress and social practice problematize the established narrative of jazz studies that stresses the singular, heteronormative, and heroic masculine figure. The politics of the study of clothing, music, and race lies at the heart of my critical intervention. Focusing on these intersections allows for a discussion of Ra and the Arkestra’s material and embodied appearance, and, as I demonstrate in this chapter, enhances our understanding of Ra and the Arkestra’s citations from and references to the archives and grammar of Black diasporic performance cultures.

**The Fanonian Moment: Dress Covering Race**

Separate from the band’s musical and theatrical performances, the dress of Ra and the Arkestra generates a high-degree of social and political work. Returning to the image I discussed at the opening of this chapter, we can see how clothes alone impart a particular social image. Anthony Reed reasons that the act of Ra donning clothing consisting of Egyptian and Futurist qualities was but one way of masking his body to “position himself outside of history” (“After” 122). Ra and his bandmates’s dress affirms Reed’s words—standing on a hallmark of American technical achievement in the hearth of white counterculture and Black revolutionary politics, Ra and the other individuals in the image intimate that they are not part of this world or aligned with either of these value systems. What Ra and the Arkestra intimate instead is that alternative forms of

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105 For more about gender and the study of creative music see Rustin & Tucker, and Gray.
social existence do exist for people of colour. The presentation of a cosmic identity through dress allows for the possibility of a social existence no longer hemmed in by geographic regions or timelines of history. Visually, Ra, Gilmore, Hadi, and the unnamed individual announce to the world that they do not adhere to a politics or a social existence grounded on earth. The location of this image, a bridge over a body of water, would also suggest an unmoored and untethered identity and existence.

It is Reed’s notion of the clothes masking the body that intrigues me. Reed’s argument falls in line with philosopher, writer, and social activist Frantz Fanon’s ideas on the role of skin colour in identity formation. Fanon’s writing on the suture of race to one’s skin colour elucidates the place of garments of clothing within Ra’s epistemological framework of an ancient and future blackness. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes about his own experience of being singled out in a crowd by a young boy because of his skin colour. Fanon’s experience is governed by his “epidermal racial schema” (92), which he describes as the experience of being “overdetermined from the outside” and a “slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” (95).

American and Visual Studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood describes this passage as “the Fanonian moment” (22). Fanon realizes that he is marked by the “fateful wrapping” of his skin and no matter his mastery of the French language or the donning of Western style clothes, Fanon’s skin colour defines his existence and movement through society (Gilroy, *Between* 46). The Fanonian moment has become a catalyst for investigations of how black diasporic peoples and people of colour use aspects of visual and material culture to opine upon and trouble the

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106 Similarly, Stuart Hall defines this moment as “literally, the inscription of race on the skin” (Hall, “After-Life” 16).
suturing of race to the skin. One such method that marries the visual and the material is the Black dressed body. Dress becomes a material means to sever the linkage to race and skin and to formulate a racial identity that defies social and political categorization, and this is where Anthony Reed’s comment about Ra and the Arkestra masking their bodies comes back into play.  

Joanne Entwistle suggests that dress functions as a “second skin” and makes individuals aware of their own bodily dimensions and epidermis while also expressing the individual’s relationship to his or her surrounding social world. This can occur through the drape and fit of the clothes in relation to the body they adorn or the social situation where an individual wears particular items of dress. Dress, in other words, becomes an avenue to diminish or heighten one’s corporeal existence and a way to align and position oneself in surrounding social worlds.

Dressed bodies of people of colour become a means to refute essentialized notions of race based upon the colour of skin. Ra’s mytho-futuristic dress advances an alternative or alien social life. His sartorial choices demand that we consider him as a being beyond the social logic inscribed upon his skin. He asks us to resist the Fanonian moment and to consider what other possibilities of human life can exist, ones not contained by particular histories or geographies, to imagine what types of blackness can exist outside out of the racist constructs of history and lived experience.

This chapter’s opening image in concert with the Fanonian moment highlights my main concern here: how does a Black experimental musician such as Sun Ra use dress in his performances to mediate the “epidermal racial schema” and to broadcast a social and political

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107 For more on Black diasporic individuals’ use of dress for identity formation see Lewis, “Dilemmas.”
identity that transcends prescriptive categories of race and gender? Ra’s style and fashion merge with his sonic production to elucidate his unique social and racial identity and to combat anti-Black racism. More importantly, engagement with the sartorial and the visual allows one to digest how the sonic and the visual merge in this artist’s performances to comment and reflect upon essentialist notions of racial appearance circulating amongst their own ethnic and performative communities.

**Sun Ra and Black Diasporic Dress: Cultural, Historical, and Social Contexts**

As Fanon’s idea of epidermilization and the critical analysis that has developed around this term has made evident, people of colour constantly seek ways to overcome social biases because of the suturing of race to skin. Both historically and within forms of Black expressive culture, Black diasporic peoples have sought to overcome these social barriers through the medium of dress. Monica Miller, in her recent study on Black Dandyism, attests to the history of Black diasporic peoples using “clothing and dress to define their identity in different and changing political contexts” (*Slaves* 1). Likewise, Noliwe Rooks demurs that the ability to manipulate, deploy, and construct clothing in aide of personal style and identity politics allows for people of colour to “locate one within a culture, in relationship to a society, or inside the realms of one’s imaginings” (4). Miller’s and Rooks’s interpretation of Black Diasporic dress resonates with what I see in Ra’s dress as well: Ra is signalling a social position outside of white hegemonic orders through the manipulation and wearing of items of dress.

A brief survey of Black diasporic expressive cultures and political economies reveals the central roles, and the power, of dress “to affirm their lives” (*White & White* 2). Within literary forms, one can turn towards Aimé Césaire’s 1969 adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The
*Tempest,* in which Prospero believes he can derail an impending slave rebellion by laying out clothes by the side of the road, because, as he believes, “Savages adore loud, gaudy clothes” (50). Ultimately, the clothing and dress of the “other” corrupts the two stranded mariners, Trinculo and Stephano. Miriam Thaggert has written on how fashion plays a role in shaping the main protagonists’s narrative arc in Nella Larsen’s novellas *Quicksand* and *Passing.* Dress, and more specifically pants, in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* become imbued with sexual politics. The novel’s protagonist, Celie, dons pants as a means of flaunting her liberation from the socio-patriarchy of her husband Albert and starts her own pant-making business, which becomes a pathway for economic liberation. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man,* the narrator famously witnesses in the subway a group of young men dressed in high and tight collars and ballooned out pants of the zoot suit. For the novel’s unnamed protagonist the zoot suit represents a declaration of modernity, but it also enunciates an existence that falls into what Fred Moten describes as the break, which, as I’ve already suggested, is his descriptive term for Black cultural practices that fall in between, in liminal spaces that do not squarely fit within western defined aesthetics.

Ellison’s invocation of the zoot suit presents us with an instance where the politics of dress cross over from the fictive to the historical and demonstrates the validity of considering clothes as an alternative archive. As a range of historians have noted throughout their work, the zoot suit was an item of clothing that carried numerous “cultural, political, and social implications” (Alford, “Zoot” 233). Within the African American community, this singular item of clothing animated discussions of the financial and political economy of World War II,
American citizenship, cultural identity, and new forms of Black social identity.\textsuperscript{108} Much like Ra and his cosmic dress, the zoot suit bears witness and becomes a tool of style to comment upon and subvert prevailing notions of social identity as well as to create space for the enunciation of new social identities. More recently, Carol Tulloch has delved into historical examples from the Black Atlantic of individuals who have used an “assemblage of garments and accessories, hairstyles, and beauty regimes” to enact a presence within a world that seeks to make blackness invisible (\textit{Birth} 4).

Along these same lines, cultural theorist Dick Hebdige has also explored how marginalized and subcultural groups appropriate, reuse, and ascribe new meanings to materials or gestures within new contexts, which in turn “express in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination” (18). One can envisage how the zoot suit manifests a form of subcultural stylings and contributes to African American youth’s self-fashioned identity and their contempt towards the dominant social and racial order. My strategic positioning of Ra as a continuation of this tradition demonstrates how, as I examined in the previous chapter on Ra’s myth rituals and throughout the rest of this study, Ra’s sustained interest in and modification of Black cultural styles and forms of the past fuel his own politics of style and performance under the guise of ancient Egyptian pasts and interstellar futures and should be considered a serious component of his performative lexicography.

The primacy of clothing and dress to Black expressive culture and the historical and cultural connections to Ra become more evident when considered from a cultural performance perspective. The most salient example of public displays of Black identity through clothing and

\textsuperscript{108} For more about the cultural impact and legacy of the zoot suit see Kelley, \textit{Race Rebels}; Peiss; and Cosgrove.
dress is the parade cultures of New Orleans. Black working-class New Orleanians sew beads and feathers onto intricate costumes in the style of Native Americans to wear and parade through their neighbourhoods while partaking in traditional call-and-response chants at distinct moments of the year and especially as a part of yearly Mardi Gras celebrations. This performative tradition allows African Americans to simultaneously exhibit allegiance with Native Americans and their long history of marginalization and oppression, and to publicly display African-based performance practices. Through the “disguise of ‘masking Indian,’” Black New Orleanians enact “the imaginative re-creation and repossession of Africa” (Cities 207). In The Fierce Urgency of Now, George Lipsitz details how the intersection of music and fashion performance extends to the second-line marchers of New Orleans brass bands. In this performative moment, “the costumes, umbrellas, and embodied movements of street parade cry out for attention. They display fashion sense, sewing skill, bodily control, imagination, and the ability to improvise beautifully with whatever resources happen to be at hand” (155). It is the merger of the musical, the material, and the embodied that creates the larger act of political and social resistance. While each of these qualities merits attention on its own, it is the intersection and integration of the three that lends this performative moment its greatest social power. The politically subversive act of Black people congregating and playing music in a public space obtains an even greater level of efficacy and power through the incorporation of costume and dress into the performance.

Another sphere of Black expressive culture where dress plays a highly significant role, and one that is worthy of its own extended analysis and is most pertinent to a critical study of Sun Ra, is that of music. Black musicians from a wide array of genres and styles incorporate fashion and dress as part of their public performances and private personas. Prominent figures

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109 For more on this topic see Ehrenreich and Turner.
who come to mind include early female blues singers such as Ma’ Rainey and Bessie Smith, who would use “extravagant costuming” to put forth an image of “bejewelled royalty” (McGinley 54) in their performances that subvert dominant imagery of Black females as homemakers and mammies. In his study of the early years of jazz in New Orleans, Louisiana, Charles Hersch notes that proto-jazz musicians would incorporate elements of dress into their persona and performance and that this emphasis on clothing and appearance continues an “African tradition of assembling an idiosyncratic wardrobe, often by mixing apparently incompatible items” (Subversive 49). Similar to how histories of jazz emphasize the bonding of seemingly incongruous musical instruments and styles, a parallel material subversion was taking place with dress.

During the Swing era, dress continued to play a key role in Black musical performance. Cultural historian Lewis Erenberg argues that the Black swing bands of the 1930s “conveyed urban style and freedom through manner and dress” (113). The appearance and clothes of Duke Ellington and Count Basie’s bands were exemplars of the possibility for Black social and economic mobility and mirrored swing music’s ideology of conformity and working together as a whole. Performers who could afford the latest fashion trends were conspicuously signalling to the wider public a high-level of economic independence and social freedom while also combatting racial essentialism about Black people.

In the wake of World War II racial politics, the rise of the “Double-V” movement, and the advent of bebop, a new generation viewed the matching suits of the swing bands as dated. Bebop emphasized a sense of personal flair and cool, and employed fashion to signal rejection of the middle-class respectability of the swing bands and to present a personal style “built around elements of northern black working-class male culture” (Erenberg 231). Like swing musicians,
beboppers adapted a manner of dress that matched their musical performances; however, as beboppers placed emphasis on individuality and anti-conformity, the matching suits of swing bands “with its faint echoes of servants’ uniforms” (Szwed, *Space* 171-2) fell out of fashion. Thus by the close of the 1950s, Ra and the Arkestra’s mix and match clothing of different styles and clashing colours signalled a new mode of visual representation within jazz performance.

An excellent example that calls attention to the politics of dress in jazz culture occurs during Ra’s Chicago period. In the mid-1950s Ra was leading his own band in Chicago, and he and members of his band would wear mismatched shirts and pants accompanied with fezzes. As Szwed recounts, the fezzes became a point of friction between Ra and members of an unnamed Black Chicago religious sect. Post World War II Chicago was a locus for both mainstream and alternative Black spiritual practices and Black intellectual thought. With the rising interest in Black diasporic sensibilities, many Chicagoans began to explore African derived forms of spiritual practice and become members of Islam-based religious groups such as the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple of America. To outwardly display their alignment with African-based religious beliefs, many members of these two groups would wear fezzes, a piece of headwear with deep connotations of African and Islamic heritage and beliefs. One night, during a break in a performance, a member of these sects approached Ra and warned him never to wear the fez during a performance again. This repudiation of Ra’s wearing of the fez shows the dialogic nature of dress within the Black community, but also how dress can function as a device to supplement a musical performer’s aesthetics and social politics.

The sense of professionalism and the counter-public stance that Islamic-based groups such as the Nation of Islam or the Moorish Science Temple of America were trying to convey

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110 For more see Szwed 143.
could not tolerate the appropriation of their signature headwear as a mode of fashion. While Szwed does not go into further detail about this incident, this moment brings to the fore the political and social power of dress. The Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam both centered around a religious practice of piety and conformity. One such way that they displayed this devotion both inward and outward was through wearing neat and ordered dress that broadcast a politics of respectability. Their warning to Ra to cease donning the fez suggests a level of discomfort with Ra’s increasing stage and musical theatrics, which by this point incorporated dancers and multiple percussionists as to appeal to the Latin dance craze that was in vogue. The optics of Ra’s performance style which merged extended solos and homophonic rhythms with gestural and embodied acts linked to Black secular and sacred vernacular performances did not mesh with the politics, beliefs, and aesthetics of the Chicago-based Islamic sects and in particular the Moors who claimed “royal descent” and wished “to divorce black identity from black southern culture and the ostensible lawlessness, laziness, and immortality typically associated with it” (Nance, “Respectability” 624). To an unknowing patron, the performance might be seen as trivializing the Moors’ and the Muslims’ sectorial beliefs and practices with its mix of dress, religious headwear, and theatrical musical performance. On the other hand, Ra’s donning of the fez into the grammar of his performance suggests an otherworldly possibility.

Ra’s bricolage aesthetic, and his particular use of religious headwear, I interpret as a commentary about the strictures and contradictions of the relationship between dress and Black social life. Despite the radical intentions of these two particular sects, both groups rely on a hypermasculine, hierarchical model that preaches conformity over individuality. These groups conveyed this message through uniform dress. Ra’s mix-and-match secular and sacred dress puts
forth an alternative political and aesthetic identity. What Ra’s clothing suggests is that Black identity need not be wrapped up in matching or conservative dress, or that dress need not reflect the cohesive and collective nature of swing or big-band music. Ra’s dress proposes a social identity that is unique and individualistic. I view this sartorial aesthetic as an analogue for his own musical practices, which at this point were no longer deferring to generic styles or conventional forms. Ra’s incorporation of the fez can also be seen as another example of his questioning of blackness and identity. As I noted earlier, the deep explorations of African religions, customs, and histories by the members of the Nation of Islam and the Moorish Science Temple was a way of countering the dominant belief of Black people as immoral and unproductive. For Ra, Black identity need not be closely linked with sartorial appearance or a particular history, whether real or mythological. Rather, Ra, through his brief adaptation of the fez, would seem to advance a logic that there is space for more than one form or type of Black social existence, or, at the very least, that there is room for other archives and histories of blackness.

The place and role of fashion in Black expressive culture, and more importantly Black music, is without doubt.111 “Black music cultures,” in Noel McLaughlin’s estimation, “have used clothes both to undermine conspicuous consumption and to question essential notions about the body, gender, and sexuality” (269). Though McLaughlin does not delve into this topic further, or provide examples, a quick sampling of black artists that upset dichotomous and essentialist notions of race, gender, and sex includes rhythm and blues piano player and singer Little Richard, disco artist Grace Jones, funk guitar player Prince, and hip-hop star Andre 3000.

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111 For other examples of the role of dress in Black musical cultures see Lewis, “Dilemmas,” and Miller, “All Hail.”
Writing about eccentric Post-Soul musicians, Francesca T. Royster argues that performers who utilize a heightened sense of theatricality and eccentricity in their performance reflect an “aesthetic of reinvention and change,” and suggests that this heightened sense offers these performers a pathway to “circumvent the pressures of authenticity and respectability reflected in and sometimes perpetuated by the black community (16). While Royster never explicitly touches upon dress or fashion, she makes clear that Black musical artists such as Grace Jones, Michael Jackson, and George Clinton offer highly mediated examples of non-normative blackness through their dress and appearance. For these artists, fashion, clothing, and dress contribute to an identity that matches, and in many instances, amplifies their sonic stylings. More importantly, musicians who embrace non-normative musical and visual aesthetics offer a rejoinder to essentialist constructs of Black identity. Like the performers mentioned above, the dress of Sun Ra provides an example of how Black musicians mesh clothing with their sonic performances to enhance both their musical and social message.

More specifically, within the field of jazz studies, meagre attention has been given to this topic. To date, only three focused studies of this relationship exist: Ingrid Monson’s 1995 essay “The Problem with White Hipness,” Susan L. Hannel’s 2005 essay “The Influence of American Jazz on Fashion,” and Alphonso D. McClendon’s 2015 book *Fashion and Jazz: Dress, Identity and Subcultural Improvisation*. In her essay, Monson details how the appropriation of African American beboppers’s dress by white jazz aficionados provides another example of white appropriation of Black culture. While the subject of dress appears at distinct moments of the essay, this is not the main focus. Despite this, Monson’s work was an early harbinger of the critical possibilities of studying the intersection of dress and music. Susan Hannel’s essay connects a relationship between the worlds of fashion and jazz by focusing on how the surge in
popularity of jazz dances during the 1920s called for the modification of dress to accommodate the physicality of the dances, but also how the iconography and imagery of jazz performance appeared in the fashions and adornments of this period. Hannel contains her study exclusively to this period while singularly focusing on female dress.

Likewise, McClendon postulates that the “creative output, an aspiration of each discipline, is achieved through exploration of textiles and construction in fashion, and likewise the improvisation of melody and harmony in jazz” (xii). Fashion designers and tailors take a pattern and a piece of cloth to construct a piece of clothing, similar to how jazz musicians will play over a chord progression and a melody to mould a new song. Though primarily concerned with jazz from the turn of the century to 1960, McClendon constructs a narrative that demonstrates the intersections between the worlds of jazz and fashion. Touching upon issues of beauty, modernity, class, gender, addiction, and the singular jazz hero, McClendon highlights how fashion plays an undeniable role in the history and the reception of jazz. Ultimately, he believes that fashion and jazz represent methods of expressing individuality and freedom, but also that these two particular modes of Black expressive culture have “played a factor in social, economic and political change” in the historical and cultural record of the United States (14).

Fusing the study of the sartorial and the musical attributes of jazz establishes a new paradigm; when combined, these two mediums provide invaluable insight into political and cultural history.

Through dress, a performer can voice an opinion of sub-cultural existence, resistance to normative societal values, or present an aesthetic that defies categorization. By donning clothes or playing music, agents of Black expressive culture put forth their place within or relationship to society. “Black expressive performance,” Thomas De Frantz and Anita Gonzalez iterate, “springs from the need to communicate beyond the limited events of words alone” (3). In many
cases, these non-textual acts become a defining aesthetic of the performance itself. Within the Black diaspora, clothes carry great import in literary, cultural, performative, and political performances and contexts. Through clothes, individuals of colour project images of respectability, remonstrate notions of people of colour as pre-modern, flaunt material wealth and social prestige perceived as outside of their social standing, or subvert and parody gender conventions. The use of clothes does not reside in one particular geographic location or temporal period, but rather, as Monica Miller elucidates in her work, is a constant throughout the history and existence of people of African descent. In relation to the confluence of the Black creative sonic arts and the Black sartorial arts, these two mediums provide a unique but underserviced area of inquiry.

Ultimately, through music and dress, people of African descent have the capacity to self-construct an identity that reflects or counters the social and embodied realities of their existence and provides a pathway to self-empowerment, both within and outside established modes of social existence. The capacity of dress to posit an alternative politics as well as essentialist ideologies about race and the body comes to a head in the much discussed youth centre scene from Ra’s 1972 film *Space is the Place*. In this singular moment, the relationship between body adornment and supplementation and competing visions of Black political agency during the era of Black Nationalism comes to the fore.

**Are Those Moonshoes?: Sun Ra’s Dress Addressing Black Power**

Ra’s film *Space is the Place* is a visual, sonic, and narrative melange that, in the words of Anthony Reed, “defies any accurate summary” (“Grammar” 123). Through a mix of concert performances, realist filmic narrative set in Oakland, California, fantastical dream-like
sequences, and improvised monologues delivered by Ra, the film provides the most accessible iteration of Ra’s Astro-Black philosophy and musical performance. The overarching narrative of the film is that Ra is visiting Earth from space by way of an uninhabited planet that he envisions Black people traveling to in advance of Earth’s destruction. This movie provides the best instance of how dress can help communicate one’s social position while also challenging prevailing social thought on identity and presentation.

In particular, in the opening third of the film, we witness Ra visiting what was established in the previous exterior shot, a Black youth centre in de-industrialized Oakland. The establishing interior shot, accompanied by a diegetic soundscape of male four-part harmony, scans across the room to reveal an array of Black youth socializing and surrounded by images of Black Nationalist figures such as Angela Davis and Huey Newton.
Ra teleports into the room alongside two other individuals dressed resplendently in their Egypto-cosmological garb. Visually, there could be no larger chasm then that of the dress of Ra and the dress of the Black youth and the images on the wall. The immediate visual dichotomy of this moment demonstrates the cultural power of dress to articulate new social identities as well as the political power of dress at the close of the 1960s and early 1970s to dictate political allegiances and collapse social identities.

In his discussion of Marlon Riggs’s film *Black Is...Black Ain’t*, E. Patrick Johnson describes how during the 1960s people of colour used dress to articulate notions of authentic blackness. Wearing forms of Afrocentric dress became a marker of one’s blackness, which stands in opposition to the donning of Western dress and an embracement of “whiteness and upward mobility” (*Appropriating Blackness* 26). Johnson continues this line of thinking: “The more African garb one donned,” Johnson summates, “the more authentically black and ‘down’ one became” (26). In opting not to wear Afrocentric dress, a Black individual, and in this case Sun Ra, was running the risk of putting forth an illegible social appearance within the current political economy that placed a premium on material and embodied notions of realness or authenticity.

A primary tenet of fashion studies is that the clothes that adorn one’s body are a medium of communication. The idea of clothes as a means of communication derives from Roland Barthes’s *The Fashion System*, in which he discerns that clothes and fashion do not necessarily work in the same way as language, but do offer the ability to propagate one’s social position.¹¹² Fashion scholar Jennifer Craik makes a similar argument in her exploration of the intimate

¹¹² For more on clothes, dress, and fashion as a language or a form of communication see Davis and Lurie.
relationship between the body and clothes and how the intersection of the material and embodied provides clothes with its greatest meaning. For Craik, fashion and clothing are a “means for constructing and presenting a bodily self” (The Face of Fashion 1). The clothed body provides the opportunity for one to create an identity to navigate the world. “Bodies and clothes,” as Craik writes, “exist in a symbiotic relationship” (15). Clothes become a way for raced, sexed, and gendered bodies to construct a social identity that helps them navigate their social and political world. Moreover, clothes do not gain social meaning until they “are activated by the wearing of them” (16). The social and political messages fastened to Ra’s Egyptian and Space Age dress would be greatly diminished if worn by other individuals; in other words, these items of clothing carry their greatest social and political impact when worn by an individual claiming citizenship of Saturn. Within the context of Space is the Place, Ra’s dress impress upon us that his vision of and for blackness would not fall in line with ideological or political trajectories as dictated by others. Likewise, considering this dress in relation to Ra’s alien status highlights how these material items can operate as an archival resource to help expand our understanding of the three-dimensional qualities of Ra’s performances and philosophical musings.

Sun Ra and the Arkestra rupture the cultural consolidation of blackness and dress within the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Afrocentric dress was, in Kobena Mercer’s words, “a potent emblem of Pan-African identification” and was a means for the wearer to announce his or her connection with the African diaspora. This connection was achieved through the amalgamation of disparate styles, drapes, and cuts of clothing (“Diaspora” 142). The emphasis on African-inspired elements of dress is because of the region’s prominence in the consciousness, history, and culture of people of African descent in the Americas. The region, at a metaphorical level, operates as place of origin for a group whose history and heritage have been
wiped from their cultural and historical memory. Unlike their contemporaries who embraced Afrocentric dress elements like the *dashiki* and kente cloth, Ra and the Arkestra integrated into their performances dress made of metallic-sheen cloth and emblazoned with a combination of space imagery and Egyptian iconography. Through their clothes, Ra and the Arkestra communicate a non-alignment with the in-vogue principles of Pan-African solidarity.

Fig. 2.3. Sun Ra’s sartorial look

The illegibility of Ra’s sartorial appearance to the Black youth within the cultural and political economy of Black Nationalism becomes apparent after Ra’s arrival in the scene. Both a young male and female inquire as to what kind of shoes he is wearing. Later, another Black female stresses to Ra that if someone approaches her on the street wearing these “funny clothes” and talking all this “mess about going to outer space” she would probably run away. For the youth,
Ra falls outside of their spectrums and expectations of acceptable forms of Black social identity. Ra’s cosmic appearance reinforces GerShun Avilez’s notion of aesthetic radicalism. In Avilez’s estimation, a feature of the Black Arts Movement was the play, subversion, and reformulation of Black aesthetics and identity. He sees this movement as allowing for “formal experimentation, generic manipulation, and reformulation of traditional conceptions of Black racial and gender identity” (Radical 19). When Ra beams into the youth centre, he presents the Black youth with not only a form of blackness that counters centuries of negative portrayals of Black identity; he also exhibits through his dress, to borrow a phrase from Avilez, a “new grammar of Black identity” (97) that openly questions the prevalent logic of the wearing of Afrocentric styles as a public display of one’s ideological underpinnings.

Ra’s play on and citation of existing material sources to self-fashion his subjectivity fits with Patrizia Calefato’s work on the commonality between clothes and music. In her study The Clothed Body, Calefato suggests that “Fashion and music have always used citations, experiences, influences, and suggestions taken from the past” (121). Thus, Ra’s ludic engagement with established clothing practices provides a material analogue to his musical practices in which he plays with established forms such as the 12-bar blues. Likewise, Calefato sees experimental musical practices of combining disparate or dichotomous elements equalling habits in the world of fashion where an individual will commingle evening wear with athletic shoes. While Calefato’s point is valid, we should be careful to note the existence of a racial line within the world of experimental music as detailed by George Lewis. The racial divide between what Lewis categorizes as Afrological and Eurological approaches to musical improvisation extends to dress as well. Howard Mandel, in his liner notes to the recent reissue of a concert performance of Sun Ra and John Cage, subliminally reinforces a visual dichotomy through dress
of white and Black experimental music (i.e. Cage’s dress is conventional and representative of a more acceptable form of experimentalism, while Ra’s is cosmic and clashing and falls outside the logic of western-based experimentation). Though I do not think there is any malicious intent behind Mandel’s words (in fact Mandel has long been an ardent supporter of Black experimental and creative musics), his liner notes reveal how the racialization of experimental music extends to all facets of the performance of this type of music and how easily racially coded language can slip into circulation.\footnote{For more see Mandel.} The sheen and shine of the Arkestra’s clothing married to the Space age and Afro-diasporic imagery match the polyrhythmic drive and heterogenous musical styles of the Arkestra. In other words, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Ra’s musical practices of mixing moments of free improvisation with jazz standards finds a material analogue in his clothing practices.\footnote{Robert Farris Thompson has explored how the textiles and clothes produced by Western African tribes may be seen as a material equivalent of these cultures’ musical practices; for more see Thompson \textit{Flash}, 208 \& Thompson 2011.} Though his cultural work intersects with and builds upon the Black diasporic tradition of signifying’, Ra’s cosmological dress also presents a repudiation of the politics of style surrounding Black political leadership.

Throughout Black political history, clothes play an integral part in displays of what Erica Edwards labels as the “charismatic scenario” of Black sacred and secular leadership (\textit{Charisma} 3). Black North American leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington adapted a genteel style that mimicked white, middle-class sensibilities that played into their message of white Americans recognizing the full humanity of African Americans.\footnote{For more about the fashion politics of Du Bois and Washington see Miller, \textit{Slaves} 137-75 and Baker, \textit{Turning} 62-72.} Black nationalist
Marcus Garvey advanced his political message of Black diasporic national unity and independence, and sought to advance an image of Black masculine militancy through the appropriation of the costume and dress of white, Euro-American Imperialism. More recent examples of Black leadership implementing dress into their political performances include religious leaders such as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan donning bowties as a form of collective solidarity with their followers as well as a unique display of respectability and “conservative uniformity” (Tulloch, Birth 140). Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver, prominent figures of the American branch of the Black Power movement, wore leather coats and black felt berets to signal an anti-establishment stance and a political rhetoric linked with militancy and resistance. In her exploration of the role of women in the political actions of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Tanisha Ford details how the wearing of denim was a way for upsetting traditional modes of Black leadership and a tool for the SNCC to build political alliances across class lines. For all of these strands of Black politics and forms of Black leadership, dress forms an integral component of their message and ideology. Furthermore, these individuals demonstrate the heterogeneity of the look of Black politics.

In particular, the tension surrounding the acceptable look of Black diasporic leadership comes to a head in the youth centre scene. Surrounded by images of Black leadership, including some of the aforementioned political leaders, Ra’s dress provides a stunning commentary about the visual discourse of the Black Panther Party. As has been well documented, in addition to mobilizing a political movement of Black self-realization, the Black Panthers deployed what Nikhal Pingh Singh calls a “visual vocabulary” of dress to augment and project their politics of liberation (Black 203). Along these same lines, Amy Abugo Ongiri, in her work on cultural displays of Black Power during this period, argues that “Black radical culture of the 1960s and
1970s would continually seek out and define the symbolic language and visual tools that could convey the potential for social and political revolution” through the appropriation and reconfiguring of various material artefacts with one such subset being items of dress such as combat boots, leather jackets, and black berets (*Spectacular* 52). The Black Panthers’s reconfiguring of sartorial devices, each with their own embedded history of political action, broadcasts a revolutionary stance of agency and self-actualized identity.\(^\text{116}\) Ra’s sudden materialization into a space richly decorated with icons of Black Power and Black Nationalism mollifies the action and urgency of a revolutionary movement reliant on dress and appearance.

The disarming of the symbolism of Black Power extends to the point that one of the youth asks “Are you for real” while another asks “what are you?” For the youth in the centre, Ra exceeds their expectations of humanity.

Ra, in his response to the youth, undercuts the political and social activism of Black Power and Black Nationalism and their ideology of realness and authenticity. Ra answers:

> How do you know I’m real? I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were, you’d have some status among the nations of the world. So we’re both myths. I do not come to you as the reality. I come to you as a myth, because that is what black people are: myths. (*Space is the Place*)

From Ra’s perspective, investment in Afrocentric dress as a sign of cultural and political nationalism, both domestically and internationally, had not altered the social position or

\(^{116}\) Nikhil Pal Singh views The Black Panthers’s public displays of power as a form of political theatricality.
experience of people of African descent. Attempts at self-defined racial realness and authenticity through sartorial appearance still left members of the African diaspora as unrecognizable myths.

My reading of this scene as a subtle, yet pointed, critique of the linkage between political activism and the visual resonates more broadly when we take into consideration hair. No symbol within the Black Freedom struggles of the late 1960s and early 1970s carried more political currency and cultural capital than the natural hairstyle known as the Afro. The growing out and cultivation of a natural hairstyle became a tool for Black people to publicly display their political views and an aestheticized form of blackness. Akin to the wearing of African-derived items of dress like the dashiki, natural hairstyles were viewed as more authentic, and thus, in Kobena Mercer’s words, folks who grew out their hair were seen as “more ideologically right-on” (Welcome 98-9). Scholars including Angela Davis, Robin Kelley, and Daniel Widener have detailed the primacy of natural hair to Black cultural politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s while also calling attention to issues of class and identity that are often glossed over in discussions of Black hair during this period.\textsuperscript{117} While Angela Davis has lamented the co-option of the Afro as a style symbol and the constriction of her own personal identity to iconic photos of her with an Afro, she reminds us that the Afro is a symbol of a more potent political moment. Daniel Widener echoes Davis’s sentiment and writes that within the historical moment of Black Power and Black Nationalism, the Afro was the “pre-eminent marker of black solidarity, radical affiliation, and the tenor of the times” (Black Arts West 193). If we revisit the youth centre scene in the film Space is the Place, I argue that Ra’s dress politics also includes the augmentation of the body through hair.

\textsuperscript{117} For more about the Afro, political power, and cultural identity see Kelley, “Nap;” Widener; and Davis.
As I noted previously, in addition to the youth displaying natural hairstyles, images of Angela Davis and Eldridge Cleaver with natural hair hang on the wall.

Fig. 2.4. Angela Davis and her Afro hairstyle.

Similar to how Ra defuses the power of Afrocentric dress through his space-inspired clothes, Ra also calls into question the logic of suturing Black political identity to hair. Ra does not display an Afro hairstyle; instead, he covers his head with a metallic chainmail head covering in the cut of an Ancient Egyptian nemes headcloth. This material play on Egyptian symbols falls in line with Ra’s Afro-futurist methods. At the same time, the headpiece may be seen as a material form of signifying on spacesuits and alludes to an idea that the blackness of outerspace could sustain Black life without the aid of life-support systems. The theme of the whiteness of space travel runs throughout the film and manifests itself in a scene where Ra informs a white rocket-scientist employed by NASA that his skills are not needed for the search for new Black intergalactic
homes. The metallic properties of Ra and the Arkestra’s dress also signify on space-age inspired fashions and designs, that as fashion and design scholar Suzanne Baldaia notes, featured “silver-colored materials and metals” and integrated “encapsulating forms and helmet-shaped hats” (Baldaia 173,6). In choosing to cover his head with this item, Ra presents a counter narrative to the hair/style politics of Black Power and Black Nationalism. Ra puts forth an alternative form of blackness that is not directly linked to embodied existence nor tied to a logic of proving one’s own racial authenticity or allegiance to a particular political ideology.

Fig. 2.5. Closeup of Sun Ra’s metallic hair.
I view Ra’s headcovering, much like his myth-rituals, as another example of him mining the archives of Black diasporic culture and presenting them within new contexts and in service to his philosophical beliefs. The shimmer and sheen of the chainmail replicates the hairstyles worn by previous generations of Black Americans, a practice that as John Szwed recounts, was one of the few vanities that Ra allowed himself as a young man while living in Birmingham, Alabama.

Kobena Mercer argues that within Black diasporic culture a long tradition of artificial hairstyles and the manipulation of hair exists. Mercer writes: “artifice is valued in its own right as a mark of both invention and tradition, and aesthetic skills are deployed within a complex economy of symbolic codes in which communal subjects recreate themselves collectively” (*Welcome* 111). Likewise, art historian Judith Wilson, writing about African and Black diasporic cultures, details one’s unwillingness “to supplement, transform, or otherwise improve on nature as a lapse of character or a breach of decorum” (13–4).¹¹⁸ In light of Mercer’s and Wilson’s ideas it becomes clear we have a new pathway to consider Ra’s metallic substitute hairpiece. This item of dress is not a breach of Black nationalist visual culture. Rather, Ra is instead citing and referencing the archive of Black diasporic bodily supplementation and augmentation and more specifically traditions of artifice in relation to hair.

Ra’s metallic headpiece, however, also fits within the Black diasporic trope of signifyin’. This particular cultural practice, as detailed by Gates, relies on Black cultural items and iconography having multiple layers of embedded meanings. Sun Ra’s metallic nemes expresses a larger stance of alterity at one level, while at another level also communicating an oppositional stance towards white material constructions of outer space and essentialized notions of Black masculine identities. At the same time, Ra’s headpiece plays with historical traditions of

¹¹⁸ By nature Wilson means embodied elements such as hair or fingernails.
processing one’s hair, but not in the name of whiteness and conformity. Rather, his luminescent hair harkens back to a diasporic tradition with roots in Africa while also proclaiming a Black identity not merged with skin or embodied traits.

The visual dichotomy between Ra and the interior of the youth center falls in line with what Ra describes as the “alter-destiny.” For Ra, this was his belief that Black people needed to explore and recognize their ancient pasts and histories to animate new futures and potentialities. Ra’s hair abstraction builds upon historical Black diasporic practices of augmentation and enhancement as a means to present a future-based and alternative mode of blackness. Rather than align with an ideology that rests on ideas of natural and authentic representations of Black identity, Ra, puts forth a new form of blackness through the replacement of the real with the artificial weave of metallic discs. Ra’s hair abstraction supplements his message of Black alterity and alienness while simultaneously articulating a commentary on embodied and material racial authenticity. The encounter calls to mind Eddie Glaude, Jr.’s point that Black Nationalist political and cultural rhetoric was both “liberating and confining” (“Introduction” 11). Yes, the visual display of one’s racial identity through dress did provide an avenue for personal liberation. On the other hand, as occurs in the youth center scene, Ra’s dress renders him illegible to the Black youth and their expectations of Black identity and elides the validity of non-normative types of blackness. Through his dress, and more particularly his hair, Ra points out the shortcomings of constructing a physical or metaphysical home through the embodied and material qualities of dress.

My close reading of this scene demonstrates the political and cultural power of dress. Moreover, this analysis reveals how body supplementation and augmentation were sites of articulating one’s identity and agency. Much like the heterogeneity and flexibility of Black
performance cultures, one could adapt presentations of the body to reflect one’s own politics, social identity, and beliefs. In Ra’s case, the space clothes and metallic nemes form a crucial part of alien identity and social existence. Through his clothes and words, and to a lesser extent his music, Ra poses the question of what other forms of life could they engender for himself and the Arkestra if they did not adhere to social strictures of dress as a way to affirm their own actuality. In addition to Ra’s dress addressing the particulars of the political and social moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the cut, colour, and material of his clothes broadcast a connection to a particular aspect of expressive culture found throughout the Black diaspora.

However, within the political and social construct of the era of Black Nationalism, Ra’s dress exposes the fallacy of suturing blackness to dress, but also reveals the heterogeneity and diversity within black political communities of this period. Ra’s dress in the youth centre scene in *Space is the Place* problematizes historical narratives on the appearance of Black leadership as well as contemporary depictions. The home for Black Nationalism and Black Consciousness does not rest exclusively on the coasts of Western Africa or urban centres in the United States; the quest for freedom can run through the shores of Nile River Basin and the Outer Rings of Saturn.

**Dandy Tricksters, Tricked Out Dandies: Sun Ra and the Play of the Cloth**

The social commentary and discursive logic of Ra’s dress is not limited to the sphere of Black Nationalist and Black Power politics. Ra’s dress also plays with dress practices recurrent through the Black diaspora. The styling and dress of Sun Ra invoke the African diasporic performance practices of the trickster and the Black dandy. These two performative figures occupy two

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119 For more about the tensions surrounding the optics of Black leadership see Gates, Jr. 1994.
separate worlds—the figurative and the real—and both subvert and defy dominant and normative constructions of racialized gender and identity. The idea of the Black dandy is a Black diasporic interpretation of the white, European dandy. Rising to prominence at the turn of the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries, dandies were young men of the newly emergent British mercantile-class who began to adapt a highly stylized form of dress. Wearing frivolous, non-masculine dress in loud, gaudy colours adorned with collars and cuffs of lace, the white dandy upsets traditional markers of gender and class and within historical narratives and popular culture has become emblematic of a highly stylized and self-centered form of identity and subjecthood.

As Monica Miller details in her 2009 study, the figure of the Black dandy presents a “creative, self-defining form” in African diasporic masculine performance cultures. An aggregate of both a performative and a constructed act, the elaborate dress of the Black dandy plays with dominant and normative categories of race and gender. In the absence of traditional markers of status such as genealogy or financial wealth, the dandy self-fashions an identity that is not beholden to these traditional categories. Black dandies reject and ruffle normative constructions of gender by focusing their energies on their dress. “The dandy,” in Miller’s estimation, “is a kind of embodied animated sign system that deconstructs given and normative categories of identity (elite, white, masculine, heterosexual, patriotic)” (10). Black dandies resist and trouble dominant epistemes that wish to place black bodies within normative hierarchies of race and gender, nationality, and economic status. The Black dandy’s response is to manipulate

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120 This is not to say that only men can be viewed as dandies. Carol Tulloch, in her 2016 book *Birth of Cool*, proposes that the idea of the dandy is useful in considering the style narrative of jazz singer Billie Holiday. Likewise, essays by Joe Luschi, Jennifer Blessing, and Susan Fillin-Yeh in the edited collection *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture* explore examples of female dandies. For more see Tulloch, *Birth* and Fillin-Yeh, ed. 2001.
style and dress to escape and evade these racist and systematic knowledge systems of rank and classification.

The African diasporic figure of the trickster shares many of the same characteristics as the Black dandy. Appearing across visual, oral, aural, and performative mediums of Black diasporic culture, the trickster takes on numerous nomenclatures such as Esu-Elegbra, Br’er Rabbit, Anansi the Spider, the Signifying Monkey, or Papa Legbas. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. believes that the trickster figure provides a bond for Black cultures across space and time. Much like the dandy, the African trickster undermines distinct barriers between genders and sexual identity. Trickster iterations like Esu-Elegbra and Anansi are gender ambiguous by taking on the physical characteristics and sexual identity of both males and females. Writing about her theoretical construct “Diasporic Spidering,” Nadine George-Graves proposes that trickster figures provide a model for Black subjectivity and performance because, much like the “multifarious and slippery performances of black identity” (43), tricksters continually incorporate new information into their identity and performance. Likewise, African diasporic trickster tales within American contexts emphasize the subversion of essentialist ideology surrounding physical appearances and social status. Prominent examples of trickster figures that disrupt these hierarchies include the character of Uncle Julius in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Women, and Other Conjure Tales* and the character of Br’er Rabbit in Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus stories.121

The aesthetic link between African diasporic dandies and tricksters, however, has not been articulated until recently. Shantrelle P. Lewis views the stylings of the Black dandy as

121 For more about the presence of tricksters and trickster tales in Black North American culture see Levine 102-32 and Martin 2015.
a rebel—a modern-day representation of the African trickster. His style and identity generally contradict the stereotypes, boxes, categories, and ideas that society has about him. The dandy represents a complicated dance between race, gender, power, and style. (“Fashioning Black” 55)

Black subjectivities and identities generated from the interplay between clothing and bodies contribute to forms of identity that disrupt traditional categories of race and gender. Moreover, this disruption of categories of race and gender allows the Black dandy to challenge “popularized notions of what he is capable of doing or being, at the most existential of levels” (59). The dressed body of the Black dandy, much like the numerous iterations of the trickster, lies outside of conventional categories of race, gender, and class. Both of these figures propose alternative forms of Black social existence, ones not regulated by social conventions of appearance, historical narratives, or cultural definitions. No longer constrained by the past, these figures put forth new modes of social existence based on possibilities and potentials. In the case of Ra, we have an example of an individual who proposes such an existence through dress. He would profess his alien identity through cosmic dress and a distancing from the bodily supplementation that characterized militant forms of Black politics. Along these same lines, Ra’s dandy/trickster dress also plays with dominant, white expectations of bodily appearance. The heavily sequined capes, smocks, and headcoverings of Ra and the Arkestra also signify upon and play with many conventions of dress from the Jazz Age of the 1920s and 1930s. Instead of playing with Africanist or Oriental imagery and styles as a way of materially othering races, Ra takes control
of his image by decorating his dress with Egyptian and Space iconography.\textsuperscript{122} He continues the trickster-dandy tradition by borrowing styles from across times and eras, while also declaring that people of African descent have a rich history and a bountiful future. Much like the trickster-dandy figure, Ra declares a freedom by masking his body through an appropriation and play with dress history and forces us to consider what, to borrow an idea from Sylvia Wynter, different forms of humanity might look like and how they might appear to us.\textsuperscript{123}

Ralph Ellison's 1978 essay “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” provides the most accessible iteration of the trickster-dandy figure as it relates to Ra. Recounting a parable taught by his music teacher during his youth, the “Little man behind the stove” represents an omnipresent figure that constantly observes Ellison and expects him to always perform at his best. Ellison categorizes the “Little Man” as a version of the trickster figure funnelled through the crucible of American culture. The Little Man evades forms and borrows freely from vernacular and high-brow modes of culture and typifies Ellison's argument that the synthesis of white and Black cultural practices forms the backbone of American culture. The trickster figure of the Little Man materializes for Ellison when he gazes upon an interracial man in the Sugar Hill neighbourhood of Upper Manhattan. With his mixture of Afro-centric style and material items of Western modernity, this individual embodies the qualities of the trickster, or in Ellison's words, “he was an American Joker” that “played irreverently upon the symbolism of status, property, and authority, and suggested new possibilities of perfection (24) through his clothes and material items. Writing about this essay in 2003, Hortense Spillers proffers that the Little Man “demarcates the border between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the distant,

\textsuperscript{122} For examples of Jazz Age fashion see Bates.  
\textsuperscript{123} For more about Wynter’s ideas about humanity see Wynter. For more on critical discussions of Wynter’s work see McKittrick, \textit{Sylvia Wynter}. 
or the near and far, and, consequently, the intimate and the antipathetic” (“The Little Man” 5-6).

Similar to other descriptions and cultural depictions of the trickster, the Little Man occupies a liminal space and spurns categorization. Though she avoids applying the term “dandy” or “dandyism,” Spillers concentrates her analysis of the Washington Heights man by highlighting his pliable, flexible, and “processural” approach to dress (15). This living embodiment of the Little Man's ability to integrate and utilize disparate items of dress resonates with the shapeshifting qualities of the dandy.

The figures of the trickster and the dandy become useful guides to grapple with the sartorial aesthetic of Sun Ra. Ra’s first professional exposure to the marriage of ostentatious dress and Black performance transpired as a result of his brief residency as the pianist with Sir Oliver Bibb’s band. Bibb and his bandmates would wear stage costumes evocative of the eighteenth-century with ruffled collars and an extensive series of buttons. Ra, in Szwed’s biography *Space is the Place*, concludes that “being black, you don’t get no jobs unless you’re a freak or something . . . people just don’t understand that” (51-2). Bibb’s attire, for Ra, was part of the gig; however, Ra’s words hint towards the problematic optics of Black men dressing up in the fashion of white dandyism—a form of dress from an era heavily linked with imperialism and the Enlightenment. As many have noted, both of these movements have a deep history of demonizing and dehumanizing black bodies. With concern to dress, one such practice during this era to impress the status of objecthood upon Black people bodies was to dress up slaves in

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124 The relationship between non-conforming aspects of male dress and the male body is fraught. In her chapter on white male musical performers and the wearing of white suits, Janice Miller details how the suit has become the accepted form of masculine dress and that non-functional and decorative aspects like frills, extra buttons, or gaudy colours denote a social existence of leisure, excess, and gender ambiguity. For more see Miller, *Fashion and Music* 73-4.
costumes and liveries. Monica Miller views the act of owning and dressing up young Black male slaves in extravagant clothes, which were referred to as “luxury slaves,” as the “perfect example of conspicuous consumption” (Slaves 59). The social status of whites being able to commodify and adorn Black people was another instance of dress being used to regulate non-white peoples’ social status and subjectivity. Ra’s earlier comments hint towards the simultaneous subversive and reaffirming dynamic of Bibb and his band dressing up in clothes of the white dandy, while also providing us with a sense of how Ra’s approach to dress fits within the tradition of Black dandyism. Dressing up in styles of centuries past and of a culture that demonized and attempted to eliminate the humanity of Black people, from Ra’s perspective, only reinforced ideas of the inhumanity of people of African descent and tropes of minstrelsy and vaudeville routines from the turn of the century.

Concurrently, one can view Bibb and his bandmates donning dress associated with the conjoined ideas of empire and Enlightenment as Black dandyism and tricksterism. Appropriating this particular style of dress suggests the possibility of Black people occupying this historical space. Richard J. Powell, in his historical survey of Black dandyism, writes that within the context of antebellum America “the black dandy’s striking, audacious appearance on America’s street corners disrupted the white majority’s false notions of social order, racial homogeneity, and cultural superiority” (222). Bibb’s dress shatters the historical narrative of white superiority. More importantly, the rupturing of historical time and mockery of social orders mirrors the ethos of the trickster figure.

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125 For more about the cultural practice of dressing up black bodies in the eighteenth-century see Miller, Slaves 27-76.
In relation to Ra, one can view his dress practice of multi-coloured clothing as his own interpretation of Black dandyism and the trickster figure that aids in the self-fashioning of his subjecthood on his own terms. The combination of Saturn and Pharonic imagery and symbols in Ra’s dress supports his belief that he was an Angel from Saturn. Claiming a legendary past and a space-based future, much like the trickster, allows for the formulation of an abstract figure that exists outside of conventional time and space and escapes Western society’s categories and boxes. Ra’s rejection of conventional western dress in favour of his own, and often hand-made, threads, defies and troubles society’s conventions and expectations of the look of dressed Black males in late 1960s and early 1970s America.

Returning our attention to John Burks’ *Rolling Stone* article, we see aspects of the dress of the trickster in Ra’s concert performances. Burks notes that Ra was “forever splitting from the stage to do a costume change” (Burks). Quoting Ra, Burks writes: “I want the band to come on in Spanish costumes, in rock and roll costumes, in space costumes, every kind of costume, a lotta changes, so it look like a whole lotta different bands” (Burks). The sartorial quick changes of Ra and the Arkestra match the musical practices of the Arkestra. Over the course of a performance, Ra would signal to the band the next piece by playing the opening four bars of the composition and it was up to the members to identify the piece and put the appropriate lead sheet on their music stand. The pieces included could range from swing standards to freely improvised moments. A 1968 review article from *Jazz on Record* supports this statement. The anonymous author describes Ra’s musical aesthetics as “a deliberate avoidance of melodic development, even a discontinuity of musical discourse” (“Sun Ra”). Like his dress and its conjoining of distinct elements, Ra’s music also emphasizes non-linearity. The material and sonic discontinuity enunciates a musical and social existence outside of prevailing logics. Evasive of rigid visual and
sonic identification of their performance and musical styles, the group’s constant change in appearance mirrors the slipperiness and shape-shifter characteristics of the trickster. Facing containment within a specific musical style of fashion, the Arkestra slips into a different look or mode of music making.

Ra’s dandyism stems from the materiality and imagery of the clothes and their undertones of western modernity. The metallic shimmer of the cloth preferred by Ra and the Arkestra invokes ideas of metallurgy and metalworking. Ra and the Arkestra’s preference for metallic-sheen clothes may be viewed as a commentary on the scientific approach to and the material forging of metallic elements, both of which bear deep links to empiricist and enlightened thought. The mimicking of Western styles contributes to the dandy’s “greater sense of mobility and creativity” (Miller, Slaves 12). Ra and the Arkestra combine Western-based styles and clothes as a way to increase visibility for people of African descent and comment upon social and political marginalization.

The dandy’s creativity with materials and the formation of new outfits mirror, for Barthes, how “a modern artist might conceive a composition using available materials” (“Dandyism and Fashion” 63). Ra’s dandyism arose from the same parameters—the construction of a new social identity through the mixing of clothing elements on hand. Burks makes this same observation in his Rolling Stone article:

At first he designed all his own, and the band’s apparel. But having set the style, he found that people all over the country were making stuff and giving it to them. So now they lovingly accept and wear anything that comes their way. All these dashikis
and togas and hats of every dimension and badges and crests and
sparkles and dangles. (Burks)

Placing discordant fashion and clothing items alongside one another to formulate new looks deepens the link between dandies and improvisation. The forging of seemingly unconnected elements—whether this process is called *bricolage*, assemblage, or junk-yard art—has been framed as an essential approach to the production of improvisatory works of art. The *bricoleur*, philosopher Gary Peters argues, has the uncanny “ability to find new and novel ways of inhabiting the old and revivifying dead forms through a productive process of reappropriation” (*Philosophy of Improvisation* 18).¹²⁶ Sun Ra’s amalgamation of African dress and Western derived styles and materials brings new life to these articles of clothing. Ra’s fusing together two contrasting fields of dress and fashion to contrive new meanings and possibilities frees these items from their socially constructed associations of primitivism and white-centred narratives of superiority. Writing about Black art in post-War Los Angeles, Daniel Widener describes how Black artists “mixed folk-art traditions and avant-garde experimentations,” which “transformed the familiar, forcing new looks at old objects” (*Black* 164). The compounding of musical styles finds an analogue in the material composition of Ra’s dressed body. The bond between the visual and sonic aspects of Ra’s performances comes about in Henry Kuntz, Jr.’s review of Ra’s 1965 record *The Magic City*. Though he is writing about a sonic artefact, Kuntz, goes out of his way to assert “that there is one thing that this record cannot convey: and that is the experience of seeing Sun Ra’s band perform” (Kuntz). The visuality of Ra’s dress proves to be a crucial element to his performances that cannot be ignored, but is also worthy of singular mention within the context of

¹²⁶ For more about bricolage and improvisational art forms, see Widener and Lewis, “Expressive.”
a record review. Much as Ra forced listeners to hear the music of Fletcher Henderson in new ways, he constructed a new visual identity through the manipulation of older and pre-existing items of dress, one that was outside of time. Ra’s clothing practices resonate with the Black cultural practices of the dandy and the trickster. At the same time, aligning Ra within this framework demonstrates how he interacted with and elaborated upon these traditions in his own public persona and spectacular stage shows to make them wholly his own.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated, Ra’s sartorial choices form a vital part of his sonic and textual message of alterity. Within the cuts, drapes, and seams of his clothes and headcoverings, Ra puts forth a material analogue to his musical performances. Writing about the role of dress in musical performances, Noel McLaughlin states that music and dress converge to form a singular aesthetic. He writes:

This means that the meaning of dress will be inflected, altered, amplified or contradicted by the musical and performing conventions and associations within which they are placed. Furthermore, clothes work not only within and against musical and performance conventions (the internal conventions of the song) but externally, as contrasted to other work by the same group or singer, as well as along chains of similarity and difference with other music, clothes and performance styles. (McLaughlin 271)

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127 Carol Tulloch views jazz vocalist Billie Holiday as another example of a jazz artist who incorporates aesthetics of collage into dress practice. For more see Tulloch 2016, 87-126, esp. 90-2.
A musician’s sonic message is enhanced through his or her clothing, dress, and fashion. In the case of Ra and the Arkestra, dress forms a crucial component to their larger message of Black intergalactic travel and alternative destinies.

Framing these items in line with Jean Allman’s theory that dress is an “alternative archive” works on two levels. One, dress serves as an alternative archival resource to text-based archives. Two, Ra’s dress provides the grammar to enunciate an alternative form of existence to the prevalent ideologies about embodied and material racial identity and existence that circulated during this period. Much like his staged performances, Ra and the Arkestra’s dress invokes and cites the archive of Black diasporic clothing practices as a means to advance a new social identity beyond the limits and boundaries of Western society.

While it would have been easy to collapse this conversation into the preceding chapter and to frame my discussion of dress as a theatrical device, an isolated reading of this aspect accentuates how Ra’s alternative archive of dress offers new possibilities, considerations, and contexts for surveying Ra’s aesthetics and legacy. The archive of dress acknowledges links with Black diasporic culture, but also highlights the role of material culture in the formation of racial identity during a specific historical moment. Dress, in this same manner, can also be used to fashion an alternative narrative in relation to the formation of an archive in the historical moment.
Chapter Three
Sun Ra and the Black Counter-archive of the Space Race, 1969-1972

As a highly allegorical statement about ideas of freedom, agency, identity, mobility, and race during the long twentieth-century, the phrase “Space is the Place” has served as, and remains to this day, a key starting point for discussing Ra’s life and works. “Space,” as John Szwed writes in his biography of Ra, “was both a metaphor of exclusion and of reterritorialization, of claiming the ‘outside’ as one’s own” while also altering the “dominant terms so that they become aberrant, a minority position” (Space 140). Space, both in idea and in form, offered Sun Ra and other dispossessed peoples the hope of an intellectual, cultural, physical, and material area “rich with potential, alternative, and promise” (Szwed, Space 130). Within these newly redefined spaces, individuals could construct and mould new forms of existence, free from established routines and logics. I would argue that Ra’s vision of space was not a particular room, building, or even a city, but rather the outer blackness of outer space. I contend that Ra’s ideas about space and place carry far more import when considered against the backdrop of the emergence and development of the Space Race. What is often lost in the discourse surrounding Ra is how he moved within and related to the world he encountered in his earth-bound existence. Despite Ra’s insistence that he was an Angel from Saturn, we must take care to note that he existed within and responded to the structures, society, and culture of Global capitalism and racism.

For me, Ra’s life and aesthetics question(ed) how and where people of colour fit within the white Eurocentric dominant order, not only of his time, but also of the past, as well as the future. For Ra, attempting to solve this social and existential quandary was a zero-sum game. The historical record was too deep to correct, the present-day was a by-product of these historical narratives, and the structures and power bases of white supremacy controlled visions of the
future and projections of outer space. Instead, through his music, words, and performance, Ra conveyed to audiences that the vastness and depth of outer space was an “extra-national, extra-territorial location” outside of this dominant logic (Reed, “African” 363). In fact, Anthony Reed identifies Ra as but one voice in a constellation of Black artists who use ideas of space and blacks in space as part of “larger epistemological and performative strategies geared towards illuminating the limits of what one might variously term Western modernity, reason, Enlightenment thought, or ‘the human’” (352). In essence, outer space provides a zone free from racial essentialism and logics of subjugation. It offers the potentiality and possibility for new social constructs and political realities.

The most striking example of Ra putting this ideology into action occurs in the opening sequence of the film Space is the Place where we witness Ra walking through an uninhabited planet filled with flush vegetation. The scenery and accompanying cacophonous music establish that we are not on Earth, but rather on a wholly different, uninhabited planet. Ra declares that “The music is different here, the vibrations are different, not like planet earth. Planet earth sound of guns, anger, frustration.” Ra then states that Black people should establish a colony on this new planet to see what they can “do on a planet all their own” (Space is the Place). As Ra makes clear, interstellar travel to new worlds free of humans and their socially and economically created systems of oppression provided the best hope for Blacks.

The phrase “Space is the Place” and its concurrent ideology function quite admirably on their own without any reference to geographic specifics or within the context of Black Nationalist and African post-colonial liberation movements. More specifically, with regards to this chapter, despite Ra’s fantastic and speculative vision of space travel and colonization, we must ask how Ra’s aesthetics and artworks about outer space intersect with and relate to the
moments, achievements, and archives of the Space Race and its connotative qualities and materials of technology, modernity, and mobility. By shifting the discussion of the act of flying toward, through, and beyond outer space away from the allegorical and to the historical moment of the Space Race, we see a clear picture arise of how Ra and other Black intellectuals used the backdrop of the Space Race to pose questions about race, culture, and technology in the present and for the future.

I argue that selections of Sun Ra’s poetry, song lyrics, musical numbers as well as interviews and archival ephemera from 1969 to 1972 reveal his deep engagement with and concern about manned (as it was then) space travel. These years encompass America’s landing of a man on the moon and the nation’s subsequent retreat from a sustained commitment to manned space voyages, the Soviet Union’s establishment of a space station, and the filming of Space is the Place. More importantly, this period creates space for the acknowledgment of Soviet achievements as well as American failures. Ra’s views about nation-state sponsored space travel and exploration, when placed in parallel with the historical archive of the Space Race and in tandem with his Black contemporaries and peers, exposes the existence of a larger African American counter-archive of this moment.

This counter-archive allows for the existence of a separate, yet complementary set of documents and artefacts that shine a different perspective on a specific historical epoch. These two parallel archives demonstrate how multiple archives and perspectives on a singular subject can coexist. By counter-archive, I mean a collection of historical documents and intellectual activity that stands alone, but is in dialogue with the dominant archive. In my example, the Black counter-archive of the Space Race can stand alone as a repository of archival sources, but this same repository can be positioned as a commentary on an archive that expunges or dampens
outsider voices. Moreover, the idea of the counter-archive plays into Paul Gilroy’s notion of Afro-Atlantic culture existing as a “counter-culture of modernity” and Michael C. Dawson’s idea of a Black counterpublic. Both Gilroy and Dawson affirm in their work the existence of parallel cultural movements and public ideas that reside outside of their respective dominant fields, but that are just as robust as, if not more robust than, their white and public counterparts. In the case of Dawson’s formulation of a Black counterpublic, he positions this sphere of intellectual thought as “a site for the criticism of existing American democratic institutions and practices” (“Black Counterpublic” 201), but also a school of thought that puts on display fully the “range of discourse” contained within Black counterpublic activity (202).

I argue that Ra’s Black Space Race counter-archive does the same. Within this parallel repository of cultural documents and artefacts exists a rich and nuanced critique and theorization of the ethics and potential ramifications of White America’s missions to celestial satellites and planets, but also of the diversity, range, and creativity of these conversations. This corpus of activity serves as a counter-archive to the dominant narrative of whiteness and progress that nation-state sponsored space travel has come to represent. The idea of a counter-archive curated by Ra calls attention to Kodwo Eshun’s formulations about the role and place of Afrofuturism in the 21st century. Writing in a speculative-critical narrative form, Eshun presents an image of Black archaeologists having to “demonstrate a substantive historical presence” of Black cultural and intellectual history to prove that Black people were worthy of being included in the historical narrative of civilization and progress (“Further” 287). To do so, the archaeologists’s task is to “assemble countermemories that contest the colonial archive” (288). In many ways, Ra presupposes Eshun’s formulation. By advocating for Black people to travel to space, he calls attention to their exclusion from the venture of interstellar travel, while also constructing a future
archive and memory that would ensure the inclusion of their presence, voice, and perspective during this historical moment. The Black counter-archive of the Space Race provides a counter-memory to a historical era that emphasized the commonality of humanity, regardless of race, gender, or nation. In the construction of this antipodal repository, Ra’s Afrofuturism and the responses of his Black peers expose the Space Race for what it was: a venture that maintained the borders and structures of race through ideas of technology, mobility, and racial politics. Black Americans’ criticism of the Space Race and the borders of inequality it maintained was not a homogenous talking point. Ultimately, by establishing Ra within a larger black public sphere, centered on the idea of black bodies in outer space, I demonstrate not only the heterogeneity of black public opinion, but also the diversity of modes of cultural and political engagement with space travel.

First, I unpack how geographic spaces become divided and marked along racial lines and how various social and cultural structures extend this rhetoric into the blackness of space. Next, I explore the centrality of the cultural trope of flying, both real and imagined, to the Black diaspora. For peoples dispossessed and displaced from the African continent, flying, both in act and in idea, serves as a metaphor for social and geographic mobility and a pathway to engagement with the technological apparatuses of flight. Demonstrating the routes and fluidity of this cultural idea establishes how Ra’s ideas and those of his contemporaries during the Space Race continued and extended this idea of psychological and physical flights to freedom into the future and beyond Earth’s stratospheres.

After establishing the cultural and geopolitical implications of race, space, and flight, I turn my attention toward Ra’s Black counter-archive from the launch of Apollo 11 in 1969 to the filming of his movie Space is the Place in 1972, the years delineated above. While both Szwed’s
and Youngquist’s books detail how the Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of *Sputnik I* influenced the textual, visual, and sonic rhetoric of Ra, very little attention has been paid toward how Ra’s works relate to and comment upon this transitional phase from manned lunar expeditions to manned laboratories for the American and Soviet Union space programs. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that Ra’s interstellar-based sonic, textual, and filmic output, while unique in its own way, concurrently built upon a larger tradition of Black flight and provided but one voice in the Black counter-narrative of the Space Race. In addition to aesthetic stances, Ra’s cultural output openly questioned nation-state and technocentric attempts to control space, and instead sought to preserve the depths of outer space as an improvisatory zone of mobility and improvisational freedom.

While Ra and other prominent Black intellectual thinkers and culture makers employed outer space at the level of metaphor, they also engaged with the idea of outer space as a symbol for and representative of nation-state governments and colonial logics. For Ra and his intellectual and artistic peers, the historical moment of the moon landing and the subsequent years to follow signaled and reinforced the disconnect between African Americans and the white hegemonic power structures of the United States. In their reactions and responses to these events, African American artists erected a counter-archive that ensured the preservation of oppositional perspectives that called attention to the colonialism and capitalism undergirding space ventures.

**Outer and Black Geographic Spaces**

While Sun Ra and his peers engage with the concomitant features of outer space at the metaphorical level, they also question how the real and material pursuit of space solidifies, reinforces, and redoubles racial hierarchy and difference along terrestrial and interstellar
geographic lines. At the core of Sun Ra’s musical practices, lexical wordplay, and visual presentations is the refutation of a racial marking and racialized hierarchy of outer space. Ra makes this sentiment evident in the 1972 version of his poem “The Fantasy” in which he declares that he exists as a lifeform that is from the depths of space:

My name is the sun
I am the stranger
From the sky
Far away farther than the eye can see
Is my paradise
A mythical world
In Outer Space. (7-13)

Ra views Outer Space as his “paradise.” It is here that he can exist as an individual not defined by his skin colour or his physiognomy. More importantly, he reinforces his stake that space is vast and already home to advanced lifeforms. The framing of outer space as an unknown nebulous zone, a point Ra makes in his 1966 poem “Imagination” in which he refers to space as “somewhere there,” presents an apolitical and ageographic notion that serves as a foil to racialized concepts of outer space that had formed around the act and discourse of space exploration.

A key feature of space culture, space technology, and space exploration was an explicit and implicit racial marking of outer space. De Witt Douglas Kilgore argues that starting in the 1950s American writers of speculative fiction and scientific reports began to construct a particular vision of interstellar exploration. Kilgore describe these conceptions as “astrofuturism,” which Kilgore defines as authors’s use of real science and technology in
conjunction with the theme of space in their texts to project American imperialist fantasies into a new realm. “The future [astrofuturism] imagines,” Kilgore writes, “is an extension of the nation's expansion to continental and global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (1). With the closing of the American West, the curtailing of imperialist ventures in Latin America and Asia, and the quickening deep freeze of the Cold War, space began to represent the last remaining territory for the American nation-state to explore, colonize, and exploit. Writers seized upon the geo-political potential of outer space to reinforce and amplify the political strategy and social message of United States imperialism in their speculative narratives and technical reports. These are the political and cultural moves that Black artists run against—an ideology that codes space into a framework of racial hierarchy and national superiority.

Astrofuturists buttress the imperial and political implications of space endeavours with the invocation and deployment of the two fields of science and technology. These two pillars, as feminist performance scholar Sue-Ellen Case highlights, create “associations of cleanliness, self-discipline, education, and privileged access to highly capitalized projects” (115). Thus, outer space conjoined with futurist technology becomes an extension of a nuanced vision that had taken hold over the course of the twentieth century—neatness, orderliness, and cleanliness were markers of technological, racial, and class-based progress. The tropes of science and technology in the hands of astrofuturists reinforce colonialized thinking of superiority founded on a rationale that presents and represents “science as exclusively and distinctly ‘white’” (185). Paul Gilroy takes a more polemical stance towards technology and science, which he judges to be “entirely complicit with the order of white supremacy” (Between Camps 345). The material and visual

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128 Anthropologist Lisa Messeri in her recent book Placing Outer Space details how scientists translate the depths of outer space into a tangible, material area and thus attempt to make it more “knowable.”
signifiers of space exploration and technology establish outer space as a territory of whiteness and maintain this status quo through exclusion, hierarchy, and difference. As we have seen previously with Ra’s use of electronic keyboards, and as we will see later in this chapter, Ra’s aesthetics and philosophy rely heavily on the negation and disarming of this white-centric imperial teleology.

Astrofuturism reinforces these narratives of subjugation and conquest by promoting the construction of new, non-earth based societies rooted in western, liberal thought and its tenets of individual freedom, science-based perspectives, and rational thought. The worlds, lifeforms, and endeavours that astrofuturism depicts mirror earth-bound social and political constructs centered on classifications and hierarchies of race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Thus, like on earth, newly formed space colonies and space stations maintain the status quo.129 Likewise, these narratives position space as a zone where humans can travel to escape social strife and political turmoil that had engulfed earth, but also a place where humans can re-establish and re-affirm social, cultural, and political hierarchies. Within the historical moment of the 1960s and its associated social and political challenges ranging from international conflicts to the questioning of social norms, the Space Race offered the United States and other Western powers the opportunity to reaffirm and reestablish social and political dominance.

In many ways, this racial coding of outer space as white and a site to redouble majoritarian social and political viewpoints and exclude non-dominant peoples mirrors arguments made by George Lipsitz, David Sibley, Katherine McKittrick, and Clyde Woods.

129 James S. Ormrod makes a similar argument that “space fiction, space programmes and the private space industry produce images of space travel from within established socio-political orders” (402).
about how geography and spatial configurations can be and are used as an instrument to reinforce racial inequality and white supremacy. All of these scholars emphasize in their work that non-majority peoples remap and reimagine geographic spaces to invert racial hierarchies and create new sites of possibility. Considering the social, political, and cultural positioning of outer space as a space of whiteness, one can see how Ra disrupts this framing by inserting himself and his bandmates into the political moment that was the Space Race. For Sun Ra, the only way to claim identity and agency was by moving into the blackness of outer space and reimagining this sector as a place of new forms of social existence—not an area that reproduces white supremacy and notions of cultural inferiority. Ra reinforces this notion in the closing of *Space is the Place*, where we witness Ra’s curvaceous spaceship speed into the blackness of space accompanied by the improvised cacophony of the Arkestra above a fading June Tyson singing “Another world, another world . . .” A life of freedom and equality can only be obtained by going to another world.

What Kilgore makes clear in his argument is that the realm of outer space can, and has, been adapted into an ideology and aesthetics racially encoded as white. Some black public figures protest this categorization. They ask how outer space and space exploration can provoke more inclusive ideas of citizenship and inspire new forms of community. Concurrently, these same public figures query whether space is a zone that, as I suggested earlier, can offer a salvation from anti-Black rhetoric and action. Despite the mapping of utopic visions onto the interstellar, space functions in the popular and public imagination as inhospitable and

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130 For more on racialized geographies see Lipsitz 2011, Sibley, McKittrick 2006, and McKittrick & Woods.
131 For Black literary examples of the creation of alternative spatial configurations see Samuel R. Delany’s *Blake; or the Huts of America* and Sutton R. Griggs’s *Imperium in Imperio*. For critical discussions of these two works see Davidson.
unwelcoming to people of color. This interpretation of space has taken shape in everything from mass entertainment that treats Space as the next phase of the American frontier to the actual exploration of outer space, which has become a larger intimation of inequality in America in terms of access to education, technology, and configurations of institutional racism. As I highlight throughout this chapter, Black diasporic space flight serves as a means of resisting the nationalization, corporatization, and racialization of space, worldviews and practices that are antithetical to the hybridity, intercultural, and collective nature of improvisation, both aesthetically and in practice.

While Ra’s life and works have become indelibly linked with his own unique brand of Black speculative fiction, we should be careful to note that the narratives and imagery of astrofuturism greatly influenced his own views. As John Szwed makes clear, Ra was an avid fan of pulp and serial science fiction and “he followed the rise of science fiction as a child, reading early comic books and seeing the movie serials of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon; learning its language, incorporating its themes and motifs into his performances” (Space 131).  

I view the unbearable whiteness of astrofuturism not as antithetical to Ra’s ideas but rather as the fuel and foundation for Ra’s Afrofuturism. Indeed, returning to the racialization of real and imagined geographic spaces, we see how the racial coding of space as white and a place of whiteness mirrors terrestrial practices of segregation. To combat this land-based epistemology of segregation and inequality, Black diasporic culture uses the idea of flying and air mobility as a pathway to freedom.

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132 For more about the relationship between Sun Ra and pulp science fiction see Youngquist 151-60.
From Flying Africans to Afronauts

“Flying,” as theater and performance scholar Soyica Colbert states, “represents one of the quintessential thrusts of African American aesthetics—the pursuit of freedom” (129). Through textual, visual, and aural performances, enslaved Africans in the New World use the metaphor of flight to express social, psychic, and embodied movement away from subjugation and exile and towards freedom and geographic homespaces. This idea of emancipation by flying through the air to ancestral homelands is but one narrative mode of what Robin Kelley calls “freedom dreams,” which he describes as sustained intellectual and cultural movement throughout the twentieth century that envisions people of African descent on a metaphysical, mental, or physical trajectory towards a better place, a utopia, or an idealized place. Peoples of the African diaspora, and more specifically within the context of African American culture, have transformed the dream of freedom by flying through the air to work within a diverse array of cultural forms and modes. Ra extends this “pursuit of freedom” into the thermosphere of outer space while also laying the foundation for a techno-science infused artistic movement seeking new modalities of freedom. While a complete inventory of every instance of flight in Black diasporic folk culture would be next to impossible, it is informative to highlight examples of this idea in speculative, real, oral, aural, textual, visual, sonic, and material forms especially given the points of similarity between Sun Ra’s interstellar re-version and this fable.

Oral and textual examples of the Flying African myth are present in several passages of Mary Granger's Drums and Shadows, a collection and transcription of black folktales produced

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133 Farah Jasmine Griffin sees narratives of freedom through geographic mobility as one of the “twentieth century’s dominant forms of African American cultural production” (3).
under the auspices of the Georgia Federal Writers’ Project in 1940.\textsuperscript{134} In these folktales, flying occurs as a way of escaping from enslavement. In turn, Toni Morrison uses this collection as an inspiration for her 1977 novel \textit{Song of Solomon}, in which the main protagonist Milkman Dead continually hears stories of, and ultimately confronts, the idea of whether African Americans could fly. Another salient textual example of the Flying African myth is Ralph Ellison’s short story “Flying Home,” which features a Black American pilot who crashes his plane in the rural countryside. As Katherine Thorsteinson has argued, this story is a unique entry in the Flying African myth because it highlights its transformation to “communicate new solutions to newly realized problems” in the context of the twentieth century as well the tension between African myths and western technocentric epistemologies (“From” 266).

African American painter Jacob Lawrence shifts flight into the visual register in his 1967 painting “Over the Line.”\textsuperscript{135} Lawrence's image depicts the physical and imagined crossing of boundaries by abolitionist Harriet Tubman. On the surface, the painting details the flight of African Americans from chattel slavery through Tubman's crossing the border between the United States and Canada. Tubman being spirited away by birds into the sky represents the metaphysical aspect of flight and her, and African Americans’ more generally, desire to depart for a real or imagined home.

Black spiritual practices also engage with ideas on and the rhetoric of flight. In her essay on African American sermons, Hortense Spillers identifies black homiletics as a “preeminent mode of discourse by which African Americans envisioned a transcendent human possibility

\textsuperscript{134} For one such passage see Granger 101.
\textsuperscript{135} To view “Over the Line” go to http://www.phillipscollection.org/sites/default/files/interactive/jacob-lawrence-over-the-line/overtheline.html
under captive conditions” (252). In particular, she singles out the topic of the eagle, with its connotations of flight and freedom, as a recurrent trope for black preachers. In a Black diasporic context, Robert Farris Thompson alerts us to how within Yoruban cultures birds represent the highest ideals and forms of knowledge (Flash 44-7). The symbolism and importance of birds to the African diaspora was not lost upon Ra. In his 1956 poem “Sun Song” Ra compares himself to a bird dwelling in a nest. Ra writes: “Yes, I have a nest; Out in outer space on the tip of the worlds. / There dwell I” (6-9). By comparing himself to a bird, Ra positions himself as operating on a higher plane of knowledge, but also slyly acknowledges his intimacy with the archive of Black fantastical flight.

Black secular and sacred musicians engage with real and imagined flying in their music as well. Jazz vibraphonist Lionel Hampton wrote his seminal and influential composition “Flying Home” while waiting to board his first air flight. Rev. A. W. Nix's gospel song “White Flyer To Heaven” mutates African American sensibilities about trains into a Zephyr ferrying its passengers to Canaan. Traditional spirituals like “All God's Chillun Got Wings” and “Now Let Me Fly” use the metaphor of flight to advance black spiritual themes of redemption and the afterlife. In an analysis of creative musician Anthony Braxton’s title-drawings, John Szwed summarizes that there is a long history of jazz and blues musicians incorporating themes of mobility and movement in their song titles. Over the course of the history of jazz, in step with

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136 The spiritual motif of the eagle holds a place of significance in the Ra cosmography as John Szwed notes that at Ra’s graveside service Rev. Pherelle Fowler asked the “lord that Sun Ra be raised on eagle wings and taken on high where he might shine like the sun” (Space 381).

137 For other examples of bird imagery in Ra’s poetry see “Birds Without Wings,” “Chaos,” and “Everytime A Bird Goes By.”

138 Olivia Smith Storey also reminds us that Hampton’s composition “preceded Ralph Ellison’s short story of the same name” (1).
new technological innovation in travel and means of transportation, song titles and references at first mention trains, graduate to cars, and eventually develop into airplanes and spaceships (“The Local and the Express” 209). On the ground, flying is but one mode of mobility invoked to posit “freedom dreams.” At a broader level, the theme of the Flying African transcends borders of genre and style. For Olivia Smith Storey, “To make it consistent or to pin down its meaning belies its basic attributes: its range, its fluidity, and its exceptional vitality” (1). The cultural trope of flying has, and continues to be, adapted to change with times and to address specific historical and social contexts. The message is always the same, though: one can obtain freedom by moving through the air. In the case of Ra, he adapts and updates the Flying African myth by incorporating spaceships and technological artefacts. The premise, though, remains the same. A pathway to mental and physical freedom can occur by flying through the air of earth or the depths of outer space. While the imaginary aspects of flying are crucial to the Flying African myth, I believe it is also beneficial to consider African Americans’ engagement with the real technological tools and machinery of flight.

Throughout the twentieth-century, black public figures such as Bessie Coleman, William Powell, and the Tuskegee Airmen provide examples of African Americans interacting with the technology and the act of flying.139 Though the “relationship between blacks and technology has always been ambivalent” (Iton 110), undoubtedly because of the long history of the use of technology to enslave and control black diasporic peoples, flight and its technological accessories provided a way for individuals to escape the racial oppression of society. It also

139 For a general history of African Americans and aviation and details on Coleman and Powell see Hardesty. For more on the Tuskegee Airmen see Moye.
creates a runway for people of color to interact, both intimately and at a distance, with the aerial tools of modernity.

African American pilot and public figure Herbert Julian serves as an example of black engagement with the materiality of flight. Julian, who gained notoriety and fame with local and international journalists for his flying and publicity stunts during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, also highlights how this engagement can bridge the gap between historical and fictive engagements by African Americans with flight and its technological apparatuses. Shane White, Stephen Garton, Stephen Robertson, and Graham White, in their essay “The Black Eagle of Harlem,” note that Julian described the experience of flying as one where the pilot was “clear of all the petty restrictions and annoyances of the world below” (302). Flight provided Julian with a range of mobility not granted to him on the ground. While in the air, Julian, whether literal or figural is a matter of debate, was able to escape terrestrial-based forms of the white spatial imaginary through aviation-based technology.

Though largely forgotten now, Julian serves as an exemplar in a discussion of historic and fictional black flight. In the opening pages of her novel Jazz, Toni Morrison writes: “A colored man floats down out of the sky blowing a saxophone” (8). White, et al. suggest that this brief passage is an allusion to Julian’s October 1923 publicity stunt of parachuting into Harlem while playing a saxophone. His appearance in Morrison’s novel serves as an example of the transmutability of African Americans’ engagement with flight. Moreover, historically, Julian’s mechanical flight highlights one method to escape the social and physical limitations placed upon his black body by terrestrial-based sites of the white spatial imagination. Julian shifts his
body into the air where he can construct a new social reality. Culturally, Morrison’s reference to Julian in *Jazz*, a novel centered around the dual themes of African Americans’ mobility and their search for cultural or historic roots set against the Harlem Renaissance, signals that black flight is not confined exclusively to the rural or the urban, to the historical or the fictional, or to the sacred or the secular.

Likewise, Ralph Ellison’s 1944 short story “Flying Home” merges the real and fantastical, but also alludes to the next transformation of the Flying African myth. Ellison’s story tells the tale of a Black Aviator named Todd who crashes his plane in rural Alabama after flying into two buzzards known to the locals as “jimcrows.” On the ground, Todd is found by an old man by the name of Jefferson who questions whether Todd is real and whether he enjoys flying. The remainder of the story is a philosophical meditation on the realities of racism in the US and the social tensions between Todd, who represents modernity and the present, and Jefferson, who stands for the folk and the past. In addition to being rife with references to and imagery of birds, Ellison’s text interrogates whether the machinery of flight can advance social equality for African Americans. Katherine Thorsteinson views the story’s narrative accelerant of the plane crashing as “a critique of the Western epistemologies that have denied [Todd] his existence for so long” (270). The Flying African myth came to a crossroads in this text. Should the myth adapt to the moment and integrate technology, an ideological thrust that contributed to the dehumanization of people of African descent, or should the tales of Flying Africans remain in the firmament of the fantastic?

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The Black experimental electronic duo known as Drexciya have explored the possibility of aqueous based imaginaries as way to achieve psychic, physical, and social freedom. Please see Mayer and Williams.
In the last-half of the twentieth century, artists have embraced the possibilities of the technological and the future to expand this spectrum of the technologically aided Flying African myth to include the extra-terrestrial. Musicians like Sun Ra, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Marvin Gaye enfold space sounds, imagery, and fantastical rhetoric into their performances. For these artists, space and space exploration function as a means and a method to escape the routinization and institutionalization of everyday life. By launching the Flying African into the interstellar, these artists intermix and re-version black diasporic ideas and icons of mobility and flight. These visions simultaneously reinsert the mythological aspect of black flight back into an age of technology, but also reveal how this particular approach to the Flying African myth can unpack the complicated relationship between non-dominant subjects and technology. It can also use the idea of space flight to expand the range of and tools for black mobility. In his essay on the “space madness” of Lee “Scratch” Perry, Sun Ra, and George Clinton, music critic John Corbett astutely notes that Perry, Ra, and Clinton “reappropriate” and “retool” the iconography and meaning of the “sea-ship into a space-ship” (17). Taking the iconography and imagery of the slave ship, which Marcus Rediker describes as a “strange and potent combination of war machine, mobile prison, and factory” (*Slave Ship* 9), artists like Ra, Perry, and Clinton transform a seafaring instrument of enslavement that renders black subjects into black bodies into a space vessel that aids and abets flights of freedom and reinscribes humanity onto its passengers.¹⁴¹ Instead of continuing the trajectory of water-based forms of transportation representing a

¹⁴¹ Both Corbett’s and my interpretation of Rediker plays into Paul Gilroy’s idea in *The Black Atlantic* that seafaring vessels can also represent a “living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” and be seen as vehicles that promote the “circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts” (*The Black Atlantic* 4).
technological tool of terror, Ra unmoors the ship from earth and converts it into an object of world- and subject-making.

Ra’s vision of Black people traveling into the outer depths of space signifies upon black diasporic ideas of mobility, and more specifically, flight. Ra's version of the Flying African speaks to the movement of black bodies, but similarly conveys the idea of departing from earthly restraints to obtain freedom and new engagements with technology. Ra proves the robustness of the Flying African myth by fusing the iconography of Ancient Egypt and the imagery and technoscience of outer space. The merger of an ancient, mythic past with the technological tools of space travel advances a unique art form that projects “noble pasts for people of color while carefully crafting a heroic black face for the future as well” through the questioning of historic and contemporary racially encoded tropes about technology and race while also proposing alternative futures (Yaszek, “Afrofuturism” 46).

This blend of markers has since become known as Afrofuturism. Sociologist Alondra Nelson states it more succinctly: “Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as African American voices with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come’” (“Introduction” 9). Both Yaszek and Nelson point to the archaeological and recovery aspects of Afrofuturism. For these two, the mining of the past becomes a way to propose alternative futures, ones that rebut centuries of racial subjugation aided by the tools and ideology of science and technology. Black diasporic literary, visual, and sonic artists have embraced the question of how the black diaspora can use the fusion of their past and present day technologies to engineer new futures, an idea that Ra would label “myth-science.” For Ra, taking ancient, mythological pasts and merging them with tools of technoscience could fuel new and fantastic voyages into outer space.
Self-labelled “concept engineer” Kodwo Eshun, in *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, advocates that Sun Ra is a key figure in the idea of Afrofuturism, but frames him as one in a constellation of black sonic artists who tackle the subject of past and future. Ra’s importance to the idea of Afrofuturism is without doubt. John Szwed describes Ra's praxis as “maybe 'Afrofuturism,' where the material culture of Afro-American folk religions are used as sacred technologies to control virtual realities” (137). Though Szwed’s work appeared around the same time as Dery’s formulation and predates Eshun’s and Yaszek’s work, Szwed acknowledges that the term Afrofuturism and its blend of the past and the future might be the best way to describe Ra’s music and words. One such Black cultural practice from the past that is present in Ra’s Afrofuturistic praxis and signifies on the idea of the Flying African includes the aforementioned ring shout.

The ring shout, which I discussed earlier in this dissertation in relation to archives of Black performance, is particularly important to a discussion of flying and the Black diaspora. Linked with African spiritual practices, the ring shout is a performance strategy by African American slaves where they move about a space in a counter-clockwise direction and leap at specific moments. The act of leaping invokes a moment of freedom from chattel slavery, but also, as Sterling Stuckey describes in his seminal classic text *Slave Culture*, the act of leaping during the ring-shout allowed for slaves to give “oneself up totally to a more transcendent state” (56). Thus, taking into consideration the Flying African myth, one begins to see how Ra has mined the multiple spheres of African American cultural practices and reconfigured them for his Astro-Black performances and philosophy. One sees a convincing example of Ra’s incorporation of the ring shout into his own performances in the closing of Robert Mugge’s 1980 documentary *A Joyful Noise*. The film, which mixes concert performance and interviews, solidifies further
Ra’s performative and spectacular approach to constructing an alternative social existence by highlighting the dress, performance, and non-heteronormative living arrangements of Ra and the Arkestra throughout the film. The closing credit of the film plays over the end of a concert by Ra and the Arkestra in which they walk in a counter-clockwise circle and leap. Szwed’s grounding of Ra’s aesthetic in Black spiritual practices of the American South and his insertion of the word “maybe” allows one to consider that Afrofuturism is not the most apt way to label Ra’s work. While Szwed does not deny the linkage between past and future in Ra’s work, what Szwed is suggesting is that Ra’s unique epistemological worldview and performance practice has antecedents in a particular form of African American folk culture. Szwed’s work forces one to consider two crucial points concerning Ra and his epistemology: first, that Ra's ideas are animated by the racial politics of the United States and Black material and expressive culture, and second, that the term Afrofuturism was taxonomically mapped onto Sun Ra and his work after the fact.

In addition to Ra’s re-working of multiple streams of Black expressive culture and issues surrounding nomenclature of Ra’s artistic practice, we must take stock of his engagement with real technological tools and hardware. John Corbett and George Lewis, in a conversation on Black collectivity, touch upon Ra’s Afrofuturism and its relationship with technology. Lewis believes that Ra's “engagement with technology,” the futurist aspect, “seemed to be the ground, or at least part of the ground” (53). Lewis forces us to consider the possibility that Ra was equally engaged with real technological artefacts just as much as he was concerned with the allegory of technology as a harbinger of futurity and a signifier of racial superiority. Ra’s integration of electric keyboards such as the Moog synthesizers and amplification as well as

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142 For more about the relationship between Ra and the ring-shout, please see Lock 39-41.
long-standing member Marshall Allen’s use of the Electronic Valve Instrument (EVI), in Lewis’s estimation, forms a crucial component of Ra’s astro-rooted practice and praxis. These instruments allow for the construction of futuristic soundscapes that put into sound a social position of alienation, as I noted in chapter one, but they also enable the musicians to counter racist and essentialist thoughts about people of colour and the use of technology.

Likewise, Paul Gilroy believes that “we can listen profitably to the futurology evident in black popular cultures and interpret their comments on science and technology as having some bearing upon ethical and even political matters” (*Against 341*). Black artists’ use of technology in their performances is an aspect that should not be overlooked. What Gilroy sees and hears in these engagements with technology is a nuanced and critical response to issues of racial justice and the politics of inequality.143 In particular, Ra’s experimentation with electronic keyboards and early electronic forms of recording technology is a recurrent theme throughout Szwed’s biography of Ra.144 The simple act of Ra acknowledging and integrating electronic and amplified instruments into his performances becomes a device to challenge the viewpoint that people of colour were primitive or not civilized enough to uses these new proto-digital musical instruments. Instead, Ra’s use of these sound tools falls in line with Gilroy’s estimation of Black popular culture’s engagement with aspects of science and technology. By playing electronic keyboards on recordings and in performance, Ra advocates for the inclusion of these futuristic

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143 For more about how technology has been raced and African Americans relationship with technology as implements in enacting agency see Fouché.

144 In one notable example from Szwed’s books, he describes Ra showing a keen interest in electronic instruments as they would be “capable of producing sounds” that the musicians “hadn’t even dreamed about” (49-50).
technologies in the grammar of Black performance, and, at the same time, proposes a future form of existence and musical practice outside of racist ideologies.

My understanding of Lewis’s statement is that the technological, and therefore the real, should be given equal weight as has been given to the spectacular and the abstract when critics and scholars engage with Sun Ra and his ideas. We should not overlook Ra’s use of technology within his mytho-poetic episteme, but rather, as Gilroy suggests, consider what Ra’s merger of the past and the future and myth with technology offers in terms of a social critique. The presence of electronic instrumentation amplifies this critical stance when considered in parallel with Ra’s rhetoric concerning Black space flight and interstellar mobility. This aesthetic stance becomes heightened when placed within the context of the lunar expedition phase of space exploration.

The theme and idea of flight in Black diasporic culture runs the spectrum from antebellum days as a means of physical and psychic relief from the transgressions of slavery to the era of Modernism as a way to escape an increasingly constructed racial caste system that limited social and geographic spaces incompatible with a burgeoning movement for equal rights. More recently, artists of the Black diaspora, with Sun Ra serving as a key figure, have shifted the idea of black flight to cosmic realms. But what happens when the multiple modes, registers, and forms of Black expressive culture interact with and respond to key historical moments and the material accomplishments of the Space Age, such as landing a man on the moon or the establishment of a continually orbiting manned space station? More specifically, what emerges when we bring Sun Ra’s engagement with, and thoughts on, these historical moments to the fore
and position them as a counter-archive to the dominant narrative?\footnote{The space age is defined as commencing in 1957 with the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik I. The terminus of the space age is more nebulous. Matthew Tribbe sees the space age ending in the late 1960s as "American culture had begun to change dramatically" and was beginning to move "away from the optimism and profound faith in rational progress" (14) that this age embodied. William E. Burrows sees the first space age ending in 1997 with the installation of the permanent exhibition "Space Race" in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. The historical treatment of the space race, in Burrows' mind, renders this period as a historical moment that has passed (x-xi). Ra's terrestrial-based phase of his existence overlaps and concurs with a broader definition of the space age. For the purposes of this study, I perceive the cessation of the first space age with the termination of funding for returnable manned space flights by the United States government in 2011.}

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“The Eagle Has Landed . . .”: Apollo 11 and the Black Counter-archive
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The 1957 launch of Sputnik I pronounced a significant achievement for the Soviet Union. At the same time, this event marked a moment of failure and crisis for the United States. Paul Dickson describes that in the wake of the Soviet Union’s achievement, the nation was “agog and unnerved” (4). Robert A. Devine suggests that the Soviet Union’s announcement of their successful launch of an artificial satellite “created a crisis in confidence for the American people” (vii). In the wake of these events, the United States, first led by President Eisenhower and followed by President Kennedy, redoubled its efforts and commitments to the Space Race.

The most well known and daring statement about these efforts was Kennedy’s 1962 speech “We choose to go to the moon” where he pronounced that America would strive to land a man on the moon by the end of the decade.\footnote{Kennedy’s earliest statement about America’s commitment to landing a man on the moon came a year earlier in an address to a joint session of Congress, but the 1962 Rice speech has become the more well-known example in the popular consciousness.} This speech, in John W. Jordan’s assessment, provided the template for the nation to frame space travel as the next evolutionary step in the American frontier myth, and also as an extension of the nation’s manifest destiny to “bring just governance
to outer space” (“Kennedy’s” 221). The United States’s space ventures would not only evolve the mythos of manifest destiny to extend beyond the terrestrial sphere, but would also be conducted in the name of protecting the depths of space from falling under the tyranny of communism.  

Despite the colourblind and nationalist rhetoric of Kennedy, these ideas run counter to how Ra and other Black intellects conceived of outer space. For them, space was a zone that offered improvisatory mobility and freedom from logics of governmental bureaucracy, the antithesis of Kennedy’s vision for space. Nevertheless, through a series of escalating and more daring space missions, the United States eventually achieved its goal on 20 July 1969 with Neil Armstrong’s moonwalk. Our present-day understanding of Project Apollo, as space historian Roger D. Launius asserts in his 2005 article, has become intertwined in a combination of myth, frontier nostalgia, and American exceptionalism. This narrative, however, precludes the existence of a dissenting viewpoint. As both John Logsdon and Matthew Tribbe have explored in their recent monographs, the historical archive of the space race often overlooks the post-Apollo decline of America’s space programs. Despite the meteoric success of the lunar program, levels of excitement and interest in space exploration faded quickly after the Apollo 11 mission. There are numerous reasons for this, including the realization of the financial costs, the nation’s attention shifting towards the conflict in Southeast Asia, and the existential question of what to do next after successfully landing on the moon. Moreover, the Apollo 11 moon landing animated...

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147 Another way of thinking about Kennedy’s speech is that the United States would halt the extension of the Iron Curtain into outer space.
148 For more see Launius.
149 For a more in-depth discussion of the decline in prestige of America’s space programs see Logsdon 1-125 and Tribbe 1-23.
discussions by Ra and contemporaneous Black intellectuals about the cultural and material value of America’s investment in manned lunar expeditions.

Debates about the moon landing were of importance to the African American community; however, public thought about this event was not exclusively limited to Black public spheres or Black channels of mass media. At specific moments, bands of African American culture intersected with mainstream culture. With the imminent landing of the Apollo lunar mission, *Esquire* magazine published “Le Mot Juste for the Moon” by journalist William H. Honan. The article comprises a series of short musings from various public figures about the significance of America's landing a man on the moon. The contributors ranged from former United States Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey and author Truman Capote to media studies pioneer Marshall McLuhan and deposed boxing champion Muhammad Ali. Other contributors included counterculture figures Timothy Leary and Sun Ra. Ra's contribution, a short poem entitled “Reality has touched against myth,” points to the significance of the moon landing:

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Reality has touched against myth
Humanity can move to achieve the impossible
Because when you've achieved one impossible the others
Come together to be with their brother, the first impossible
Borrowed from the rim of the myth
Happy Space Age To You . . . . (1-6)
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Ra posited elsewhere that the exterior levels of the atmosphere occupy the world of fantasy and myth. The landing of a man on the moon fell into the category of a new reality. Ra signals this achievement as the launching point for the realization of other impossibilities and suggests that outer space could become a mediation zone between white and black spatial imaginaries.
Another of these impossibilities that Ra alludes to is for individuals to “Come together to be with their brother, the first impossible” (4). For Ra, the next phase of the space age will commence a logic of equality outside of the frameworks of race, ethnicity, or nationality. While the other contributors to Honan’s piece couch their response within the framework of the American nation-state, Brent Hayes Edwards notes that Ra omits references to America and instead focuses on the universalist and the human. If humanity as a whole can work together to achieve one impossible, which in this case is the moon landing, then the dawn of the Space Age can mark the beginning of a new age of racial cooperation and social possibilities (Edwards 30-1). In the above-quoted piece, Ra positions outer space as lying outside of the jurisdiction of the colorblind or white technological and spatial imaginary of the United States. Only here, in outer space, outside of social and geographic boundaries limned by ideas of race and technology, could Ra’s vision manifest itself.

Hortense Spillers, in her essay on the impact of Apollo 11 moon landing on speculative writing, echoes Ra’s sentiment. She writes:

Now that going to the moon no longer counted as a patent impossibility, the figurative dimension suddenly shifted into the literal, and the act of imagination that had fired the engines of poets and songwriters and graced the most youthful eroticisms with the stuff of myth and dreaming now belonged to the precincts of the engineer and the computer specialist. (“Imaginative” 3)

Outer space, which served as the fuel for generations of creative imaginations, was at risk of becoming enfolded within technocratic bureaucracy. Spillers boosts her point by suggesting that
science fiction writing as a whole, and more specifically, Black female writers of science fiction, advance their rhetorical project through reconfiguration of the images and ideas of the known so that they become strange and unfamiliar (4). Ra does this in his poem. He reconfigures the American-centric envisioning of the moon landing by removing themes of the American nation-state and the frontier, but he also troubles how other African American public figures perceived the moon landing and Project Apollo as a whole. Ra advocates that the lunar phase of the space race could serve as a catalyst for the exploration and establishment of new social configurations, and more importantly, as an opportunity to ameliorate racial difference.

Spoken-word performer Gil Scott-Heron, on the other hand, viewed the moon landing differently. Released the following year, Scott-Heron’s poem “Whitey on the Moon” puts into words the material contradictions of space exploration. The work opens with the following stanza:

A rat done bit my sister Nell
With whitey on the moon
Her face and arms began to swell
And whitey's on the moon
I can't pay no doctor bills
But whitey's on the moon
Ten years from now I'll be payin' still
While whitey's on the moon

Despite the innumerable wealth of the United States and the incredible expenditures involved in sending men into space and onto the moon, the nation did not have the financial and social wherewithal to ensure equal access to health care and sanitary housing. In Scott-Heron’s poem,
this contradiction is played out through the imagery of his sister having a reaction to a rat bite. In the rest of the poem, Scott-Heron touches upon access to clean water and the unequal exchange of his tax dollars versus the invested infrastructure within his community. Michelle Commander, more specifically, states that “Scott-Heron’s sardonic reading of the U.S. government’s focus on the space race figures the moon—and by extension, outer-space politics—as a type of neo-colonialism” (“Space” 424-5). The voyages to the moon were attempts to expand the American brand, conducted at the expense of the marginalized. A stark contrast to Ra’s mytho-poetic formulation of the moon landing, Scott-Heron grounds the accomplishments of Apollo 11 by singling out the social inequalities for people of colour in the United States. “Whitney on the Moon,” moreover, also demonstrates the various stances about this moment circulating in the Black community.

Ra’s response to the Apollo 11 moon landing was not solely restricted to the printed word. His 1971 album My Brother The Wind, Vol. II, which is made up of sessions recorded in 1969 and 1970 in New York with the first half of the record including numbers by Ra and the Arkestra, and the second half consisting of Ra solos on electronic keyboards, contains the only direct sonic engagement with this particular historical event. The song “Walking on the Moon” is dedicated to Neil Armstrong and set to a modified 32-bar form with a steady swing beat that mixes organic jazz instruments with electronic instrumentation that support lyrics touching upon the human dimension of lunar expeditions. Sung by Arkestra singer June Tyson, the song opens with the following words:

Them folks been walking, a walking on, a walking on the moon

If you wake up now, it won’t be too soon
The lyrics suggest a state of alterity by referring to the *Apollo 11* astronauts as “them,” thus setting up a dichotomy of the white astronauts as the “other” and the members of the Arkestra as the standard bearers. The second line suggests that if one were choosing to enter a state of slumber to avoid and ignore political consciousness or the dawn of a new age of modernity, then now would be the time to emerge and engage. After extended solos by Ra on the synthesizer and Pat Patrick on tenor saxophone, the lyrics of the second verse-refrain with a verse tag continue the theme of lunar strolls:

Take your first step out to outer space (2x)
You’re like a little baby who never walked before (1x)
So take your first step out to outer space (1x)

*Verse-tag:*
If you fall down get up and walk some more
You’re like a little baby who never walked before

The opening line of the verse suggests that Neil Armstrong’s and Buzz Aldrin’s walk on the moon is indeed humanity’s and society’s first step into outer space, but also that this process renders the two astronauts into an infant-like state. The verse-tag provides another example of the difficulties of a sustained archival study of Ra. Original pressings of “Walking on the Moon” did not include the verse-tag lyrics. The last 2:30 of the track, which is the portion that includes the verse-tag, were edited out because of poor sound engineering. In live performances, however, singer June Tyson would sing and riff on these lyrics, which have been subsequently preserved in bootleg concert recordings (Campbell 153). “Official” reissues of *My Brother The Wind* restore this closing verse-tag to this track. Though the verse-tag was never officially released in 1970, the lyrics survive in live performance, and have now been restored to recordings presented
as authoritative. The multiple versions of this song highlight how Jairo Moreno’s idea of multiple timelines of jazz history is useful for considering Ra’s life and works. “Walking on the Moon” also offers another entry into the Black counter-archive of the Space Race. The song highlights the multiplicity of Black responses to the Space Race and represents just one view and interpretation of the Apollo 11 moon landing.

Two contemporaries of Ra—Ornette Coleman and Duke Ellington—also penned musical compositions inspired by the moon landing. Brent Hayes Edwards and Katherine Whatley, in their recent essay “Ornette Coleman at Prince Street: A Glimpse from the Archives,” detail how Coleman recorded a piece on 7 July 1969 entitled “Man on the Moon.” The work “apparently made in anticipation of the Apollo 11 moonshot” (Edwards & Whatley) is a bizarre mix of free improvisation by Coleman, Don Cherry, Dewey Redman, Charlie Haden, and Ed Blackwell over a pre-recorded electro-acoustic soundscape by French Canadian composer Emmanuel Ghent. Though it is hard to construct a definitive link between the sounds and title of the piece and the impending moon landing, I read Ghent's futurist sounds merged with the musicians’ organic sound production as celebrating a new age of unlimited possibility of interactions between technology and humans. At the very least, Coleman's piece demonstrates that the impending moon landing was an active topic of discussion throughout multiple segments of African American culture.

Likewise, Duke Ellington contributed to the Black counter-archive of the moon landing. As part of the media coverage for the event, American television station ABC broadcast a day’s worth of coverage, analysis, and commentary of the lunar mission. A segment of this broadcast included the world premiere of “Moon Maiden” by Duke Ellington. An anomaly in the Ellington catalogue, this work is the only known recorded example of Ellington singing his own lyrics. Set
over a 36-bar melody, Ellington’s lyrics sexualize outer space. In the opening stanza, Ellington sings, “Moon maiden, I got to get with you/I made my approach and then revolved.” Here, Ellington uses the language of seduction to describe the moon landing. Within these lyrics, the moon has become feminized and framed a potential female conquest, and in so doing Ellington’s rhetoric matches Kennedy’s. Ellington follows this by singing “Your vibration’s coming in loud and clear/I’m just a fly-by-night guy, but for you /I might be quite the right-so-right guy.” The lyrics play on themes of exotica and modernity that were common tropes of mass and popular culture in the 1950s and 1960s; they also elide the cultural and political significance of the moment. In comments following the broadcast, Ellington opined, “he had no trouble writing about a space voyage, although he did admit it was difficult getting romantic about a spaceship” (Jurek). Like Ra’s poem, Ellington’s lyrics de-emphasize ideologies of nationalism by omitting any reference to the American nation-state. Conversely, Ellington reinforces narratives of sexual hierarchy by framing the moon as a feminized zone of seduction and masculine sexual domination.

Ellington’s role in the media coverage of the Apollo 11 moon landing did not escape the attention of singer and social activist Harry Belafonte. In the “Words of the Week” column of the September 4 1969 issue of Jet Magazine, which consisted of short, topical quotes from prominent black public figures, Belafonte was highly critical not only of Ellington’s involvement in media coverage, but also of the media coverage of the event as a whole. Belafonte states:

Look what happened: No black commentators, not one Negro sociologist or scientist. One network did show Duke Ellington playing the song he wrote in honor of Apollo 11. It’s like they were saying, ‘Yeah, there’s a black man playing music for whitey
to do his important thing by. Keep him in the rhythm section, boys.’ (“Words of the Week”)

For Belafonte, Ellington’s highly visible role in this event reeked of tokenism and essentialism. ABC, instead of choosing to include or highlight the contributions of Black scientists or mathematicians to Project Apollo, limits Black participation in this to the medium of popular entertainment. Ellington’s role of musical accompanist combined with the lack of non-white commentators reinforces my reading of America’s space programs as a manifestation of the extension of the white spatial imaginary. In addition to the denial of Black people being included in the physical act of space exploration, official discussions also exclude Black voices and opinions. Furthermore, Belafonte’s opinions expose the tension surrounding space and Black artists by showing that there was no singular opinion amongst these individuals. Belafonte hears Ellington’s seemingly benign “Moon Maiden” as a sonic reinforcement of Black exclusion.

Belafonte’s castigation of Ellington’s participation in the pomp and ceremony of Apollo 11 echoes earlier entries in the Black counter-archive of the Space Race. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his speech “Where Do We Go From Here?,” delivered to the eleventh annual meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Atlanta, Georgia on 16 August 1967, chastises the nation for its misplaced priorities. For King, if America can spend “twenty billion dollars to put a man on the moon, it can spend billions of dollars to put God's children on their

150 For more about Black contributions to the Space Race see Shetterly and Paul & Moss. 151 “Moon Maiden” was not Duke Ellington’s first foray into musical interpretations of space. For more about Ellington’s “fascination with the space race” see Edwards, “The Literary Ellington.” For another example of Duke Ellington and the intersection of outer space, mobility, and Black musical cultures see Vogel 2012.
own two feet right here on earth” (King).  

King’s point is simple. The nation has misdirected its priorities. The funnelling of untold wealth towards an endeavour that would only benefit a small segment of the population exposes the nation’s moral bankruptcy. How could a nation with untold financial resources and scientific capital launch men into space and engage in a war of political and cultural one-upmanship with a foreign nation, but not have enough moral fortitude to ensure that its citizens, regardless of race, class, gender, or locale, were treated with equal rights and access to basic necessities such as food and water?

King honed his criticism of the space program in his 1967 book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* where he wrote: “Without denying the value of scientific endeavour, there is a striking absurdity in committing billions to reach the moon where no people live, while only a fraction of that amount is appropriated to service the densely populated slums” (86). Space ventures provide the United States with substantial political and scientific capital, but for King they expose the nation’s misdirected priorities and its devaluation of urban populaces.

Similarly, numerous newspaper editorials and columns appeared during the week of the moon landing. These articles echo and amplify King’s castigation of the moon program. In an article in the 15 July 1969 edition of *The Chicago Daily Defender*, Ann Eskridge attests that the upcoming moon landing and the space race are “nothing more than a useless venture when the country should be channelling the billions of dollars into programs of the poor” (Eskridge). Eskridge details the plans of the leadership of the SCLC to protest at the launch site of *Apollo 11* in Cape Kennedy, Florida to bring more awareness to the economic suffering and inequality of the African American community. In an unsigned editorial published in the 25 July 1969 edition

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152 Twenty billion USD adjusted for inflation in 2014 would roughly be the equivalent of 140 billion USD.
of *The Miami Times*, the author advocates that before America gets carried away in the excitement of the moon landing that “Problems of poverty, war and discrimination are far more important to the survival of this great nation [than] a few rocks gathered from the moon's surface” (“First”). Both of these works align with King's sentiments. How could a nation with so much economic wealth and resources let a sizeable portion of its citizenship languish in poverty? While these two articles and the King speeches can hardly be considered exhaustive or authoritative on the subject of African American responses to the Apollo moon missions, it is clear that a theme of critique and questioning of the validity of the moon landing program arose throughout. The rhetoric emerging from the African American community shows that the space program was not a unifying enterprise, but instead served to amplify America's avoidance of addressing social, racial, and economic inequality.

Underlying King’s and other Black public figures’ critiques of the economic and social costs of interstellar inquisitions were the material and earthbound consequences of these projects. Indeed, Black Americans’ suspicions towards the technoscience of America’s space programs were warranted. In a speech delivered on 7 May 1967, Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey declared that the science and technology that rendered it possible for America to put a man on the moon would be the same “techniques that we are going to need to clean up our cities; the management techniques that are involved, the coordination of Government and business, of scientist and engineer” (“HHH”). Humphrey’s words align with the political and social rhetoric

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153 In a wire report for United Press International, Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party, makes a similar statement and suggests “All that effort (sic), all that technology, all the (sic) money could go to be used to solve problems we have down here” (“Moon”).

154 For more on African-American journalism's critique of the space program see Thompson.
of the period where urban cores were seen as sites of decay and social unrest. Order could only be restored to these areas through technology and managerial science. More telling, Humphrey’s words serve as another example of how science and technology treated people of colour as objects of scientific experimentation and their geographic spaces as zones of abjection. Unbeknownst to Humphrey, his words played right into Ra’s sentiment that African Americans were seen as alien and inhuman, and therefore could be treated as scientific objects of inquiry.\footnote{For more about the United States Government’s interest in using the advancements of the Space Age to cure urban plight and racial strife see “Layer 19” in de Monchaux.}

Likewise, John Szwed has drawn attention to how the white rewriting of Black geographic sites under the banner of the Space Race was not limited to northern urban centres. As he noted in a recent lecture, the Redstone Arsenal outside of Hunstville, Alabama, which houses the Marshall Space Flight Center and served as the original site for Werner von Braun’s rocket testing, was built on land acquired by displacing African American sharecroppers (“Sun Ra on Earth”). Huntsville is a site of note in the Ra cosmography as this is the city where he briefly attended university and where he began to reveal his literal and figural alien status. The palimpsestic nature of the Redstone Arsenal is another instance of the impact of the Space Race on Black geographic space in the name of technological advancements and geo-political domination. The African American community’s muted response to the achievements of the Space Race was borne out of an acknowledgement that space travel not only threatened to leave them on the outside looking in during the space race, but also that the accomplishments and achievements of these endeavours would continue the chronicle of using technology and progress to erase black agency and build upon black geographic spaces.
Overall, these examples show that Ra and other African American public figures directly engaged with the significance of the Apollo 11 moon landing, and the Apollo program as a whole, both for their community and for humanity. While the examples detailed above can by no means be seen as definitive or exhaustive, the selections show the multiplicity of registers, both in terms of media and approaches, in which African American public figures assessed this particular historical moment. For individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., pursuit of the moon shot was an example of misdirected finances and disregard for America’s own population. Ornette Coleman’s response to the moon landing is more abstract and through his mix of organic and electronic instrumentation, I read a statement that there is an equal place for man and technology in the future. Sun Ra’s poem reinforces that the moon landing was, and still is, a remarkable achievement, an event that seemed inconceivable only years before, but also that this moment marked the beginning of a new epoch for humanity. “Walking on the Moon” offers a different take. Here, Ra treats the event with a hint of detachment and whimsy through his word choice and lyrics.

Ra’s playful form of engagement with America’s space programs counters the dominant rhetoric of austere seriousness. Brought into dialogue with one another, these documents form the backbone of a Black counter-archive that exposes the heterogeneity of views amongst the black community. And, as we will see with the case of Ra, he continually engaged with these aspects of the space race: both the domestic and the international, the speculative and the real.

“…that space station they got out there”: Sun Ra and Salyut I

From a North American perspective, we often lose sight of the achievements of those who opposed the Space Race. Despite losing the race to successfully land a man on and return him
from the moon, the Soviet Union continued its own commitment to space exploration with the push of establishing a continually orbiting manned space station above Earth. In 1971, this project came to fruition with the launching of *Salyut I*, an extended duration orbiting station capable of hosting upwards of three cosmonauts for a period of up to eight-months.\(^{156}\) Though the launching of this manned platform into orbit was clouded in secrecy and received perfunctory coverage in the American press, the event did not escape the attention of Sun Ra.\(^{157}\)

Ra openly engaged with this event in an interview from 24 May 1971 given on the San Francisco, California radio station KMPX. Over the course of this interview, Ra and the DJ, identified only by his first name, Jay, engage on the usual topics in relation to Ra: ideas of myths, discipline, and the history of Black music. An additional topic that emerges over the course of this conversation, and that is unique to this particular interview, is Ra’s mention of “Russia sending a space station” to outer space (“SR073”). Based on the date of the interview, Ra is referring to the Soviet Union’s *Salyut I*, launched the preceding month. Ra indicates that this event served as a reminder to “Black men and other people” that they need to be cognizant of these endeavours and their implications for earth-based humans (“SR073). For Ra, white technocratic space travel indicates an attempt by Earth’s nation-states to solve societal failures such as overpopulation. Overpopulation has led to a scenario where “each nation will have too many people to feed” (“SR073”). As opposed to working within the realm of the possible to solve this quandary, Ra sees the establishment of a space station as an attempt by nation-states to shift their attention into the territory of the new and the untested, and, in his words:

\(^{156}\) For more about the Soviet Union’s ambitions for a permanent space station see Ivanovich.  
\(^{157}\) For examples of coverage of this event in the *New York Times* see “Soviet,” “Orbiting,” and “Brezhnev.”
prove the impossible, then he can become part of the outer universe, that’s what I’m talkin’ about, to be part of the greater universe where there is plenty of room for everybody, and everybody can be wealthy because the planets are immeasurable, and in this and the creator of the universe has made this for people to be part of, there’s no need for anyone to poor, or being in these miserable conditions they in because they have a whole universe out there that belongs to them because it belongs to the creator.

(“SR073”)

The shift into the impossible implies that the peoples of earth are willing to consider new social alignments and potentialities. From Ra’s perspective, the blackness of outer space offers a hope and a resolution to the misery of earth-based existence; this is an idea he alludes to in the opening of Space is the Place and which I discuss in the opening of this chapter. The quote from this interview, moreover, works at multiple levels in the Ra cosmography. First, Ra positions himself as not from this planet; he is a citizen of space, “his true home” (Szwed, Space 130). What lies in the great beyond of space, both spiritually and materially, he has already seen and knows. Second, Ra’s words remind us, and Black people of earth more specifically, that the awe and wonderment of the technology of interstellar mobility could be once again used to exasperate a divide in humanity along colour lines. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the fight for the inclusion of people of African descent in the space age was a sonic, material, and textual idea that formed the basis of Ra’s aesthetics.

Later in his San Francisco interview, Ra attests to how the establishment of a space station demarcated epochs in earth’s history. Putting a space station into orbit was not an act of
science fiction, but, as Ra implies, something that awakens people to the fact they are now in a different age. This line of logic re-animates early thoughts Ra had about how the launch of *Sputnik I* marked the dawn of a new age for humanity, echoing the lyrics of his 1968 composition “The Satellites are Spinning,” which states “The satellites are spinning/A better day is breaking/Reality is suspended/While planet earth is awaking” (“Satellites”). For Black people to be included in this new age, Ra urges them to action. He insists that the Black people of earth “should be getting things together . . . and claim some planets and the right to be part of outer space.” Equal presence and opportunity in space, for Ra, was an extension of the right for equality and justice on Earth. Ra prophesizes that a white-led incursion into space will illuminate a new age for humanity, but one that is built upon the same structures that propagate these exclusions and inequalities. In Ra’s words, if “other nations get out there in the universe and you’re not a part of it and haven’t express yourself then black people be in a bigger slavery and they greater slaves then they ever have been” (“SR073”). The establishment of a space station, alongside more daring interstellar ventures, lays bare the exclusion of non-dominant peoples. To not be a part of these adventures condones the non-majority to an outsider status, and worse yet, leaves them behind on earth where they remain beholden to those who control the technology and apparatuses to do so. Ra continues this line of reasoning by insisting that the Soviet Union’s wishes and desire to go into space could serve as a template for Black people. The Soviet Union’s push into space, in Ra’s estimation, was merely the act of wishing and putting those desires into action. As Ra saw it, the desire to go into space could be achieved by a concentrated effort and belief in the possibility of doing so.

Through these brief moments of conversation, Ra’s relationship to the real tasks and adventures of space travel come to the fore. Achievements, such as the Soviet Union’s
embedding of a space station into earth’s orbit, did not escape Ra’s attention. Despite his claims of otherworldliness, this interview divulges his interest in and awareness of the world around him. Engaging with the Soviet Union’s space labours shows Ra’s desires to transgress national boundaries or extend beyond nation-based moments such as the Apollo 11 mission. Ra’s vision of space was extra-national and extra-territorial and offered the promise of fairer and more equitable social arrangements.

**After Apollo?: Space is the Place and the Decline of NASA**

Ra’s Black counter-archive to the Space Race was not limited to its achievements and success. Ra continued his engagement with nation-state sponsored interstellar ventures after the Apollo 11 moon landing. In the months following Apollo 11, the United States carried out six additional missions to the moon, but as I noted earlier, this period was met with ambivalence from a nation grappling with deindustrialization, urban strife, and international conflict. Coupled with the Nixon administration’s shift in space policy and a commitment to the dismantling of Johnson’s “Great Society” social programs, Project Apollo was prematurely ceased followed by the implementation of budget cuts to NASA as a whole. NASA’s decline in prestige in the national consciousness and the question of what to accomplish and conquer next formed an integral portion in a key document within the Space Race’s Black counter-archive: Ra’s 1972 film *Space is the Place*.

The bond between space exploration, technology, race, and NASA’s rapid fall from public consciousness, as Ramzi Fawaz points out, informs a scene in this film. The scene in

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158 For an excellent summary of the domestic issues facing the Nixon administration during this period see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s recent book *From #BLACKLIVESMATTER to Black Liberation*, esp. 51-74.
question is framed sonically by June Tyson singing “If you find earth boring/just the same old
same thing/come on, sign up for outer spaceways incorporated/” while the camera, from a first-
person perspective, moves through a red door with the title “Outer Space Employment Agency”
stencilled on the front. Once in the building, we see Ra sitting behind a desk flanked by an
individual with the head of the Egyptian god Enubis and a Moog synthesizer. The camera reveals
that the individual we followed into the agency is a white, balding, middle-aged man who works
for NASA designing guidance systems. Fawaz interprets this scene as a clash between Ra and his
myth-science and the NASA employee, Curtis Rockwell, whose training has “not prepared him
to encounter an interpretation of space travel that does not coincide with traditional mechanics of
rocket science” (“Space” 1107). I contend that the scene also offers Ra’s condemnation of what
NASA and space exploration had become and not so much what it could offer. The guidance
system engineer with his short-sleeved, white button-down shirt and black tie represents a vision
of NASA that is managerial and desk-based. No longer attempting to achieve impossibilities, the
bureaucracy and the officialdom of US government work have enveloped the agency, and more
tellingly, are no longer the focal point of American culture and prestige. In other words, space
exploration had fallen from a place of prominence to a mere afterthought swallowed up by
managerial science.

The processes and equations for Ra’s space travel include “multiplicity,” “teleportation,”
and “transmolecurization” (Ra, Space is the Place): approaches that run against the white,
western approaches to science, mathematics, and space travel that Rockwell represents. In
addition, Rockwell’s plea for a job also points to the decrease in support and funding for NASA,
which, as Matthew Tribe points out, became evident in 1970 “when NASA announced it was
scrapping the last three planned Apollo missions due to budget constraints, and relatively few
Americans objected” (9). No longer a financial priority, the United States’ divestment from scientific and technological space travel creates a void in outer space. In the absence of nation-states claiming territories beyond Earth, Ra fills this void with his myth-fuelled approach to space travel and black diasporic sensibilities which suggests that space travel and exploration is no longer the sole purview of nation-states, but could also be carried out by individuals or non-governmental collectives. Travel within and to space, moreover, no longer had to be goal-oriented. This transmolecular overhaul of space travel calls to mind Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s question of what happens when non-entities (i.e. the dispossessed and the displaced) rise up and take control of the vessel (*Undercommons* 88-99). Ra and the Arkestra’s vision of space travel demands that we view outer space mobility as an improvisational, non-linear activity, one that can be carried out for pure joy and not in service to a mission of conquest or domination.

**Conclusion**

The Black counter-archive surrounding nation-based supported space exploration from 1969-1972 provides us with a sustained analysis and evaluation of America’s and the Soviet Union’s involvement with outer space. What emerges from this discourse is a nuanced discussion of earth-based racial politics, the relationship between race and technology, and what role outer space would play in the rejuvenation and reconfiguration of humanity. I believe that my initiation of a conversation about race and space during the latter phase of the long civil-rights era opens up new considerations of Ra’s relationship with and to the Black public sphere during this social movement. Along these same lines, this line of inquiry opens up a parallel archive of documents that questions the master archive of the Space Race.
One cannot think of Ra as an outsider or an isolated figure during the long civil-rights era. I have shown that we need instead to view Ra as a voice, albeit a unique one, amidst a broader constellation of black public figures and intellectuals concerned with the potentiality and ramifications of space travel, colonization, and exploration. What makes Ra’s inclusion in this circle of intellectual activity distinctive is his proposed outcome. Ajay Heble, in *Landing on the Wrong Note*, suggests that Ra’s sonic and visual mix of ancient Egypt with technology and outer space marks “a shift in postcolonial struggles for identity formation” (125). Rather than curing earth’s ailments by correcting historical narratives and recasting contemporaneous social and political structures, Ra’s music and words ask us to “envision new models for an aesthetic of resistance to generate a space outside the very framework of domination” (125). Instead of interrogating how space exploration could function as a metaphor to address social inequality on this planet or suggesting that the act of departing earth could solve racial injustice, Ra proposes that shifting existence into the outer depths of space could provide the opportunity to escape nation-state and legally based structures of racism and offer new social and political configurations. And yet, the question remains: Does this concentrated pool of archival documents have any resonance today? The answer is yes. In two examples, we can see how Ra’s mantra of “space is the place” continues to this day.

The first example is a short story by Nigerian-American speculative fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor. Blending text with an accompanying audio transcription in an on-line format, Okorafor tackles the trope of “advance-fee fraud” via email and transmutes it to the realm of space with a Nigerian astronaut stranded in space seeking financial assistance to fund his return to earth. In the story, Dr. Bakare Tunde writes to an online publication soliciting funds to offset

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159 For more about Black public spheres see Dawson 2012.
the costs of returning his cousin, Air Force Major Abacha Tunde, from space. Major Tunde has been abandoned on the Soviet Union’s Salyut 6 space station and his cousin writes to a newspaper to solicit money to fund a return voyage for Tunde. Okorafor’s story is unique as the narrative acknowledges the speculative archives and genealogies of Sun Ra, Parliament, and Funkadelic, while also developing the theme of nation-states and their white citizens ceding space exploration to private companies. Okorafor’s story, in addition to commenting upon the claiming of space in the name of private corporations, provides an assessment for the disposability of black bodies in space. Abandoned in the wake of the Soviet Union’s dissolution with his place on a return voyage instead taken up by outbound cargo, Tunde becomes biopolitical refuse left to rot in outer space. Okorafor’s story affirms space as the domain of white corporations and as a place exclusionary to black bodies. I also read this tale as suggestive that the blackness of outer space does not offer a space completely free of racial injustice.

The second example, a sketch from a 2012 episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, also shows the urgency for continuing to place entries into the Black counter-archive of space. This sketch, which was filmed in the wake of the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, plays upon ideas of the blackness of outer space offering comfort and solitude to the Black diaspora as well as the mapping of white spatial imaginaries and de-improvisational agendas about outer space. To escape the increase in racial violence enacted towards black men and women in the United States, *Daily Show* correspondent Michael Che departs for space, which he positions as an extra-national zone outside of the racial covenants of the nation. In response to why he has travelled all the way to outer space, Che announces that there is nowhere more comfortable for a black man than the “infinite blackness of outer space.” Shortly after declaring the hospitable nature of space towards black subjects, Che is pulled over by a law enforcement
officer and queried about what he is doing and if he has a receipt for his helmet. Che’s sketch, much like Okorafor’s story, highlights perceptions of the unsuitability of black bodies in space and calls attention to the increase in range of the white spatial imaginary—that there truly is no area safe from the surveillance of and violence towards non-white individuals. Despite functioning as a zone of respite in the artistic, political, and spatial imaginaries of marginalized social groups, space threatens to become enmeshed within and co-opted by dominant systems of thought.

Ultimately, what both of the above examples demonstrate is the lasting influence of Ra individually and the Black counter-archive of the space race as a whole. The Black counter-archive does not represent a closed and fixed archive, but rather a conceptual warehouse that is ongoing and continuously accepting new entries. In the case of Ra, the intellectual and material items of this counter-archive help reveal his engagement with the later phases of the Space Race but also how vital the idea of the archive, both real and imagined, is to assessing Ra’s life, works, and legacy.
Conclusion: Saturn’s Ark—A New Type of Archive

The performative, material, and intellectual archives of Sun Ra demand that we think more deeply about his relationship to and interaction with the archives of Black expressive culture. As I have demonstrated in this study, Ra’s engagement with these various repositories goes beyond surface level evocations. Through his multimedia performances, dress, and engagement with the intellectual economy of the Space Race, Ra’s life, works, and legacy repel the textual, official, and definitive demands of the archive. Instead, Ra’s modalities of archival practice call attention to the discursive power of the archive to preclude elements that do not fit within the dominant paradigm. Also, he demonstrates how material configurations of the archive yield different results. Indeed, Ra’s performances resonate with Marco Pustianz’s notion of “counter-cultural praxis,” and I have shown how the work of the Arkestra stands outside the gates of the sanctity of the archive (472). Instead, my work demonstrates how inserting a non-textual mode of culture into the space of the archive resists the textual bias and construct of these spaces. The materiality of dress, for example, provides a three-dimensional object that can contain its own embedded cultural meaning. The Black counter-archive of the Space Race, in short, presents an archival collection that provides a more detailed and inclusive account of a pivotal moment in history. Turning towards performance, dress, or subtended histories as “alternative resources” for archival research and discussion allows archival forms such as embodied cultural memory, the materiality of clothing and hair, and historical counter-narratives to be included in archival discussions (476).

In the case of Sun Ra, we have an individual whose practice and praxis break the logic of the capturing of history. His improvisatory, transcultural, futurist aesthetic resists archival narratives and power structures that rely on smooth narratives, stable objects, and sanctioned
histories. This resistance to conventional archival practices and chronicles demonstrates the emancipatory power that resides in Ra’s performative, alternative, and counter archives. Instead of treating archival sources as fixed entities that reinforce a definitive history, Ra remoulds the archives of Black expressive culture and its multiplicities to construct new futures of Black existence.

Ra’s work with archives also alters our perception of his life and legacy. His deep-seated engagement with archives of Black expressive culture and his place within the construction of a counter-archive force us to consider Sun Ra as an archivist himself. Ra’s work collecting, curating, and preserving modes of Black culture and Black intellectual practice for future generations mirrors many of the duties and obligations archivists fulfill today. Along these same lines, Ra’s intervention and conservation of cultural practices of importance to the wider Black community continues the tradition of jazz artists who conduct community-oriented activities. In the case of Ra, this activism takes the shape of preserving modalities of Black expressive culture. These archival acts are administered with an eye towards capturing these traditions while also using them to construct a new form of social being. By turning to these sources, Ra uniquely demonstrates how the creative practices and intellectual histories of the Black diaspora are equally as worthy to be considered as an archive as textual-based documents and dominant forms of culture.

By pursuing this angle, my intervention allows us to see Ra’s persona and performance practice in a new light. Focusing on his excursions into and manipulations of the archives of Black expressive culture changes how we must assess Sun Ra’s life and legacy. Indeed, we must view him and his aesthetics as engaging in profoundly important cultural work; Ra’s aesthetics are themselves a form of archival intervention. His play with early African American staged
performance, stylization of Black diasporic dress practices, and reengineering of the Flying African Myth for the Space Age serve as examples of this work. Revitalizing these elements for future generations performs two vital tasks. First, Ra’s archival interventions serve as an act of recognition and acknowledgement that the aural, sonic, material, and performative modalities of Black expressive culture contain an internal epistemology and aesthetics worthy of historical preservation. These cultural practices form the backbone of Ra’s aesthetics that preach a social position of alterity and a political message of liberation. More importantly, I argue that bringing these elements to the fore allows us to tease out the links between Ra’s space-oriented epistemology and the cultural histories and intellectual traditions of Black expressive culture.

Second, Ra’s archival objects and their resistance to the sanctity and stability of the archive bring to the fore how his aesthetics and practice fit within the Black radical tradition of delimiting the primacy of western and modernist epistemologies. For example, Ra’s sound recordings and their accompanying print packaging upset linear narratives of progress and definable moments of history. In this same vein, Ra’s extramusical and theatrical concert performances not only defy the commodification of Black expressive culture, but also, in their form and structure, produce a cultural act that exceeds the media containers of the archive. Ra’s dress demonstrates how material items can be positioned as an archive themselves, illuminating our understanding of an individual’s social position and politics as well as that individual’s relationship with and to Black diasporic practices. Ra’s visions of space travel as part of a larger Black counter-archive of the Space Race disrupt nation-state-backed trajectories and histories of space travel. Placing Ra within a constellation of Black intellectual labour creates space for questioning who benefited from deep space ventures, but also accentuates a counter-memory and a counter-history of a global, epoch defining event. Each of these archival approaches resists the
textuality and stability of the archive and demonstrates the rich possibilities of engaging with non-textual, material, and counter-archives.

Ra’s archival intervention, while unique in its own right, fits within the matrix of intellectual, political, and cultural activity defined as Black Radicalism. As Cedric Robinson cogently argues in *Black Marxism*, a long history exists of Black political thought and activity that refutes the categorizations and hierarchies of western modernity. Western society, Robinson notes, rests on categorical and racial difference that leads to the sectoring of society into white and black spheres. The maintenance of these boundaries, Robinson writes, demanded “immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies in the West” (*Black* 4). The construction of Euro-centric narratives that advanced white superiority and pushed out the presence and achievements of peoples of African descent required an incredible amount of effort on the parts of these authors. I suggest that the contents of most institutionally controlled archives are a physical manifestation of these energies. From Robinson’s perspective, Marxist interpretations of history subsume the efforts of Black radicalism as part of a global movement concerned with class and economics. Robinson distinguishes, instead, that Black Radicalism works outside of the constructs of Western civilization. In his words, Black Radicalism is a “specifically African response to an oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development” (73). To respond to the status of objecthood and commodification, Black people formulate social configurations and political practices from an African diasporic perspective. In this way, one can see how the archives of black expressive culture called upon by Ra operate as an Africana response to European-derived approaches to ideas and acts of constructing historical narratives.

Ra and the Arkestra, with their invocation of Black diasporic cultural and intellectual practices, fabricate and invoke archives outside the domain of textual documents and physical
locations. What Ra and the Arkestra achieve with their multimodal performances is the curation of an archival repository outside the precinct of Western modernity. In fact, Ra and the Arkestra are, I suggest, part of the Black Radical tradition. My positioning of Ra and the Arkestra within this Black history comes into focus if we return to the idea of the archive as an apparatus of state power. Writing on the relationship between archives and the state, Antoinette Burton, much like Ann Laura Stoler, proposes that we consider how colonial archives “served as technologies of imperial power, conquest, and hegemony” (“Introduction” 7). While Burton focuses on how imperial entities filter and manipulate archives to propagate narratives of exceptionalism and justification of their actions, her argument of the archive as an extension of the ethos and politics of the state and in turn as a “site of knowledge, an arbiter of truth, and a mechanism for shaping the narratives of history” echoes earlier statements by Ra (2).

In the opening of the 1980 Robert Mugge documentary *A Joyful Noise*, Ra states: “They say that history repeats itself, but history is only his story, you haven’t heard my story yet, my story is different from his story, my story is not part of history” (Mugge). Ra’s syllabic play between history, his story, my story, and mystery places the spotlight on the idea of history and archives. For Ra, history, much like the archive, was a manufactured narrative that excluded the stories, experiences, and knowledges of the subjugated. His turn towards ancient myths and Black cultural practices as a knowledge repository undermines the sanctimony of the archive. Ra turns towards Black sonic, performative, and material elements as a historical source to generate new narratives—his stories—for consumption, but also as a place to lay the foundation for new futures. Similar to how Robinson suggested that Black Radicals turned away from the constructs of Western society to build their resistance movements, Ra also proposes in his work to look
outside of established histories and textual documents of institutionally condoned memory to construct new pasts and futures.

If we broaden the scope of our discussion to within the frame of the African American community, Ra’s performative, material, and intellectual archives bring to the fore the winnowing of acceptable forms of cultural memory. Indeed, on a singular level, Ra’s acts of radical archivization stand on their own as an epistemological approach with global impact. Archivist Rabia Gibb, in her essay on the issues of African American representation in established archives, details how the development and inclusion of African American archives into larger archival repositories runs the risk of putting diversity on display while replicating the social structures of the Black community. In the years after emancipation, Gibbs describes how “African American history took on a more demonstrative component, often expressed through commemorative exhibitions which included parades and speeches” (197). Instead of turning towards books or written documents, Gibbs foregrounds how Black Americans preserved their histories and stories in performative, aural, and sonic acts. In the years leading from post-reconstruction to the start of the Progressive era, the Black community emphasized aspects of elegance, order, and public deportment in these public displays as a form of social uplift. However, around the turn of the century, as Gibbs notes, “black historians now wanted to archive and disseminate information based on established research instead of perpetual social myths and exaggerations” (198). This shift in archival priorities was a move away from cultural practices such as public displays like Juneteenth celebrations and folktales such as John the Conquerer or the Flying African. Instead, Black historians wanted to move towards scientific methods of categorization and accession numbers and away from the ephemeral and performative. In short,  

160 For more about Black public displays of memory during this period see Brundage, esp. 55-104.
there was a push to have Black archives look, feel, and function in the same manner as white archives. The very cultural practices that Ra invokes in his own performances, by contrast, continue a historical trajectory of performative memory and non-textual forms of culture as a mode of remembrance.

In fact, this effort to create a legitimate historical record for future generations heightens the tension that emerges when we discuss Sun Ra in relation to the African American community. While Ra’s aesthetics resonate with Arthur Schomberg’s edict that “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (“Negro” 231), the disconnect is obvious. Instead of establishing a permanent archival home telling the story of social uplift and politics of respectability, Ra turns towards social and cultural practices deemed less appropriate for the social advancement of African Americans. Ra’s reinvestment in working-class sacred and secular cultural practices as archival sources, accentuates, as Gibbs explains, how Black archives reinforce social stratification and regional difference. Gibbs also calls attention to the role of Historical Black College and Universities (HBCU), which have their own internal histories of biases, priorities, and hierarchies in terms of race, class, color, and economics, as some of the earliest sites of Black archives and archivization.161 These internal social categories lead to the silencing of alternative voices and perspectives as well as more coarse and uncouth modes of cultural performance. Considering the internal politics of archiving Black life and culture, we see that Ra’s archival resistance takes on further meaning. In addition to resisting the textual

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161 For a more thorough history of Historically Black Colleges and Universities see Drewery and Doermann. For more about colorism at HBCUs see Gasman and Abiola. For a specific example of an HBCU and the politics of archives and archivization see Howard University’s Moorland Spingarn Research Center’s “About” section on their website.
orientation of archives, Ra resists a Black archiving epistemology that wishes to mute the archival presence of performative aspects of Black expressive culture.

From another vantage point, Sun Ra’s archival collections and my positioning of Ra as an archivist also dialogue with a wider exchange about the relationship between jazz and archives. This dissertation supplements the larger conversation about how the discursive practices and power of archives fit into the formation of the canon, archives, and repertory of jazz. Moreover, this dissertation fits into more nascent conversations about where and what we consider the archives of jazz. Do the archives of jazz reside in textual archival documents such as letters and publicity materials, or is the history of jazz an acoustical phenomenon documented in sound recordings and discographies? At the same time, my work reinforces Jim Merod’s notion of jazz as a “cultural archive” (“Jazz” 1). Merod views jazz as an African American cultural practice whose qualities of improvisation and signifyin’ resist logics of commodification. Jazz, as I have argued throughout my analyses of Sun Ra’s work, is an archival repository, but one that can sometimes withstand the officialdom and fixity of the archive.

For example, Michael Heller, in his recent monograph on the loft jazz scene of 1970s New York, proposes a new front for the consideration of archival jazz studies: that of personal collections of jazz musicians. Building off his own work with the prolific improviser Juma Sultan, Heller details how private collections offer new sites for critical investigations of jazz and improvised music, and how they accelerate conversations about the methodological approaches and questions about historical research. In his conclusion, Heller asks the pressing question: “Where is the archive of jazz?” (Loft 177). While I would prefer to frame this question

162 Sultan was an active musician and venue facilitator of the loft jazz scene in 1970s New York and a member of Jimi Hendrix’s band that performed at Woodstock in 1969.
in the plural, “Where are the archives of jazz?” Heller details how jazz research methodologies have migrated over the years. Starting with oral histories, the study of jazz moved to sound recordings and discographies, shifted towards rich historical contextualization, and more recently has focused on social histories and ethnographies. In many ways, the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra and the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection fit within this new paradigm as laid out by Heller. The materials that form these collections were curated by a single individual, Alton Abraham, and are exemplary of what Brent Hayes Edwards has coined as “autoarchivization,” or, in Heller’s words, “the purposeful establishment of archives of the self” (Edwards 60; Heller 148). The press clippings, record requests, lead sheets, notebooks, and album jacket covers were collected by Abraham as a way of documenting the practices and praxis of an artist and his record label, which, even from the outset, existed outside the established business practices of the marketing and selling of jazz. The diversity of this collection reverberates with Heller’s argument that archival jazz studies must be a multi-modal, multi-genre task that reads and reaches across disciplinary praxis and media containers.

Along these same lines, Sun Ra’s multimedia and extramusical performances function as a mode of archival practice through their mining and redeployment of forms of historical Black staged performances. Integrating performative, theatrical, and material elements into his performances, Ra’s concerts are an excursion into the archives of jazz performance, but ones that venture into an archival history that has largely been de-emphasized, erased, or ignored. With his homages to, and twists upon, Black sacred and secular working-class performance cultures, Ra knowingly nods and winks towards a performative archive of jazz that was labeled as too ribald.

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163 For more about how Ra and Abraham built a record label from scratch see Corbett, “Sun Ra.”
coarse, or excessive. For a truly representative archival history of jazz, we must, as Ra’s example teaches us, take into full consideration performative, material, and contextual archives from across the Black diaspora.

Furthermore, Heller directs us to consider the implications of what we do with archival sources. While in many ways it is easy to go to an archive, look at a document, and report back what the artefact tells us, Heller urges for more. In the closing pages of his chapter on jazz and archives, Heller writes: “The archive is a storehouse, but it is also a mechanism. A mine, but also a pickaxe” (178). Archival documents should not be seen as static objects; rather they need to be seen as tools for scholars, critics, and activists to bring shielded stories to light or shed new light on previously existing topics and individuals. The archival documents of Sun Ra provide us with a wealth of textual, visual, and sonic documents that help propel investigations of Ra’s life and works in new directions. These documents, and their configuration within a physical archive, on the other hand, can also be used as an implement to chip away existing historical facades and reveal what lies beneath the surface. These archives can be used as a tool to build new pasts, new presents, and new futures in relation not only to Sun Ra, but also to individuals, geographies, and vital moments of the Black diaspora. We need to load the documents and performance practices of Sun Ra onto a new ark—one that has space for textual, visual, and sonic artefacts spread over a wide array of media formats. In this new configuration, these documents could attend to the heterogeneous nature of Black expressive culture, but, more importantly, they can be used as part of a larger mechanism to construct new futures.
Coda

“Excuse me while I improvise”: Archival Research as Improvisatory Act

We walk into a glassed wall room to unfurl a canister of 16mm film labelled “Les Halles” that purports to be a live, in-colour, concert recording of Sun Ra and the Arkestra from 1971.

Fig 5.1 Cover of 16mm film canister, “Les Halles”
She plugs in the light table, checks the magnifying loupe, and utters “Excuse me, while I improvise.” This offhand comment and moment shared between me and Christine Colburn, a Reader Services Manager in the Special Collections and Research Center at the University of Chicago, perfectly distills my experiences of research in the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra and my larger probe into the relationship between Sun Ra and Black diasporic archives. As I indicated in the opening of this study, an ethos of improvisation permeates the persona and performances of Sun Ra. And why should this be no different than the work I conducted with his archives?

Just as a host of scholars, critics, artistic practitioners, research clusters, and initiatives have explored how the idea and practice of improvisation extends beyond artistic acts and can inform our everyday social practices, I argue that many of the qualities that elucidate our understanding of the social possibilities improvisation offers us reverberates with the act and performance of archival-based research. In other words, I believe that archival-based research is itself an improvisatory activity. Allow me to explain.164

**Listening:** “A jazz musician,” as George Lipsitz writes, “has to listen carefully, to recognize not only what the music being played is, but also what it *could* be, to listen for the prophetic foreshadowing in even the simplest phrase” (“Improvised Listening” 9). Working with archival materials and working in archives relies on listening. One has to listen to the archivist and the library staff to find out more about the collection, what documents are within, what requests are possible. Along these same lines, one’s excursion into the archive demands the act of listening.

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164 My riffing on key terms in the emerging field of Critical Studies of Improvisation is modelled after the coda of Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz’s *Fierce Urgency of Now*, and the structure of Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble’s *Spontaneous Acts*. 
The textual and audio documents in the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra and the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection forces one to listen to the documents, not in the sense that they are examples of speaking texts, but rather one has to read and hear what the documents are saying. I, much as Lipsitz has suggested, have to see and listen to what could be in the documents and assess what future stories and possibilities the documents can tell. Listening, for Lipsitz, “teaches performers to prepare for rupture and to respond to it. It is not simply an aesthetic practice but rather an epistemological and ontological imperative” (10). Substitute archival researchers for performers, and Lipsitz’s maxim holds true. Jacques Derrida, in a talk given to mark the official opening of the *Fonds Hélène Cixous* at the *Bibliothèque national de France*, describes archival research with the papers and documents of French Feminist Hélène Cixous as a “mingling of voices” from diverse perspectives and critical methodologies, and he advocates that the Cixous papers should form the heart of “an active research centre, of a new kind, open to scholars from all parts of the world” (*Geneses* 8, 83). What Derrida proposes is an archival repository that promotes collaboration amongst and, more importantly, listening to and between archival researchers. Like improvisers, the act of archival research depends on good listening.

**Risk/Trust:** Archival research is inherently risky. The hope is that you will travel to the archive, find a document, and that this source will underscore and buttress the argument you are trying to make. But, as Ellen Waterman reminds us, “the possibility of failure is always imminent” (“Improvised Trust” 59). The risk of archival research is that a document as described in the finding aid might not what it purports to be. The finding aid of the Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra lists the contents of Box 1, Folder 1 as a copy of the first issue of *Change*, the magazine that John Sinclair curated as part of his efforts with the Detroit Artists’ Workshop in Detroit,
Michigan during the mid-1960s.\footnote{For more about the magazine see Fitzgerald.} The table of contents lists eight pages of essays and reviews about Sun Ra and his music. Alas, these specific pages have been cut. Waterman’s statement about failure could not ring more true. In archival research, failure is always a box away. On the other hand, “risk takers stand to win big” (60). My excursion into the Sun Ra/El Saturn archive yields significant findings. Within this collection are four interviews that have not circulated widely and which contain several points of information that have proven useful in advancing my argument that Sun Ra was just as concerned with the historical moment as he was with the construction of new futures. The improvisatory act of risk creates an avenue for assessing archival research and provides a methodological approach that accounts for the contingencies and risk of visiting the archives and assaying the collections

**Surprise:** Writing about her own experiences in curating improvisational performance pieces with aggrieved communities across three continents, Rebecca Caines discusses how “Improvised methodologies and practices have also caused difficult or challenging surprises, taking the projects from their origins and planned routes into uncharted and perilous places” (“Improvised Surprise” 384). While archival research does not have the same social urgency as working with Indigenous communities in Australia and Canada or devising a performance piece across sectarian lines in Ireland, the fact remains that in working with archives you must welcome the element of surprise. When working in the archives, one must be prepared for mislabelled items or noticeable absences. In leaving room for spontaneous contingencies, an archival researcher embraces a methodology that, to paraphrase Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, resists closure, enjoys interruption, syncopation, and indeterminacy (*Fierce* 234).
Such a moment occurred for me while listening to interviews in the basement of the Experimental Sound Studio, when I heard Ra begin to talk about Russia’s “space platform.” Ra’s discussion of the Soviet Union space program came as a surprise, as much of Ra’s persona and aesthetics relies on the acceptance of his otherworldliness. Granting space to interruption and indeterminacy allowed for a deeper investigation of the cultural impact of the Space Race, but also a perusal of English-language literature on the achievements of the Soviet Union’s space program. More importantly, Ra’s acknowledgement of Salyut I demonstrates how Ra’s opinions about space travel and exploration reached beyond the boundaries and context of the United States. Allowing for surprise in archival research creates space for archival research to take you in different and often unexpected directions.

**Ethics and Responsibility:** Hinging on responsive acts of listening, trust, and surprise, improvisation also relies on an ethos of ethics and responsibility. Writing on this topic, Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, argue that to be responsible “You need to account for what the other really has to say in order to be responsible, that is, to account morally and ethically for your own actions in relation to others” (*Fierce* 239). Being responsible is not only a practice of good ethics, but also a practice of responding in a way that is productive, responsible, and respective to what others have said in past or are saying in the present. More recently, Daniel Fischlin has explored how improvisation relies on a thick network of historical moments, memories, and feelings that are only brought to the fore via improvisation (“Improvised” 289).

In many ways, archival research relies on this same ethos. The ability to work with archival sources and the dense tangle of historical documentation and cultural memory embedded within them demands that the archival researcher respond to these artefacts in a
respective manner. Perusing documents in an archival setting forces one to be self reflexive. One must ask: What I am doing with these documents; what stories were these documents intended to preserve; does my intervention advance a new narrative that is inclusive and productive; does my work, to reference Fischlin’s words, add consonance or dissonance (290)? These are all questions that immediately framed my work as research and pushed me to think productively about how my work can be ethical and responsible.

To this extent, the idea of improvisatory archival research as ethical and responsible can inform larger questions of institutional and geographic inequities. In my case, I found myself bound to consider the implications of conducting work on an individual who preached social and physical liberation through space travel at an institute founded off the labour and profits of slave labour (the University of Chicago) in a section of a city noted for its economic disparities and racial injustices (the South Side of Chicago). As a cis-heterosexual white male, does my navigation of multiple layers of institutional boundaries and controls reinforce these wider issues of archival access and power relations all within in a geographic space that shaped Ra’s persona and informed his professional development? I found that to work with archival materials is an act of improvisatory practice-based research that must be conducted with a high degree of ethical responsibility. I found myself reflecting on how handling boxes, opening folders, and flipping through their contents meant I also had to engage with the cultural forces that contributed to the production of archival artefacts, the individuals who authored said documents, and the social

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166 For more see “Case.”

167 As William Sites outlines in two essays, the infrastructure and geography of Chicago more likely than not contributed to Ra’s reconfiguration of mobility as freedom to fit the demands of late-twentieth century technoculture. For more see Sites, “Radical” and Sites, “We Travel.”
politics that lead to the materials in question becoming housed in an official and sanctioned archive.

In conclusion, I argue that the labour and production of archival research is an improvisational act that should be equally concerned with the process as with the end results. Emphasizing the process, as opposed to the findings, reinforces my idea that Black archives are objects that resist categorization, ossification, and reification. In the case of Sun Ra, we have an example of an individual whose life, music, and words exemplify the thorny relationship between the archives and Black life. To begin to capture the life and legacy of Sun Ra and the Arkestra in an archival setting we must construct a new ark. This ark must be malleable and flexible to accommodate the richness and variety of Ra’s music and performance practices. These sources can range from musical scores and excerpts of poetry to moving images and sound recordings alongside articles of clothing. Like Sun Ra’s fantastic and emancipatory visions of Saturn, the ark and archives of an individual from Saturn need to defy the conventional and call for the formation of new forms of archives, new types of archival objects, and new approaches to archival research.
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