

Sun Ra's Mystical Time

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*"The future is always here in the past."*¹

Sun Ra matters. More now than ever. His music, his metamusical thought, his prose, his relationalities, his myth-science, his activism, his Afro-black mytho-ontology, his imprint on proliferating lines of Afrofuturist expression, his creative decodings of histories and futures, his imaginings of alternative anthropocenes—alternative nows that express, through the collaborative action of musical expression, the impingements of mythical pasts and utopian futures; this is why Sun Ra remains an activist force the transformative potential of which often gets swept aside in narratives that foreground his utopian aspirations.

This essay is a slightly modified version of a talk that I gave at the 2017 Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts conference, the theme of which was "Out of Time." We're in an extended moment where it feels like we might truly be out of time: catastrophic climate change is imminent; real dialogue across ideological boundaries is increasingly impossible; capitalism is unquestionably assumed as the default condition within which contemporary life unfolds, even as it increasingly is shown to destroy just about everything it touches (and even the tiniest flickers of challenges to capitalism's unquestioned hegemony are mercilessly mocked as purely fantastical or even dangerous); legislation is voted upon (and settled along party lines) without due process; tribal fears and loathings ignite new violence—against women, against LGBTQ communities, against ethnic and religious Others. Even guiding themes of post-structuralist epistemology, like the contestable status of so-called "facts," are mobilized to score partisan political points—viz. the invocation of "alternative facts" by right-wing political advisors. We should celebrate the belated acknowledgment in public discourse of the contingent nature of reality (and its representation in "facts") but that acknowledgment is mired in craven political gamesmanship rooted in an ontology of winners and losers. It is easy to fall into despair, intensified by knowing that the same forces that create all of these conditions have also created a mechanism—through gerrymandering and voter suppression and micro-fascistic collusion between party, media, and capital—that makes the possibility of substantive change an elusive prospect indeed.

Sun Ra ascribes all of this, to an extent, to time, at least as we understand it. When he arrives, in the opening moments of Space is the Place, on his mythical new planet, free of the structuring forces of hegemonic Earthly conditions, radically displacing space and time, matter and meaning, he proclaims that now "we work on the other side of time." Sun Ra's myth-science is no utopian dream, however, it is a script for vital action in a here and now: our here, this now. More than ever, Sun Ra matters...

* * *

*"The music is different here, the vibrations are different—not like planet Earth... Planet Earth: sound of guns, anger, frustration—there was no one to talk to up on planet Earth as I understand... We'll set up a colony for black people here: see what they do on a planet all their own, without any white people there. They could drink in the beauty of this planet, it would affect their vibrations, for the better of course. Another place in the universe, up under different stars—that would be where the altered destiny would come in. Equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time... We'll bring them here through the isotope teleportation, transmolecularization... Or better still, teleport the whole planet here through music..."*²

In Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, one of the most fundamental science fiction conceits, the time machine, is used to construct a meaning-enacting conduit to the past: to Butler's protagonist Dana's past, but also to enliven and clarify aspects of the relationship between contemporary African American society and its histories. The specific mechanism by which time travel is enacted is not made clear, nor is it important: Butler, the consummate storyteller, shares only what she absolutely needs in order to draw us in: we're right there in the middle of the action; our knowledge is positioned and partial, and therefore phenomenologically rich.

¹ Baraka 2011 [1995], xi.

² Sun Ra 2003 [1974].

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Because time travel for Dana is actual and embodied, the psychic and physical wounds that she receives are very much real; her scars speak the histories of actual lacerations, her psychological trauma expresses fears born out of actual dangers. That Dana's pain is a metaphor for the psychic scars borne by contemporary descendants of slaves living in a still racially stratified and culturally polarized US capitalist culture is unsubtle, but all the more powerful for it.

Sun Ra is another kind of time-space traveller. While official records have his birth taking place in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama, he famously disavowed that account, dislocating his own origin story to Saturn, changing or erasing details of his past and inventing new ones. The truth or non-truth of Sun Ra's claims matter little. I'll develop this idea shortly; for now I offer two meditations by Kelly Josephs and one by John Szwed:

"...what does time and place...really matter?" (Josephs 2013, 129);

"...freedom cannot be bound to...official chronologies or geographies; it exists in the cooperative 'in process' between the past, present, and future of an integrated black diaspora" (130);

"Here...., space was both a metaphor of exclusion and of reterritorialization, of claiming the 'outside' as one's own, of tying a revised and corrected past to a claimed future." (Szwed 1998, 140)

Ruth Mayer offers another take, a "suspension of time and place" brought about by the "collusion of myth and history...to come up with a history of one's own." (Mayer 2000, 559, 562) She goes on to call this an "aesthetics of alienation" (563), only a small etymological step away from what Samuel Delany or Octavia Butler or Sun Ra would certainly support reinscribing as an *alien-nation* in which the very structures of oppression within which one finds oneself are co-opted to project a specific, positive, productive, acquisitive alien status—in Sun Ra's case as teacher/shaman/space-time-traveller/hipster/queer/schizo imagining a new alien nation in a mythical transplanetary future.

So what has all this to do with working on the other side of time? In music studies we tend to describe the temporality of our practices in two ways: diachronic and synchronic; in-time and time-out. By remapping what Josephs calls "the geography of the narrative" to imagine a manifold temporality all aspects of which exist in mutually constitutive and creatively co-determinant ways, temporal trajectories (and the discourses that describe them) begin to proliferate in manifold directions at manifold speeds and slownesses, to enact reversals and redeployments, to conjoin in new transverse movements. In a passage titled "The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel" in his volume on Deleuze's philosophy of time, James Williams engages similar themes. He writes:

any process in the present is also, in some special way, a process in the past, a moving backwards into the past.... However, no process in the present can go back to the past as it was when the process of going back began.... [A]ccording to Deleuze's account we are travelling back and forward in time all the time and with no need for special machines or for odd physical properties such as wormholes. This is because the 'special ways'...involve alterations of the past and of the future in the present. Any actual present process is altering the past and the future, not in a causal or statistical manner but instantaneously and for all the past and all the future. (Williams 2011, 8–9)

All of this, then, operates within a spatio-temporal manifold that Erin Manning would call an *activist present*. Manning is interested in the more-than-human of experience, in decentering what we might call neurotypical anthro-phenomenology. This involves attention to any now-ongoing present as the expression of *all* of its potential pasts—including imagined or invented pasts; new pasts unfolding through impingements of new presents—and virtual futures. What can we learn in this respect from Kurt Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians, who engage the entirety of time at all times, who would consider diachronic experience simply as a culturally-specific mode of attending, a product of a particular (limited, human) set of sensory apparatuses? The "at all times" of this construction is a human rendering: in Tralfamadorian time there is only time, not times. It is also a particular way of inscribing time based on certain kinds of epistemological givens; as Sun Ra and the Afrofuturists have shown us time and time again (pun intended), diachrony can certainly be falsified; pasts can be erased and reinscribed; history revealed as ideologically constructed.

“But history is his story; my story is mystery,” Sun Ra has famously said. Diachrony is State history, hegemonic history, history as a distribution of what can or cannot be said and heard, the history of bodies being told what and how to be. “You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you’re just depraved” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 159).

Tralfamadorian experience is not synchronic, however: it is pan-chronic; all times are seen at once. This is the lived experience made possible by an alien set of sensory apparatuses, offering a para-human *tralfamadorocene* that might help us sort out how the radical temporal redirections of Afro-futurist time travel work and are expressible. Synchronic experience is Donna Haraway’s god-trick, seeing without being seen, engaging without being ethically responsible to the objects of experience, and it is the context of most of the conventional tools not only of music scholarship, but of all scholarship in the humanities. The movements away from synchronic engagement are remarkable for their rarity and for their radical nature; that most of them ultimately fail to achieve that radical break and instead fall back into new binaries or new empiricisms speaks to what Bergson, James, Whitehead, and countless others have demonstrated as what I might call an epistemological–ontogenic block: a crippling shortcoming of our discursive apparatus that prevents us from making an actual diachronic connection to the object of study, which is in turn engendered by the fact that we experience existence through the course of the time that our limited, human, culturally-conditioned senses allow us to perceive as true.

Enter Sun Ra’s *mythical* time, which seems analyzable as a form of pan-chronic engagement: *not* outside of time, but in all times. When Sun Ra and his Arkestra first land on their far-away planet, dreaming of forging a utopian society for people of color, free of the social/political/racial structurings they left behind, he proclaims that they can now “work on the other side of time.” They are already in another space, a mythical “somewhere there.” As Sun Ra write:

If we came from nowhere here,
Why can’t we go somewhere there?”³

We might read this alongside the concluding line of another Sun Ra poem:

With all the many greater dimensions
Of a living tomorrow.⁴

This is another *other side of time*: a living tomorrow suggests that today is somehow not alive, or is no longer. A rebirth in every opening onto the future. Sun Ra began his live performances by introducing himself: “Some call me Mister Ra. Some call me Mister Re. You may call me Mister Mystery.” *Mr. Re*, with a long “ee”: rebirth, return, reenactment, revision, renaming, reinscription, reimagining, reterritorialization. Ajay Heble develops Sun Ra’s nowhere-here and somewhere-there by describing *this here* as being really nowhere, a no-place—we’re all familiar with this theme from Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and many, many other parables—and *that there* is somewhere, recalling promised-land narratives from the Old Testament and the black church.⁵ There is another register though, that we shouldn’t overlook: “If we came from nowhere here” is a striking critical engagement with the past: a past that was severed, violently erased in the slave trade, but also a past that is itself a nowhere, an imagining, a fiction. This, then, is another reading of Sun-Ra’s post-time onto-mytho-mysteriology. We are after history, because there is no history, history is nowhere, because, again, “history is not my story, my story is mystery.” History as myth-science.

To theorize this slightly, we might say that to transcend the space of here and the time of now is to erupt within what Jacques Rancière would call representational regimes of oppressive (or diachronic) thought, discourse, and action. To understand space *as here/not-here* and time *as now/not-now* is exactly to repeat the images of thought bound up in those regimes: **here** is determined by socio-cultural and political borders drawn in the interest of serving the dominant forces that draw them; **now** is a product of the movement of historical forces that cause it to be what it is in the way that it is. *I am me, this is my here, and what lies beyond my borders is not-me, not-here, there*: this is exactly the kind of reifying stultification that Félix Guattari radically overturns with his schizoanalytic project; that Erin Manning opens to new differentiating

³ “Imagination,” in Sun Ra 2005, 54.

⁴ “New Horizons,” in Sun Ra 2005, 90.

⁵ See Lock 1999 for an analysis of these themes in Sun Ra’s writings.

forces when she insists upon the more-than of subjective existence. *Now is an expression of the determinable pasts that caused it to be what it is*: this is what Deleuze falsifies when he replaces the reality of now-as-causal-outcome with a triple synthesis in which virtual forces become-actual and, importantly, vice versa: actual forces become-virtual, all in a double movement that Deleuze describes as differentiation/differenciation; what Octavia Butler and Kurt Vonnegut and Doctor Who demonstrate is a process of creative co-constitution, of transversal impingements (every present unfolds within a complex ecology of concurrent presents, affecting and affected by one another...).

So an activist now doesn't transcend time, it invents a new time, in each new now. If each present is an expression of its past—of its histories—then opening-onto-future, as a radical reinscription of the past, is exactly what marks the end of history. Music, for Sun Ra, takes on a heuristic value here. My role as a music scholar as well: there is a great deal of research on Sun Ra, from the perspectives of literary theory, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and more, but little of it touches Sun Ra's music. Music theory and analysis, conversely, continue to privilege things like coherence and connection and what we might call "hearing-as" as its disciplinary/disciplining projects. I'm interested in what can we learn specifically from Sun Ra's *music*; its materiality, its matter(ing)—or from the activist now of any improvised musical expression, or from the relations between musicking human subjects and post- or trans-human sonorous bodies—that can be of value beyond the hermetic world of music analysis. I'm interested, in short, in the ways that music theory—and the ways that it can imagine or reveal relationships between musicking human and sonorous bodies, relationships that, necessarily, transform those bodies through the very acts of relating—might *matter*.

Consider this passage from Carolyn Abbate:

At least, a coherent stance might mean not saying what musical configurations mean without simultaneously signaling a deficit in seriousness or without proposing too many alternative meanings at the same time. Why repay the freedom we are given by putting the gift-giver in a cage...., without wondering what this activity may say? Such statements anthropomorphize musical works, making them into living things towards which we must develop an ethical position. They are not, of course, but the way we cope with them may reflect choices about how to cope with real human others or how not to. (Abbate 2004, 517)

Of course we don't have to become new materialists, or animists, to push against the idea that anthropomorphic beings are the only kinds of things toward which we can or should develop ethical positions! But there are two other points in Abbate's text that Sun Ra's music and thought bring to the forefront: first, might a "deficit in seriousness" be a sign of a far richer and more creative interface with a world only very particular subthemes of which seem to reward or respond adequately to 'serious' inquiry? Part of Sun Ra's rhetorical strategy was to suggest on at least one register that perhaps he was clowning you, that he didn't actually believe his own wild and woolly proclamations. So every utterance is already accompanied by a double that opens onto new layers of fabulation. Every utterance already its own deterritorialization.

And then, Abbate asks us, why a meaning-drive that, in the end, suggests that a single agreed-upon meaning (or, generously, perhaps a small handful of meanings) is even what we should be striving for? That meanings proliferate, that meaning-inscription is a creative and personal act, is a tenet of Afrofuturist thought. The proliferation of meaning—as *possibility*—is enlivened through the ways in which fact and fiction are strategically blurred in Afrofuturist expression; see, for example, novelist Erna Brodber's marvelous essay "Fiction in the Scientific Procedure," where she advances an activist heuristic of "twinning" these two epistemological modes. Like fiction, music is a mode of knowledge production that opens up possibilities that transcend what we are taught get to count as facts. "Facts" like the principles of Newtonian physics, the real-ness of materiality in a here and now, put into question through a hundred-plus years of critical scrutiny from perspectives as diverse as Husserl and Einstein to DeLanda and Barad. "Facts" like historical truths as we loosely agree to understand them, not just decentered and problematized like multiple strands of modern and postmodern historiography have demonstrated, but completely and radically inverted through the impingements of fictions: are not Odysseus and Oedipus as "real" in terms of their effects on the ways we think and behave and theorize as Aristotle and Aquinas? "Facts" like understandings about time and space torn asunder, revealed to be products of epistemologically-proscribed modes of rationalist thinking, to be replaced by myth-science, time travel, projections into outer space. As many writers have suggested, Sun Ra's music functions as the spatio-temporal project through which all of these so-called facts can be

disrupted, displaced, deterritorialized. Impossible, you say? Well of course: that's the point! Here's Sun Ra writing in 1969 in response to a request to provide some words that might be uttered by Neil Armstrong and company when they landed on the moon:

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...⁶

(This poem always reminds me of the White Queen, who has “believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast,” echoed in Douglas Adams: “If you’ve done six impossible things this morning, why not round it off with breakfast at Milliways, the Restaurant at the End of the Universe?”)

Three years later Sun Ra writes:

Thus is the idea of the PIVOTING PLANES
of the
greater impossible
and the
Immeasurable equation
SPACE – VOID
reality
on
the
outer reach
of the unending
On
ONNESS “O N.”⁷

The “immeasurable equation”—a significant enough theme to be used as the title of the first volume of Sun Ra’s collected text works—returns in a late interview anthologized by John Corbett, in which Sun Ra eschews the word philosophy to describe his framework for interfacing with the world: “Philosophy is a conjecture. I’m dealing with equations. Philosophy is something like religion, it’s a theory. It could be true or not true. But I’m not dealing with theories, I’m dealing with equations.” (Corbett 1994, 312) That Sun Ra’s equations turn out to be, perhaps, wildly fantastic etymological inventions only reinforces their status as exemplars of a myth-science. Hence, perhaps, their immeasurability. Not true or not-true, but rather, “do they *work*?”⁸ How do Sun Ra’s equations function; how can we use them? Not only after time, but after truth; both time and truth are sublated in Sun Ra’s mythical reimagining. Ajay Heble refuses to deconstruct the possible/ impossible binary in Sun Ra’s poetic language: “outer space...functions as a metaphor for possibility (or perhaps for performing the impossible), for alternatives to dominant systems of knowledge production....” (Heble 2010, 99) John Szwed, Graham Lock, Marcel Swiboda, and others have written about Sun Ra’s scholarly sources, especially the highly polemic reinscriptions of black African identity for ancient Egypt, and the suggestion that most of the significant philosophical concepts attributed to classical Greek thought originated in black Africa: George M. James’s *Stolen Legacy* and Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* are two of the most often cited works in this vein, but there are many others. Many of the most tendentious claims put forth in these reimaginings have been debunked by empirical archaeological and hermeneutic research. But as Swiboda writes,

Sun Ra’s own take on the spurious reading of Egypt on the part of the enlightenment is less concerned to provide a rationalization of this historical legacy than to re-mythologize it, or

⁶ “Reality Has Touched Against Myth,” in Sun Ra 2005, 153.

⁷ “The Pivoting Planes,” in Sun Ra 2005, 133.

⁸ This is a formulation that recurs through Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*: a turn from the kind of meaning-ascription that derives from signification to function, in a context: *[how] does it work?* See especially Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 179–189.

else to re-inscribe the mythological tropes associated with Egypt with a mind to exploring the significance that they have for African Americans in the aftermath of slavery and the ongoing exploitation of their culture as part of white-dominated American capitalist society. (Swiboda 2007, 99)

Swiboda goes on to compare Sun Ra's equations and creative etymologies to what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls "signifyin'," a "complex play of language and meaning that provides a strategic basis for the critique of 'Western' thought and its inflexible systematicity." (100)

In other words, again, it is not the truth value of these claims that is important, so much as their power to enact new mythic structures that animate possibilities for new futures and for new modes of social organization. In Octavia Butler's *Dawn*, the alien Oankali describe hierarchy as a defective genetic trait that humans, if they are to survive, must overcome:

But we are not hierarchical, you see. We never were. But we are powerfully acquisitive. We acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, manipulate it, sort it, use it. (Butler 2000, 41)

An Oankali ontology of acquisition is a perfect way to fold back to Sun Ra's music—to its materiality and thereby its meaning. As Karen Barad suggests, material and meaning are inseparable; thus the double meaning of "matter" in which both resonate. Matter matters. Sun Ra's music is also powerfully acquisitive, as are the affective movements it animates.

<www.chrisstovermusic.com/kingporter.mp3>

<www.chrisstovermusic.com/joyfulnoise.mp4>

The first excerpt is from Sun Ra's arrangement of Jelly Roll Morton's "King Porter Stomp." Multiple temporal trajectories are enacted in this performance. Swing-era composer Fletcher Henderson first recorded "King Porter Stomp" in 1928, but it became a smash hit with Benny Goodman's 1935 recording. Henderson wrote the Goodman arrangement as well; the implications of the outsized success of Goodman's "white" recording should not go unnoticed. Sun Ra's first high-profile gig was as arranger and sometimes pianist with Henderson's band in the late 1940s, and throughout his career Sun Ra revisited Henderson's music. In this 1977 recording we are dislocated from what we understand Henderson's music to be, and by extension from how we understand accepted narratives about what constitutes *the jazz* tradition and how its historical progression unfolds. All this is expressed through the materiality of the sounds, through the music's matter(ing): Sun Ra subverts teleological harmonic progressions with impossibly long static, repetitive sonic stretches that suddenly snap right back into alignment with a now-temporally displaced continuation of the song. His electric organ subtly dislocates the harmonic and timbral integrity of the original. Harmonic, in the sense that Sun Ra's note choices form an additional pitch-class stratum that both crowds against the familiar sonic space of Morton's melody and chord progression and melt into (and then again out of) those familiar spaces, each affecting the other. The always-ongoing double movement of Deleuze and Guattari's territorialization and deterritorialization is continually evident in Sun Ra's keyboard textures. Timbral because the sound of the electric organ enacts an anachronistic relationship with its Henderson–Morton context. "The future is always here in the past." The sometimes wild improvisatory utterances from the Arkestra's soloists project these dislocations into more radical reterritorializations, as does the frenetic drum backbeat, a caricature of swing dance accompaniment.

In the second excerpt, we see and hear Sun Ra entering what seems like an ecstatic state, eschewing technique (which he had in spades!), turning away from the forms and pitches and timbres and rhythmic dynamism of jazz and toward what he sometimes called "space music." He uses all parts of his hands to extract sounds from his instrument, twisting and turning, arms intertwined, a stern, focused facial expression gradually transforming into one of beatitude. He begins to turn in a counterclockwise motion: the direction of African American ring-shouts, Brazilian rodas, and African ritual dances. The technological mediation of the electric organ this time subsumes everything around it; dialogue transforms into noise ("a joyful noise to the Lord"), the noise of a thousand proliferating lines of communication across space, time, and metaphysical dimensions.

It's important to reinforce that these excerpts need each other; together they define a manifold movement across multiple temporal trajectories that Sun Ra's music enacts. African-American history reimaged: *what would Fletcher Henderson be like if...?* Historical-temporal lines collapsed into transversal ones: Jelly Roll Morton and Albert Ayler and Bootsy Collins in dialogue. And longer lines—to Africa; to mythical Egypt; to Egypt reimaged as a black African culture; to Pharaoh; to a critical reading of black American redemption narratives (Moses and the Israelites; the promised land, now projected to interstellar regions, “space is the place”); to Gnosticism; to mysticism; to *theosophy*—what I've characterized as “the theo-poetics of St. John Coltrane the Divine”—redemption, transportation, teleportation, transmolecularization, through sound...

Afterword:

Sound

(or, the theo-poetics of St. John Coltrane the Divine)⁹

So then the moment came when we discovered that the string theorists were right...

An ontology of stirring strings—sensuous seductions—sound subtending structurings. A geography of sound-objects, of sound-movements, of tunings and attunements, of harmonics and inharmonics, of touching feeling. Can you touch sound? (How do we consent to sound?) What kind of a residue does sound leave, what kind of affective trace is left when our sonic selves make worlds that coalesce harmoniously (or not) with the world-makings of those with which we sing? Is the world, in the end, the improvised unfolding of a primal ur-performance—not a symphony, but a temporally-unfolding interactive creation, ontologically simultaneous with itself—with the sonic stuff of the world its materiality and the trans-subjective relationships that emerge within in its performers? (Deleuze and Guattari: “to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it”) Boethius thought so. Pythagoras supplied the tools. Plato implored that we seek those harmonies and rhythms that are “the expressions of a courageous and harmonious life”—have we found them? How would we know if we have found them? (Stockhausen: “I will tell you.”) Plato sought simplicity and parsimony, but string theory suggests an endless proliferation of combinations, a pullulation of chaotic becomings. Is sound sentient? That's the wrong question—instead, is sentience sonic? That's a better question: getting closer to an always-emergent trans-subjective sonic agency. Sonic ontology is a post-materialism, but it is also the original productive force—that is what the string theorists have been trying to tell us all along. And also Sun Ra and Scriabin, Huxley and Heidegger, Cage and Carroll, Braxton and Bach (Douglas Hofstadter was onto something too). Sound knows no borders; or rather, if there are sonic borders, they are indeed locations of encounters: a second sound added to a first creates a relation (Schoenberg), a space for creative negotiations, for meaning-enactments...¹⁰

⁹ www.coltranechurch.org

¹⁰ Stover, in Raffle, Stover et al. “Thinking Past the End Times” (*New Geographies*, forthcoming).

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