

A Solar-Ship Voyage: The Ancient Egyptian Religion as Inspiration in the Life and Music of Sun Ra and the Astro-Intergalactic Infinity Arkestra

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Abstract

Presenting himself as an alien coming from Saturn, Sun Ra has been considered a pioneer of Afrofuturism whose music and live performances with his Arkestra are nowadays considered classics of African-American jazz music, theater and poetry. Egypt has been a central source of inspiration for this polyhedric artist; this essay analyzes how Sun Ra used and re-interpreted elements of the ancient Egyptian religious culture and its deities in his work and how such contents relate to the development of the Afrofuturistic philosophy within the American climate of political unrest during which he lived and performed.

Keywords

Sun Ra; Afrofuturism; science fiction; music; Egyptology; extraterrestrials; religion; mythology.

Ancient Egypt and Afrofuturism

In the long history of reception of ancient Egyptian religion, African American artists, musicians, writers and thinkers of the modern and contemporary eras play an important but not yet fully recognized role. Among them, the polyhedric figure of Sun Ra, who crafted a persona as an alien from Saturn manifesting himself on Earth as an embodied deity, is particularly intriguing in relation to the world of sci-fi and the role that ancient cultures play within it. Sun Ra's significance to the aesthetic is evidenced by near ubiquitous references to his work in scholarly discussions of Afrofuturism, currently one of the most inspiring literary, musical, and artistic movements in the United States and among people of African descent. The term "Afrofuturism" was coined in 1994 by Mark Dery, who defined it as a type of "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses

African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture”.¹ Ytasha Womack, herself a prominent exponent of Afrofuturism, about 20 years later, amplified and broadened the scope of the movement, describing it as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation”.² Of course, Afrofuturism existed before the term itself, expressed in the art, literature, cinema and music that African Americans have produced throughout modern and contemporary times. Afrofuturism is not just about Black imaginings of the future, but also and especially about re-imaginings of the past. In this respect, Afrofuturism is intimately connected to Afrocentrism and to its principle that some of humanity’s most sophisticated civilizations were Black and originated in Africa—in particular, in Egypt and Nubia.

From W. E. B. Du Bois to Cheikh Anta Diop and Theophile Obenga, influential and celebrated Black thinkers, authors, scholars, and artists have long found in the civilizations of ancient Egypt and Nubia a central source of knowledge and inspiration.³ Recently, and in the light of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been increasing public interest in Egyptology and in museums that house ancient Egyptian and African collections—especially in the United States—in highlighting the role of ancient Egypt as an African civilization and in connection to other African cultures, ancient and modern.⁴ This shift is revitalizing Egyptology, a discipline of colonial origins, and the history of whose reception has for too long solely focused on the phenomena of Western Egyptomania and Egyptianizing arts and architecture in Europe, while ignoring or dismissing Afrocentric and

1 Dery, “Black to the Future”, 180. The term also appeared in 2003 in an essay by the British music critic Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism”, 289. More recently, there have been proposals for dismissing the use of the term and to replace it with more African-centered notions, such as “Africanfuturism” or “Africanjujuism”, coined by Nnedi Okorafor, “Africanfuturism Defined” [<http://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html>], or “Afritopianism” by Faust, Introduction, xv–xvi. “Afro-diasporic”, “Black Atlantic” futurism and “Afro-futurism” as a primarily African American trope has recently been discussed in relation to Caribbean and Creole views of technology, sound, race and culture by Chude-Sokei, *The Sound of Culture*.

2 Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 9.

3 On Du Bois and his important role in Egyptology, see Davies, “W. E. B. Du Bois”. On Afrocentrism, Afrocentricity and its major exponents, see Moses, *Afrotopia*. On the historical origins of Afrocentrism and its relationship to other Black ideologies, see Bay, “The Historical Origins of Afrocentrism”.

4 See, for instance, the recent exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum; “The African Origin of Civilization” and the Brooklyn Museum’s framing of Egyptian Gallery’s collections Brooklyn Museum; “Museum Spotlight: African Ancestors of Egypt and Nubia”.

other non-Western views and interpretations of the ancient Egyptian and Nubian civilizations.⁵


As part of the scholarship that seeks to redress this balance,⁶ this paper scrutinizes the work of Sun Ra from an Egyptological perspective. I analyze how Sun Ra used and re-interpreted elements of ancient Egyptian religious culture and religion in his work and how such contents relate to the development of Afrofuturist philosophy in the United States from the 1950s to the 1990s, when he lived and performed. His lasting influence can still be felt today, as the musicians of the Arkestra continue to thrive in the music and art worlds, continuing his legacy; through Sun Ra and his Arkestra, ancient Egypt becomes part of African American history and of American history itself. Ultimately, this paper aims at promoting a non-Eurocentric perspective when considering the history of reception of ancient Egypt, in order to highlight the creative and central contributions to it from African American artists and authors who for too long have been ignored, and among whom Sun Ra stands out in terms of originality and worldwide influence through his music and poetry.

Ancient vs Futuristic: space-travel in Sun Ra's music and thought

Sun Ra's philosophy and music are based on familiar concepts from sci-fi art and literature: time- and space-travel, parallel universes, extraterrestrial life, and advanced futuristic technology. In his work and aesthetic, however, Sun Ra embedded motifs and symbols taken from ancient traditions and mythical accounts of creation. As demonstrated by this special issue, this is by no means unique: science fiction, fantasy and speculative fiction more broadly incorporate ancient Egypt into their remit in diverse media. Sun Ra is noteworthy for mar-

⁵ American Egyptomania of the nineteenth century in particular has played a role in advancing constructions of race and colonial white supremacy. See Trafton, *Egypt Land*.

⁶ There is currently an increasing interest in looking at ancient Egypt from an Afrocentric perspective and in finally recognizing the contribution of Black scholars to the study and understanding of the ancient Egyptian culture (see Davies, "W. E. B. Du Bois"; Davies, "Egypt and Egyptology in the pan-African discourse"), as well as reconsidering Egypt as part of Africa and therefore to be related to other African cultures and not anymore exclusively with the ancient Middle East (see the work of the *Nile Valley Collective*, "Home"). The revaluation of the Nubian culture as neither dependent nor subordinated to ancient Egypt and of the complex Egypt-Nubia interactions is also part of the effort to decolonize Egyptology (see Smith, "Ethnicity").

rying these themes in a Black diasporic context, though, crafting an identity that embraced a futuristic aesthetic based on a foundation that celebrated Black historical achievements rooted in ancient times. Sun Ra expressed his perception of a personal connection to ancient Egyptian solar theology by changing his birth name from Herman Poole Blount to the stage name “Sun Ra”,⁷ referencing the sun god as the creator god. He also found inspiration in Akhenaton and his exclusive cult of the Aton, the non-human form of the solar disk.⁸ Through an intimate connection to the sun cult, which is especially evident in the variety of solar symbols he used on his album covers and on stage,⁹ Sun Ra re-enacts and re-interprets what Jan Assmann has defined as “solar religion”, *en vogue* in ancient Egypt during the New Kingdom, in a musically and poetically oriented key.¹⁰ In ancient Egypt, “solar religion” refers to the beliefs in the sun god as creator god, which also gave rise to the popular myth of Heliopolitan creation as well as developing into a sort of exclusive sun-worship—the “cult of the Aton”, the sun disk, during the Amarna period.¹¹ One of the royal names in the titulary of the ancient Egyptian king was  s' r' (*Sa Ra*)—“Son of Ra”—which indicated the privileged connection of Pharaoh to the sun god. Sun Ra seems to present himself as “Son of Ra”, namely as a sort of semi-divine intermediary between the god and humankind, similar to an ancient Egyptian king.¹²

Sun Ra stands out not only as a pioneer of Afrofuturism, but, as the analysis of his chosen name above suggests, also of what I define as “Ancient Futurism”, namely a philosophical trend that is concerned about the future while, at the

7 On Sun Ra’s adoption of different names and their meanings, see Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 79–87. He believed originally that “Re” was the moon good of ancient Egypt and decided to be named Le Sonny Re, from which Sonny Ra and finally Sun Ra originated (Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 83). His original name was Herman Poole Blount and it seems that the name Herman was inspired by “Black Herman”, a popular African American magician of the time, who claimed to descend from Moses and to be able to raise the dead; he was also a political activist associated to Black nationalists such as Marcus Garvey, with the mission to promote Black power using occult magic (Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 4; see also Kentake, “Benjamin Rucker aka Black Herman”).

8 Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 76–79.

9 See the recurrent use of the solar disk and of the solar boat in album covers such as “Horizon” (1971; Campbell and Trent, *The Earthly Recordings*, 182 [190]). The costume of Sun Ra on the cover of “Crystal Spears”, issued in 2019 but originally recorded in 1973, is inspired by the Amarna imagery of the arm-shaped rays of the solar disk (Campbell and Trent, *The Earthly Recordings*, 194 [200]).

10 Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*.

11 Quirke, *The Cult of Ra*.

12 One could also note the similarity in pronunciation between “son” and “sun”, which would make “Sun Ra” sound like wordplay for the ancient Egyptian royal title “son of Ra”.

same time, reactivating the past, functioning similarly to what in science fiction is called “retrofuturism”; if in retrofuturism the “retro” is typically held to refer to a past not so distant from our own—stretching only as far back to the late nineteenth century—in Ancient Futurism the futuristic is deliberately infused with references to the ancient past.¹³ The Ancient Futurism of Sun Ra also calls to mind the utopian (but not dystopian) aspect of Solarpunk, a twenty-first-century sci-fi subgenre and art movement imagining and working towards a provocative, sustainable and community-oriented future. Solarpunk does not typically integrate ancient Egyptian aesthetics or religious thought into its remit, although it envisions possible futures through rethinking the past similar to Sun Ra’s employment of ancient Egypt and ancient knowledges in optimistic visions of the future.¹⁴ In this way, we might read Sun Ra as a sci-fi pioneer, anticipating the genre’s new directions as much as he drew upon and manipulated established tropes (space travel foremost among them), integral to the narrative history he invented for his artistic persona.

Space travel, according to Sun Ra’s crafted backstory, began around 1930, when aliens (replete with antennae) came to Birmingham, Alabama, where he was living, to bring him to Saturn; they had selected him as a spiritual guide to return on Earth at later point when life for humankind seemed hopeless.¹⁵ The aliens’ intention was for Sun Ra to return to Earth equipped with a new transcendent knowledge, recalling the idea of the ancient Egyptian gods providing secret, esoteric knowledge to those who could access the divine dimension of temple and funerary cults.¹⁶ “I know you, I know your name” is a recurrent sentence in magical spells meant to help the deceased during their journey in the *Duat*, the ancient Egyptian netherworld, which is characterized as a different plane of existence and a timeless dimension, and where the deceased goes through a transformative journey through celestial regions and landscapes made of fire and water and inhabited by hybrid beings, providing what could be seen as

13 In *The Oxford Handbook to Science Fiction*, retrofuturism is defined as “an ambivalent fascination for a future that never came to pass”, that is, creative and speculative imaginings of the future derived from a particular cultural-historical moment that is itself now in the past; Guffey and Lemay, “Retrofuturism and Steampunk”, 434.

14 *Project Hieroglyph*, “Solarpunk”; Hunting, “On Solarpunk”.

15 Hsu, “How Sun Ra Taught Us”.

16 On the concept of *rh*, “knowing” in terms of secret, restricted religious knowledge in ancient Egypt, see Baines, “Restricted Knowledge”; Jasnow and Zauzich, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of Thoth*. Jan Assmann has discussed the idea of religious and restricted knowledge in many of his publications, in particular in Assmann, *Ägyptische Geheimnisse*.

a sort of ancient Egyptian extra-terrestrial journey.¹⁷ Although Sun Ra did not refer specifically to ancient Egyptian spells mentioning secret knowledge in his music, it is clear from his public speeches and interviews that, especially after his Chicago years with Alton Abraham (which I go on to outline in greater detail below), he wished to present himself as a semi-divine holder of ancient esoteric knowledges and philosophies.

Sun Ra's wish to detach himself from the earthly world by means of space travel probably derived from the fact that he was born in Alabama, a place of racial struggle in the 1960s. In 1963, Martin Luther King wrote from the city's jailhouse: "Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known".¹⁸ In such a terrestrial setting, where Sun Ra was raised, a talented, artistic child who spent most of the time in solitude reading books and playing the piano, the desire to travel somewhere else where Black people could more freely express themselves and congregate to discuss history, art and literature was strong, explaining why Sun Ra moved to Chicago, Oakland and then New York. He did return to Birmingham, but only in the last years of his life, before dying of pneumonia in 1993.¹⁹

By imagining himself as a space traveler, Sun Ra re-wrote his biography, erasing all terrestrial dates and events from his past. In one interview, he claimed:

Me and time never got along so good—we just sort of ignore each other [...] I came from somewhere else... I am not a human. I never called anybody "mother".... I've separated myself from everything that in general you call life... I've abandoned the habitual, and my previous life is of no significance any more for me.²⁰

Time travel in Sun Ra's re-shaping of his life could be compared to the different and often overlooked function that traveling had for Black Americans since the time of the Great Migrations, from around 1916 to 1970 and during the segregation era.²¹ The discrimination and danger bound up in the experience of "traveling Black" is made clear in the so-called *Green Book*, the most popular guide that

17 On the Duat, see the recent study of Zago, *A Journey through the Beyond*.

18 Rose, "Alabama, May 1963".

19 The main biographical works of Sun Ra have been produced by John Szwed (*Space is the Place*) and by Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*.

20 Extracts from Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 5–6, whose source was Kaiser, "Sun Ra", 183.

21 See Bay, *Traveling Black*.

African Americans would use while traveling.²² The *Green Book* supplied vital information on safe places for Black people to stop for food, gas or lodging while on the road, crucial at a time when racist violence and hostility were so widespread. Space-travel might therefore be interpreted as a liberating experience in which a Black traveler might elude historical travel restrictions on earth; it is the ultimate, sci-fi reaction to racial capitalism based on the exploitation of Black labor, in which the difference between classes is no longer of importance, and the colonization of the land a distant memory.²³ Space and time travel are also central to ancient Egyptian religious imagery related to the netherworld, in particular in the iconography of the solar boat traveling in the sky and then entering the underworld as represented in texts known as the “Books of the Netherworld”.²⁴ Space and time travel in ancient Egyptian religion are also about transformation and rebirth: the sun god unites with the mummified body of Osiris in the underworld during the hours of the night in order to then be reborn anew in the morning sky. As mentioned above, the iconography of the ancient Egyptian solar boat and its journey—found on tomb and temple walls as well as on coffins and magical papyri from ancient Egypt—was familiar to Sun Ra through the illustrated books on ancient Egypt that he read, influencing his own vision of space travel. One of his poems is entitled “Prepare For the Journey”:

This is the space-age...
The age beyond the earth age
A new direction
Beyond the gravitation of the past...
Prepare for the journey;
You have a rendezvous
With the living wisdom
Of the unadulterated fate....
To reach the splendour days
Of the even greater tomorrow of the Cosmo-age.²⁵

²² Taylor, *Overground Railroad*. See also the discourse surrounding the 2018 Hollywood movie *Green Book*, which does not render the true historical and social role of the book despite using its title: Chow, “What to Know About the Controversy”.

²³ On these central themes for the history of the United States and for Black Studies, see Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

²⁴ On the Books of the Netherworld, see Darnell and Manassa Darnell, *The Ancient Egyptian Netherworld Books*.

²⁵ Abraham, *Sun Ra: Collected Works Vol. I*, 143.

The invitation to “prepare for the journey” during which one would encounter “wisdom” recalls the initiatic path that ancient Egyptian priests as well as the deceased had to go through in order to meet the gods.²⁶ The “splendour days” and the “greater tomorrow” recall the many invocations to the netherworld as a place of light (the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead itself being in Egyptian a “book to go out in the sunlight”) and the use of the term for tomorrow (sf) in the ancient Egyptian magical texts to indicate the rebirth after death.

Astro-Black Mythology

It was by erasing his terrestrial life and exploring a new persona in a mythical dimension—what Sun Ra himself described as “Astro-Black Mythology”—that the musician, philosopher, and mystic Sun Ra simultaneously became an Afro-futurist and Egyptophile. “Astro-Black Mythology” refers to both a mythic past and a mythic future for African Americans, incarnating the duality of an astronomical future and a Black ancient Egyptian past.²⁷ Although at first glance Astro-Black Mythology can appear as a purely imaginative invention, it emerged from a real cultural context, namely that of avant-garde musicians in Black America of the 1950s. Sun Ra explained the main points of this “spiritualized political agenda” in a poem that he wrote and chanted in his later performances with the Arkestra.²⁸

Astro-Black Mythology
Astro-Timeless Immortality
Astro-Thought in Mystic Sound
Astro-Black of Outer Space
Astro Natural of Darkest Stars
Astro Reach Beyond the Stars
Out to Endless Endlessness.²⁹


²⁶ A pivotal study on priests and priestly initiation in ancient Egypt is Sauneron, *The Priests of Ancient Egypt*.

²⁷ Lock, *Blutopia*, 14.

²⁸ Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 193.

²⁹ Sun Ra, “Astro Black”, in Wolf and Geerken, *The Immeasurable Equation*, 74. Also sung in Sun Ra, *Astro Black*, Impulse! AS-9255, 1973, quadraphonic LP (see Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 297 n. 20).

Principles such as mythology, immortality, the endlessness of the sky and its stars are powerful references to celestial religions and African cosmologies, including that of ancient Egypt. The sky and the earth are closely connected in ancient and modern African religions, in order for the cycle of life and death to continue endlessly. For millennia the sun, moon and stars have been looked at as deities in ancient and modern polytheistic religions; they have been the source of inspiration for understanding and counting time, for divination and for myths of creation. Examples of ritual and religious artifacts and divination instruments that have been inspired by cosmologies and solar theologies can be found in particular in the material culture of the Yoruba people in Nigeria.³⁰ The Yoruba religion is central in Afrocentric thought and Sun Ra has been mentioned as an inspiration by the American musician and Yoruba priest Osunlade.³¹ The connection between Sun Ra's "myth-science" and African religions also recalls the Dogon cosmology and creation myth from West Mali, which refer to the Sirius star system. The Dogon cosmology has been also connected to the ancient Egyptian representations of the cosmos in Afrofuturist discourses.³²

Sun Ra found ancient Egypt especially stimulating because of its many solar symbols and scenes on magical objects and on tomb and temple walls, from falcons crowned by a sun disk to baboons, associated with the sun because they call out or "bark" at the sun at sunrise, aiding Ra on his journey (Fig. 1). In the ancient Egyptian solar religion this kind of imagery, which could be found on magical papyri and on tomb walls, symbolized the power of transformation and rebirth of the sun god. The scarab was also the hieroglyph used for the word *ḥpr* (*Kheper*), "to become": , and the god Khepri, often depicted as an anthropomorphic god with scarab-head, represents the rising morning sun.³³ The moment of sunrise was associated with creation and rebirth, themes that were central to Sun Ra's philosophy. The solar disk, the Aton, which is omnipresent in the religious art of Amarna, features on Sun Ra's vinyl covers (Fig. 2) as well as on one of his costume accessories in the 1974 movie *Space Is the Place* (Fig. 3). Although Sun Ra was studying religious texts such as the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead in which this imagery was very common, its use also shows a creative and imaginative reinterpretation of the ancient symbol; as very often happen with reception, the symbol is reinvented as a sort of new medium that carries on only in part its

30 See Lawal, "Ayél'oya; òrunn'ilé". This publication is the catalogue of an exhibition held at LACMA in 2014: "African Cosmos: Stellar Arts".

31 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 252.

32 See Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 84–86.

33 Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods*, 230–233.

original meaning, while being recontextualized in a new artistic setting. In many of Sun Ra's album covers, the sun disk transcends the original idea of creation and evokes time and space-travel by associating other planetary and cosmological symbols to the image of the sun boat.



Fig. 1: Book of the Dead of Anhai (BM EA 10472): Introductory hymn to rising sun (spell 15) with vignettes, The British Museum <http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/818849001>

As documented by his biographers, Sun Ra was an avid reader of books on ancient Egyptian religion and spirituality, especially after he moved from Alabama to the South Side in Chicago in the early 1950s.³⁴ Black cultural activism thrived in the South Side, in communities that were segregated from the rest of the city. Chicago played a central role in Sun Ra's life and career, and he in turn contributed to and inspired the city's avant-garde jazz scene.³⁵ It is in Chicago that Sun Ra had his first mystic visions; for instance, he wrote in his diary about a dream in which

³⁴ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 70–73; Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 42–46.

³⁵ See Sites, *Sun Ra's Chicago*.

he was summoned by robed figures who had transported him through a narrow beam of light until they all reached their destination—the planet Jupiter.³⁶



Fig. 2: Cover of the album "Horizon" (author's photograph)

The idea of aliens taking him into space and then returning him to Earth became prominent in Sun Ra's art and music during the Chicago years, which were also heavily influenced by his friendship with an eccentric local mystic man and intellectual, Alton Abraham. John Szwed writes that, "like Sonny, Abraham was philosophical by nature, serious and scholarly, with a deep interest in science, metaphysics, and Bible scholarship, and both loved to talk; but unlike Sonny he

³⁶ Campbell, Trent and Pruter, "From Sonny Blount to Sun Ra". See also Goldhammer, "Who Knows Sun Ra?".

was practical, careful, a conservative dresser”.³⁷ Evidently the two simultaneously matched and complemented each other. Together they visited bookstores in Chicago, looking for reading to advance their own spiritual and esoteric learning, and together they studied numerology, Egyptology, astrology and astronomy, mixing a diverse array of subject matter upon which they drew when they sermonized in Washington Park.³⁸

Abraham was himself a musician, and soon became Sun Ra’s manager and promoter.³⁹ Together they founded an independent record label, El Saturn Records, which they used to distribute Sun Ra’s space-inspired music. Abraham and Sun Ra’s collaboration was not only musical but also ideological and religious, and the two shared a common aim to talk, preach and share their ideas with the various religious and political Black groups they met in Chicago’s Washington Park, including Garveyites, Communists, and fundamentalist religious groups.⁴⁰

Abraham recalled that to those who told them: “Next you’ll be saying you’re gods!”, they replied: “we were, gods-in-the-making”.⁴¹ Such a statement recalls the ancient Egyptian wish of the deceased to be assimilated to the gods by “becoming” one, which could be reached only through the secret knowledge acquired thanks to the spells of the Book of the Dead.⁴² Abraham and Sun Ra learned about the ancient Egyptian belief in eternal, divine life, “in the following of the Ra”, as many of the ancient Egyptian spells of the Book of the Dead relate. For Sun Ra and Abraham, this belief informed their mission: preaching about eternity in a non-earthly, cosmic space, in the following of the sun god. A widespread fascination for ancient Egyptian culture and religion in Chicago—part of what can be termed “American Egyptomania”⁴³—must have played a role in exposing the

³⁷ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 75. Note that Sun Ra was still using the name “Sonny” at this time.

³⁸ Sites, *Sun Ra’s Chicago*, 104; Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 78.

³⁹ Abraham also put together a massive collection of Sun Ra’s records, manuscripts that are today part of “the Alton Abraham Collection”, a subset of the Chicago Jazz Archive, which is a main source of information for understanding Sun Ra’s philosophy. See Abraham, *Collection of Sun Ra*.

⁴⁰ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 78–79.

⁴¹ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 78–79.

⁴² See Scalf, *Book of the Dead*.



⁴³ See Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 64–73 for a description of possible Egyptian influences on Sun Ra in his life, from the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb (when Sun Ra was eight years old) to the Egyptian exhibitions at the Field Museum and at the Oriental Institute. The books of E. A. Wallis Budge were also popular among street booksellers in Chicago in those years and were great inspiration for Sun Ra and his idea of ancient Egyptian religion and writing; he derived knowledge on these subjects through Budge, *Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*.

pair to ancient Egyptian funerary religion. Thus, “Astro-Black Mythology”, and its divine message, of which Sun Ra was the messenger, manifested in the cultural imagination in the urban space of Chicago’s South Side, channeled through art and music.



Fig. 3: Sun Ra in “Space is the Place”. Source: Brian Zimmerman, “Sun Ra –‘Space is the Place’”, *Jazziz*, 22 May 2019 <http://www.jazziz.com/sun-ra-space-is-the-place/>

To take a first example, the album *We Travel the Space Ways* was recorded by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra mostly between 1956 and 1960 in Chicago, although it was not released until 1966 on Sun Ra’s own label, El Saturn. A toy robot was used to produce the mechanical sounds at the end of the title track,

where the ensemble chants: “We travel the space ways from planet to planet”.⁴⁴ Space-travel remained central to Sun Ra’s music and poetry, mixed with the theme of mythology and Blackness as a transformative dimension: Astro-Black mythology was meant to teleport humankind to a new, perfect Black world, where myth becomes real.⁴⁵ Sun Ra’s ancient Egyptian inspiration symbolized the space dimension of the ancient solar deities re-incarnated in a living myth, namely Sun Ra himself. Afrofuturism is also a global creative space, wherein Black cultures of the past, present, and future are re-united. *Astro Black* is another of Sun Ra’s iconic albums. Recorded in Chicago in 1972—right after Sun Ra and his Arkestra had left Oakland—and released in 1973,⁴⁶ the album was inspired by the ancient Egyptian timeless dimension of eternity, or “astro-timeless immortality”, as the lyrics of the eponymous track relate. In ancient Egyptian religious texts, *dt* (Djet)  was the term used to indicate static time, while *nhh* (neheh)  represented the eternal cycle of time-repetition. Sun Ra’s “astro-timeless immortality” seems to unite these two concepts in the notion of a Black future as eternity played by Sun Ra’s band, which is not an *orchestra* but the *Arkestra*, the Ark being a spaceship powered by sound.⁴⁷

Thmei

It was also in Chicago, with Abraham, that Sun Ra created *Thmei* Research, a secret society and publishing house for “[B]lack counter-knowledge incommensurable with conventional academic learning”.⁴⁸ The aim of this society was to create a new mythology for disenfranchised Black Americans. *Thmei* considered Judeo-Christian thought and history too modern and white, and looked for some-

44 Sun Ra, *We Travel the Space Ways*, Evidence 22038, 1992, CD; originally released, Saturn HK 5445, 1966, LP. For a chronology of Sun Ra’s full discography, see [Campbell and Trent, *The Earthly Recordings*](#). On this and other compositions of Sun Ra as a product of “Black Urban Utopia” and “utopian musical strategy” see [Sites, “We Travel the Spaceways”](#).

45 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 209–227; in his chapter on Sun Ra’s movie *Space is the Place*, Youngquist discusses in detail how space-travel and myth converge in Sun Ra’s performances and aesthetics.

46 On the years that Sun Ra spent in Oakland and when he joined the Black Panther Party, see [Szwed, *Space is the Place*](#), 294, 330. On Sun Ra’s controversial and difficult relationship with the Black Panther Party, see [Kreiss, “Appropriating the Master’s Tools”](#).

47 [Steinskog, “On the Other Side of Time”](#), 3.

48 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 33–41. A thorough analysis of the role that *Thmei* had in the Black radical culture of Chicago in the 1960s can be found in [Sites, “Radical Culture”](#).

thing more ancient, so source material coming from Egypt—to them the world’s first civilization—was mixed with other ancient traditions such as Kabbalah to create “an alternative tradition of greater force and promise gleaned from the combined mystical traditions of Egyptology, theosophy, numerology, and others among the occult”.⁴⁹ *Thmei* could provide the intellectual frame for an alternate reality that stood on hope and beauty and rejected segregation and oppression. “They would forge political resistance”, writes Paul Youngquist, “from a slagheap of beliefs deemed irrational, obsolete, or just plain crackpot by Western religion, philosophy, and science”.⁵⁰

But where did the name *Thmei* come from? William Sites posits that the term may mean “new” in Khmer, the language of Cambodia, although Sun Ra and Abraham themselves never mentioned this language as having a particular influence on them.⁵¹ I believe that it was instead taken from early Egyptological books that were also popular in the Theosophical Society to which Abraham introduced Sun Ra in Chicago, such as John Gardner Wilkinson’s *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837),⁵² where many names of Egyptian deities are transcribed in Coptic. The name Maat, the ancient Egyptian goddess of Justice and Truth, was referred to here as *Thmei* and associated with the Greek goddess Themis (Fig. 4).⁵³ Maat also represented “what is right” on Earth and the “cosmic order” that the pharaoh had to maintain in Egypt and as such is represented as a statuette of a goddess that the king offers to main gods such as Osiris, Isis, Horus and Amun-Ra in temple scenes.⁵⁴ As the divine manifestation of order and justice and as a universal symbol of ancient Egyptian and African ethics, Maat has been and still is popular in Afrocentric thought.⁵⁵ The ancient symbology of *Thmei*/Maat, personified by a beautiful winged goddess, also fit the aim of Sun Ra and Abraham’s society: promoting justice (*maat/thmei*) for Black people in the segregated area of South Side Chicago.

49 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 33.

50 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 33.

51 Sites, “Radical Culture”, 713, fn. 21.

52 Wilkinson, *Manners and Customs*. I wish to thank William Sites for the information on the influence of theosophy in Sun Ra and Abraham Alton’s circles, and for pointing out to me that Blavatsky’s *Theosophical Glossary* also mentions Wilkinson’s work on *Thmei*; see Blavatsky, *The Theosophical Glossary*, 30–31.

53 Wilkinson, *A Second Series of the Manners and Customs*, 28.

54 See an example here: Smith, “Standing Figure of King Seti I”.

55 See Martin, “Maat and Order in African Cosmology”.



No. 458. A breast-plate, with the figures of Ré and Thmei.

Fig. 4: *Thmei* (Maat) with Ra, from a pectoral. Source: Wilkinson, *A Second Series of the Manners and Customs*, ii.

This was an important phase in Sun Ra's life, when he responded to the unjust and brutally discriminating world of mid-twentieth-century America not through violence or political fighting but through culture (music, poetry, and the arts) to imagine an alternative present and future to an oppressive reality.⁵⁶ In one of the broadsheets distributed by *Thmei* outlining the aim and principles of the society is a declaration in capital letters: "IS THERE ANY HOPE FOR THE NEGRO? . . . YES . . . ONLY WHEN THEY DECIDE TO ACCEPT THE *TRUTH* AND JUDGE FROM THE STANDPOINT OF *TRUTH* RATHER THAN FOR MATERIAL ADVANTAGES".⁵⁷ The concept of social truth was at the heart of *Thmei's* agenda, highlighted here in its italicization, which would also support the origin of the name of this society as inspired by the ancient Egyptian goddess. Sun Ra and Abraham were likely consulting ritual scenes, with images of Egyptian deities in the Hall of Truth, taken from facsimiles of temple reliefs and copied in books about ancient Egyptian religion, to find the needed inspiration to "tirelessly improve life on

⁵⁶ Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 2.

⁵⁷ The italics are mine. The full broadsheet is published in Sites, "Radical Culture", 692–693.

planet Earth, challenging listeners everywhere to heed a simple call to joy”, as Sun Ra claimed.⁵⁸ All of this speaks to the influence of nineteenth-century Egyptological publications on Sun Ra and his acolytes, and the creative purposes to which they were put, long after the nineteenth century itself.⁵⁹ Sun Ra did not seem to have fully rejected Western Egyptological scholarship but rather mixed it with Afrocentric and esoteric literature about ancient Egypt; his reliance on these sources highlights the problematic origins of Egyptology as a discipline. A certain image of Egypt had been created by (white) Egyptologists, but it was time to ‘free people’s imagination’ and propose alternative constructions of the Egyptian past”.

Egypt: Real vs Imagined

Sun Ra’s pioneering Afrofuturistic work was meant to help Black Americans to see their situation clearly, imagine a fairer world, and realize this through cosmic aspirations. In other words, Sun Ra wanted to free their imagination. In one among his many poems, “Imagination”, recited in the 1968 recording “Somewhere there”, he asks:

“Imagination” is a magic carpet
Upon which we may soar
To distant lands and climes
And even go beyond the moon
To any planet in the sky
If we came from nowhere here
Why can’t we go somewhere there?⁶⁰

Freeing the imagination was central to Sun Ra’s role as an artist, in whose performances improvisation always played a central role.⁶¹ Sun Ra’s attraction

58 Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 9. It is also interesting to note that “Maat-Maat” was used as a variation of the song “Muck-Muck”, recorded by Sun Ra and a singer called Yochanan, the Space Age Vocalist (Sites, “Radical Culture”, 173), who claimed to descend from the sun (Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 106). Maat-Maat seems to have been the alias of Elijah Muhammad as well, according to the discographers Robert Campbell and Chris Trent (Sites, “Radical Culture”, 173).

59 For the relationship between nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Egyptology and contemporaneous cultural forms, see Dobson, *Writing the Sphinx*.

60 Sun Ra, *The Immeasurable Equation*, 206. Also in Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 141.

61 Heble, “Why Can’t We Go Somewhere There?”.

to Egypt was intimately related to his idea of being a space traveler, able to reach mythological places of origin such as ancient Egypt, which is presented as the primordial site of Black civilization in Afrocentric classics such as *The Stolen Legacy* (1954) by George James, in which the author argued that Greek philosophy and religion originated in ancient Egypt.⁶² Reading this work, Sun Ra learned that the ancient world, and Egypt in particular, was less a place than a myth on which white people made claims for themselves through scholarship. As Szwed writes,

The Negroes had long been a threatening force, their race a cypher that needed to be explained away in order to sustain white people's claims to the ancient world. It was a competing mythology which white people had to once suppress and demonize. It was another history of the world, history of the universe really, that needed to be discovered, and one which the right person might discover, a person whose heart was pure and whose sincerity was unquestioned.⁶³

That "person whose heart was pure" was Sun Ra and, like the sun god from ancient Egypt, he had a following, namely the band known as the Arkestra or "Solar Myth Arkestra", "Astro-Infinity Arkestra", "Intergalactic Solar Arkestra", or "Cosmo-Love Arkestra", among the numerous other space-inspired names he gave to his band. The band included the saxophonist Marshall Allen (who still leads the band today), John Gilmore and Pat Patrick, among others, with whom Sun Ra moved to New York in the 1970s. This was also the time when Sun Ra became known for wearing elaborate costumes inspired by ancient Egypt but also incorporating futuristic elements.

In 1971, Sun Ra and his Arkestra traveled to Egypt and played there, in settings such as the Valley of the Kings and the Great Pyramid of Giza, where the ancient Egyptian colossal monuments and desertic landscapes, which affected the foreign travelers with a sense of eternal and divine grandeur, provided the perfect environment for the visionary music of these artists,⁶⁴ which still today

⁶² James, *Stolen Legacy*. *Stolen Legacy's* debate on the Egyptian influence in Greek culture and philosophy continued later with Bernal, *Black Athena*. On James' book's influence on Sun Ra, see Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 45–46.

⁶³ Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 72–73.

⁶⁴ For an account of Sun Ra's first trip to Egypt, see Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 292–294. See also diangle, "Sun Ra in Egypt and Italy".

provides the soundtrack for a future human exodus “beyond the stars”, as recently suggested in an article in *The New Yorker*.⁶⁵

Soon after his trip to Egypt, Sun Ra became a lecturer at the new Department of Afro-American Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, where, during the spring term,⁶⁶ he taught a course entitled “The Black Man in the Cosmos” (or “The Black Man in the Universe”, “Sun Ra/AAS 171”),⁶⁷ in which ancient Egypt played a key role. From the syllabus, it seems that the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead was part of the reading list for the course, together with a version of the Bible and books on Afro-American folklore, among others.⁶⁸ Szwed reports that in Sun Ra’s lectures he also talked about the “Creator” as “the oldest of gods, the god of gods, the one that made all gods possible, the oldest known extraterrestrial being [...]. He never dies. He always *is*. Though the Creator *is*, he is also in evolution, a natural being, a superior being”.⁶⁹ The influence of ancient Egyptian solar theology and myth of creation seems undeniable in this discourse,⁷⁰ which referred to Sun Ra’s imagined Egypt, not the Egypt that he encountered when he visited the country with the Arkestra. In a recent interview, Knoel Scott, an original member of the Arkestra, was asked how the band felt when they visited Egypt the first time in 1971; his answer was: “It was like going back home and finding out that someone else is living there”.⁷¹

65 Hsu, “How Sun Ra Taught Us to Believe in the Impossible”.

66 The University of California, Berkeley, voted to return to the semester system in 1976, so Sun Ra must have been teaching for a quarter. It is not clear how long effectively Sun Ra had been teaching at Berkeley since, according to Szwed (*Space is the Place*, 330), he declared that he was not paid by UC Berkeley for two months and that the University administration thought he was in Egypt “that term”.

67 “Professor Sun Ra”, *Sensitive Skin*.

68 See full list of required readings here: “Sun Ra’s Full Lecture & Reading List”. Also Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 294–296.

69 Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 296.

70 See, in particular, the solar hymns included in magical and ritual texts of the New Kingdom, such as Chapter 15 of the Book of the Dead and other literary texts collected by Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete*. One of the many variants of chapter 15 of the Book of the Dead, for instance, opens with the invocation: “Hail Ra in his rising, Atum in his setting. You rise, you rise! You shine, you shine! Arisen as king of the gods. You are the lord of the sky, lord of the earth, maker of the heaven of stars, and people below, sole god, who came into being in the first time, maker of the lands, creator of the populace” (translation by Quirke, *Going out in Daylight*, 37).

71 The interview, to whose organization I have contributed, will be part of an upcoming exhibition at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden of Leiden, “Kemet”, on Egypt in music of the African Diaspora.

Modern Egypt was not the same as that universe Sun Ra was exploring with his music, art and philosophy, the latter being what he termed “myth-science”.⁷² In an iconic scene from his 1974 movie, *Space Is the Place*, Sun Ra lands his spaceship in a youth center in Oakland and talks to the young Black people he finds there after materializing in the middle of the room. Everyone wonders whether he is “for real”. And Sun Ra answers:

I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were, you’d have some status among the nations of the world. So we’re both myths. I do not come to you as a reality; I come to you as the myth, because that’s what Black people are. Myths. I came from a dream that the Black man dreamed a long time ago. I’m actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors.⁷³

Here, the myth-dimension of Sun Ra’s Astro-Black mythology becomes a metaphor for salvation and Black eschatology; Sun Ra wears a composite Egyptian headdress typical of the goddess Hathor (cow horns with a solar disk on a nemes), and he is accompanied by two gods who play a central role in the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead’s spells and iconography, namely Thoth and Horus, and who were probably seen as especially connected to the solar and celestial world by having the bird forms of an ibis (Thoth) and a falcon (Horus). Thoth, moreover, is the ancient Egyptian god that gave origin to the religious and philosophical movement of Hermetism and Theosophy.⁷⁴ Sun Ra introduces himself, saying, “Greetings Black youth of planet Earth. I am the ambassador from the Intergalactic Region of the Council for Outer Space”. Ancient Egypt has been transformed here into a space-region with alien-gods.

The same speech has recently been used in an Afrofuturistic series streamed in the United States on HBO, *Lovecraft Country* (2020), inspired by Matt Ruff’s 2016 novel of the same name.⁷⁵ The latter has been compared to novels representing what has been called “race melodrama” by Susan Gillman, where racial

⁷² On myth-science in relation to mythopoesis and science fiction in modern and contemporary art and philosophy, and the role that Sun Ra plays within it, see [Burrows and O’Sullivan, *Fictioning*](#), in particular chapters 11 and 12.

⁷³ For a detailed critical description of the movie, see [Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*](#), 209–27.

⁷⁴ On Hermes Trismegistus (a syncretistic figure uniting the Greek Hermes and the Egyptian Thoth) and Hermetism, see [Bull, *The Tradition of Hermes Trismegistus*](#).

⁷⁵ [Ruff, *Lovecraft Country*](#).

tensions and the dimension of history as “occult” are outlined through stories from the twentieth century.⁷⁶ The novel and its TV adaptation are both an homage to H.P. Lovecraft’s stories and their fantasy and occult atmospheres, and the TV adaptation in particular presents a retro style that recalls the idea of retrofuturism and techno-science of the past discussed at the beginning of this article. The narrative opens in Chicago, where Atticus “Tic” Freeman (Jonathan Majors), a young Korean War veteran, is an avid reader of fantasy and weird fiction authors such as Lovecraft. He embarks on a quest to find his disappeared father, whom he at first believes travelled to Arkham, Massachusetts, the fictional town of Lovecraft’s creation, in Jim Crow America of the 1950s. Tic is accompanied by his Uncle George (Courtney B. Vance) and his childhood friend Leticia (Jurnee Smollett), who become implicated in a family drama that involves supernatural, occultist activity. Another of the novel’s and series’ main characters, Hippolyta (Aunjanue Ellis), Atticus’ aunt and George’s wife, loves astronomy, and in Episode 7 of the TV series, entitled “I am”, Hippolyta journeys across space and time to define her identity as Black woman. Using her knowledge of astronomy, she is able to understand how to repair an old orrery mechanical model of the solar system; on the orrery, she also finds an inscription with a quotation from the philosopher Kant: “Every beginning is in time and every limit of extension in space”. She then lands on another planet and finds herself in a spaceship where she meets an Afrofuturistic extraterrestrial being.⁷⁷ In the 3-minute scene when Hippolyta and George exit their spaceship, we hear Sun Ra’s iconic speech from *Space is the Place*, which aligns perfectly with the outer space, myth-inspiring and futuristic dimension of the episode.

Conclusions

“You may say jazz came from the sun priests of Egypt”, Sun Ra once said.⁷⁸ The role that the ancient Egyptian solar religion played in his philosophy, music and performances is undeniable and should be recognized within the history of reception of ancient Egypt and Egyptology. In Astro-Black mythology, art and

76 See Jackson, “The Missing Melodrama”; Gillman, *Blood Talk*. The race melodrama genre also includes works by African American authors and scholars who were deeply inspired by ancient Egypt such as Pauline Hopkins and W.E.B. Du Bois. On Pauline Hopkins, see Davies, “Pauline Hopkins’ Literary Egyptology”.

77 Gaskins, “Lovecraft Country”; Newby and Wigler, “Lovecraft Country”.

78 Szwed, *Space is the Place*, 62.

sci-fi, Egypt allows the Black past and future to merge through space travel, all the way towards a magical, mythical land and back on Earth. Those mortals who would listen to the call of the space music, Sun Ra thought, could be chosen and brought to a world beyond their reality. In the movie *Space Is the Place*, Sun Ra says: “I came from a dream that Black man dreamed long ago. I’m actually a presence sent to you from your ancestors. I’m gonna be here till I pick out certain ones of you to take back with me”.⁷⁹ Sun Ra’s “presence” is still transporting souls through his music and art. As Kodwo Eshun writes in a central essay on Sun Ra, while science and technology sterilize all myth and generally myth starts where science stops, Sun Ra understood that music and the recording medium act as an interface between science and myth.⁸⁰

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⁷⁹ *Space Is the Place*. See Youngquist, *A Pure Solar World*, 221.

⁸⁰ Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 160.

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