

Paul Youngquist. *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016. viii + 346 pp. ISBN 978-0292726369. \$27.95.

While some publications on the legendary poet, visionary, and jazz musician Sun Ra have made mention of his interest in things mystical, esoteric, and occult,<sup>1</sup> it was Marques Redd who was the first to devote significant attention to the link between Sun Ra and esotericism. In his strong contribution to *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: There is a Mystery* (2012), the first book-length study of black esotericisms, Redd takes Ra's poem "Astro-Black Mythology" as the starting point for a "properly hermetic literary theory" that views certain forms of poetry and other works of art not as "objects" to critique and dissect, but as initiatory, imbued as they are with a particular kind of "gnosis."<sup>2</sup> Paul Youngquist's *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*, which makes a strong case for Ra as a purveyor of esoteric epistemologies, further cements the poet and musician's place in the pantheon of esotericism.

*A Pure Solar World* is not a biography: for those interested in the biographical account of Sun Ra, born Herman Blount in Alabama in 1914 (although Ra himself would later state that he came from Saturn), Youngquist directs readers to John Szwed's phenomenal *Space is the Place*. Rather, more than any other recent scholarly publication, *A Pure Solar World* seeks to place Sun Ra firmly within his times by combining careful analysis of Ra's music and poetry with elaborate discussions of the cultural, social, and political contexts in which his work emerged and which it helped to shape. According to Youngquist, Ra's seemingly eccentric and out-of-this-world practices, words and sounds were informed by the lived experience of segregation and inspired by the Space Age and various esoteric and occult epistemologies, and should be seen as a committed, cogent and creative response to the oppressive reality of being black in America. In positing this thesis, Youngquist also reclaims Ra's more political side, portraying him as at heart a black activist who, witnessing the violent everyday reality of anti-black white supremacy, practiced "a cultural politics of sound." (2)

<sup>1</sup> See, in particular: Tobias C. van Veen, "Other Planes of There: The MythSciences, Chronopolitics and Concepttechnics of Afrofuturism" (PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2014); John F. Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Marques Redd, "Astro-Black Mythology: The Poetry of Sun Ra," in *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*, eds. Stephen Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh Page (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 231–32.

Youngquist demonstrates that for Ra, politics and institutional religion (Ra was particularly critical of Christianity) had failed to foster change; instead, his solution was to produce forms of art—most importantly music and poetry—that would create a better world. His music would transport black Americans from segregated inner-city neighborhoods to outer space. Or, as Youngquist succinctly puts it, “[f]rom nothing to infinity.” (194) The terms “nothing” and “infinity” are Ra’s, and relate to one another: Youngquist argues that Ra, on numerous occasions, likened the plight of African Americans in the United States to a condition or state of nothingness, yet was convinced of (his) music’s propensity to bring change, to inaugurate infinity—for black Americans, first and foremost, but perhaps also for the rest of the world. Ra, moreover, linked the condition of nothingness of black America to the “[n]othing of heard sounds”—that is, its “fugitive quality”—which for Ra did not translate as an absence but as “active force that transforms the present.” (81) While Ra displayed ambivalence regarding the transformative power of language, sound (expressed in and through music and poetry) could, quite literally, create a better world. Or, in the words of Youngquist, Ra was convinced that “music moves. It transports. In transporting, it transforms. Music can transform worlds.” (117) In linking the nothingness of black America to the transformative nothingness of sound, Ra reconfigured blackness as the potential for “Black Infinity.” (193)

The book consists of a short introduction and conclusion and twenty-one chapters of varying lengths which, although more or less chronological, are organized thematically such that they “can productively be read in any order or disorder.” (3) Although this approach does occasionally make the text unnecessarily repetitive, it does not impede on Youngquist’s argument, which is sound, easy to follow, and convincing. Moreover, his rationale—“[a] book on Sun Ra and his explosive music should eschew too tidy a linearity” (ibid)—immediately sets the tone of the text. As another reviewer remarked, Youngquist is an “unapologetic convert” who not only subjects Ra’s life, music and poetry to scholarly tools of analysis—although Youngquist certainly does this too, and does so very well—but seeks to convince us that Ra’s poetry, tone science, and esotericism continue to be relevant, as they open to new worlds, to better worlds, to pure solar worlds.

Occasionally, this approach backfires when Youngquist *imagines* conversations that Ra would have had (see 13–14, 47–53, 260–63). This tactic feels particularly problematic in the last chapter, when Youngquist imagines the words Ra could have shared with loved ones on his deathbed. (260–63) Precisely because Youngquist quotes Ra extensively, allowing his voice to speak for itself, it is unnecessary, and quite problematic, to take the liberty

to imagine—or invent really—what Ra’s last words would have been. For the most part, however, Youngquist’s ardent conviction of Ra’s brilliance and importance allows for an engaging read that takes Ra’s music and his poetry—and in particular, taking a cue from Ra himself, the relationship between music and poetry—seriously. Carefully dissecting both, Youngquist reveals, as noted above, a complex but coherent, consistent and inspired response to the plight of black Americans, a truly alternative and original vision for the future. His claim that Ra’s experimental poems form an integral, if mostly overlooked, part of this vision is an important and much-needed contribution in this respect. In “Immeasurable Equations,” one of the lengthier chapters, Youngquist conveys that Ra’s poems—which Ra referred to as “equations”—are, like his music, grounded in Ra’s confidence in the “fugitive quality of sound,” which explains his fondness for wordplay and his attention to tonality. In his poem “Discernment,” for instance, Ra utilizes the sound of the word “justice” to arrive at the devastating conclusion that “justice” can also imply “just is,” or “the status quo.” (93, 280n.51) Dissecting this particular play of words, Youngquist argues that for Ra an ostensible commitment to social justice issues “conceals a longing for control enforced by language.” (93)

Ra’s faith in the transformative power of music began early in life. After a relatively short but devastating period in which he was deprived of music as a forced civil servant during World War II, it found force when Ra exchanged Alabama for Chicago’s Bronzeville. It was here, in 1951, while working as a musician and composer, that Ra met Alton Abraham. According to Youngquist, the two men were brought together by a shared intellectual interest in occult and esoteric knowledge. Abraham was as concerned with the often-denigrated position of black Americans as Ra and together, building on Egyptology, Theosophy, numerology and other esoteric and occult traditions, the two would “cobble together an intellectual countertradition for the South Side, a forgotten legacy of wisdom to invigorate a people caged without a key.” (33) They would distribute leaflets and booklets, and call their semi-secret organization Thmei, probably named after the Egyptian goddess of truth and justice. They practiced what Youngquist calls “political theosophy,” “a radicalism combining the spiritual imperative of esoteric wisdom with a social agenda of black advancement.” (37) Ra, Abraham, and other members of the group offered a means for creative resistance—not through conventional politics or religion but through culture. And while Ra occasionally spoke of the universal potentiality of his music, Youngquist correctly observes that he was primarily concerned with producing forms of art that would reach, help, and inspire black Americans.

While I wished for a more thorough discussion of the notion of “political theosophy,” and, for instance, the ways in which it relates to other theosophical traditions, I understand that this work is perhaps better suited for scholars of esotericism. And, to be sure, Youngquist’s chapters on Ra’s occult and esoteric interests, made possible through archival research at the recently established “Alton Abraham Collection of Sun Ra” at the University of Chicago, are riveting. Moreover, he attributes to Thmei (and thus esoteric thought) a much larger role regarding the musical and spiritual trajectory of Ra than other scholars have, suggesting that Ra’s band, the Sun Ra Arkestra, served to spread and advance Thmei’s message or, at the very least, “complemented Thmei’s program of cultural activism.” (63) For Ra, music was a conduit for esoteric knowledge, and a vehicle for change. The pervasive influence of Thmei is also evidenced in the fact that Ra, when he became a visiting lecturer at UC Berkeley in the Department of Afro-American Studies in 1971, assigned, among other things, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* and the works of Theosophist Helena Blavatsky, alongside contemporary black writers such as Amiri Baraka and Henry Dumas. (206–07)

Indeed, Youngquist demonstrates that Thmei continued to be important for Sun Ra, even as he, inspired by the Space Age, added a more “futuristic dimension” to Thmei’s “occult message” by the mid-1950s, as evidenced in such tracks as “Blues in Outer Space” and “Space Aura.” (130–31) Even as Ra was influenced by the cultural zeitgeist of his time, his ideas about outer space were very different and more sophisticated: carefully comparing the goals of the government and Sun Ra, Youngquist argues that Ra’s alternative space program, El Saturn, was “much bolder” than that of the US or Soviet Union, precisely because it was not informed by “state-sponsored technoscience,” nor steeped in the desire for and “politics of domination.” (140) Ra offered an alternative future, a “visionary NASA,” precisely because he “imagine[d] it,” thereby “eschewing the language of politics and propaganda for a poetics of outer space.” (ibid) The Arkestra had no need for rockets, he continues, precisely because they *played* “space music,” transporting black people from segregated neighborhoods to “outer space,” “blasting humans to infinity on a fiery counterthrust of sound.” (147) This, Youngquist observes, also distinguishes Ra’s music from other musical forms that embraced outer space and a more futuristic dimension, but that lacked the larger political agenda of transforming the plight of black Americans through the liberating power of music.

It is only towards the end of the text that Youngquist provides a rationale for his subtitle, *Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism*, although those familiar with Afrofuturism would already be aware of Ra’s foundational influence on this

cultural movement, from his emphasis on the transformative power of myth to his attention to outer space. Youngquist argues convincingly that Ra should be seen as a progenitor of Afrofuturism, a term coined in the year that Ra passed away, 1993, as a rubric for an aesthetic and a set of forms of cultural production that combine technological, science fictional, magical realist and speculative tropes and themes with (West-)African cosmologies and histories to construct alternate identities, re-examine the past, offer a critique of the present, and envision alternatives to destructive whitewashed futures.

Youngquist's discussion on Afrofuturism also opens possibilities for future research in *our* field: while he does not explicitly discuss the relationship between Afrofuturism and esotericism, and while the two strands of thought generally remain separated in the Academy, his analysis does point to various areas of intersection, such as ufology and the transformative qualities of sound. It would be fruitful to explore this relationship further.<sup>3</sup> Youngquist's careful analysis also opens additional possible research paths for future studies in esotericism. One can think here about the mutually constitutive relationship between jazz and esotericism, or, in continuation of the work of Jeff Kripal, esotericism and science fiction.<sup>4</sup> Of course, Youngquist's intricate attention to the Thmei society and its undeniable influence on Ra's poetry, music, and mission provides us with insight into a heretofore largely unknown but highly creative esoteric phenomenon, which will hopefully encourage new scholarship. *A Pure Solar World* also invites further research on the ways in which esoteric currents such as Blavatsky's Theosophy found their way to black communities, where they were interrogated, utilized and altered, such that new currents and variations, of which Ra's "political theosophy" is merely one example, emerged. Moreover, Ra was clearly in conversation—either explicit or implicit—with other black purveyors of esoteric thought, such as Elijah Muhammad, leader

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<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, this has yet to be done. The edited volume *Esotericism in the African American Religious Experience* is the only publication that has brought the two fields together. Yet, although Stephen Wehmeyer in his contribution does briefly engage the intersections of conjure and Afrofuturist texts, Afrofuturism is more frequently mentioned in passing, and its relationship to esotericism, or Africana Esoteric Studies, is only provided a cursory glance; Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr, "Introduction: Africana Esoteric Studies, Mapping a New Endeavor," in *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*, ed. *ibid.* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1, 9, 11; Stephen Wehmeyer, "Conjurational Contraptions: Techno-Hermeneutics, Mechanical Wizardry, and the Material Culture of African American Folk Magic," in *ibid.*, 259–60.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

of the Nation of Islam, and these connections, and the creative thought that emerged in their wake, are worth exploring further.

That said, Youngquist’s accessible and vivid prose, careful exegesis of Ra’s at-first-sight impenetrable music and poetry, and never-ending commitment to communicate (or transport) Sun Ra’s vision to the twenty-first century deserves a much wider audience. I highly recommend this book for scholars and students interested in music, sound, science fiction, the space age, and American and African American history, culture and religion. Ra departed Earth in 1993. Youngquist—like so many musicians, artists, and activists that continue to find inspiration in Ra’s oeuvre—revives Ra’s “cultural politics of sound” for the twenty-first century, in a persuasive plea that demonstrates the propensity of Ra’s music to open up alternative futures, or a pure solar world.

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Advance Review