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Review

William Sites, *Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism and the City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 313 pp. ISBN 9780226732107 (pbk). $30.00.

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While reading William Sites's book *Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism and the City*, I came to think of the title of Theodor W. Adorno's *The Stars Down to Earth* several times. Adorno's book is an analysis of the astrology column in the *Los Angeles Times* between November 1952 and February 1953, and as his title shows, 'the stars'—the constellations—are, in a sense, moved 'down to earth'. The 'superstition' of astrology is analysed through sociological and psychological theories, and it is pointed out how astrology is less an irrational belief system and more an element of everyday life. In Sites's book, one could similarly argue that the Sun—Sun Ra, arguably the most important composer, musician, and thinker of what has come to be called Afrofuturism—rather than travelling the spaceways, is discussed in a down-to-earth fashion; within a context of urban geography and city life.[1]

The book is published within the University of Chicago Press series 'Historical Studies of Urban America'. After an introduction, the book is divided into two parts, one about Birmingham, Alabama, the arrival place of Sun Ra when he came down to earth, and a second focusing on Chicago and the years Sun Ra lived there, from 1946 to 1961.

Chapter 1, 'Downtown Sounds', begins with Herman 'Sonny' Blount's birthday, according to John F. Szwed's biography, on 22 May 1914 (Szwed 1998: 4). As such, the book opens like a biography, but Sites quickly moves

1. The reference is to 'We Travel the Spaceways' from the album *When Sun Comes Out* (1963) by Sun Ra and his Myth Science Arkestra. *When Sun Comes Out* was recorded in New York, after Sun Ra left Chicago. The composition is recorded on several later albums. Sites has previously used the same composition as a title for his article '"We Travel the Spaceways": Urban Utopianism and the Imagined Spaces of Black Experimental Music', *Urban Geography* 33/4 (2012): 566–92.

to a detailed description of downtown Birmingham, Alabama in the 1910s. The sign by the train station stating 'Birmingham, the Magic City' is highlighted, pointing towards the album *The Magic City* by Sun Ra, recorded in New York City in 1965, after Ra left Chicago. Thus, the timeframe the book engages is already indicated in this sign. However, rather than speculating, Sites details the geography of Birmingham, the number of venues for different kinds of music, and several social organizations found in the city, from schools and churches to the Masonic Temple. The rest of Part I follows Herman Blount through high school and early musical life, leading up to an 'extraordinary dream' where he is 'transported upward into outer space' (39). And as Sites writes: 'Many of the dream's images—the sky train, the space robe, the planet Saturn—would become important cosmological motifs for Blount in the years to come' (40). This dream, obviously, could be read as the site where Sun Ra becomes Sun Ra, but as Sites also underscores, this is an ongoing becoming. The cosmology of Sun Ra is in that sense a work in progress, expanding endlessly, not only to outer space, and not only to a future but also to mythical pasts reinterpreted.

Part II begins with Sun Ra arriving in Chicago in 1946, where he almost immediately gets a job with Fletcher Henderson. Sites maps the musical scenes of Chicago's South Side and discusses the development of 'a new music that could change the world' (128). Here cosmology, countercultural dimensions, and musical dimensions are read together, where the origins of the Arkestra are a result of all these different contexts. The utopian and the urban are understood as entangled dimensions in this development. Sites (to this reviewer's pleasure) takes the time to explore how this new music sounded and shows how Ra's visions and music continually expands, focusing on outer space and Africa, the future and the past. Arguably, the most revelatory chapter in Part II, chapter 5, 'Sounds So Loud It Will Wake Up the Dead', introduces Alton Abraham, whom Ra met in 1951. The chapter is a detailed account of the 'secret society'—'Thmei Research'—that Abraham and Ra formed in the early 1950s, and the broadsheets they wrote, interpreted by Sites in the context of heterodox religious, occult, and spiritual life in Chicago. It also happened in this period, on 20 October 1952, that Sonny Blount legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra. The combination of different belief systems found in the broadsheets—from Theosophy to Ethiopianism, and much in between—in a sense seems to mirror the different musical styles and genres Sites highlights in his reading of Sun Ra's music. The broadsheets clearly demonstrate a revisionist attitude towards history, with counterhistories and

countercultural dimensions coming to the fore in tandem with Sun Ra's cosmology. The final years in Chicago, 1957–1961, is when, according to Sites, Sun Ra 'fully *became* Sun Ra, the leader of a collective exploring other worlds' (147). Sites hears a 'sonic geography' that moves further out than Chicago, to the past and the future, while still, as the main argument of the book makes clear, being grounded in this contemporary Chicago.

It is important for Sites to hold on to a chronological exploration of Sun Ra. The cities of Birmingham and Chicago are crucial sites in this exploration. The first three chapters on Sun Ra in Birmingham—before, technically speaking, he became Sun Ra—and the following five chapters on different aspects of Sun Ra in Chicago are mostly chronologically ordered, while thematically organized as well. As Sites writes in his introduction: 'Growing recognition of Sun Ra's eccentric genius may, however, encourage commentators to project understandings derived from late-career interviews and performances onto the young musician and writer', adding that 'his self-presentation as a traveler from a different world can overshadow his creative and often deeply critical engagement with this one' (2).

Contrary to taking Sun Ra's self-presentation at face value, Sites insists on contextualizing him within the urban and the historical, pulling him down to earth, so to speak, and understanding him in a this-worldly perspective. The cosmological and musical dimensions are interpreted as related to the different discourses found in Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s, Sun Ra's music in relation to music played in the city at the time, in contrast, to a more speculative interpretation often found in Afrofuturist discourse.

In the Introduction, 'Urban Routes, Utopian Pathways', Sites opens with the context of the second half of the 1950s, and Sun Ra in Chicago, presenting the main questions the book will engage.

> Although few cultural commentators took notice at the time, the emergence of Sun Ra and the Arkestra in late-1950s Chicago is seen today as a foundational moment for Afrofuturism—an influential mode of utopian expression that draws on mythical African pasts in order to envision new black-centered worlds of the future. How did Sun Ra's own music and cosmology emerge? And why did they flourish in Chicago? This book addresses these questions. (1)[2]

These questions show what I have called Sites's down-to-earth perspective that stands in contrast to some of the more speculative dimensions of the

2. I do not alter spellings in quotations, and Sites writes 'black' with lowercase b. In the 'Author's Note' he comments upon it, referencing that the 'contemporary editorial preferences' of 'capitalizing Black' was not as widespread when the book was in press.

discourse on Afrofuturism. Thus, when the author writes about 'mythical African pasts', one could wish for both a discussion on 'myth'—Sun Ra's Arkestra is often called the 'Myth Science Arkestra'—and historical African pasts. As an example, Kodwo Eshun considers the term 'MythScience' in his 1998 book *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, insisting on the mythical as real. Eshun's ideas are almost absent in Sites's book, merely referred to, together with *The Last Angel of History*, '[as] important early discussions of Afrofuturism' (233, n. 4). This near absence could be related to Sites's down-to-earth perspective, or it may be related to different scholarly and critical perspectives, but Sites's question 'How did Sun Ra's own music and cosmology emerge?' could arguably also have been addressed in dialogue with Eshun. And as Eshun writes:

> … just because Ra pushes it by saying that he comes from Saturn. I always accept the impossibility of this. I always start with that, where most people would try and claim it was an allegory. But it isn't an allegory: he really did come from Saturn. I try to exaggerate that impossibility, until it's irritating, until it's annoying, and this annoyance is merely a threshold being crossed in the readers' heads, and once they unseize, unclench their sensorium, they'll have passed through a new threshold and they'll be in my world. (Eshun 1998: 193)

Sun Ra coming from Saturn, and arriving on planet Earth in Birmingham, Alabama, 22 May 1914, is not a down-to-earth story but an important fact in Sun Ra's myth science. Thus, the scholar and the critic may differ here, both in temperament, questions, and level of speculation. If Afrofuturism today is also discussed as Black Speculative Art, then speculation may also be one of the methodological approaches in the discourse. Take the documentary, *The Last Angel of History* (1996, directed by John Akomfrah), as an example. In many ways it is a speculative documentary, using elements of speculative fiction to tell a story about what we today call Afrofuturism. Sites is not unaware of these speculations. Already in the Introduction, he writes that Sun Ra was 'an explorer of alternate realities' (1). My appeal to the speculative is not meant as a criticism of the scholarly choices he made in his book, but rather to highlight a possible discrepancy between writing a history of Afrofuturism versus writing an Afrofuturist history.

Sites's title and subtitle point in different directions. 'Sun Ra's Chicago' underlines the urban contexts of most of the book's readings, whereas 'Afrofuturism and the City', while still clinging to the urban contexts, at the same time promises an interrogation of Afrofuturism, which arguably seems to be less important in the final result. It is not, however, entirely absent.

One must really look for the Afrofuturist perspectives in the chapters. They appear in a different way than in much of Afrofuturist scholarship.

To tell the truth, there is not that much direct engagement with Afrofuturism in Sites's book. In a footnote in the Introduction, he writes that 'Sun Ra did not call himself an Afrofuturist', which is undoubtedly true. Sites references the term as being introduced in Mark Dery's 'Black to the Future', and mentions *The Last Angel of History*, Eshun's *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, and Alondra Nelson's 'Introduction: Future Texts' in *Social Text*'s special issue on Afrofuturism as 'important early discussions of Afrofuturism', as well as Ytasha Womack's book *Afrofuturism* as 'a general survey' (cf. Dery 1994; Eshun 1998; Nelson 2002; Womack 2013). Towards the end of the book, in the concluding chapter entitled 'Lineages/Legacies', Sites mentions musical acts often discussed as Afrofuturist (George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic, Rammellzee, OutKast, Erykah Badu, and Janelle Monáe) as well as additional literature about Afrofuturism such as '25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought' (Barber 2018) and Alex Zamalin's *Black Utopia* (2019) in the footnotes. All in all, Sites does not really engage that much with scholarship on Afrofuturism (at least not satisfyingly given the explicit reference in the subtitle of the book). One key exception should be mentioned. Sites engages with Paul Youngquist's *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* (2016), a book that proves fruitful to read in companionship with Sites's own book. Youngquist's book is about Sun Ra's whole career and is explicitly related to the Afrofuturist discourse, but Sites shows how some of the elements defining Sun Ra's later career are already in place in the Chicago years.

The relative absence of Afrofuturist discourse, however, does not mean, in my view at least, that Sites's book is not about Afrofuturism in a different sense. His understanding of Afrofuturism is closely related to the idea of utopia, where utopia or a utopian sensibility is dynamic and changing and is related to urbanity, to different historical views—past, present, and future—but also to mystical, spiritual, or occult understandings. Sites finds all these different strands of becoming-Afrofuturism in Sun Ra's Chicago context.

Sites's book is an important contribution to discussions on Black music in the 1940s and 1950s, presenting details about how urban and musical life co-exist and co-create, while also introducing a number of elements Sun Ra used throughout his career, even after leaving Chicago, for musical, political, philosophical, and mystical projects. While not necessarily in dialogue with the literature on Afrofuturism, this book still contributes

important material for future writings on Sun Ra and Afrofuturism, as well as for the history of Black music, both utopian and speculative.

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