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## **Multi-Voiced Archival Performances and the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection**

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## Abstract

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*This article critically explores creative reinterpretations of a sonic archive. It focusses on the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection, a catalogue of the experimental jazz composer Sun Ra (born Herman Poole Blount, 1914-93). In 2010 the collection's caretakers commissioned visual artists, writers and musicians, including myself, to create new works based on the recordings. Each resulting work acts as an archival performance, understood here as any embodied reimagining and recontextualisation of the archive. Together, the works suggest a process of listening to and remixing the archive 'from below', rather than a singular, top-down authority of archival interpretation and power. I examine these works through analysis and artist interviews, noting a tension between appropriation and recontextualisation on one hand and archival stewardship and acknowledgement on the other. I observe how exchange, conflict, solidarity and accountability are all potentially present within each archival performance.*

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A recording begins. A half-dozen screeching cellos glissando and pizzicato down in pitch into a pattern that is both polyrhythmic and sporadic; they expand and contract in and out of metric time. Celesta, bass clarinet, vibraphone and electric piano soon join in. As the instruments begin to settle into discernible rhythmic patterns, another recording interrupts them, related in musical content, yet different in timbre and grain: It is a rehearsal tape, and its room sound and hiss betray that it is taking place at a different place and earlier time. The tape reveals a second band of instruments – flute, drums, bassoon and keyboard – that dovetail and take over from those at the beginning. A voice breaks in: 'That ain't the sound. Let me hear your rim shot [...] It ain't powerful enough [...] Now, one, one, one, two [...] Marshall: one, two, three, four!' The two ensembles join together, old and new, their sounds merging and departing, and all performers are listening to and following the leader's instructions. The recording, entitled 'Marshall', is a sound collage I composed consisting of archival samples of Sun Ra rehearsing his band, the Arkestra. Musicians Fred Lonberg-Holm, Jeff Kimmel, Jeremy Woodruff, Aaron Butler and myself add new performances to the mix. 'Marshall' makes use of interstitial moments of Sun Ra counting, teaching and making adjustments as the piece unfolds. My intervention takes advantage of these moments and brings them to the fore: What was initially a documentation of a working process becomes the backbone of a new sonic work.

The Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection is approximately 600 audiotapes from the 1950s to 1993 of the experimental jazz composer and bandleader Sun Ra (born Herman Poole Blount, 1914-93).<sup>1</sup> Sun Ra's life and works have increasingly been the subject of scholarly and popular interest, and his importance has grown from marginalised outsider to celebrated cult figure. His music is at once rooted in the traditions of American big-band jazz and experimental and free musics. Sun Ra

used and embodied mythology – specifically related to outer space – as a means to subvert and circumvent racism against African-Americans (Eshun, 1998; Szwed, 1998; Lock, 1999). This resonates strongly today with a new generation of artists and scholars, in what is now referred to as ‘Afro-futurism’ (Dery, 1994; Corbett, 2006a). The recordings are remarkably varied – including rehearsal tapes, live concerts, phone messages, television recordings, lectures and poetry – and are held together tangentially through their connection with Sun Ra. The collection furthers historical and cultural elements related to Ra’s music and art as well as American history, mythology, Afrocentrism, memory, race, civil rights and everyday life.

The collection is housed in the Creative Audio Archive (CAA) at the non-profit Experimental Sound Studio (ESS) in Chicago. John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis acquired and stored the collection in 2000, and the recordings were subsequently donated to CAA in 2007 (Kapsalis, personal communication, 2013). The digitisation of the collection was completed in 2010. Importantly, Sun Ra L.L.C. (and not CAA) holds the collection’s copyright, with Sun Ra’s nephew, Thomas Jenkins, Jr., as the Managing Director. According to archivist Allison Schein, CAA’s role is twofold: to enable on-site listening by appointment, and to commission new works based on the collection (personal communication, 2016). However, online listening to the collection is not allowed due to copyright restrictions.

ESS received funding to not only preserve the collection, but to develop ways of interpreting it.<sup>2</sup> ESS commissioned new works from writer and musician Terri Kapsalis, visual artist and musician Damon Locks, filmmakers Cauleen Smith and Rob Shaw and musicians Todd Carter, Mike Reed and myself. As such, the commissions are an integral part of CAA’s mission and ethos. Lou Mallozzi, Executive Director of ESS, states that CAA is a ‘living archive and not only a repository’, and that the commissions ‘activate the history therein and [...] stimulate further cultural production in the present’ (personal communication, 2016). Also of note, the commissioned artists – including myself – were asked to sign a ‘letter of agreement’ with ESS. The agreement protects the copyright holders, positions ESS as a facilitator and ensures a dialogue between all parties to use the materials. I signed the agreement willingly and saw it as an integral part of working with the collection. These contrasts between access, restriction and interpretation highlight ways in which an archive navigates between preservation, stewardship and interpretation of the materials.

My analysis of the commissioned works falls under the auspices of sound studies. The works are at the intersection of cultural, archival, musical and artistic approaches to sound. As a result, they are multidisciplinary and emphasise listening, performance and social interaction. I draw from these fields and use sound studies as a lens on social, cultural and media contexts stemming from the collec-

tion. In addition, the pieces are seen and heard from multiple subjective positions, which encourages an interdisciplinary analytical approach. Finally, my personal experiences with the collection as a commissioned artist have deeply informed my scholarly work. This can be understood as part of the emergent field of ‘practice-based research’ in the arts (Allegue et al., 2009; Riley & Hunter, 2009; Barton et al., 2010).

I understand each commissioned work to be an ‘archival performance’ (Cook & Schwartz, 2002; Jackson, 2000), defined here as any embodied reimagining and recontextualisation of the archive. Archival performances are two-way interactions between the archive and its remixers, and as such they highlight the agency of the archive. The recordings offer what Jane Bennett (2010) understands as a ‘vitality’ or ‘vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans’. This vitality, according to Bennett, is ‘the capacity of things [...] not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forced with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’. Here, the artists transform the archive, and the archive bleeds through to the present to transform them. Each archival performance is what Jackson (2000) refers to as a ‘performance of history’. Heard together, they tell many smaller stories – flawed, open-ended, fragmented, interstitial – that coalesce to form the body of an archive listened to and remixed ‘from below’ (Sekula, 1986). They become a topography of necessarily imperfect and unfinished accounts (Stewart, 1996; Spieker, 2008). These accounts are replete with the mistakes, errors and triumphs of both past and present; the process of listening to them offers a means of acknowledgement of the original creators and becomes integral to a larger archival stewardship.

Archival performances of a sonic archive highlight a dilemma: Any act of access, appropriation and interpretation carries with it the potential for an imbalance of power. Although musical borrowing – from its earliest origins to digital sampling – has been a key component of Western musical history (Burkholder, 2013), it nevertheless can repeat the same patterns of other forms of appropriation, tantamount to cultural imperialism. The tensions between archival stewardship and interpretation, between authors and remixers, can never be fully resolved. Sekula (1983) points out that each act of archival interpretation contains both a ‘liberation’ and a ‘loss’. In essence, no interaction with the archive’s creation or interpretation is fully objective or beyond reproach.

In this article I consider multi-voiced archival performances as one way of navigating complicated balances of power between creators, archivists and remixers. I draw on Sekula’s (1986) call for interpreters to ‘listen to, and act in solidarity with, the polyphonic testimony of the oppressed and exploited’. Sekula points to a way of thoughtfully and respectfully working with polysemic archival materials that can all too easily be detached from earlier contexts and meanings. The commis-

sioned projects share this same spirit: Sun Ra tunes are remixed into flashmobs that celebrate Ra and protest against class oppression and racism; archive-inspired digital prints incorporate myth and space to address social issues; and sound collages recognise past and present to look towards the future. Modalities of archival listening are explored, and I observe artists using ‘mislistening’, ‘close listening’ and ‘peripheral listening’ to guide their creative process. Finally, Sun Ra’s use of homophones offers a model for archival interpretation. Words such as ‘so’, ‘sow’ and ‘soul’ become archival links that connect disparate materials and forge multiple meanings.

## Archives, Sound and Performance

The archive has long been a subject of examination in cultural and critical studies. Over the last century scholars have shown a growing interest in the function, power and significance of the archive (Freud, 1925; Foucault, 1970; Derrida, 1995). The archive’s traditional meanings are associated with the controlling and bureaucratic power of the state, with direct implications on documenting and writing history. Merewether (2006) emphasises this historiographical function of the archive, stating that it is a ‘repository or ordered system of documents and recordings, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written’. Ernst (2012) cites power and control as being central tenets of the archive. This, according to Ernst, distinguishes it from a ‘collection’, which is associated more with institutions such as museums and libraries. Ernst critically notes that over the last century the distinction has become increasingly blurred. I have found this distinction to be helpful, yet argue that power and control remain integral to both archives and collections: It is impossible to ignore the institutional power present in the collection, storage, protection and dissemination of materials. In the Sun Ra collection, ownership and copyright flow back to the family of Sun Ra and inform how the commissioned artists interact with and interpret the recordings.

Sounds and sound recordings in archives have not been scrutinised as fully as textual and visual elements. Sonic archives require different approaches – rooted in methods such as listening – that do not exclude traditional archives, but add to and complement them. These approaches are not bound to either ocular or aural centrism (Erlmann, 2004) and instead challenge and open our perception of histories and presence. Ernst (2012), for example, notes that recorded sound produces a ‘noisy memory’ encompassing and registering ‘the whole range of acoustic events’. This is in contrast to music notation, whose ‘alphabetic symbolism’ is akin to traditional archival documents. Sound also allows for the ability to hear several distinct layers

at once, a contrapuntal simultaneity or multi-voiced stratification that is both in the present and layered upon past histories.

Recently the field of archival studies has slowly moved away from a traditional positivist approach in favour of an analysis of the archive that is both subjective and questioning (Kaplan, 2002). Notions of applying performance to the archive have also emerged and remain richly open to investigation (Jackson, 2000; Schneider, 2001; Taylor, 2003; Osthoff, 2009). Spieker (2008) discusses how the archive has been used as material for artists, from Marcel Duchamp to postmodern artists 'at play' in the archive. Spieker focusses on how archival bureaucracy helped form an 'irrational underside of modernism', which in turn allowed artists to subvert and react against archives. In contrast, Foucault (1970) offers an encompassing definition of the archive, one that is concerned less with the archive's objects than with an ever-unfolding *a priori* system that defines and shapes how and what is collected and stored and the ways in which we relate to them.

Archival performances, then, reside in the tension between the archive's materials, their generation and their interpretation. This can be understood as a divide between 'inside' and 'outside' the archive. Derrida (1995), aware of this tension, states that there is 'no archive without outside' and offers a term to define one such outside space: 'exergue'.<sup>3</sup> For Derrida, an 'exergue' is always in a position before the archive: It 'prearchives' the language and is the archive continually becoming. Derrida states that all archives are simultaneously 'revolutionary and traditional', and with this comes a 'violence' that works to destroy the archive. Positioned outside so that it might give order, an 'exergue' describes an archival process that paradoxically tries to destroy itself and yet needs an outside space to redefine and renew itself.

I draw from Derrida's 'exergue' to articulate a performative, archival 'outside' that does not necessarily function out of nostalgia or a drive to destroy. This outside informs and articulates the division between Derrida's 'revolutionary' and 'traditional' and between Sekula's 'liberation' and 'loss'. It encourages human interaction with the archive as a means to add to, disrupt and keep it in circulation. Such encounters and relationships offer the one thing that an archive does not: living contexts that continually add to and change the archival materials. Just as there must be an outside, the archive cannot remain a closed system to those who access it. The process of listening to and working within the archive must be opened outwards and set in motion through human interaction. Surprisingly, the archival process eventually swallows this up, too, and its cyclical rhythm starts over, continuing to unfold into the future.

## Modalities of Archival Listening

Modalities of listening featured prominently in the artists' creative processes and include mislistening, close listening and peripheral listening. Within the wider context of sound studies I follow Susan Smith's (2000) call to investigate the 'possibility of learning through listening'. Listening becomes broader than the physical act of hearing alone to encompass a spectrum of listening practices, what Sterne (2012) refers to as 'typologies of listening'. Listening can be a way of aurally understanding the past (Thompson, 2002; Sterne, 2003; Smith, 2004) or a form of social engagement and critical analysis of the present (Ultra Red, 2013). It reveals unfolding connections between people and how they transform through time. This not only deepens the contexts of archival sounds heard, but allows what Samuels et al. (2010) refer to as multiple subject 'positionalities of listeners', ensuring that sounds are listened to from many perspectives. Hence, the resulting works are as reflective of the artists' own backgrounds, interests and experiences as they are of Sun Ra's. In my own practice, listening is the primary method used. I combine my subjective archival listening with a critical, historical listening that includes cultural, political, musical and temporal elements. Ihde (1976) understands this listening process as 'auditory imagination', where perception and imagination function as two, co-present types of experience, and the listener can move between them. As such, listening is at once performative and dialogical: To listen is to actively participate in conversation with sound's physical and imagined presence as well as the nexus of relationships that stem from it.

Paul Carter (2004) suggests that the process of paying attention to gaps in the material is a form of 'mislistening', which also functions as a means of combating a purely nostalgic or sentimental approach to the historic collection. These 'in-between' or interstitial sounds within the collection often become primary material for the artists' new works. 'In-between' here broadly refers to sounds that are often removed from commercial recordings, yet are retained in the archive. In-betweenness in the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection includes recorded ephemera such as banter and laughter, rehearsals and phone messages. It also includes the audible material aspects of the media, such as tape hiss and deterioration. The use of in-between sounds is not as much a diffusion of the authorship of the original creators as it is the unearthing of additional layers of sonic information, allowing a greater depth of insight and dialogue between creators and remixers. It also points to the listeners' perceptual shift. Individual apprehensions of the recordings change over time; today's listeners hear them differently from their counterparts in the past, adding their own subjectivities and aesthetic tastes. Paying attention to these sounds and incorporating them into new works functions as a

device to shift from a singular, canonical interpretation to many viewpoints at once.

Todd Carter presents media noise and interstitial moments of the archive in an improvisatory setting. Carter, a Transfer Engineer at ESS, helped to digitise the collection in addition to being one of the commissioned artists. This dual role gave Carter an immersive vantage point, allowing both preservation and expansion of what he refers to as ‘the living archive’ (personal communication, 2013). In his piece, *2010: Digital Black or Sun Ra pt. II*, the live mix becomes a place where in-between moments come together with longer excerpts. Sun Ra lectures, heavily distorted percussion, radio signals, electronic synthesised sounds and singing from the Arkestra can be heard. The sounds of archival media are included, marking the physical transformation of the materials over time. Carter states, ‘There were many varied examples of tape print-through, electromagnetic deterioration, tape stop/start sound, [and] demagnetizing artifacts’. These noises became material to be improvised with for the new piece and performed live. *Digital Black* becomes a way of bringing in-between sounds and media noise into a dynamic, uncertain present-moment, where Carter’s compositional voice directly curates and interacts with the material.

In sharp contrast, Mike Reed’s *Living by Lanterns* (2012) draws from a single rehearsal tape, entitled ‘NY 1961’. Reed and collaborator Jason Adasiewicz identified melodic and harmonic fragments that otherwise had been rejected or left undeveloped from Ra’s music and recomposed them into new pieces. Reed deliberately avoided sampling the collection and instead favoured transcribing these in-between moments. The new pieces contain kernels of Sun Ra’s material that inform layers of newly composed melodic, rhythmic and timbral components. Kapsalis (2012) refers to Reed’s process of beginning with ‘unused historical material’ as the transformation of the archive, becoming ‘a vehicle for creating new myths’.

‘Mislistening’ is similar to ‘mishearing’ (Labelle, 2010) and ‘listening awry’ (Drobnick, 2004), where listening is ‘from an angle, from an “interested” rather than objective perspective’. Further afield, mislistening is related to Bloom’s (1997) ‘strong misreadings’ of previous poets to create new works. Bloom acknowledges past generations and their influence on the present, rather than focussing on the search for originality and novelty. To struggle with the resulting anxiety becomes the means by which poets extend the life of older works and dialogically add their own to the mix. Mislistening, then, is the moment in which a new voice, filled with its own concerns, beliefs and misunderstandings, can enter into a direct conversation with archival materials across time and space. The project of reinterpreting the sonic archive – including sampling, recomposing, transcribing to other disciplines

and media and more diffuse interactions – can be considered as a candid engagement with mislistening.

The artists employed additional modalities of listening, moving along a spectrum between close, focussed listening and peripheral listening. Damon Locks' creative interpretation includes both a series of digital prints and a collaborative work with Terri Kapsalis of sound, text and video, entitled *Noon Moons*.<sup>4</sup> Locks listened to many archival recordings in his studio while he created paintings and collages. He then continued his work without the music (personal communication, 2012). Locks' intent was to have the archive *indirectly* influence him as he translated its materials and meanings into different media, and then to allow the collection to recede as his own voice emerged. The prints reflect this process, where references to the collection are layered, nuanced and often oblique. The prints are collages that employ techniques of photography and drawing.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the series scenes of everyday life are combined with references to Sun Ra's opus of space, music and Egyptian and Afro-futurist imagery.

In digital prints such as 'Street Scene: A New Dimension' (2010) the image is densely complex, with several layers of information and noise. Colour is saturated, and the bright figures of young girls jumping rope on a city street are contrasted with textures of cracked paint and drawn, fluid lines. Acknowledging this complexity, Locks states, 'I enjoy a distressed, weather worn, aged look. I layer and combine images to develop a composition using drawings and my photographs'.<sup>6</sup> Several moons and suns are present in contrasting colours and are seen in the back-, middle- and foregrounds. This combination of the everyday and space-based imagery fuses present-day social issues with mythology and metaphor. Elements of science fiction are tied to and based in reality. Locks' work subtly, yet directly reflects Sun Ra's ability to employ myth and space as a means of addressing society, politics and race.

Kapsalis' listening process is inquisitive, without a preconceived notion of what to listen for. Her long-term relationship with the archive affected her approach to its materials. Working with Locks, she states, 'We both just listened and listened and took notes and were listening for things that caught our ears. It was a very intuitive and organic process. I did not have a guiding idea from the outset. I was listening both for ideas and for sections we might sample' (personal communication, 2013). Creative research, for Kapsalis, involves the process of 'letting the mind wander' in order to hear connections, links and offshoots present within the archive. Sounds may leap out of the background, or her work may draw from more direct sounds. For Kapsalis, as well as the other artists, there is a gradual focussing of the material, often with accompanying detailed notes.



Figure 1. 'Street Scene: A New Dimension', Damon Locks, 2010.

Reminiscent of Locks and Kapsalis, Cauleen Smith's working process began with an intense period of listening. Smith states, 'I listened to [the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection] about ten hours a day every day for about six weeks. His ideas, sounds, procedures, and even sense of humor crept into every part of my life and even at times, my dreams. But for a long time, I had no idea how to tie together the disparate things that I found interesting' (personal communication, 2013). Smith's searching is curious, immersive and open-ended. She allows the material to seep into her present world, sometimes unconsciously. This agency of the archive is also a temporal compression (Jackson, 2000). The artist/remixer engages with the archive through listening, and the archive in turn actively transforms the listener and her work. All of these experiences, then, can be thought of as a mixture of mislistening, close listening and peripheral listening, where the Sun Ra recordings over time affect the listeners in both direct and indirect ways.

## Archival Authorship and Collaboration

Archival performances form relationships between authors, archival material and remixers, what Stanyek and Piekut (2010) refer to as ‘posthumous duets’ and ‘intermundane collaborations’. These relationships can be affirming or problematic, since they are between the worlds of the living and dead. They also point to complexities of archival power that emerge: on one hand, Sun Ra is remembered and championed through the collection’s creation and interpretation, and on the other hand, he is unknowingly and perhaps unwillingly ‘collaborating’ with remixers. As such, the process of remixing, often involving a radical recontextualisation of archival materials, is in tension with an archival stewardship that fosters an awareness and accountability of the archive’s historical and cultural contexts.

Perhaps in an effort to bridge this gap, several of the commissioned artists understood their relationships to Sun Ra as akin to teacher and student. They follow and move alongside perceived directives from Ra via his music. Cauleen Smith states, ‘I cast myself in the role of an apprentice to Sun Ra, and made my work inhabiting this space [... My work] is a direct response to the lessons offered in the archives from Sun Ra via his voice, his conversations, the things he recorded on the radio and TV, [and] his lectures to the Arkestra in particular’ (personal communication, 2013). Damon Locks also saw himself as student. Locks states, ‘[My role was] not as someone that was trying to put myself in [Ra’s] place and act as him’ (personal communication, 2013). Instead, Locks looked for points of intersection – what he refers to as ‘crossovers’ – between his own interests and his perception of Sun Ra’s interests.

In my own work I too was aware that the original ‘authorship’ and presence of Sun Ra never fully disappears. It intentionally becomes a part of the new work. Akin to Barthes’ (1977) ‘myth of filiation’, Sun Ra occupies an unstable space as an author, one that is in a constant process of questioning, flux and becoming. My work aims to highlight this space, creates several coexisting, stratified musics next to it and lets them permeate one another. I collaged recordings from the archive into a sample-based, rhythmically unstable ‘click track’. This was given to several musicians along with composed melodic fragments, which they used to improvise with. I combined both the new and archival recordings, creating a discursive interaction where Sun Ra, the new musicians and myself as remixer all became ‘characters’ in the work. This intervention is necessarily an act of inclusion and exclusion: It flows between presence and absence, forgetting and remembering, authors and remixers.

The artists’ responses to the Sun Ra recordings suggest that many interpretations of the same archive potentially mitigate power imbalances between posthumous creators, contemporary archivists and collaborative remixers. A clear delineation between these actors establishes a strong juxtaposition, allowing archival material to remain intact, while allowing new voices to exist alongside it. The relation-

ships that take place between them contain the potential – if not a guarantee – of solidarity, a way of engaging with the material without exploiting it. Rather than being ‘anarchival’, where there is an attempt to subvert or erase the power structures present (Lessard, 2009; Ernst, 2012), here the artists approach the collection from perspectives of acknowledgement of Sun Ra and his work. This encourages interpretations of the sonic archive where detachment, distance and irony – often associated with postmodern ‘pastiche’ and ‘bricolage’ – are *not* dominant (Eshun, 1998; Weheliye, 2005). They are instead deliberately anchored to the original works. This rootedness affects how the artists use the material: They move through the collection without forgetting its many contexts.

As listeners, performers and participants, the commissioned artists hear past and present together. Remixing the archive highlights layers of subjective and historical counterpoints. Not only does the original author become a character: Each person who interacts with the archive is entangled and involved. The artists acknowledge the work of Sun Ra, while adding their voices as contemporary collaborators. Their memories, emotions, concerns and histories are present alongside those gleaned from Ra. New listeners, in turn, become yet another part of this performative, circular motion between the archive and its continually unfolding human interaction.

## Embodied Archive

Cauleen Smith’s ‘Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band’ is an archival performance rooted in celebration, disruption and protest. Smith commissioned five Chicago composers to make arrangements of Sun Ra pieces. The pieces were then performed as flashmobs in Chicago and beyond.<sup>7</sup> Smith states that the group functions as a ‘rogue insurgent marching band’ in order to ‘celebrate this model of self-invention and to protest the lingering and ever oppressive constraints which beleaguer working class people in America’.<sup>8</sup> For Smith, the band is a present-day ‘homage to Sun Ra’ and converges ‘from many points (like stars) into a designated site to incite the abandonment of the status quo, interrupt corporate routine, and celebrate the ways that individuals agree to exist within communities’.<sup>9</sup> This sentiment illustrates a multi-voiced approach to the archive that traces back to Sun Ra and opens out into new futures.

In a video documentation of a flashmob Smith organised the Rich South High School marching band to perform Sun Ra’s ‘Space Is the Place’ in Chicago. As the video unfolds, the scene is relatively quiet, and it is raining. Drums are heard from afar as the marching band parades into view, and curious onlookers follow them. The familiar Sun Ra refrain of ‘Space Is the Place’ is first heard in the bass instruments, and singing musicians soon join in. A crowd gathers. The musicians are exposed as rain pours down, splashing off their instruments. An enthusiastic, synchronised

dance accompanies their performance. As they finish, the marching band exits in the same organised manner as it entered. Now empty, the scene returns to its earlier state, and the musicians peel off one by one, giggling and laughing, proud of the event they just participated in.



Figure 2. Solar Flare Arkestra Marching Band: Rich South Band at Garfield Green Line, Chicago, 2013.

The Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band embodies the Sun Ra archive. The sonic material is brought outside the confines of the archive and literally into the streets of the city. Smith involved many participants at each stage of the creative and performative process, including delegating composers' reinterpretations of the Sun Ra material and the young musicians. Following in Ra's footsteps, the music is used as a tool to draw from local resources and bring together different communities. Smith chose sites related to Sun Ra throughout Chicago that also have connections to contemporary social issues, such as public housing projects. Smith states that, 'inquires into social justice are embedded into almost everything Sun Ra created, so it felt to me like an organic location for the work' (personal communication, 2013). The marching band interrupts everyday life, causing a disruption of the status quo and an invitation to reflect on it and reject it. The project is a form of celebration and protest, bringing people together through Sun Ra and highlighting inequalities that continue to exist today.

## Archival Homophones

Ra's love for wordplay and homophones offers an appropriate metaphor for archival performances. Baraka (2014) points out that Sun Ra's ability to bridge text and sound holds a homophonic power. Baraka states, 'Ra taught that a word is not only an idea, but a *sound*. It has force and power, and the way it sounded makes it open in the world of what it sounds like, and its many meanings manifest at once'.<sup>10</sup> Sun Ra delighted in polysemic and philosophical wordplay in his lectures and writings, which are closely aligned with the practice of 'street-corner preaching' (Corbett, 2006b). Many of the recordings from the Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection are steeped in this homophonic adaptation of words. In the transcription below Ra is lecturing to a class during his residency at the University of California at Berkeley in 1971.<sup>11</sup> Amid the sounds of chalk quickly etching on a chalkboard, Ra states,

Watch what you're saying, because you're going to have to give an account for it. In other words, you're going to reap what you sow. Now, that "reap what you sow" is another thing that is dangerous. You're gonna "reap what you sow," that's what you think it means, but there's also the phonetic: you're gonna "reap what you so." Now, what is that? "So" means something. You say, "It is so," it means something you make true, it's over there with this truth thing. Whatever you call the truth, you see, you're gonna get that back. Now, you're gonna "reap what you so." Now what's "so?" It's represented by a plus, like you say... So, that's so, that's positive, [a] plus sign. As I said, when people die they give them a certificate: something certified means something that is positified, something that is true, something that is so. It moves over into this, too: people get mad, and they say they "so." You see over there? And then, you've got this "soul" when people are ailing and they delve into their *soul*. Now, I'm gonna show you one more word on this thing, and then I'm gonna play you some music.

Sun Ra is using homophonic wordplay as a technique that develops a personal, methodical and argumentative logic. It is subjective and often idiosyncratic, yet points to deep cultural, historical and political insights, with Ra as the connecting voice. In fact, Sun Ra alone holds the heterogeneous recordings in the collection together. This further complicates notions of authorship and archival power. Ra becomes the link – no matter how tangential – between each recording regardless of his presence on it.

Hence, archival recordings such as Sun Ra taping a television show on acupuncture, a studio session for a Busch beer commercial and a Pentecostal preacher's sermon are *archival homophones*. Kapsalis (2012) considers the archive to be an 'active laboratory, a place of fantasy, not a mausoleum' and points to 'wordplay and permutations' as a way of moving through the collection. She draws a self-created line of connections – a 'fictitious etymology' – between the roots of words such as 'ark' and 'archive' and uses this to understand the larger project of reinterpreting the collection. This use of homophones – much like Sun Ra seamlessly joining the

words 'sow', 'so' and 'soul' together – turns the archive into a space of social, musical, tangential and ambiguous connections, as the archive continues to unfold into the future. The archive acts as a sonic network that allows a critical analysis of historical, cultural and material contexts. Listeners and remixers following their own paths along these archival homophones provide new approaches to the recordings, thereby expanding and complicating the notion of archives and their performance. Exploring these recordings, no matter how loosely connected to Sun Ra, encourages an understanding of archives as more than a collection of objects. Instead, it focusses on the agency and vitality of the archive, the relationships and living contexts that extend from the materials within.

## Conclusion

The dilemma between archival stewardship and interpretation – along with appropriation more broadly – continues to generate much debate. The works shared here offer ways of performing a sonic archive that begin to address these issues. They engage with archival materials in order to celebrate and expand Sun Ra's music and life, while also recognising the complexities of archival power. It is worth noting that all of the commissioned pieces are also collaborative in nature. Perhaps each artist felt compelled to share the archive with others in a communal spirit. Each commission expands outwards into larger and larger networks of voices adding to the ever-evolving interpretation of – or listening to – the sonic archive. Wordplay, homophones and mislistening all play a part in the different routes each artist took in his or her engagement with the historical recordings, transforming them into embodied and emplaced performances and works. The result is many new voices, all moving along interrelated trajectories and teeming with celebration, mistakes, anomalies and contradictions. These voices act as many forms of acknowledgement of both Sun Ra and the many issues that his body of work represents.

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## Notes

- 1 'The Sun Ra/El Saturn Collection', accessed 15 January 2013. [Experimentalsoundstudio.org](http://experimentalsoundstudio.org). Also see 'Creative Audio Archive', accessed 19 November 2013. <http://www.creativeaudioarchive.org/xml/sun-ra-el-saturn.xml>.
- 2 Ibid. ESS received a three-year grant from the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation to 'preserve and interpret this important and unique collection'.
- 3 In the structure of Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1995), for example, the main 'Theses' are comprised of only a few pages near the end, and the bulk of the body consists of an 'Exergue', 'Preamble', 'Forward' and a 'Postscript', all outside the supposedly central text.
- 4 Musician Wayne Montana joined them, as well as Rob Shaw, who added animation to their sound.
- 5 'Damon Locks - Noon Moon', accessed 6 December 2013. <http://www.seek-art.com/portfolios/project/97/noon-moon#>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 'What Is the Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band?', accessed 6 December 2013. <http://solar-flareark.wordpress.com/2010/07/08/what-is-it/>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 From the Fourth Annual Charles Olson Memorial Lecture, Cape Ann Museum, Gloucester, MA, 19 October 2013.
- 11 This recording, 'SR149 Reel 179', is undated, but does indicate being made at the University of California, Berkeley, and corresponds with Sun Ra's lectures that took place there in 1971.