

SUN RA AND JOHN COLTRANE:  
CRITIQUING ESSENTIALISM IN THE DISCOURSE OF JAZZ  
THROUGH THEORIES OF POSTETHNICITY AND TRANSETHNICITY

BY

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**Abstract:**

Jazz has long been imbued with an essentialist discourse that perpetuates myths of racial and cultural purity, which serves to maintain boundaries between people where they need not necessarily lie and denies the formation of new identities. These racial divisions are still reified following a shift in focus from race to ethnicity, despite Jazz being a transnational music born through a confluence of many cultures, races and religions meeting in America as globalization developed. Two iconic Jazz musicians, Sun Ra and John Coltrane, offer counter arguments to this essentialism, whether racial or ethno-centric, through their philosophical views, religious/spiritual leanings and Avant-Garde music. Identifying these aspects, I apply the theories of postethnicity and transethnicity to the life, ideology and work of Sun Ra and John Coltrane in order to critique the long-standing discourse in Jazz, which places strong ethnic characteristics as defining elements of their identity, and thus their work.

**Key Words:**

Postethnicity

Transethnicity

John Coltrane

Sun Ra

Jazz

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Avant-Garde

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## 1. Introduction:

Jazz music, forged in the heat of America's south by displaced peoples of Africa, has long been tied to discourses concerning race and ethnicity. This has led to an emphasis on identifying "African" characteristics as the font from which Jazz is derived, with certain "European" elements adopted superficially. However, given that the most common source of Jazz's inception links it to turn of the twentieth century New Orleans, a meeting point of cultures from across the globe and a site of simultaneous entries and exits, one can identify that the confluence of numerous cultures is in fact where Jazz gained its character or, if you will, essence. Once thought is given to this notion the idea that ethnic or racial features are defining becomes problematic, as it would rely on greatly simplified notions of what constitutes "African" against "European". This manner of thinking also disregards not only the tremendous diversity within each perceived ethnic group, but also the influence of cultures outside of Jazz's assumed binary influence. Furthermore, the influence of shared features (including musical elements), which existed concurrently for centuries before these different cultures encountered one another, becomes downplayed in our search for defining difference.

Much of the research concerning Jazz has, until recently, resulted from a manner of thinking developed in the 1960s to 1970s that regards race and ethnicity as key parameters for analyzing the inspiration, delineation and manifestation of Jazz. Writers such as Frank Kofsky in his *John Coltrane and the Jazz revolution of the 1960s*, and Amiri Baraka in his *Blues People* purported the idea of an essential black spirit that has manifold implications expressed through Jazz. This notion is problematic in three ways; firstly, it relies on an essentialist reading of blackness based on an American exceptionalist-imbued model of West African culture, which acts as a synecdoche for all non-western European culture; secondly it fails to account for new or mixed formulations of race and ethnicity, which only downplays the role of cultural hybridity; and finally it offers but a distraction from the very real issue of a complicated class structure, under which race has become incorporated to further divide society. Counter-arguments to this manner of critical thinking have been offered, particularly by writers dealing with the increasing experimentation of Jazz musicians from the late 1950s to early 1970s, including John Litweiler's *The Freedom*

*Principle*, Ekkehard Jost's *Free Jazz* and Norman C. Weinstein's *A Night in Tunisia*. There contrasting approaches to the new Avant-Garde Jazz idioms still however impose boundaries that rely on ascribing psychological traits to mask cultural difference/similarity, which ascribes the continuity and development of cultures by the maintenance of cultural traits passed through the generations. A prime example however may be Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*, which critiques the idea of essential black nature, but still relies on overwhelming exceptionalism in its methods and places rigid boundaries on the very fluid notions of race and ethnicity. These manners of thinking lent themselves to the emergent Black Nationalist and Afrocentric strains of thought, but also spawned criticism of Jazz and its ties to Black Nationalism (such as the writings of Stanley Crouch and Ken Burns's *Jazz* documentary series) as a reaction, adopting a more classicist framework that shunned the Avant-Garde for its deviation from an idealized Jazz tradition<sup>1</sup>, particularly in its focus on issues of race. The problematic nature of these all of these modes of thinking however lies in their reinforcing of racial/ethnic boundaries, and therefore the whole structure of the American racial hierarchy, but with a subversion of core values to place African-American culture at the centre under the guise of an all-encompassing African or African-American culture. This manifests itself in ideas of "soul" or an innate musicality/rhythmic essence, based itself in stereotypes and reactions to stereotypes that emerged in transatlantic thinking during the times of slavery.

America's deeply troubled history of racism is constantly reified and reinterpreted; as we proceed further into the future the past informs the present and the present informs the past. Cultural identity in this manner has become a version of "a shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common", leading to "stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shirting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history" (Hall, S., pp.704-705). The fact that race as colour of skin merely accounts for a modicum of biological difference does not negate the lingering negative cultural and systemic effects of a centuries old racial discourse, which can reflexively reify notions of race and ethnicity. As these reified notions are manifest in the discourse of

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<sup>1</sup> The idealized Jazz tradition as a counter to the Avant-Garde will be explored and disentangled within chapter two, in an analysis of Ken Burns' documentary series.

Jazz, without wanting to ignore the role race or ethnicity has played in Jazz's formation, there is a need to transcend these values that serve only to perpetuate myths of race/ethnicity. Furthermore these values also prevent the formation of new conceptions of ethnicity as we move further into an era of transnationalism, where borders become blurred and finite lines dividing racial/ethnic groups become hazy.

How then can Jazz's multi-ethnic character be revealed? A partial insight can be gained by looking into the life and work of two iconic Jazz musicians, Sun Ra and John Coltrane, both of whom are often tied to essentialist notions of race and ethnicity based in Black Nationalism or notions of an African-American *Great Tradition*<sup>2</sup>. By looking at their work and philosophical conceptions; a curious combination of different ethnicities, contrasting post-racial posturing with transcendent universalism; we can explore how the workings of theories of post-ethnicity and trans-ethnicity are elicited, in a curious mixture of adherence and divergence from the temporal social-political climate of the times they were working in.

2014 saw the centenary of Jazz musician and composer Sun Ra's arrival on earth, whilst 2015 saw the fiftieth anniversary of John Coltrane's seminal album *A Love Supreme*. This has sparked a resurgence of interest in the popular and public sphere, but also brings with it a recapitulation of the same staid links to Black Nationalism and fixed notions of race/ethnicity, as well as the roles both Sun Ra and Coltrane played in supposedly representing them. In this thesis I will argue for a critical reappraisal of the role of ethnicity in the life and music of these two iconic musicians and composers, where alternatives to the view of the racialized world are offered via the means of transethnic and postethnic outlooks respectively. The nature of music as an abstract medium and shifts in thinking over time, which still inform the critical discourse, however can attach a much different image/message to music than what was intended. Focusing primarily on African-Americans, we can observe that as time passes these signified notions eventually become accepted as the established facts from which we draw our knowledge and identities, leaving us to ask how ones identity can be affirmed without resorting to either negative stereotypes, collaboration with the varying forms of white supremacy within American society, or overreaction to either of these?

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<sup>2</sup> Again, this idea will be explored and disentangled within chapter two.

I therefore wish to intervene in the critical discourse concerning the work and philosophical underpinnings of Coltrane and Sun Ra, principally within the field of Jazz music<sup>3</sup>, which ties them to notions of black authenticity and reifies racial conceptions, allowing for the opportunity to reinterpret their life and work through more recent developments in theories of ethnicity. Through this the wider opportunity arises to explore specific cultural practises in America and how they can be used as a site for the articulation of voices, usually through people from marginalized positions, to counter the hegemony and hierarchies of American society. To reveal the multi-ethnic character of Jazz music, through the theories of transethnicity and postethnicity, is therefore intended as a counter to many long-standing discourses and narratives that still pervade today.

The first chapter will begin with an examination into the nature of race/ethnicity informing the discourse of Jazz in an American exceptionalist manner is necessary, with particular references to both Sun Ra and John Coltrane, to demonstrate the need for reappraisal. This will take a trajectory of how Avant-Garde Jazz is portrayed in critical discourse, starting from the late 1950s with the dawn of Black Nationalism through to Afrocentricism, to explain how essentialism becomes reformulated into cultural practise. Succeeding this will be an assessment of how notions of African-American exceptionalism, in the form of canonical modes of thinking, are formed and create the representations of Coltrane and Sun Ra today. After assessing the problematic representations of the two Jazz musicians, the theories of transethnicity and postethnicity will be introduced as ways as a counter to the dominant narratives and discourse, with reference to who formulated the theories and how they are particularly applicable to the two case studies. Following this I will make reference to the globalized nature of Jazz since it's inception, before exploring how the ethnic labelling of music can become problematized over notions of what is considered an essential part of Jazz music; "Swing".

In the second and third chapters, having already introduced the theories of postethnicity and transethnicity, an inquiry into how these new concepts are manifest in different aspects of the work and life of both Sun Ra and John Coltrane will unfold. Following a similar methodology for both musicians, drawing attention to how the

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<sup>3</sup> Although, at times their oeuvre questions the very definition of Jazz.

mediated image of both of these musicians affects future representations and narratives, the religious/spiritual aspects of their work will be analyzed, as well as the philosophical and explicitly musical aspects. With the two musicians following different musical paths, as well as Coltrane's relatively early death aged forty, two additional elements will be assessed in the case study of Sun Ra, that of his conception of history and mythology, both separate yet fundamentally linked to his views of spirituality and philosophy.

Bringing this paper to a close I will surmise my findings of my two case studies, before drawing conclusions about the wider effects this analysis could have on the perception of Jazz, with views to further research and the potentials offered by the theories of postethnicity and transethnicity.

## 2. The Signifyin(g) Country?:

Milford Graves, celebrated avant-garde Jazz drummer, says his work is “directly linked to African music”, yet at the same time maintains “I do not deal with music that has any ethnic classification. I deal with human music.” As Paul Austerlitz notes such positions are not uncommon with African American jazz players, who often assert black ownership of their art whilst declaring it as a universal music forged in America (p.ix). Seemingly paradoxical, Milford Graves sums up both sides of the long-standing racial binary surrounding Jazz in one short extract. If we deconstruct Milford Graves’ statement we begin to ask if his music is directly related to Africa, then in what ways is it so? Does it relate to the entirety of Africa, from the Cape of Good Hope to Tripoli, from Dakar to the Horn of Africa? Or does he mean it relates to sub-Saharan Africa? A problematic term in itself, often used to homogenise all darker skinned inhabitants of Africa under a common banner of difference from their Arabic African counterparts. Perhaps he’s referring to certain regions of West Africa, the most common point of departure for African slaves bound for the Americas. This too is problematic, as it would assume an overriding culture uniting a wide geographic spread, composed of different ethnic groups who speak different languages and engage in different cultural practises. If it does relate to Africa (however we conceptualize it), then in what ways does it do so? If these relations are identified, have they remained essentially African? Or have they adapted over time? If this music is also universal, does this mean it can be played by all, or just appreciated by all? If so, what features make this music universal over other musical styles or traditions? If the music is universal, does this mean it is received in the same manner with fixed meaning regardless of the receptors class, ethnicity or religion? I ask these questions not as an ethnomusicologist who is well versed in the regions and cultures of Africa, for which their insight is most necessary, but an inquiry into these ideas may challenge our assumptions when we embark upon thinking about music and its relation to notions of race/ethnicity, or indeed its ability to transcend these barriers. I think, without discrediting his musical ability, experience or intellect, what is most revealing about Graves’ statements is that the language surrounding Jazz is tied closely to notions of race and ethnicity.

I raise these questions in relation to Graves' comments to illustrate how the basis of our assumptions when thinking, listening or playing Jazz can often rely on a narrowed view of African culture that excludes the cultures of the North, South and East of the continent, instead focusing on the survival of aspects of West-African cultures in America, or the elision of all non-white<sup>4</sup> American cultures into a unified differential other. Chief exponents of this narrowing ideology emerged in the critical discourse of the late 1950s and early 1960s, as the emergence of Black Nationalism coincided with a new wave of experimentation in Jazz. This change in the music brought Jazz into the new frontiers of the Avant-Garde, which not only challenged the established notions of form, rhythm, melody and harmony in Jazz, but also imbued the music with political and social meaning. Principal architects of merging the ideology of Black Nationalism to the new wave of "Free Jazz"<sup>5</sup> were Amiri Baraka<sup>6</sup> and Frank Kofsky, who advanced essentialist notions of blackness in an attempt to demonstrate how these become manifest in the assumed Black Nationalist positions of musicians such as John Coltrane and Sun Ra.

### **2.1. Sun Ra and John Coltrane:**

Composer and musician Sun Ra was born in 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama, yet maintained he was not of this world, and in fact from the planet Saturn. Conceptually beyond Earth-bound racial classification, he portrayed himself as a member of the "Angel race" by adopting a persona based on aspects of mysticism, science and ancient mythology revitalized through an adventurous futurist lens, with the incorporation of new forms of technology central to this. He would often use cryptic phrases in interviews<sup>7</sup>, such as "I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, I did everything not to be a part of it. I never wanted their money or their fame, and anything I do for this planet is because the Creator of the universe is making me do it" (in Litweiler, p.144). Revealing a connection between spirituality and science in his

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<sup>4</sup> Again, another problematic term, begging the question of what constitutes "white", which unfortunately cannot be dealt with in any detail here. A brief summary of the problematization of classifying whiteness however is given in Appendix I.

<sup>5</sup> Known also at various times, by various writers, as "The New Thing", "Energy Music" and "Avant-Garde" – all of which are loosely defined terms which band together numerous different approaches to music.

<sup>6</sup> Previously known as LeRoi Jones.

<sup>7</sup> Something his principal biographer John F. Szwed notes as part of a continuous, often seemingly contradictory, dialogue with the world and difficult to ascertain the full context (p.345).

music, itself a veritable cornucopia of Jazz styles and experimentation, Sun Ra sought to alter the consciousness of the listener and promote “a model of the universe [...] where it has the power to bring human beings in line with the cosmos” (Szwed, p.113).

Born slightly later than Sun Ra in North Carolina, 1926, John Coltrane was a musician and composer that worked in contemporary times of Ra, though forging a different brand of spiritually transcendent music which also allows us to question notions of a monolithic black culture. Coltrane’s music blurs and problematizes racial boundaries, with the saxophonist serving as a model for dismantling reified notions of blackness (Whyton, p.13). He places his work and himself in terms of transcendent universalism, which he attempts to explore through the medium of music. In a series of interviews conducted whilst on a 1966 tour of Japan, Coltrane revealed he had no time for nationalistic tendencies, signalling a desire to see beyond national borders as means for defining identity, whilst Coltrane also hardly spoke in racial terms in relation to his music, instead viewing music as a universal language, which is a side of Coltrane’s work that is of great interest to me for exploring the theory of transethnicity. For instance, when questioned on how he classifies his music, he attempts to dereacialize notions of his music by stating “if you would ask me what we are playing [...] I feel it is the music of just the individual contributor [...] you could name it a classical music” (DeVito, pp.271-274)<sup>89</sup>. Seeing his music as a contribution of the individual to a wider whole in a universal definition of music, Coltrane dismantles notions of an essential collective racial/ethnic identity being applied to his work, developed largely after his religious awakening of 1957 to which more discussion will be given in chapter three.

## **2.2. Black Nationalism and Jazz:**

Black nationalism has been ascribed to Jazz since Duke Ellington’s insistence on calling his work “negro music”, through Be-Bop and Afro-Cuban Jazz, up to the civil rights era where explicit black nationalism became, at least to Archie Shepp,

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<sup>8</sup> Throughout this paper I will be taking numerous quotations derived from DeVito’s concise collection of interviews and liner notes. Full bibliographic references are available in this collection, but within this paper I will use DeVito’s pages as a reference, whilst mentioning the original source.

<sup>9</sup> More time will be spent discussing this quotation in Coltrane’s view of Classical music in chapter 3.4.

“fundamental to *our* music”<sup>10</sup> (Austerlitz, pp.10-11). Also worth consideration is the fact that Black Nationalism started “in unison” with European nationalism (Moses, p.5). The writer Amiri Baraka, who has since 1974 given up his Black Nationalist beliefs<sup>11</sup>, offers a different view of Sun Ra. He portrays Sun Ra as possessing “the true self-consciousness of the Afro-American intellectual artist revolutionary” who “knew our historic ideology and socio-political consciousness was freedom” (Baraka, 2010, p.3). Again, careful deconstruction of such a statement may reveal that this in fact says much more about Baraka’s ideology than that of Sun Ra, as Baraka reifies notions of race by referring to Sun Ra as “Afro-American”, and by placing him as a descendent of a “historic ideology and socio-political consciousness” he locates his ideology as yearning backwards to crystallize his own identity for the future, creating a stasis of African-American identity, unchanging over time. If we compare with statements Sun Ra made, we can see differences in their view of the racialized world. For instance in an interview given in England Sun Ra states he is not “an African American, but an English American” as he doesn’t “know any African languages” (Szwed, p.313). We can see from this that the emphasis on skin colour is downplayed in favour of a combination of geographical and linguistic identification. Despite coming to prominence in the Jazz world via his work from the late 1950s-60s, coinciding with Black Nationalisms rise, Ra could never be truly placed as an aesthetic theorist of the movement as, whilst there were some shared features<sup>12</sup>, he never conformed to the orthodoxy of the movement. This included his assumptions that African-Americans were “no longer African peoples, and had very little in common with Africans” (Szwed, p.311), a significant break with the essentialist elements of racial heritage the black nationalists promoted. Instead, positioning himself as “not a man, not a mortal, but part of the angel race” (Szwed, p.313) Sun Ra seizes the opportunity to serve as a critical being outside of America’s (and furthermore, the planet’s) racial hierarchical structures; by stating that he is not of this world Ra gains the position of an outsider looking in on an absurd world, defined by hollow racial divisions constantly reified.

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<sup>10</sup> My emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Yet never rejected the tenets of cultural nationalism, that saw black people as “a race, a culture, a Nation” (Baraka, 1966, p.248 in Harris, p.10)

<sup>12</sup> Including seeing whites as writing blacks out of history (Szwed, p.71) and a belief that black Americans should have their own culture,

Frank Kofsky, a historian of the Marxist tradition, too wrote of Jazz musicians links to social-political movements in the 1960s, explicitly aligning the work of Sun Ra's contemporary John Coltrane with Black Nationalism in his book *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* of 1971<sup>13</sup>. In this book Kofsky aligns Jazz music and radical politics. Drawing on Baraka, Kofsky advances notions of Jazz as a manifestation of the "negro soul", retaining "roots in a flesh-and-blood community without having sacrificed anything in the way of aesthetic value" (p.186). Here Kofsky reifies race by making it a somatic concept, embodying aesthetic values into the flesh and blood of black Americans. He sees musical change in Jazz as arriving from "the intimate relationship between jazz and the urban Negro community" as this community undergoes a "shift in the collective consciousness of the ghetto" (p.233), as racial identity is now aligned with the notions of class yet still brimming with an essential nature.

Not without its problems, Kofsky's heavy-handed approach becomes almost ham-fisted in stressing his concept of blackness embodying an aesthetic set of values in his interview with John Coltrane. His leading questions follow a pattern of making assumptions about music's relation to social-political issues, and the expectation that Coltrane would answer in the manner he predicts. To the question "what do you think about the phrase, the 'new black music,' as a description of some of the newer styles of jazz?" Coltrane answers "They don't mean much to me [...] it makes no difference to me one way or another what it's called", indicating a desire to break free from racialized labels. Not content, Kofsky attempts to draw Coltrane into his line of thinking by stating "people who use *that* phrase argue that jazz is particularly closely related to the black community and it's an expression of what's happening there", to which Coltrane observes "it's up to the individual, you can call it what you may, for any reason you may. Myself, [...] I recognize the artist, and I recognize and individual. I see his contribution" (DeVito, Ed., pp.282-283), again distancing himself from racialized labelling of his music. One gets the impression throughout the development of the interview that Kofsky is mistaking Coltrane's avoidance of agreeing with his postulations for a humble reticence. Coltrane, widely regarded as a humble and earnest person, expresses no preference for colour of his audiences,

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<sup>13</sup> Which was expanded and revised as *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution of the 1960s* in 1998.

noting no real difference in his reception along the colour line (DeVito, Ed. p.284), despite Kofsky's dogged determination to assign Coltrane to the social-political tenets of Black Nationalism. In fact this wasn't the first time Coltrane has expressed such an opinion; in a 1963 interview for French publication *Les Cahiers du Jazz*, Coltrane was questioned as to whether he felt a difference in sensibility between white and "colored" musicians, to which Coltrane iterated "the problem of facing sensitivities is not at the racial level but only on the individual level", and that he knows no "criteria that can differentiate a white musician from a black one; in any case, I don't believe they exist" (DeVito, Ed., pp.175).

Like Sun Ra, Coltrane was a musician with some similarities in ideology with members of the Black Nationalist cause, though he never conformed to the central tenets of the movement. Instead Coltrane positions himself in universal terms, beyond the colour line, drawing on the spirituality revealed to him following his religious awakening in 1957. After a period of alcohol and heroin abuse, Coltrane freed himself from the grips of addiction cold turkey and, as revealed in the liner notes to his seminal album *A Love Supreme*, he sought the strength of God to guide him in his quest to "make others happy through music" (DeVito, Ed., p.225). It is through this increasing interest in realising and promoting spirituality through the medium of music that defines the later work of Coltrane (1964-67), which also reveals a reliance on Coltrane's deeply personalized mysticism that defines his idea of a world that transcends ethnicity, as a challenge to social reality. However his early death, as he was further developing his vision by exploring spiritual and musical outer-realms, allowed an essentialist discourse concerning his life and work to re-emerge (Whyton, p.91).

### **2.3. Reformulating Essentialism into Cultural Practice:**

Aside from their association with advocates of Black Nationalism<sup>14</sup>, Coltrane and Sun Ra never aligned themselves with the movement and furthermore never

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, Coltrane worked with Archie Shepp, whom he helped to get a recording contract with Impulse Records, and invited to appear on alternate versions of pieces from Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*, as well as landmark recording *Ascension*. Sun Ra maintained an association with the Black Panthers, even staying in one of their residences in Oakland, California (Kreiss, p.57), something hinted at in feature film *Space is the Place*, but they were eventually kicked out for differences in ideology.

became explicitly avowed adherents or pioneers of an Afrocentric philosophy. Afrocentricism built on the developments of Black Nationalism amongst other African-American movements before it, and despite both figures being highly revered within these movements, and also sharing similar concerns regarding emancipation from racial oppression, Sun Ra and Coltrane cannot be considered truly part of these movements. The crucial split in thinking between Coltrane and Sun Ra's expression of concerns, compared to those enunciated by advocates of Black Nationalism/Afrocentricity, is the emphasis placed on the essential nature of African-Americans as cultural, as well as biological, descendants of Africa. This process of thinking serves to create a Pan-African culture that elides all countries, cultures and ethnicities of Africa, regardless of the tremendous amount of diversity between them. In addition, the Americanization processes of culture are downplayed in place of a search for the roots of the differential nature of African-American culture, rooted in a problematic designation of what constitutes racial boundaries, which can rely on the same "one-drop of blood" rule that relegated African-Americans to second-class citizenship<sup>15</sup>. This example might act as a synecdoche for the well-meaning intentions, but flawed logic for combating racism via pluralism, as pluralist logic "respects inherited boundaries and locates individuals within one or another of a series of ethno-racial groups to be protected and preserved" (Hollinger, p.3). Furthermore this line of thinking disavows the creation of new identities, places a colour line within issues of class, and relies on the same rigid boundaries of race, subverted yet maintained, even as a reaction to the racism of American society. This manner of thinking arose as a necessary "defense of communal interests" in reactions against the structural racism within America (including segregation amongst others), but also has the effect of mobilizing "the fantasy of a frozen culture, of arrested cultural development" (Gilroy, 2000, p.13).

Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah asserts that cultural identity is often interpreted from a misreading of history, based on constructed and historical sets of "false presuppositions", that form "conventions of narrative to which the world never quite manages to conform" (1992, p.194). If we follow Appiah's assertion, cultural identity is built on unstable foundations which further analysis is able to deconstruct.

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<sup>15</sup> Ethnicity theorist David A. Hollinger for instance, notices that many black politicians defend a "one-drop rule" for identifying African Americans (Hollinger, p.1).

It must be asked then in what sense can Kofsky talk of the “revolution in black music” he places Sun Ra and Coltrane within? Does this now mean all music played by people with black skin? Or is he referring to black American/African American music (hyphenated or unhyphenated)? Perhaps he means a globalized form of black music, born through interactions of African slaves with a multitude of cultures in America’s south? This further begs the question of whether Jazz is “about the African-American experience”, as it is commonly portrayed, or if it reflects “universal expression” (Gerard, p.10) that can remove the dictates the racial/ethnic prism places upon music and its relevance to society.

A shift in thinking on race occurred following the publication of Melville Herskovitz’s *Myth of the Negro Past*, which brought race into the world of social studies and out of biological definitions. Through this book, the view that African-Americans have lost touch with the traditions handed down throughout the years was dismantled. In its place arose the idea that a much more subtle syncretism has in fact taken place, resulting in “Africanisms” that survive in American culture today (Herskovits, in Austerlitz p.xi). The social reality stays the same, but it allows for the realization that cultures are not singular entities, “eternally fixed in some essentialized past” (Hall, S., p.706). Through this shift, the concept of ethnicity is brought to the fore in place of race as the site for locating difference, as ethnicity encompasses cultural traditions over a unified essential nature. However, we are now at a point where our very notions of ethnicity are being challenged; where physical borders and ethnic demarcation are ceding as we progress into an ever-increasing era of globalization and transnationalism. It is becoming much easier to encounter different cultures and their products from outside the borders of our national and supranational bodies, making notions of cultural ownership and appropriation more problematic. At the same time, seemingly temporally fixed ideas and cultural products can re-emerge and become re-interpreted in any number of different ways, depending upon the resonance this has with the receiver. Jazz in this instance can be performed all over the world, in all manner of varieties, whilst eliciting numerous different cultural resonances depending on an individual’s interpretation. Whether in Addis Ababa, Buenos Aires, Dunedin, New Orleans, Tokyo or Stockholm, Jazz can be enjoyed as it knows no national borders, nor does it discriminate on basis of skin colour or station in society.

Following Herskovitz's break with the notion that essence determines existence, Coltrane's work and life<sup>16</sup> depict a vision of the universe "as music and its spiritual substance" (Gerard, p.68). Instead, Coltrane favours a realization of ones individual nature detached from the wider cultural constructs and not determined by the past, as well as mans own capacity for good, over falling into the mythic biological traps of race and the divisions which continually arise from this manner of thinking. Sun Ra on the other hand sees an entire planet blighted by the societal effects of racism, born in biological definitions but transplanted into the sociological effects of difference and othering. In a 1971 interview for Musiikkiykkönen<sup>17</sup> he states that his inspiration for music comes from "being in tune with the way of the universe", which is neither part of "the past or the present or the future, but rather what I call an alter-destiny." We see here how the universe, much like Coltrane, is being invoked as a source of inspiration for music, free from the confines of this world (including the embedded racial boundaries). By placing it outside of temporal bounds, negating the relevance of the past, present or future, Ra invokes a timeless nature of music and society in favour of his alter-destiny – a separate path for the world, not dictated by what has shaped it and will seemingly continue to shape it ad infinitum. Immediately he proceeds to state "I'm dealing with equations and, like most people, feel that the planet is doomed anyway", turning the interviewers question from an explicitly musical to an eschatological concern. In an attempt to apply objective mathematical analysis in the form of equations, which would seemingly offer logical solutions to the planet, Ra anticipates an "[a]wareness of the indissoluble unity of life at the level of genetic material" that allows us to "reconceptualize our relationship to ourselves, our species, our nature, and the idea of life" (Gilroy, 2000, p.20). Portraying himself as an outsider to Earth and all human society, he offers the potential to see inspiration beyond reification of race or ethnicity as defining features of not only his music, but also the "doomed" planet that upholds constructions of racial difference.

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<sup>16</sup> Accelerated by his spirituality, which increased dramatically in his work from 1965-67.

<sup>17</sup> A televised music programme in Finland.

## 2.4. African-American Exceptionalism and The African-American Canon:

Distinguished scholar of African-American studies Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1989 book *The Signifying Monkey* offers an analysis of African-American literature through tracing the aesthetic lineage from West African forms, epitomized by the relationship between Yoruban deity Esu-Elegbara, a trickster and messenger of the gods, to his American and pan-African agnate, the "Signifying Monkey" (p.21). Whilst Gates makes a compelling case for cultural relativism, allowing a text to be judged on its own terms and merits and reducing the structural power of western hegemony, the conflation of ethnicity to race abounds throughout his work. In critiquing the "Eurocentric bias presupposed in the ways terms such as *canon*, *literary theory*, or *comparative literature* have been utilized as a culturally hegemonic bias" Gates intends to "serve as a model for the abolition of racist and sexist presuppositions in literary studies" (p.xiv), yet bases his analytical method on tracing a notion of black difference from the past to the present. Gates' analysis is grounded in the assumption that all black texts are mulattoes, using Romance/Germanic language and literary structure, but with a "distinct and resonant accent [...] that Signifies (upon) the various black vernacular literary traditions" (p.xxiii). This idea resonates with the longstanding views on Jazz as a distinctly African-American tradition, who can solely claim ownership of the music formed via a mixture of European harmony and African rhythm, despite the reality being much more complex.

Through Gates theoretical basis, there is the ascendance of a modern "pan-African culture fashioned as a colourful weave of linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal threads", whilst Afro-American culture becomes "an African culture with a difference as signified by the catalysts of English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish languages and cultures, which informed the precise structures that each discrete New World Pan-African culture assumed" (p.4). Through his perusal of the Yoruban myths of Esu-Elegbara to "identify and analyze assertions" that can "begin to account for a black theory of literature and its interpretation, [...] as inscribed in the black vernacular traditions" (p.23), Gates has embarked upon a theoretical analysis based overwhelmingly within racial structures masked as ethnicity, maintaining a binary relationship between simplified notions of blackness and whiteness. Furthermore, when referring to a pan-African culture Gates falls into

the same trap as Milford Graves; what is portrayed as a pan-African culture features an overwhelming bias on the West African cultures that were transported to America on slave ships, revealing a notion of American exceptionalism as his African-American experience informs his notions of what constitutes “African”. Moreover, the linguistic peccadilloes of “black”, “African” and even “European” reveal that social frames organize interpretation of history and collective identity, something that affects critical thinking on music, indicated when Gates applies his literary theory to the work of Jazz music and musicians, including John Coltrane.

Perhaps Gates’ most influential idea though was the establishment of a black literary canon to stand against the Eurocentric literary canon, outlined in the book *Black Literature and Literary Theory* that he compiled and edited. This idea gained much credence in musical circles and becomes manifest in the idea of the “Great Tradition” of Jazz, with a fixation on the past informing the standards for the present and the future. This notion is epitomized by neo-traditionalist Jazz thinking, which can be identified through the criticism Stanley Crouch, Wynton Marsalis’ establishment of Jazz programmes in conservatoires and Ken Burns’ *Jazz* documentary series<sup>18</sup>. Through their combined historicising approaches to Jazz we can observe a tendency to preserve Jazz as the official African-American high art, ethnically bound and thus racially tied (Gerard, p.124).

Burns’ *Jazz* documentary series, released in 2001, serves as a de facto history of Jazz for the contemporary listener, as the most notable spotlight given to Jazz as a musical genre in the past two decades. Originally broadcast nationally in America on PBS the series was nominated for several awards, like much of Burns’ previous work, and was given a well-publicised DVD release. Divorced from the times of the people discussed, the documentary series brought Jazz back into the public awareness after a long period of the genres decline in sales and popularity since the 1950s. Burns’ *Jazz* series however looks backwards in its search for the definitions of Jazz and frames of reference in processes of identity, with nearly all of the musicians discussed deceased and thus left to be remembered through the mediated images produced on record and film.

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<sup>18</sup> Both Crouch and Marsalis featured in interviews as part of the *Jazz* documentary series, with Marsalis also acting as artistic director and co-producer.

Burns' opts to depict a very selective view of Jazz history, which covers the period of 1917-1961 in nine hours of film time, whilst the succeeding four decades are given an hour to cram the rest of the history of Jazz in, coincidentally just as Free Jazz and Avant-Garde styles were developing. This relegates the increasingly experimental forms of Jazz expression as firmly outside of the canon, with much of screen-time devoted to the period leading up to and during the Free Jazz era (c.1959-1965) given to older Jazz establishment figures as they returned to the popular mainstream, including Duke Ellington's revival following the *Ellington at Newport* album and the success of Louis Armstrong's<sup>19</sup> 1964 single *Hello Dolly*. A discussion of Cool Jazz is portrayed as the beginning of the period of rejection by black musicians of white musicians ability of capacity to play the music called Jazz, which complainants saw as resulting in the taking of jobs and esteem away from black musicians.

Later, Jazz's relation to the Civil Rights movement is portrayed within a violent frame of reference, as a conscious act of freeing Jazz from white control. Roughly around ten minutes is given to the dawn of Free Jazz via Ornette Coleman<sup>20</sup>, who is portrayed as rejecting all tradition before him<sup>21,22</sup>. Coleman is, almost sarcastically, noted to see himself as "firmly within the Jazz tradition", whilst his legacy is revealed as thus: "for the next 40 years the Avant-Garde music that Ornette Coleman and many others played continued to inspire and to divide the world of Jazz". So far a clear and historicized picture of Jazz's trajectory is portrayed, built upon features such as the denigration of the Avant-Garde, worship of the "Great Men" of Jazz, an American exceptionalist rhetoric for describing Jazz's development, and a clear demarcation of a colour line that affects the music, as white appropriation leads to black rejection and sparks new innovation. My own interference in this discourse stems from a view that race or ethnicity can claim neither the ownership, nor the essence of a musical form, particularly in the variety of genres that Jazz

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<sup>19</sup> The same Louis Armstrong whom, with no sense of hyperbole on Burns' part, in the first episode was said to have influenced "every singer, every instrumentalist and every artist who came after him".

<sup>20</sup> Whom Coltrane had once taken lesson from (Khan, 2006, p.180)

<sup>21</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the inclusion of a statement that Charlie Haden, Coleman's bassist, was a white musician who had previously played on stage at the iconic Country music venue, the Grand Ole Opry, in an apparent attempt to emphasize the whiteness of an important figure involved in the creation of Ornette Coleman's sound.

<sup>22</sup> Whilst it is noted that Coltrane sat in on one of Coleman's sets during his famous stint at New York's Five Spot club.

covers, of which the Jazz Avant-Garde of the 1960s offers pertinent examples. Jazz music is clearly the product of the meeting of a multitude of cultures, hastened through late modernity into post-modernity. Notions of any pure culture or tradition become problematic the further one delves into history, but Jazz continues to reify the notions of a “changing same”, born in essentialized views of race and ethnicity throughout history.

Burns spends ample time on emphasising Coltrane’s role as a key figure in the development of different styles of Jazz, including recognition of the contribution his spirituality played in the creation of his music. A lot of this time however is spent on connecting Coltrane to a tradition and placing him within a frame of reference as one of the “Great Man” of Jazz. The focus is on Coltrane’s conservatory education, the adoption of Sidney Bechet’s favoured soprano saxophone and his serving under other *Great Men* of Jazz: Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk. This has the effect of preserving Coltrane’s status as a canonical musician, firmly within the tradition, with the locus of Burns’ depiction of Coltrane is the music created with his *Classic Quartet*<sup>23</sup>. An exploration of his piece *Chasin’ the Trane*, from 1961 album *Live at the Village Vanguard*, is embarked upon in terms that suggest it’s exceptional avant-garde nature, despite the piece being essentially a blues, albeit based on no pre-composed thematic material and a lack of piano accompaniment to delineate a block-chorded harmonic structure. When compared to later offerings from albums such as *Meditations*, *Om* or *Ascension*, none of which get a mention, *Chasin’ the Trane* can be hardly be seen a revolutionary break with the past, as it is still firmly rooted within a Hard-Bop aesthetic: 4/4 metre creates the rhythmic underpinning, emphasized by Garrison’s bass and Jones’ timekeeping on the drums; there is a clear harmonic basis of a twelve bar blues, which determines the structure and informs the melodic development. Admittedly a few John Gilmore<sup>24</sup> influenced runs and squeaks occur (DeVito, p.299) and Coltrane’s solo is beyond average length, but this piece should not be revered as a significant departure from previous Jazz conventions, as it is in Burns’ mind, whilst later works that challenge the formal, structural, harmonic and melodic conventions of Jazz are outright ignored.

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<sup>23</sup> Featuring McCoy Tyner on piano, Jimmy Garrison on bass and Elvin Jones on drums.

<sup>24</sup> A tenor saxophonist who rose to prominence within Sun Ra’s Arkestra.

Later we are presented with Coltrane emerging as the “high priest of the Avant-Garde”, whose later works are “asking a lot of the audience”, yet never presented. We are persuaded into accepting an image of a transcendental Coltrane, whose music speaks in universals, purely to the sound of pre-1964 recordings. Wynton Marsalis states Coltrane’s “vision extended far beyond race and nationality”, but immediately after identifies within him the “lyrical shout of the preacher in the heat in full fury of attempting to transform the congregation”. Whilst race is not mentioned in Marsalis’ final statement, it is clear that he is referring to the Southern Black Baptist tradition of preaching, which leads his two statements to seemingly contradict each other, by placing Coltrane as both a figure free of race, whilst firmly grounded within an ethnic sensibility of the black American south. A brief exploration of *A Love Supreme* is given, before noting that Coltrane’s final two years became “more experimental than the last” and there Coltrane is left; preserved for posterity firmly within the confines of the canon, purely for his works that adhere to the tradition, before his increasing musical experimentation overpowers his stature as a genius of the Jazz idiom.

This canonical mode of thinking, formed as recording technology advanced from the early to mid-twentieth century, can therefore reduce Jazz to that of a museum piece, all the while casting its gaze backwards in search of identity for the future, as it too looks to the past for evidence to reify notions of racial characteristics within the music. This offers a homogenising role, that legitimates taste and authenticates experience to promote notions of cultural continuity, so we believe that time changes whilst essential values remain intact (Whyton, p.43). Jazz, in the view of the neo-traditionalists, is a “a proudly mongrel *American*<sup>25</sup> music”, whilst the voices and influences of Europeans, Latin Americans, Asians, Africans and even certain African-Americans<sup>26</sup> are written out of the history, in favour of an American exceptionalist rendering of Jazz history. Furthermore when Burns’ states “the voices of the past still its greatest teachers” he furthers the idea that the only development forwards can be achieved by gazing backwards, further cementing the notion that racial/ethnic tension is the defining aspect of identity, which is crucial to the music’s essence for the future. Whether it’s through American exceptionalism or African-

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<sup>25</sup> My emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Including Sun Ra, who fails to register a single mention throughout the entire documentary series.

American exceptionalism (Whyton, p.12), one gets the impression race (and moreover ethnicity) has become embodied in the discourse of Jazz.

What is striking about the approaches following the turn from Black Nationalism and Afrocentricity through to Gates and the neo-traditionalists, is that embodied race, based on biological reasoning and essential nature, has now become codified into ethnicity, which portrays these same features; including a natural sense of rhythm and ability to improvise, an essentialist ever-changing same and a desire to express a feeling of liberation<sup>27</sup>; as an expression of a shared cultural connection. This cultural tradition is now passed along colour lines, which only the most exceptional whites can participate in and contribute to, and furthermore blurs numerous people of various different cultures, races, social backgrounds and ethnicities into an overriding African-American culture. This African-American culture is cast as part of a lineage from black inhabitants of New Orleans who, in reaction to the daily encounters of people from all walks of life, created a musical style that, in spite of the effects of globalization, still evokes the Voodoo priest, the Congo jungle, the bordello and the gambling hall.

On the European critical side, Jazz began as an empty, vacuous product devoid of real meaning as a calculated product of the *Culture Industry*, in Theodor Adorno's thinking. Whilst his ideas on Jazz have deservedly been critiqued to the nth degree, Adorno does raise intriguing points on the question of Jazz looking backwards to inform its present state. Noting that '[t]here is nothing archaic in jazz but that which is engendered out of modernity through the mechanism of suppression' (in Witkin, p.164), he sees the essentialism of racial or ethnic character in Jazz as ideology and mythology, that distracts from the status of African-American Jazz musicians and composers as second-class citizens in American society. Class-conscious historian and academic Eric Hobsbawm saw Jazz as the music of black Americans (p.378), whilst admitting that there was a move in the 1960s to Jazz becoming more of an Avant-Garde Classical music, developed from a distinctly jazz base but now opened up to all manner of non-jazz influences. Anticipating modern transnational thinking, he notes that European, African, Islamic, Latin American and

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<sup>27</sup> Where "the African American is idealized as the incarnation of the free soul, the pre-social being untethered by the constraints of civilization, possessing both innocence and powerful emotions that whites, because of the pressures of modern civilization, no longer possess" (Gerard, p. 100).

especially Indian influences come to prominence in the Avant-Garde, whilst Jazz was becoming “less American than it had been” (p.382). Ekkehard Jost, sympathetic to Avant-Garde sensibilities<sup>28</sup>, sees the music as clearly deriving “from a music that is Afro-American in the broadest sense”. Writing in 1975, he notes that “after seventy years of jazz, the observation that white musicians play music that is ‘black’ in essence should surprise us as little as the statement that 18<sup>th</sup>-century German composers wrote ‘Italian’ operas” (p.12). We can see that even if dynamics of class and transnationalism are brought into the discourse, the myths of music claiming an ethno-racial essence still prevail.

The establishment of an African-American canon, now applied to music, is based on a historicized view of a *Great Tradition* that looks backwards to inform its future destiny. Furthermore, the entire basis of the creation of an African-American canon is built upon the subversion of ideas derived from the Western establishment, which serves not only to maintain racial boundaries but also excludes those deemed outside of the collective consciousness born through tradition. Despite Gates’ claims to the contrary that “blackness in black literature is not an absolute or a metaphysical condition”, or a “transcending essence that exists outside of its manifestations in texts” (p.121), it is still based to a degree on essentialism in that it serves to trace a lineage embodied in differential cultural traditions, passed on by members of various cultures, blended into one overriding African-American culture. This mode of thinking now begs the questions of what the criteria for inclusion and exclusion into the canon consists of? Those that deviate from the tradition devoid the music<sup>29</sup> of ethnic markers, making the now non-canonical music bereft of value for its failure to conform to the orthodoxical ideology. This American exceptionalist-imbued conception of the “Great Tradition” of Jazz therefore submits to a reflexive mode of race and its relation to music. *Reflexive racialisation*<sup>30</sup> could be used to explain the discourse of Jazz, which is dominated by an individualist desire to maintain collective identities (Park and Song, pp.575-576), even as definitions of authenticity, belonging and interethnic relationships are recurrently explored (p.579). The placing of race and

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<sup>28</sup> As well as writer of the first serious musicological analysis of the Jazz Avant-Garde in his 1974 book *Free Jazz*.

<sup>29</sup> And therefore the music’s political and social dimensions.

<sup>30</sup> Identified by David Parker and Miri Song in relation to the redefinition of ethnic identity, expressed by British minority groups through essentialist notions online.

ethnicity into the critical discussions of Jazz is therefore “to submit to the surreal fantasy in which America nonetheless engages because of its racial obsessions” (Radano, p.7), whilst to persist in linking Jazz and skin colour is to “continue to shoulder the burden of slavery”, promoting a self-defeating politics of race for both poor blacks and whites (Hollinger, p.169).

## **2.5. Depictions of Sun Ra and John Coltrane; the Avant-Garde Canon:**

Following the fiftieth anniversary of Coltrane’s seminal album *A Love Supreme* and the centenary celebrations of Sun Ra’s arrival on Earth in 2014, the discourse and narrative surrounding these two musicians still perpetuates ethno-racial myths about not only the musicians themselves, but the music of Jazz. John Litweiler’s *The Freedom Principle*, a book dealing with Avant-Garde Jazz from the late 1950s onwards questions in the cover flap “[a]re European folk-classical music’s altering this essential Afro-American art?” Furthermore books on Coltrane still tell us that unless you have a good understanding of the blues, through the experience of growing up and living in a black American neighbourhood, you cannot play the music properly (Kahn, 2002, pp.12-13), and that African American music is defined by tropes that insist “[i]t’s not what you play; it’s how you play it that counts” (Washington, p.134).

Principal modern Coltrane biographer Ashley Kahn subtly enforces the role of the white man’s conservatism in Coltrane’s art, placing the emphasis on Coltrane’s more traditionally minded albums of the early to mid 1960s<sup>31</sup> as down to record producer Bob Thiele’s instruction (Kahn, 2002, p.71), without seemingly any co-operation or willingness to appeal to a wider audience on Coltrane’s part. Furthermore Coltrane is repeatedly tied to the violent side of the civil rights era as, according to radio DJ Joel Dorn, despite maintaining a radio audience composed of roughly equal parts white and black, among the latter Coltrane “had another meaning”, responding to *A Love Supreme* in the same manner as they would to Malcolm X and the march on Washington (Kahn, 2002, pp.159-160). Coltrane’s “angry aggressive music” here, in the modern biographical view, seems to perfectly “match the times” (Kahn, 2006, p.131).

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<sup>31</sup> Including collaborations with Jazz legends Duke Ellington and Johnny Hartman.

Proponents of detailing ethnic characteristics in Coltrane's music are eager to ruminate upon certain statements Coltrane made in reply to the critics that dubbed his increasing experimentation as "anti-jazz". In a collection of essays on the connection of spirituality and music in the work of Coltrane, Leonard L. Brown focuses on this "anti-jazz" response, where Coltrane notes "[w]e have absolutely no reason to worry about lack of positive and affirmative philosophy [...] The phrasing, the sound of the music, attest this fact. We are naturally endowed with it" (pp.20-21). Little critical enquiry into other interpretations of this statement, which could stem from a universalist/transethnic sense via the rapturous spirituality of a divinely ordained musical inspiration, is offered. Instead Brown simply sees the view that "what Coltrane means by 'us' and 'we' are Black Americans, musicians and otherwise" (p.21). Later in the same collection, Emmet G. Price echoes Brown in tying Coltrane's music to notions of African-American identity and natural musical ability, as he portrays Coltrane as a "revolutionary twentieth-century griot" (p.161). How far then has the critical enquiry into notions of ethnicity in Coltrane's music seemingly moved from the 1961 words of British journalist Gene Lees, who stated: "[n]o doubt he had a short fuse. No doubt he is, in fact, or in sympathy with, a part of that anti-white Negro element in jazz that is known, with grim humor, as the Mau-Mau<sup>32</sup>?" (DeVito, Ed., p.75).

Interpretations of Sun Ra follow a slightly different path, achieving less popularity than Coltrane, with his outer-space conception of ethnicity seemingly a distraction that left him and his work outside of the African-American Jazz canon. In Jost's *Free Jazz*, we are given a statement by Sun Ra detailing an aspect of his musical philosophy: "[m]usic is a universal language [...] The intergalactic music is in hieroglyphic sound: an abstract analysis and synthesis of man's relationship to the universe, visible and invisible", to which Jost refuses to contemplate the "cryptic meaning of these words, which say absolutely nothing about Sun Ra's music" (p.181). Yearning for something more than our Earth-bound conceptions of man's relationships to each other, which impose lines that demarcate colour as enough to determinate ones societal class, statements such as this in fact do bear a relation to Sun Ra's music as

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<sup>32</sup> Lees admittedly later rescind this statement in the same piece, after taking the time to get to know Coltrane. The words given still accurately portray the mood of certain aspects of the critical community at the time.

there is certainly no such thing as “the music itself” (Whyton, p.9). Jost goes further, rendering the futuristic aspects of Sun Ra’s shows as irrelevant, seeing them instead as born from “the origins of Afro-American music: in the rites of the voodoo cult, a blend of magic, music and dance; and in the vaudeville shows of itinerant troupes of actors and musicians, where there was room for gaudily tinselled costumes and the stunts of supple acrobats, as well as for the emotional depths of blues sung by a Ma Rainey or a Bessie Smith” (p.191). Again, notions of idealized African-American traditions are present here, in a disparaging manner that serves only to hark back to the past in search for the future identity. Litweiler also sees Sun Ra’s early music as coloured by the “pianists of the likes of Liberace”, that makes his music “burble with bourgeois secrets, and over the years Sun Ra’s most impenetrable music, as composer and improviser has been influenced by the most flabby kinds of popular musics” (p.143). Here we can see that Sun Ra, in the minds of both Jost and Litweiler, is not even allowed to enter a newer Avant-Garde canon, as Litweiler’s conception of Ra’s music renders it as simply a Jazz influenced form of “cocktail music” (p.147). Seeing Sun Ra’s theatrical stage show, bright costumes, penchant for Eastern cultures and outer-space philosophy as nothing more than a distraction from “the music itself”, Ra is often spoken of disparagingly for his music, as it doesn’t conform to a set of preconceived notions of the role of race and ethnicity, which it should seemingly embody.

J. Griffith Rollefson and Daniel Kreiss had articles on Sun Ra’s “anti-anti-essentialism” and black consciousness published in a 2008 edition of the *Black Music Research Journal*, whilst John Sinclair released a collection of interviews and essays on Sun Ra in 2010. Influenced by varying degrees of divergence and adherence to the Avant-Garde, Neotraditionalist and Black Nationalist ways of thinking, they portray Sun Ra as following a “uniquely African-American take on futuristic narratives of scientific and technological progress” (Rollefson, p.83), who sees the conventional ideas of a race-free future, born in liberalism, as smacking of a white (male) future (Kreiss, p.85). Furthermore, Sun Ra is deemed an “African-American musical genius” (Sinclair, p.5), whose work features a “massed percussion choir throbbing with African and Afro-Cuban polyrhythms” (Sinclair, p.7). It is clear that the emphasis is still upon the “African” in “African-American” when considering Sun Ra’s work, despite the admittance that Ra’s “uniquely African-American take on futuristic

narratives” lends itself to notions of African-American exceptionalism that still remain unexplored, allowed the ethnocentric discourses to continually re-emerge in newer forms.

We can see that there are two types of canon formed – that of the neotraditionalists and that of the Avant-Garde. Coltrane in canonical thinking of Jazz intersects both, whilst Sun Ra is allowed to enter neither<sup>33</sup>. Critics tend to become distracted by aspects of Sun Ra’s ideology and performance, although Jost does acknowledge that Ra’s “mysticism dressed in the costumes of a utopian minstrel show” can represent a level of consciousness “that can by no means be reduced to the equation “free jazz = Black Power” (Jost, p.199). Whilst Jost admits that Sun Ra may not conform to a set of standards within the realms of our conceptual experience, he does at least allow the potential to see beyond ever-simplified notions of Ra’s music, representing one particular intersection of music and racial politics, even as Jost becomes lost in his search to find another set of ethnic characteristics seemingly lacking in Sun Ra’s music.

Sun Ra’s simultaneous “positing of a mythic consciousness for black people and psychological wholeness for all races” gave him more flexibility than many other artists, in order to speak across various political and cultural movements of the time (Kreiss, pp.68-69). The opportunity to explore the theory of postethnicity is offered by this, whilst Coltrane’s transcendent Universalist position, where humanities nature reveals itself in notions of all as one under God, allows a transethnic perspective to be applied. In light of these recent developments, we can provide a model for analysis that reinterprets these two iconic musicians life and work, particularly as they underwent a period increasing experimentation by delving into the realm of the Avant-Garde, that doesn’t follow the same tired formulations of essential blackness or cultural purity.

## **2.6. Theoretical Solutions:**

What is clear now, is that to be able to understand Jazz as a cultural, let alone musical construct, there is a need to look at Jazz without submitting to the “surreal

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<sup>33</sup> Despite the recognition within the latter of Sun Ra’s role in the creation of Avant-Garde Jazz sensibilities.

fantasy” of race, by utilizing not only trans-national or trans-ethnic<sup>34</sup> perspectives, but also a post-ethnic and post-national<sup>35</sup> perspective. Firstly, I will address the relevance of these theories in contemporary times, by gaining an insight into how previous modes of thinking on race and ethnicity have benefited white people over people of colour, before utilizing recent insights into cultural identity formation in the age of transnationalism to indicate the need for a change in perception, offered by the theories of transethnicity and postethnecity. I will then offer a brief synopsis of both of these theories, who formulated them, and how they have become more relevant to the modern era of transnationalism in the rest of this subchapter.

Examining and applying the transethnic and postethnec approaches will be necessary in order to accurately gauge the complexity of Jazz music and its social relevance, without resorting to the fuddled simplicity of race thinking as a defining structural element. This manner lends itself to the repetition of ethnic myths forged in the Western view of history, that casts its gaze in ethno-racial terms chiefly for the benefit of white Europeans and Americans. Furthermore these approaches can be applied without “cynically turning the tables and indulging this will on behalf of some other contemporary group” (Hollinger, p.127), in order to hear the music that links such varying figures at John Coltrane, Stan Getz, Jelly Roll Morton, Gato Barbieri, Peter Brötzmann, Dizzy Gillespie, John Tchicai, Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five, Sun Ra’s Interplanetary Arkestra and The Original Dixieland Jazz Band free from these distractions.

Stuart Hall sees cultural identity as “not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture” and “not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark” (p.707). Following

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<sup>34</sup> That is not to define transethnicity in terms of the recent case of Rachel Dolezal, who was forced to resign from her position as President of a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), due to her portrayal of being of African-American ancestry, despite her parents assertion that she is white, and descended from German, Czech and Native American ethnic groups (Elgot, 2015). The prefix trans- is here used in the same manner as in terms such as ‘transsexual’, to indicate a that the identity assigned at birth (be it gender identity, or ethnicity) does not match that which the subject identifies with, with the added pejorative connotation that the subject is out to fool the wider society. This conception of transethnicity is not only damaging, by reflexively solidifying porous racial and ethnic boundaries, but also brings in a discussion of the gendered content of language, which unfortunately can not be addressed within the confines of this paper.

<sup>35</sup> Perhaps even a configuration to pre-national thinking is necessary.

the transnational turn in American Studies, as indicated by Winfried Fluck, the hopes put on transnationalism, deriving from a particular view of globalization, argues that borders have become porous and permeable but that this does not signal the end of American power or exceptionalist notions of identity. In fact it reconfigures and consolidates itself in new forms (p.73). Not simply physical boundaries, in the form of national borders however, we can apply this model to the simulated boundaries of race and ethnicity. Working from a transnational sense, “American” now does not refer to exceptionalist national characteristics and virtues. Instead, without referring to mythic notions of national identity, “American” now refers to a “particular set of economic, social or cultural conditions that, for historical and other reasons, are different from those of other countries and nations” (Fluck, p.74). Therefore to explore new conceptions of ethnicity in the work of two American-born Jazz musicians and composers, there must first be the identification of American exceptionalist myths pervading the discourse and perception, born in American reflexive racialization. Artistic strategies to counter these myths can be analyzed via two more contemporary theories of ethnicity outlined below, which will be applied to the life and work of John Coltrane and Sun Ra in chapter four.

Transethnicity:

Outlined in the work of *E Pluribus Unum? Research Group*, composed of Josef Raab, Sebastian Thies and Martin Butler amongst others, they propose to challenge the ideas of cultural purity, homogeneity and essentialist notions of culture or identity (Raab and Butler, p.1), in an attempt to shift thinking on ethnicity away from the “utopia of a ‘cultural diversity’ or ‘multiculturalism,’ in which the Other is an object with a certain essence that can be known or controlled” (p.4). The reified concept of race (filtered through ethnicity) and its relation to Jazz is evident, whilst the effects this produces maintains African-Americans as a monolithic ethnic group positioned as the cultural Other, still failing to gain acceptance into the wider American society. Instead the suggestion is made of multidirectional processes, where identities are constantly shifting from moments of fluidity and stasis, a process of de-ethnification and re-ethnification, whilst always keeping an eye on transcending ethnic fixation is proposed (Rausser, p.5).

Once we identify that isolationism, whether in politics, cultural practise or national identity, does not fit the realities of the twenty first century (Raab and Butler, p.16), we can now see there is a need to re-evaluate the work of musicians from the 1960s, to rid them of the troubled isolationist cultural identity projected on to them. John Coltrane offers a perfect example to evaluate transethnic identity, demonstrating the processes of de- and re-ethnification within his music's multi-ethnic character, whilst his philosophical underpinnings, rooted in a universal spirituality, demonstrate an ethnically transcendent character. Anticipating this, Tony Whyton's *Beyond A Love Supreme* suggests that Coltrane's fascination with music of other cultures offers an alternative view to that which places Jazz as an American musical form (p.121).

Furthermore, following *E Pluribus Unum? Research Group's* work, we can identify that the longstanding discourse on Jazz has portrayed it as a "Contact Zone", in Mary Louise Pratt's definition, as a social space "where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (p.34). "Contact" here "assumes a spatial metaphoric that thinks of cultures as fairly homogenous linguistic and socio-cultural systems, whose homogeneity is imperilled by the triple chronotope of encounter, conquest, and discovery and is subjected to constant processes of transculturation." This way of thinking, seemingly flawed, "explains present-day social exclusion, subalternity and capitalist exploitation as part of a colonial legacy" (Thies and Raab, pp.13-14). However, this would assume as notion that America was only a meeting point of rich whites and black slaves. The creation of a white identity for one thing was much more complex, relying on class dynamics that excluded Irish, Eastern Europeans and Jews at various points. To carry on relying on the same processes of thinking therefore will essentialize and simplify our notions of what constitutes "European" identity as much as "African" identity, as the two are pitted together in the forms of "European Harmony" "African Rhythm" creating Jazz, without an exploration of class dynamics within each seemingly unstable monolithic ethnic bloc. "This binary morality is completely out of touch with the times and excludes the possibility of building a more complex and holistic sense of community" (Raab and Butler, p.15), to which Jazz's multi-ethnic character, evidenced through the work of John Coltrane, can demonstrate.

Postethnicity:

David A. Hollinger outlines the theory of postethnicity in his book *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. Seemingly incongruent, in a land where race can dominate so much of societal standing, the concept of postethnicity allows for a perspective beyond colour lines, with consideration given to the individuals desire for voluntary affiliation, over embodied ethnicity. Of course, an individual cannot choose their country of birth or the colour of their skin, but in postethnicity the emphasis is placed on the individuals role in deciding how much emphasis is put on these aspects to define their identity (Raussert, p.4). For example, Hollinger notes that “[o]ne does not easily choose to be a Japanese American in the absence of an element of Japanese ancestry to begin with” (Hollinger, p.117), however by analyzing a figure such as Sun Ra, we can see this idea of affiliation taken to the extreme of an outer space ethnicity, seemingly outside of the social-political dimensions of earth-bound conceptions of race and ethnicity, which allows Sun Ra to transcend these constructs.

In stating the postethnic focus is on voluntary over prescribed affiliations that recognize “the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society” (p.116), Hollinger indicates that this is not a colour blind concept, but serves to learn from the past in order to deconstruct notions of monolithic ethno-racial concepts, thus prevent the reification of racial categories that deny new ethnic identities. Denying neither history nor biology’s role in shaping identity within society, postethnicity simply critiques that these two features “provide a clear set of orders for the affiliations we are to make”, by claiming an anti-essentialist reading of ethnicity. We are instead lead into a perspective that now directly challenges “a common prejudice [...] that affiliations based on choice are somehow artificial and lacking in depth, while those based on the ordinance of blood and history are more substantive and authentic” (Hollinger, p.113). Many were bemused by Sun Ra’s proclamation of Saturnian descent and angelic lineage, perhaps explaining his exclusion from canonical modes of ethnically-imbued criticism on the arts, where such pronouncements are regarded as a distraction from musical features and the ideological agenda of the critic. I would argue that a postethnic reading of Sun Ra’s life, philosophy and music is now necessary, in order to reinterpret the message he intended to portray free from preconceived and unstable notions of ethnicity.

In critiquing America's fascination with race, Hollinger notes that "by failing to provide sufficient opportunities for poor people of all ethno-racial affiliations, [America] is in the process of squandering whatever opportunity it now may have to move in a more postethnic direction" (Hollinger, p.16), revealing that there is often an unstated class dynamic at work within ethno-racial constructs, which will remain problematic for as long as it is ignored. This is further enunciated in the epilogue to *Postethnic America*, where Hollinger states that "[a] society that will not take steps to help its poor citizens of all ethno-racial groups will have little chance to find out how successful have been its efforts to overcome the racist attitudes of empowered whites. The more inflexible the class structure, the longer will the ethno-racial groups caught in its lower segments remain there" (Hollinger, pp.167-168)

American exceptionalism here can indeed be a very necessary part of the postethnic perspective, as there is a shared grounding in theories of civic nationalism, including the notion that "a civic nation can mediate between the species and the ethnos in ways that an ethnic nation cannot" (Hollinger, p.14). This is why the application of postethnicity to the medium of Jazz is particularly apt, as Jazz sprung from a site of globalization, where the convergence of numerous cultures was facilitated by the constant flow in and out of New Orleans' ports, situated between the south of America and the north of the Caribbean, in a state with a very real need to create a sense of civic nationalism post-reconstruction. New Orleans, widely regarded as the cradle of Jazz, was the destination for a tremendous amount of internal black migration following the implementation of Jim Crow laws, which attracted many to move there as people of colour were treated marginally better, as well as being a site with long-established Creole communities situated alongside communities of all hue and background, including Italians, Eastern European Jews, Chinese immigrants, Cubans, Spanish, French, English, Scottish, Welsh Irish, Celtic, Native Americans, Canadians, Mexicans, Brazilians, Argentineans, Bavarians and Dalmatians, to name but a few (Wagnleitner, p.36).

## **2.7. Jazz – The Classical Music of Globalization:**

In stating that "the study of music offers a unique lens with which to focus on various debates in cultural studies, media studies, literary studies, history, sociology and anthropology", Wilfred Raussert offers an approach to the study of music that

allows a greater bent towards seeing beyond merely musical features. Without relying on problematic social-political emphases, it is acknowledged that “issues of shifting identities, new ethnicities, shifting agency, inter-cultural exchange, processes of commodification and transnationalization in times of globalization” indicate the necessity to analyze the issues that are raised through music, as well as its ties to race/ethnicity (Raussert, p.1). Applied to Jazz, this approach is grounded in a manner that doesn’t seek to deny the tremendous creativity and influence of African American artists in the creation of Jazz, but allows for recognition of the artistic contributions from a wide mix of creoles and whites in its formative years (Wagnleitner, p.29), and doesn’t resort to a logic of simple binary confrontations.

The true picture of Jazz is much more complex than a series of binary relationships in an unbalanced power structure. For too long the explanations of Jazz history have been based on tracing an African lineage built upon romanticized visions of Africa, as well as generalized descriptions of African music<sup>36</sup>, which discredit the fact that there are numerous types of African music, instead favouring a vision of a single unified whole. As the music developed these ideas become re-imagined, reaching a zenith under the formulation of an “Africanization” of Jazz in the 1960s. Set against a backdrop of Black Nationalism, as well as reactions against this, this zenith can be viewed both in relation to Sun Ra’s fascination with a re-imagined ancient Egypt and Coltrane’s involvement in the founding of the Olatunji Center for African Culture<sup>37</sup>. To talk of this Africanization of Jazz is therefore to downplay the role individual choice plays, in favour of abstract processes (Gerard, p.53), and falls into the trap of colluding with Western hegemony that “normalizes’ and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the ‘primitive, unchanging past’” (Hall, S, p.710).

Reinhold Wagnleitner identifies Jazz as the *Classical Music of Globalization*, stating that its inception in New Orleans, “the most globalized city in the world” (p.36), allowed a type music to develop that encompasses many traditions; approaches to rhythm, harmony, melody and timbre; performance styles; and notions of ethnicity/race, derived from an almost endless variety of sources. Holding back

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<sup>36</sup> Usually culled from the writings of ethnomusicologists.

<sup>37</sup> Seen by Whyton as contradictory to Coltrane’s denunciation of essential black subject (p.94).

reservations placing New Orleans as the sole site of Jazz's inception, once we accept that Jazz is a transnational music "through and through" its ethnic boundaries becomes problematic, as we can observe a process that gives us the sounds of creolization and cultural hybridity, rendering fixed notions of ethnicity and race as ill-equipped to explain a multi-faceted music in hard and fast terms. As a music entirely steeped in global transmigration, Jazz "represents a fugitive culture opening new modern identities (not only) for lower classes and minorities" (Wagnleitner, p. 46) in an ever changing world.

It must be stated then that Marsalis and Crouch, not to mention Baraka and Kofsky before them, played an important part in reclaiming the predominant position of black musicians from those who belittled the role African-Americans could play in contributing to American culture and society. As a transnational music, the story of Jazz has however somewhat become a history where those that also contributed to its origin are written out, despite it being a music that since its inception has "transcended the ethnic political and cultural boundaries of the United States" (Wagnleitner, p.47). Of course there is room for viewing Jazz as deriving from African American sources, with whites involved from the beginning on an unequal playing field, forged through shameful practises of segregation and slavery, amongst other social factors. The unequal playing field of American society cannot be understated enough, but this manner of thinking also has the tendency to lead to theses promoted by Baraka and his like-minded companions, of a white appropriation of black culture as "the great music robbery" (Austerlitz, p.13), rendering notions of cultural purity and ethnic boundaries set in stone, without an allowance for syncretic cultural practises and development.

We must then assess the accepted notion that Jazz is America's music. Whilst this may fail to recognize that major innovators have been African American in a land that has marginalized blacks, the globalized nature of Jazz has forged new identities and created new cultural practises that extend beyond simplified notions of the "African" or the "American" in African American identity. Furthermore, Jazz as "America's music ignores the fact that this hemisphere includes South and Central America as well as North America, and that the United States is itself home to Latino as well as Anglo cultures". Jazz has long been indebted to both the African and

Western/Central European sources, but also to Latino sources, amongst many others, that too can teach us much about the United States” (Austerlitz, p.x).

We have now reached a point where we can recognize that although Jazz hasn't changed since its inception, having always been a globalized music, it hasn't necessarily always been perceived as thus. So how can Jazz be presented to invoke post-ethnic and trans-ethnic thinking? Postethnically, the music of Sun Ra and his Arkestra can, within a single performance, bring the sounds of a frenzied percussion choir, lushly orchestrated Jazz standards, outer space synthesizer solos, group singing of their signature space chants and collective improvisation under Sun Ra's conduction, none of which can be easily attributable to an idea of a “pure culture” exclusively, rendering our definitions of a culturally based ethnicity as problematic. Transethnically, Coltrane's later work with the Classic Quartet, as well his musical explorations post-1965, drew on ideas derived from Sufi mysticism, Indian approaches to improvisation, his (globalized) Jazz heritage and a growing interest in the different *Classical* musics of the world, at various times de- and re-ethnifying these musical features into a single unified whole, with the intention to transcend our narrow constructs of culturally based definitions of ethnicity. American born, experienced in the problematic relationship between white and black, both musicians offer a body of work, supplemented by philosophical underpinnings, that can allow us to see beyond notions of Jazz as simply “American” or “African-American” music, revealing its globalized syncretic nature and questioning the ethno-racial labels we apply to the music.

## **2.8. Does It Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing?:**

The twentieth century was indeed a meeting point of musical traditions and cultures, with Jazz and its antecedents influencing Classical music and Classical music and its antecedents influencing Jazz music. Composers such as Dvořák, Stravinsky and Ravel were noted for their Jazz influence<sup>38</sup> (Austerlitz, p.7), whilst Jazz musicians have long drawn on sources derived from Classical music, from the earliest ragtime piano rolls, through Be-Bops adoption of extended harmonies

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<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Stravinsky was even noted to have enjoyed the performances of Charlie Parker at Birdland, (Austerlitz, p.19-20)

(influenced by the work of composers such as Stravinsky), to the “Third-Stream” movements conscious melding of the two idioms. Dvořák in particular was inspired by the spirituals he heard performed, noting the similarity of a particular rhythmic inflection between the music of African-Americans and of Scottish traditional music (“*Scotch Snaps – The Big Picture*”).

The rhythmic feature mentioned by Dvořák is commonly known as the “Scotch Snap” and consists of a stressed sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note, rendered in musical notation as thus:



Ex. 1. “Scotch Snap” rhythm. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015

This rhythmic quality is a common feature of speech patterns of the languages of the British Isles (Gaelic, Lallans Scots, Welsh and English amongst others) and is thought to have arisen from a transcription of these speech patterns into music. In particular the Scottish *Strathspey* is noted for its use of Scotch Snap rhythms. A keen eyed observer would notice that the Scotch Snap rhythm is a reversal of the ‘swing’ rhythm, intrinsic to the foundation of Jazz music and often seen as the most vital component to the classification of music as Jazz.

Swing rhythms written in either of these three ways

4 Swing rhythm most easily transposed to Western notation

Ex. 2. “Swing” rhythms in three forms. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.

Swing, is often seen as deriving from African sources, particularly the rhythmic displacement, cross rhythms and polymetres of West African musical traditions. Kofi Agawu challenged this notion in *The Invention of “African Rhythm”*, which shows how notions of Africa derive from European discourses, pitting “Western music” against “African Music” to show how the “complexity of African rhythm is emblematic of the otherness of African peoples, their essential difference from us” (p.109). Instead, Agawu calls for an “ideology of sameness” to counter ideologies of difference, that can in fact teach us more about how difference is created. Perhaps an overlap between Scotch Snaps and Swing rhythms can illustrate this “ideology of sameness”, as swing is so heavily identified with notions of “African music” yet, as Philip Tagg notes in a film dedicated to the Scotch Snap rhythm, in a polyrhythmic setting Scotch Snaps can become swing rhythms and swing rhythms can become Scotch Snaps, overlaid on top of each other. Example 3 demonstrates how a typical Blues/Jazz 12/8 time signature with four downbeats per bar and overlay a repeated swing rhythm can demonstrate this:

4 downbeats per bar

3 Sw. S.S. Sw. S.S. Sw. S.S. Sw. S.S.

**Ex. 3. Swing rhythms overlaid on 12/8 beat, reveal ability to become Scotch Snap, dependent upon where downbeat is felt. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

In the opening chapter of Burns’ *Jazz* documentary series, it is stated that, amongst other features, “above all it [Jazz] swings”. One may well ask if this is the case, what happens when the music doesn’t swing? In order to sense this notion of swing, the music must rely on a steady repeated downbeat, to which the swing rhythm conforms, with a longer quaver followed by a shorter note, roughly equivalent to a dotted semiquaver in the most easily represented manner of western musical notation. If we take into consideration that swing relies not only on rhythmic function, but also

aspects of timbre and pitch, there is reason to dispute the longstanding binary definition of Jazz as deriving from “African rhythm” and “European melody” (Austerlitz, pp.28-29). Sun Ra and John Coltrane’s music of the mid to later 1960s challenged the notion that this music above all swings, with rhythmic structures in relation to a steady downbeat negated as a first step. In fact, Coltrane had already declared in the early-sixties to British interviewer Kitty Grimes that “I don’t love the beat, in the strict sense [...] I don’t really care about the straight 4/4 at all [...] A sense of the pulse, rather than the beat, can take you out of a stodgy approach” (DeVito, Ed., p.120).

On Coltrane’s posthumously released 1968<sup>39</sup> album *Om*, at large points of the near thirty minute piece pulse is maintained without calculated and regulated metric consistency, whilst all manner of rhythmic ideas on various melodic instruments are explored over a bed of walking bass, piano vamps, additional percussion flourishes and Elvin Jones’ drums. Sun Ra also utilized the same technique of unregulated metricism on pieces such as *The Beginning* from 1961 album *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra*, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.6. Whether it is called multidirectional time, rubato or lack of pulse, all approaches that remove strict metrical boundaries within performed sound show that history is not repeating itself. This means that every performance, even of the same piece, will be different each time, and contained within each performance any perceived similarities are merely coincidental, not fixed within a time-based framework but purely from the efforts of individuals within a collective framework of thinking. Challenging the separation of the individual and collective, of spontaneity and planning, this literally timeless music does not repeat itself; it is no changing same, but simply changing.

It may well be a good time to now assess where are the ethnic markers in these forms of metrically unregulated music. It becomes problematic to classify music as Jazz once it loses its sense of swing, but furthermore it is among one of the principal features that blocks Coltrane’s later work and Sun Ra’s musical conceptions from entering the canons of African-American music. Take David S. Ware’s statement in Ashley Kahn’s history of Avant-Garde Jazz record label, Impulse! Records, where he reveals that “[y]ou can get almost as avant-garde as you want to be, as long as you

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<sup>39</sup> Recorded in 1965.

keep that steady pulse [...] But once you break pulse, I guarantee you, you're going to lose half of your people" (Kahn, 2006, p.263). Their initial breaks with metric confines<sup>40</sup> proved to be acceptable as, in a sense, it was still possible to maintain some element of swing, that "essential *quality* of black music" (Floyd, p.80), albeit fractured and distorted, that one could still tap a foot to. However when a sense of pulse is denied the music takes on a transcendent quality that can serve to take it completely out of the realm of Jazz, at least in the canonical sense of the term, as it is now devoid of this perceived connection to an African heritage due to the lack of the essential notion of swing. Once a sense of swing is cast aside in the music of Sun Ra and Coltrane, what is left is a formation of sounds devoid of easily ascribable ethnic markers, favouring a syncretic blend of tonalities, rhythms, harmonies and melodies that form a new musical whole.

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<sup>40</sup> Such as pieces from Sun Ra's *Super-Sonic Jazz* and numerous takes by Coltrane of *My Favourite Things*.

### 3. Guided by A Love Supreme; John Coltrane's Transethnic Vision:

It is Coltrane's view on the universal side of music that interests and draws me to his work and ideology, as his music allows the critic and musicologist to explore as much musical similarity as there is musical difference in an eclectic body of work. Even as early as 1960, as revealed in a *Down Beat* magazine article to Don DeMicheal, Coltrane was stating his desire to "cover as many forms of music as I can put into a jazz context and play on my instruments", which included at the time certain styles of Eastern and Spanish music, combined with "exotic flavours". Whilst the early ambition to explore different types of music was there, Coltrane did still maintain that the music "has to swing, and it has to be varied" (DeVito, Ed., p.70). Increasingly becoming interested in various types of music from across the world, he began to see folk tunes as dedicated to the goodness in people, which he wanted to combine with "what I feel here" (Kahn, 2002, p.51). Statements like these serve to indicate a transnational musical context to Coltrane's work; he is demonstrating a desire to explore music from outside of his cultural experience that puts forward a view of America being more akin to the incubator of his music, not the mother. In the 1962 *Cahiers du Jazz* article mentioned previously, Coltrane refines his view of music: "British popular music is not the same as South American, but take away their purely ethnic characteristics – that is to say, their folk aspects – and you'll find yourself in the presence of the same pentatonic sounds, of comparable modal structures. It's that universal side of music which interests and draws me, and that's where I want to go" (DeVito, Ed., p.181). Through perusal of Coltrane's ideas on universal notions of music we can begin to explore the theory of transethnicity in action.

We can observe transethnicity when it becomes manifest through an agent embodying a sense of ethnic identity (usually the one assigned at birth), encased within a Universalist framework of *shared* knowledge and values. Transethnicity allows the creation of hybrid identities, where one can identify with many at the same time, which the music of Jazz is particularly suited to. John Coltrane, principal exemplar of transethnic Jazz, is not simply a reflection of a Janus faced American society; he does not pit unity against disunity, tension against resolution or order against disorder, instead he combines all forces into a singular whole, where each feature is allowed its own time to surge forth within his music. As Jost notes,

Coltrane's rubato ballads are "never oriented toward just one of two opposite poles [...] on the contrary, they all have a variety of levels" (p.103). In creating a multifaceted, yet singularly identifiable body of music, he echoes the spirituality that underlines every aspect of his life and work, which sees every individual as part of an all-encompassing Godhead.

Coltrane was raised into a middle-class existence. Although his immediate family was composed of different social classes, they were comparatively well off compared to others in the area (Washington, p.128), but Coltrane was still ever aware of his second-class status as a black child growing up in segregated North Carolina. As the grandson of two preachers, a sense of religiosity was always present in Coltrane's life from his early days. He moved to Philadelphia in 1943 aged 17, following a tragic few years following the loss of his maternal grandparents, uncle and father all in 1939, the year he took up the saxophone (Kahn, 2002, pp.8-9). After serving in the Navy, where he played in a segregated band, Coltrane continued his tutelage under bandleaders Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, whilst making a few records as bandleader. In 1962 he formed his Classic Quartet, with whom his musical output went through a period of constant development until 1965, when internal unrest at Coltrane's growing musical vision forces Elvin Jones and McCoy Tyner to leave. Playing with Coltrane until his death in 1967 was a second quartet/quintet composed of his second wife Alice Coltrane on piano, Rashied Ali on drums and Jimmy Garrison, from the Classic Quartet, retained on bass. Occasionally this second quartet would be joined by a myriad of complementary musicians on percussion instruments, derived from a wide variety of locations, as well as Pharoah Sanders on reed instruments to make the ensemble a quintet. The music with this second quartet began to delve further from Jazz conventions, which needless to say became problematic for critics and audiences alike, based on Coltrane's increasing pursuit of representing spirituality through musical means and achieving enlightenment.

Whilst there is indeed an emphasis within my thesis of portraying Coltrane as purveying a brand of transcendent universalism, there is contained within this notion an acceptance of a certain way of thinking that doesn't allow works to mean different things to different people at different times, favouring the artist's strategy over the listeners reception. As Coltrane biographer Kahn states "it wasn't so much what the saxophonist made explicit as what could be inferred from his music" (Kahn, 2002,

p.76), which allows for numerous interpretations of Coltrane's music to exist, dependent upon the receiver, simultaneously. This demonstrates why there is a need for constant reappraisal of works as times do change the meaning of a work, as well as a consideration of past critical discourse to see just how features have changed. Coltrane's work is transethnic, not postethnic; it is not monolithic in its appeal, conveying "a singular meaning or set of values" (Whyton, p.88). Instead Coltrane's work is like a diamond; a glimmering example forged through a compression of various musical forms; multi-faceted and able to bring up questions on the definitions and assumptions we assign to music, as now both sides of the artist/receiver relationship are given equal consideration. Transethnicity taps into the ethnic identity that was crafted for Coltrane, living as an African-American in the segregated South, but refuses to define him entirely by this or to allow this aspect of his life determine his future. Instead Coltrane uses a unique version of spirituality, manifest in his music, to "unify social, political, economic, cultural and religious expression" (Price, p.161) into an all-encompassing vision for humanity. Coltrane's transethnic music positions him as a unifier of this world, able to relate to everyone simultaneously in different ways.

Far from portraying Coltrane as "colour-blind", the intention is to reveal how through possessing an increased awareness of race through the vicissitudes of American life, Coltrane utilizes this to "articulate a vision of pan-humanity" (Austerlitz, pp.xxi-xxii) that breaks free of the American mould. He taught his daughter on black history, a point often missed out when raising Coltrane as the transcendental figure he has come to embody, where in highlighting features such as the mysticism and ecumenicalism of Coltrane's work we are led to the mistaken assumption that he didn't care about worldly matters (Washington, p.144). This is indicative of where the processes of de- and re-ethnification enter Coltrane's philosophical underpinnings; at certain points in Coltrane's later life and work aspects of ethnicity become emphasized, whilst at other points these same aspects are downplayed. The music Coltrane composed in the final three years of his life, steeped in spirituality, was intended to create a universal sound that promotes good feelings between human beings of every shade and hue, whilst retaining hints of the identity we have been assigned by our social structures, that serves to critique the notion of rigidly held constructions of racial borders.

The potential to see Jazz as a product of globalization is available through looking at the transethnic position of Coltrane. We can observe Coltrane utilizing a projected pan-racial persona, formed through a combination of his growing spirituality and the influence of different musical traditions from across the globe, including many forms of devotional music. Take magnum opus recording *A Love Supreme* for example; on this album you can hear dervish-like melodies, free-flowing rubato rhythm, blues structures and raag improvisation all within thirty-five minutes, neither aspect dominating over the unity these elements create when combined into a whole. There are of course also ties to Africa within Coltrane's music, starting with early inclinations to title works with African sources (including tracks such as *Dahomey Dance*, *Africa* and *Tunji*<sup>41</sup>), to the inclusion of Juno Lewis' poems on the need to preserve African culture on *Kulu Se Mama*, finally to Coltrane's appearance at the Olatunji Centre of African Culture<sup>42</sup>. These ties to the vast continent of Africa should not arise at the expense of other features however, as they too are part of a cohesive whole that Coltrane intended to present to the world, signalling through his gift of music a comprehensive reflection of the goodness in the world formed by all cultures; a common humanity that ties us all together, regardless of lines of colour or cultural background.

In consideration of some of the factors of Coltrane's later work, it is perhaps therefore not surprising to read statements by those influenced by Coltrane's music to state "[s]ure, it was black music, but it was almost beyond that. It took on a universality that could embrace these other things and still keep its blackness. In other words, it's not like us against the world. It's like all these things are included and we all *are* the world" (Frank Lowe, in Kahn, 2002, p.186). Despite my divergence from Lowe's opinion of Coltrane embodying "blackness", we can instead understand this as retaining a sense of African-American identity, formed through the American racial hierarchy that places African-Americans at the bottom of the social-class structure. Coltrane reveals through his championing of the oppressed racial-class he was born into, manifest not just by his music retaining a sense of Jazz roots, but also through an alignment with other cultures around the world. This includes adopting musical

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<sup>41</sup> Named for famed Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji.

<sup>42</sup> Where he gave his penultimate (although often mistakenly thought of as final) live appearance, later released as an album *The Olatunji Concert: The Last Live Recording* in 2001.

features from Indian, Islamic and African sources, in combination with the already globalized Jazz music he has been inculcated into, to create a music that utilizes aspects from a global pool of resources, tied together by a sense of spirituality, which portrays a musical vision that sees all as equal under the Divine

The following subchapters will analyze four aspects of Coltrane's life and work that demonstrate the embodiment of transethnicity contained within them. Beginning with a look at the role mediation plays in understanding Coltrane, incorporating the projected image of Coltrane, who is in control of this and how it is projected through film and photography, as well as the influence of recording technology, as these are the three most distinguishing aspects of the portrayed Coltrane today. I will then analyze the philosophical inspirations and influences upon Coltrane's works, before moving onwards to delve into the role of religion and spirituality in Coltrane's life and music. Bringing this chapter to a close will be an analysis of the musical features of transethnicity in Coltrane's later works<sup>43</sup>.

### **3.1. Mediation:**

The image projected of Coltrane has been heavily mediated; owing to numerous facets including his early death, recording technology, depictions in other media and religious dogmatism; which allowed a legacy that portrays Coltrane as both a transcendental figure and champion of African-American identity to arise. Alice and Ravi Coltrane, wife and son of John respectively, have been in charge of Coltrane's estate since his untimely death. This has ensured that a spiritual message has been attached to depictions of Coltrane and allowed to be at the forefront of representations of Coltrane post-death, as they too share these ideals and are willing for this side of Coltrane to be portrayed. Furthermore the Coltrane estate has also refused to license the usage of Coltrane's music or image in any medium that utilizes or seemingly endorses drugs, prurience or violence (Kahn, 2002, p.202), fearing that this would tarnish the image they intend to maintain.

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<sup>43</sup> A further short sub-chapter on the role of Drugs, particularly the role Coltrane's liberation from heroin and alcohol addiction played in his spiritual awakening, as well as his alleged use of LSD in achieving spiritual inspiration, was to be included. However owing to space constraints, this is not incorporated in the main body of text, but is included as a supplement to this chapter in Appendix II.

The mediation of figures such as recording engineer Rudy Van Gelder, who shaped the sound of *A Love Supreme*, *Kulu Se Mama*, *Transition*, *Ascension* and *Meditations* are essential to the creation of Coltrane's sound. Tightly polished studio albums recorded in Van Gelder's New Jersey studio create a sound much different from the harshness and abrasive nature of live recordings made during the same period (*Live at the Village Vanguard Again!* or *The Olatunji Concert* for example), whilst the packaging and design team of *Impulse! Records* portray a pensive Coltrane on record sleeves, pictured as a solitary character wrapped up in either his thoughts or instrument (see Ex. 6), further building upon the transcendental and spiritual connotations applied to Coltrane.



**Ex. 4. Record sleeves, featuring images of pensive looking Coltrane; Solitary, wrapped up in either his thoughts or his instrument.**

Source: <<http://www.vervemusicgroup.com/johncoltrane/releases>>, Accessed 15/07/2015.

Films depicting the life and work of Coltrane too aid this mediation. In *The World According to John Coltrane* we are given the glimpse of a man who, in the words of Minimalist composer La Monte Young “had the ability to project

immediately [...] with no sense of commerciality”. Certainly Coltrane possessed a charismatic aura as many musicians, particularly those as talented at their instruments as Coltrane, do. To say Coltrane had “no sense of commerciality” however would maintain that Coltrane had no say in albums such as *Duke Ellington and John Coltrane* or *John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman*, relying on a discourse that puts this solely as the idea of studio executives (in this case Bob Thiele of *Impulse! Records*), as mentioned in chapter 2.5. Indeed, if Coltrane retained no sense of commerciality, he would not be able to project his vision to the world with as much success as he did. To maintain there was no sense of commerciality in Coltrane’s output, despite the Avant-Garde leanings his later records encapsulate, therefore is to project a fixed idea of transcendent universalism that is based around a mythic Coltrane, disconnected from the world and everyday situations of the racialized world. In the same film Roscoe Mitchell, saxophonist with the Art Ensemble of Chicago and devoted Coltrane acolyte, states “[h]e [Coltrane] could fuse different sounds together to bring about a complete idea” before explaining how Coltrane heard this idea first in church. Here is an intriguing portrayal of Coltrane, which demonstrates Coltrane’s transethnic vision: is Mitchell here revealing the multi-parted nature of African-American identity, formed through various trials and tribulations, by people of varying shades and hues, in a land that simultaneously needs and rejects those of black colour? Or is Mitchell tying Coltrane to one specific notion African-American ethnic character, based in a southern Baptist church tradition? This demonstrates the levels of de- and re-ethnification that one can encounter with Coltrane within a single extract, where ethnic features can be simultaneously emphasized or played down, to allow a realization that all are one under God despite the divisions society enforces.

### **3.2. Philosophy:**

Coltrane first noted an interest in philosophy in a 1955 interview with August Blume, where Coltrane connected his philosophical pursuits to a questioning of his long-held notions of religion. Interestingly he reveals that through his pursuit of meaning via philosophy he was becoming disappointed that there were so many religions and doctrines to choose from, seemingly unable to grasp how all could not be right at the same time. Hastened by 1957 spiritual awakening, which he achieved by freeing himself from long term addictions to alcohol and heroin, Coltrane becomes

increasingly interested in pursuing more than just one religious, spiritual or philosophical doctrine exclusively (DeVito, Ed., pp.10-13). Whilst this may seemingly lead back into Coltrane's growing interest in spirituality, there are also some philosophical doctrines that can be derived from Coltrane's work, indicating that there more than simply one ethno-cultural connection that Coltrane was enunciating<sup>44</sup>.

Links can be made between what we know of Coltrane's life post-1957 with that of Greek philosopher and polymath Pythagoras, which could lead one to believe that Coltrane was aware of and bears the influence of Pythagorean thought. There are shared concerns for care of the body via diet, exercise and contemplation, to help attain transcendence, whilst both Pythagoras and Coltrane attempt to comprehend the many religions they encountered in order to combine numerous viewpoints without conflict. Furthermore there was a philosophical view created by Pythagoras and echoed by Coltrane that approaches numerous different ideas and practises at the same time, but not merely as an outsider looking in. Instead they both engage by becoming a student of many forms of knowledge; Coltrane noted for his growing interest not just of different musical styles and religions, but also astronomy and the works of Einstein (DeVito, Ed., p.88), revealing the scientific and mathematical aspects to Coltrane's later works dedicated the cosmos such as *Stellar Regions* and *Interstellar Space*; which enhanced the potential to guide both Pythagoras and Coltrane further in their "search for understanding, wisdom and truth" (Hopkins). Of course their views manifest themselves in different mediums, with Pythagoras largely remembered for his philosophical views recounted in text, whilst Coltrane remains first and foremost a musician rather than a thinker. However Coltrane, like Pythagoras thousands of years before him, draws on a variety of different sources and indicates a desire to conceptualize ideas and practises outside of the modern realms of ethnicity, instead using all the knowledge available to him to craft his own inclusive vision for the world.

Possibly most explicit linkage between Pythagorean thought and John Coltrane's philosophy is his expressed desire to be able to use his music for healing, an idea derived from Pythagoras' philosophy on music. In a 1966 interview, nearing

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<sup>44</sup> I.e., more than simply the manifestation of the "negro soul", retaining "roots in a flesh-and-blood community without having sacrificed anything in the way of aesthetic value", that Kofsky ascribes to Coltrane and his music (p.186).

the end of his life, Coltrane reveals this desire: “[i]f one of my friends is ill, I’d like to play a certain song and he’ll be cured” (in Kahn, 2002, pp.192-193). Understanding music as a force beyond earth-bound conceptions with the ability to express not only higher levels of understanding, but also to be a force for healing the disunity of the body and soul, the philosophical dimension of Coltrane’s music moves beyond simply a portrayal of “the intimate relationship between jazz and the urban Negro community” (Kofsky, p.233), to encompass ideals of achieving transcendent universalism through music.

Coltrane’s music too possesses aspects of the spontaneous emotionalism of the Dionysian character, most famously identified in Nietzsche’s aesthetic philosophy, as a contrast to the ordered rationality of the Apollonian character which one may find in the philosophy of Sun Ra. In Nietzsche’s mould the Dionysian is characterised by an ecstatic nature, representing “an overabundance of joy, and the basic human drive to triumph over the horrors of the world and to embrace life in its totality”. The Dionysian is all-inclusive whilst it positions the individual in closeness to worldly experience, as it emphasizes that one is all and the same within the realm of human experience. Crucially, this “life-affirmation” is highly valued by Nietzsche, who claims it as an essential component part of his philosophical view of the world to counter the “narrow-minded, ascetic tenets of Christian morality” (Moore and Pryor Paré, p.131).

We can see in Coltrane’s life and work an inclination towards Nietzsche’s Dionysian ideals; Coltrane too rejects strict devotion to the “ascetic tenets of Christian morality” by indicating in the liner notes to 1966 recording *Meditations*: “I believe in all religions” (DeVito, Ed., p.263). As he declares his belief in all spiritual paths and religions, Coltrane repudiates Christian notions of God in favour of an all-encompassing belief of many paths and deities guided under the dominion of a single Godhead, free from self-denying dogmatic values and culturally inherited allegiances. Coltrane too finds in the rejection his Christian upbringing the ability to allow an individuals search for truth within the realm of human experience, intended to allow man to realize their ability to “grow themselves into the [...] *best good* that they can be”, as revealed in the Tokyo interviews (DeVito, Ed., 277). This stated emphasis upon the individuals role in value-creation allows the transethnic current to be exposed: placing the emphasis on the internal thought processes related to the

experiences of the individual, we are allowed to “embrace life in it’s totality” as the revealed nature of humanity will render us all equal within the realms worldly experience, all sharing birth, death and emotions amongst other features, free from cultural/racial constructs.

The ecstatic character of the Dionysian is also contained within the original recordings of the *Meditations* suite, released posthumously in 1977. These pieces pay testament to the emotional impulse, as indicated by the titles of tracks such as *Love, Compassion, Joy* and *Serenity*. Correspondingly the musical aspects of these pieces incorporates a wide range of emotional features; the rhythm section ranges from rolling rubato, freely laying a malleted drum kit underpinned by a diatonic harmonic bed with bass counter melody, to a steady swinging pulse, ushering forth a romantic character with drive and conviction; Coltrane’s saxophone technique incorporates “partial tones, including honks and screams”, intended to carry the listener “into the spirit realm”, expressing an otherworldly character as he reaches ever higher into the saxophones *altissimo* register (Washington, p.139); finally the lush soaring piano and *arco* bass melodies further add to the transcendent nature of the works, which characterises *First Meditations* Dionysian concern for the ecstatic impulse. This ecstatic impulse guides the musical nature of the works and indicates a sympathy with Nietzsche’s philosophy, demonstrating that Coltrane’s character was not composed solely of contemporary ethnic constructs, but looks into nineteenth century German philosophy, modelled on Ancient Greek mythological characters, incorporated into a view of spirituality enhanced by globalizations ease of access to varying cultures from across the world.

### **3.3. Religion/Spirituality:**

In 1968, whilst discussing John Coltrane’s turn to various cultures of Africa, the Middle East and Asia for musical inspiration and experimentation, Baraka (then Jones) offers the following take: “[a] black man is naturally religious, and the whole bankruptcy of Western culture forces the sensitive black man back to his natural resources” (Clarke, p.43). In an interview taken nine years later, Baraka now criticizes Coltrane for losing his “tough street sound” as he begins to explore “Eastern cosmology and other esoteric ideas” (Benston, p.113). Baraka, here embodying Black Nationalist and cultural nationalist principles, initially sees Coltrane’s spirituality as

deeply tied to an ethnic character that connects Coltrane to these Eastern regions; seemingly via a bond that reaches over temporal, spatial and cultural changes or limits; before becoming frustrated when these views detract from Baraka's own political message. Coltrane's spirituality is however much more complex than the essential character, contained within Coltrane's skin colour, that Baraka would have us believe. Race certainly did play a role in forming the religious views of many black American musicians in the 1960s. This is not to say that these musicians are defined entirely by these views, or that these views are used in the same manner, to convey the same message for different musicians, as Stuart Hall states: "[w]e all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always 'in context' *positioned*"<sup>45</sup> (p.704). Therefore the temporal changes, as well as spatial and ethno-cultural boundaries, are circumvented in ways that do not match the political mind-set of Baraka, which will be discussed in this subchapter.

Temporally, we must not forget the era Coltrane was working within. Composing and performing as "flower-power" was becoming prominent in American popular culture, an increased spiritual outlook, usually inspired by a turn to Asian and African mysticism and religion, was beginning to dominate not just the work of Coltrane or the burgeoning hippy generation. Working at the same time as Coltrane, on the other side of the Atlantic, was German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen who was creating contemporary Avant-Garde Classical work whilst Coltrane pursued his spiritual path. Stockhausen was too imbued with a sense of spirituality, stating: "I understood that the origins and the aim of every theology are the same. I have kneeled to pray in both synagogues and mosques", indicating a similar ideology to that of Coltrane's, who as previously stated declared his belief in all religions. Another contemporary American composer who too worked in an Avant-Garde Classical idiom, George Crumb, speaks of his spirituality informing his work: "[t]here's some spiritual energy that is burning all over the world that takes different forms. [...] I can say music is equally religion" (both quotations taken from Adamenko, p.155). Coltrane clearly wasn't alone in his thinking that a spiritual impulse can be located within music, which allows all manner of borders to be crossed. Here two white composers of different backgrounds, nationalities and experience worked within their

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<sup>45</sup> Hall's emphasis.

own mediums of contemporary Classical music to discover the same spiritual impulse that was defining Coltrane's late works. Within the temporal context the notion of spirituality perhaps meant more at the time Coltrane was working in; situated within an era of post-World War II existentialism and increasing secularism in the arts; than it is represented now, as spirituality becomes downplayed whilst ideas of transcendent universalism or African-American heritage are reiterated ad infinitum in the critical discussion of Coltrane's work. Working within a time of post-holocaust horror, seeking faith in spirituality and religion proved to be a welcome and powerful influence in features such as the movement against the Vietnam War. What is clear is that Coltrane's spirituality is not merely an expression of an African-American sensibility, or a cultural connection that was always contained within Coltrane's flesh and blood. Instead this spirituality is part of an individual journey, shared by many in the arts as a reaction to the state of the world at the time, to realize that ethnic borders create divisions between people that are socially constructed, which serve as but a distraction from the achievement of a high state of wellbeing for all on the planet.

In the series of interviews given in Tokyo, Coltrane mentions his stated desire to become a Saint (DeVito, Ed., p.270), a statement that indeed became prophetic as Coltrane was later Canonized by African Orthodox church in 1971. These aspects however tend to discriminate against the all-inclusive nature of Coltrane's spirituality, fixing him to distinct notions of Christian and African heritage that ignore the multi-faceted nature of Coltrane's spiritual outlook. Contradictions to the fixed ethnic/religious nature can be derived from a variety of sources, for instance Yusuf Lateef notes that in the text of *Psalm* from *A Love Supreme*; a rubato ballad where the melodic line derives from the rhythmic phrasing of a poem Coltrane wrote in dedication to God, which was included in the liner notes; bears the stylistic marking of Qur'anic verses, which states "All praises to God, the Lord of all the worlds" (Brown, Ed., p.194) for example, as Coltrane echoes this in his words "Let us sing all songs to God, To whom all praise is due" (DeVito, Ed., p.228). The nature of Coltrane's all-encompassing approach to spirituality is not simply tied to literary allusion in his work however, with an emphasis on the study of many religions, through devotional music from across the world, key to understanding Coltrane's later work and its freedom from ethno-religious confines.

By embodying a religious sensibility, influenced by the teachings of Sufi mystics amongst others, there was a conscious attempt to remove the ethnic markers from Coltrane's music. This renders the music free from spatial constraints, as the era of globalization gains further development, whilst transnational religious/cultural allegiances allowed those spiritually inclined to seek influence from a vast pool of sources. However given the often explosive nature of American race relations in the 1960s there were moves within collective identities, often opposed to formulation processes within individual identities, to reformulate "on the lines of the ethnic and national categories which are basic to secularized, Western societies" (Hammarlund, p.40). This collective identity process has the effect of bulwarking ethno-racial barriers within society, which maintains that a spiritual path taken by an African-American Jazz musician such as Coltrane is an expression of a deeply held cultural affirmation, as opposed to an individual journey into the realm of mysticism.

Coltrane is noted to have become especially interested in Sufism as part of his growing spirituality (Washington, p.148), influencing his work conceptually and concretely. The Sufi path derives from Islamic mysticism, which takes certain views considered antithetical to traditional religious teachings, such as finding God's nature within the abstract emotion love, which can serve to destroy Western Judeo-Christian concepts of monotheism. Instead, preaching a general gospel of individualism and spiritual exultation, Sufi followers revere passion, love, carnal pleasures, dancing and in certain cases even drinking<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore Sufi music (the vessel through which Coltrane becomes versed in Sufi mysticism) is a secularized religious music, devotional yet not played in the mosques. Instead of the clergy Sufi music is played by people of all classes to act as a unifier of society, from "learned men in palaces" to "illiterate peasants" (Hammarlund, p.1), cutting through class, racial/ethnic and even religious barriers. Furthermore, concerning the musical aspect of Sufism in Coltrane's work, there are numerous recordings within Coltrane's oeuvre where any sense of pulse is negated, favouring different methods and approaches to this concept. As with much of Coltrane's musical inspiration in this period, the ideas of non-metric improvisation can be seen as deriving from a spiritual source of which Sufi music, in

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<sup>46</sup> Also in line with the Dionysian ecstatic character.

the form of the *Makam*, can be identified as one amongst many inspirations from music outside of the Western sphere.

As revealed in an interview with Yusuf Lateef, Coltrane read Sufi musician Hazrat Inayat Khan's influential book *The Mysticism of Sound* (Brown, Ed., p.203). In this multi-volume work the entire universe is portrayed as music; a view of the universe that places "sound as the basis of creation and music as an essential means towards spiritual development" (Khan, p.7).

*To obtain spirituality is to realize that the whole universe is one symphony; in this every individual is one note, and his happiness lies in becoming perfectly attuned to the harmony of the universe. It is not following a certain religion that makes one spiritual, or having a certain belief, or being a fanatic in regard to one idea, or even by becoming too good to live in this world.* (Khan, p.148)

Khan's message here reveals a transcendent nature; where boundaries of class, race, religion and sex have no distinction; that can be realized through an acceptance of the entire world as being composed of the vibrations created by each individual, which all play a part in the creation a symphonic collective whole. Coltrane certainly elicited Khan's message in the liner notes to *Meditations*:

*Once you become aware of this force for unity in life [spirituality], you can't ever forget it. It becomes part of everything you do [...] My goal in meditating on this through music, however, remains the same. And that is to uplift people, as much as I can. To inspire them to realize more and more of their capacities for living meaningful lives. Because there certainly is meaning to life.* (DeVito, Ed., p.263)

Having already rejected the term "religious" in sectarian terms in the liner notes preceding paragraph, he instead maintains there is a search for the meaning of existence through purely musical means. Coltrane later stated in the Tokyo interviews that the message he wants to convey through his music is "[t]he love that holds the universe together" (DeVito, Ed., pp.266-267), indicative of the Sufi message of Khan, that sees music as the most appropriate medium to explore spiritual ideas. Music becomes a medium where the realization that one is all and all is one is capable; where boundaries between people become blurred or negated entirely.

This idea of collective unity is also manifest in the music Coltrane played in his later years. Coltrane's long-time bassist Jimmy Garrison noted that whilst he learned to play as part of a collective melodic process with Ornette Coleman, it was

his work with Coltrane that it became part of the “sheer energy of the band” through the spiritual dimensions the music gained (Kahn, 2002, p.63). Indeed the formation of the Classic Quartet demonstrates a collective whole as within a piece all members are contributing equally, in terms of harmony, rhythm, melody and timbre, to the creation of the unified music. This could be seen as embodying the ethos of Martin Luther King Jr.’s appreciation of love and social democracy as opposed to the separatist Black Power movement (Washington, p.140). Indeed even the very way the band played their music could be seen as an expression of a transethnic message, inspired by Sufi mysticism, to reveal that every individual is one note within the perfectly attuned harmony of the universe.

Khan’s writings too, at certain points, could be considered to emit a transethnic take on the world, stating:

*When one is open to one’s tried friend in life, one knows so much about him it is only a question of opening the heart [...] Where there is hatred and prejudice and bitterness, there is loss of understanding [...] It is smallness, narrowness, lack of spiritual development, which makes a person exclusive, distant, different from others. He feels superior, greater, better than the others.*  
(Khan, p.83)

Coltrane also sees this lack of spiritual development as holding humans back from achieving their potential for understanding humanity, and now post-spiritual awakening his job as a musician is to “give a picture to the listener of the many wonderful things he knows of and senses in the universe”. Through musical means Coltrane is attempting rid the world of the social constructs that separates people via means of hubris; through hatred, prejudice, bitterness, narrowness and superiority; to instead give joy to the universe and bring people together through music on a level playing field of equality for all under God. Khan is however dismissive of Jazz music, stating that it “does not trouble the soul to think of spiritual things” (Khan, p.111), with numerous references to Jazz as merely popular entertainment that has “come from the negroes” as “a natural expression of their racial rhythm” (Khan, p.45). Ostensibly at odds with his Sufi teachings, Coltrane seemingly sees Khan’s statements as a challenge to be answered through his attempts to blend spirituality with the music of Jazz, to project an image of the world that doesn’t reify racial characteristics with musical forms, as a devotional offering to God.

Ideas of transcendental universalism are revealed to Coltrane through his growing spirituality, undertaken after a study of numerous religions derived from a variety of sources across the world. Temporally Coltrane's spirituality could be connected to part of a wider trend within the era he worked in, which removes spatial boundaries as the ability to experience and learn about new cultures is made available as globalization further develops, allowing cultural contact and hybridity to flourish without rigid national or ethno-cultural borders. This allows a transethnic vision of the world to be portrayed, by retaining roots in an American culture yet engaging and experiencing many other cultures from across the globe as equals, unifying them all into a singular whole through his spiritually-imbued music, that grants a transcendence of strict ideas on music, ethnicity and religion.

### 3.4. Music:

Coltrane's most interesting approach to pulse, metre and rhythm, briefly discussed in chapter 2.8, is offered in his rubato ballads<sup>47</sup>, with perhaps *Crescent* from the 1964 album of the same name serving as a precursor. Coltrane's rubato ballads, such as *A Love Supreme's Psalm* and *First Meditations' Love*, display typical Jazz quartet instrumentation but engage in a distinctly un-swinging flow of rhythmic colour on drums (instead opting for malleted colouristic use of the tom toms and cymbals), whilst the piano relies on tremolo techniques to explore the full range of the instrument and lay a harmonic bed. This harmonic bed typically revolves around a single consonant chord, with deviations from this chord still rooted in the tonic note of the original chord, underpinning an entire piece. Coltrane floats on top of this harmonic bed playing simple diatonic melodies designed to elicit a romantic emotional response from the listener, often exploring the upper reaches of the saxophones altissimo register, whilst Garrison's bass offers counter-melodic ideas played either *pizzicato* or *arco*<sup>48</sup>. Perhaps Coltrane has now demonstrated in his rubato ballads the new form of "Classical Music" he was hinting at in the Japanese interviews, discussed in the preceding paragraph, forged out of a conscious syncretism of all the musical styles he had been listening to and studying at the time.

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<sup>47</sup> Of which there were numerous.

<sup>48</sup> The timbre of *arco* double bass in combination with the diatonic melody and harmonic underpinning particularly adds a sense of Western Classicism to the music.

Coltrane's views on what constitutes Classical music are an interesting feature for exploring notions of ethnicity ascribed to music. Having studied at Granoff studios in Philadelphia from the mid-1940s to 1950s Coltrane was taught in Classical as well as popular music frameworks, including composition, as revealed in an interview with the schools founder Isadore Granoff (DeVito, Ed., p.372). After his career as a soloist and band leader had taken off by 1961, in an edition of British magazine *Jazz News* Coltrane now remarks that he is apologetic for not being schooled in Classical music, like so many of his contemporaries, but that he was beginning to study Western Classical forms (DeVito, Ed., p.78), which is perhaps evidence of his humble nature, or maybe Coltrane here issues an apology for not being able to play in the symphonic "white" styles of music that "Classical" came to represent.

By 1966 Coltrane's view of Classical music has now drastically changed, declaring it as "the music of a country that is played by the composers and musicians of the country, more or less, as opposed to the music that the people dance or sing by", adding "there are classical music's all over the world, different types of Classical music" (DeVito, Ed., p.273). It is this notion that I am most interested in from a transethnic perspective as it indicates elements of de- and re-ethnification, as well as hinting at class distinctions free from the confines of race. If there are, as Coltrane states, different Classical musics for each country then there is clearly an element of ethnification within the music, as in Coltrane's mind these types of music seemingly takes on a cultural character enclosed within national borders. However Coltrane's music at this time was becoming the product of a diverse range of sources, with different elements hand-picked to be combined into Coltrane's fresh new whole, as the music of America (and indeed, succumbing to a notion of American exceptionalism) combined with processes of globalization to bring a wide sweep of cultures together, allowing cultural hybridity to develop as the music takes on a transnational and transethnic character. Furthermore in declaring that there are Classical types of music and popular/folk types of music ("the music that the people dance or sing by"), Coltrane is stating that there are serious types of music – for so long the mainstay of middle to higher classes – and types of music intended solely for entertainment - usually relegated to the lower classes. Whilst allegations of cultural snobbery may be allowed to arise from this thinking, what is crucial is that Coltrane's music can be played by people of any colour or ethnic minority background and still retain it's

status as serious music, which takes Jazz out of the realm of mere popular entertainment (as Adorno or Khan would have us believe) and into the realm of serious art, with the potential for transcendent qualities to arise.

Always interested in searching for new approaches to music, in the liner notes to 1962 recording *Live at the Village Vanguard*, Coltrane acknowledges the influence of Indian music upon his recent work, in particular the idea that certain sounds and scales “are intended to produce specific emotional meanings” (DeVito, Ed., p.108). Coming from the Indian Classical musical traditions, musical scales/modes<sup>49</sup> are intended to possess different meanings when played at certain times of day, to contain certain emotional qualities, meanings and even colours. Highlighting this as part of a “turn to the East”, as it is often portrayed in various different lexical formations, would be a gross overstatement, particularly when considering that contained even within “Indian music” is as many different forms, sounds, timbres and variation, as there would be in “European music”. When we treat vast regions as singular entities, there is a tendency to render them as monolithic and unchanging, however Coltrane doesn’t elaborate into which specific elements of Indian musical traditions, bar the inspiration of *raga* and the work of Hindustani Classical musician Ravi Shankar (whom Coltrane’s second child is named after), that he is incorporating. Regardless of Coltrane’s seemingly monolithic conception of Indian music<sup>50</sup>, the influence is acknowledged and helps to create a vision for music that overcomes spatial and cultural boundaries, as Coltrane fuses music derived from sources and traditions thousands of miles away to incorporate into his own already protean Jazz background.

The relation of Coltrane’s work to the music of Africa, seen as a culturally based attempt to reconnect with his roots, is also often portrayed as part of Coltrane’s turn to the East for inspiration. The fact that the African elements of Coltrane’s music are often portrayed as the principal source of inspiration seemingly stands at odds with methods of identity formation, whilst discrediting new formations of individual and collective identity, as it looks to the past in search of a vision for the future. For instance we are often informed that Coltrane “remained rooted in the African

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<sup>49</sup> *Raga*, as they’re known in India, coming from a Sanskrit word meaning “colour” or “musical tone”.

<sup>50</sup> That is not to say it was monolithic within Coltrane’s mindset, and is where the work of scholar on Indian musical traditions locating the influence within Coltrane’s music would be welcomed. At the present time I can only ascertain Coltrane’s position from his declarations.

American traditions of music making and spirituality while simultaneously incorporating elements from other traditions” (Washington, p.125). If this is true, then how so is it true? Seemingly the elements from other traditions are allowed to remain a footnote in tracing the influence of Coltrane’s work, as the role Coltrane can play as an African-American hero and role model is overwhelming. It does however discredit Coltrane’s multi-parted nature, as the influence of other *specific* cultures (outside of simple constructs of “African” or “Asian”) play an enormous role in his transethnic music. It also downplays the role that individual choice plays in musical decision-making and composition and furthermore can misattribute ethnic features to music that were not there in intention. Gerard claims that “[f]or Coltrane, African music was an influence he felt comfortable using freely. He was never interested in African authenticity as such” (Gerard, p.68); for how could a man American born claim African authenticity, when his entire cultural knowledge is grounded in the experience of America’s racial-hierarchical system? Certainly the rhythms and colours derived from the African music Coltrane was listening to were utilized within his work, as Coltrane attests in the liner notes to *Africa/Brass* (DeVito, Ed., p.93). What is often understated is the effect Coltrane tried to achieve by utilizing two bass players on this album to simulate the effect of the Indian water-drum and the rhythms that entails, as revealed to Valerie Wilmer in a 1962 edition of *Jazz Journal* (DeVito, Ed., p.115). This adds a much different perspective on notions of “Africa” within Coltrane’s music, as on his most overt reference to Africa within his music there are still key structural/rhythmic elements contained within the music derived from cultures far beyond Africa.

Excusing my earlier criticism of Salim Washington’s take on Coltrane’s expression of an African-American aesthetic, he does offer the following salient words:

*Coltrane eventually became an iconic figure for enlightened universal consciousness, thanks to his eclectic spiritual views and his pioneering use of musical practise and concepts from various folk traditions, especially those of India and Africa. Yet he never abandoned his roots in the jazz/blues aesthetic.*

(Washington, p.126)

Here we get a more appropriate image of Coltrane, that treats him as neither an upholder of a monolithic African-American tradition, nor opposed to Euro-American practises and cultural values, allowing Coltrane to crosses lines of class, race and

ethnicity. Truly, he does retain roots within a Jazz/Blues aesthetic, but already contained within Jazz is a variety of influences formed through a hybrid of various ethnic groups from across the world, of all colours, classes and countries. Furthermore as globalization further enables cultural contact transnationally; through mediums of radio, LP, television and air travel; Coltrane's music is now able to access an even vaster pool of sources from which to draw inspiration.

Coltrane scholar Tony Whyton notes that Jazz records are often seen as part of a natural "one-take" approach to composition and recording, rooted in ideas of spontaneous natural musicality, inherently "black" in nature. An examination of watershed album, *A Love Supreme*, however offers a contradictory approach to racialized processes of musical creation. For instance there are overdubs, often considered anathema to the creation of Jazz records, where Coltrane allows his voice to be doubled whilst chanting the mantra "A Love Supreme" in opening piece *Acknowledgement*. Closing piece *Psalm* too features as a concluding musical coda a second saxophone restating the opening quartal sax melody of *Acknowledgement*. Both of these instances of overdubbing utilize increasingly advancing recording technology to add an extra dimension to the playing of Coltrane's band, allowing two versions of the same voice (be it human or saxophone) to be heard simultaneously, taking the listener into a realm of new possibilities. Furthermore there were additional takes of *Acknowledgement* featuring extra tenor saxophone and bass, whilst the process of meticulous planning and resurfaced outtakes, as identified by Whyton (p.25), in combination with overdubbing, conclude that this record is not an act of ethnically-charged spontaneous musical inspiration, but a carefully planned work where a wide array of parameters were assessed by Coltrane before the record was released.

The liner notes to *A Love Supreme* include a devotional poem in the form of a prayer to God. Far beyond the Christian conception of monotheism however, aspects of Qur'anic verse and Hindu notions of God abound. From a transethnic perspective the significance of the following line is paramount to understanding Coltrane's musical inspiration: "all made from one...all made in one". (DeVito, Ed., p.227). Here the listener may be inclined to follow Lewis Porter's assessment, where he sees the closing statements of Coltrane's saxophone in *Acknowledgement*, which repeat the *A*



create a field of colour and noise. Enclosed within are the many elements of societal relations, however violent or peaceful they may sound, in an ecstatic manner that overwhelms the listener into an acceptance of the multi-parted nature of a singular existence under God. Contained within the challenge to the individual/collective binary throughout *Ascension* is the potential to see a transethnic image of the world. A combination of all musicians working together acts as a metaphor of what is necessary for humanity to solve the problems of ethnic conflict; whichever shape or form, harmonic relationship or emotions this would take; by working together despite the seeming discordant relationship between the twin aspects of individuality and collectivity.

*Ascension* has however proved to be a difficult record for listeners since its release. As the recording fails to meet the dictates of the African-American canon-bearers, it has become relegated to the temporal/social context of the 1960s, and becomes claimed by Baraka et al. as a symbol of the violent side of the civil rights movement, whilst outright rejected by the neo-traditionalists as it is deemed beyond the confines of acceptable Jazz. Around this time, Coltrane indicated a refusal to recognize the term “Jazz” in a Tokyo interview of 1966, explaining: “we are sold under this name, but to me, the word doesn’t exist [...] To me it’s the music of individual expression” (DeVito, p.266). Seemingly recognizing that music has been divided along a colour line since the split between Country and Blues by early twentieth century record companies, “Jazz” became equated with “Black music” ever since. By refusing to recognize his music as Jazz, Coltrane places his music as free from ethnic markers, instead recognizing it as his individual expression, free to incorporate features that interest and resonate with him from whichever sources he chooses to pluck them.

It is feasible that the catharsis contained within *Ascension* can be misconstrued as unstructured ramblings intended merely to evoke a certain expression, as opposed to a structured and planned piece of music. However the fact that Coltrane chose a different take than the one initially issued does move us away from any standard evaluations of the work, where it is assumed that any take will do (Whyton, p.78). Furthermore there are structural elements contained within the music, as both takes of the recording emit an alternating group-solo structure, pitting collective unity against a setting where each musician gets a chance to emit an individual expression. This

includes a bass duet and piano solo, whilst all horn players play against a typical Jazz rhythm section backdrop (piano, bass, drums), augmented by an additional bass providing counter-melody. Jost's musicological research on *Ascension* indicates that, despite its seemingly atonal sound, there are a series of three alternating modes<sup>52</sup> also determining the structure and harmony of the piece (p.87), providing a basis upon which the soloists improvise upon, although free to deviate at their whim. Clearly *Ascension* is more than a mere expression of emotions in a fervent, fierce, hysteric or histrionic manner, but is actually the work of a composer making conscious decisions, with room for the role of individual decision making and improvisation enclosed within. It is however not simply the expression of a singular ethnic identity; *Ascension* as a term is a multi-faith concept, appearing in Zoroastrian, Hindu, Jewish and Christian religious works amongst others; the music is a mixture of freely interpreted ideas, with elements of Jazz heritage, European modality and polyphony common to many global musical sources. The music, if it is not Jazz but still retaining features of Jazz, is therefore not easily attributable to a singular, monolithic, ethnic group but the music of an individual creator supplemented by a band of like-minded individual creators to further aid his expression.

Recorded in 1966, but only released in 2014 *Offering: Live at Temple Univesity* captures the later work of Coltrane's quintet in full flight, with the second quartet augmented by Pharoah Sanders and two other musicians on reeds alongside three additional percussionists, whilst Sonny Johnson stands in for Garrison on bass. This recording demonstrates the cathartic sound of Coltrane's later work, with meter completely negated on all tracks demonstrating the shift in band personnel, as Elvin Jones' more polyrhythmic style is now displaces in favour of Rashied Ali's pan-rhythmic flushes of colour (Washington, p.142). Ever searching for new modes of expression, there are reinterpretations of tracks written or popularised by Coltrane from as early as 1959; including *Naima*, *Crescent* and *My Favourite Things*; all appearing in wildly different forms from their original incarnation. Unlike Henry Louis Gates' take on Coltrane's reinterpretations as a form of formal parody suggested

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<sup>52</sup> Beginning with B flat Aelonian before changing to D Phrygian (as well as a change in rhythmic structure), when finally the collective improvisatory sections are closed in F Phrygian, as the individual solos begin.

via dissemblance<sup>53</sup>, far from a parody or deconstruction of the tune Coltrane's reworking of the piece explores new potentials, to take the music of what was a typically light-hearted Broadway show-tune into higher realms of expression. To suggest that this is a parody would be to state that Coltrane had no high regard for the melodic or harmonic treatment of the piece, seeing it as merely a throwaway work, which stands at odds with the sheer volume of live performances captured of what is considered one of Coltrane's signature pieces. Furthermore, however abstracted it may seemingly appear, Coltrane's Avant-Garde treatment of *My Favourite Things* still maintains the minor/major shifts in tonality of Coltrane's original 1961 treatment, even if the melody isn't explicitly stated until close to the end of the twenty three minute running time. Notably within the performance, at one point Coltrane abandons his soprano saxophone, steps closer to the microphone and begins to sing and beat his chest. This elicitation of primal sounds was also featured in another Coltrane recording, *Live in Seattle*, on the track *Evolution* where you can hear Coltrane growling into the microphone, almost shouting, as other members of the band join in. Part Tuvan throat singing, part primal howl, Coltrane is forever demonstrating a capacity for eliciting new sounds in order to connect with the listener, taking them completely by surprise. Perhaps connected to his spiritual awakening and ideas contained within the all-encompassing syllable *Om*, Coltrane doesn't sing words or verse in a structured manner but emits a freely improvised melody with his voice that is devoid of ethnic markers, intended to connect to the universal nature he wanted to imbue his music with.

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<sup>53</sup> As illustrated in Gates' attempt to map out an African-American aesthetic lineage in *The Signifying Monkey*, (p.104).

#### 4. Space is the Race; Sun Ra's Postethnic Vision:

The theory of postethnicity, formulated by Hollinger in his book *Postethnic America*, attempts to strip away our reliance upon preconceived notions of identity as we make further strides into an era of transnationalism. Plunging deeper into a world where national borders have become fluid and begin lose their relevance, whilst boundaries of race and prescribed cultural affiliations become more complex or vitiated, matters of identity are liable to change without relying on notions of race and ethnicity developed from the eighteenth century onwards. "Identity" in this sense is used to imply a fixed nature that is more psychological than social, whilst "affiliation" allows for an increased level of flexibility that is more performative instead of essential. Identity, within the theory of postethnicity, is now recognized as formed through a process of affiliation however proscribed or chosen (Hollinger, pp.6-7). Following Hollinger's lead, Stuart Hall elaborates on this formulation of identity and affiliation by stating "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact [...] we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, S., p.704). Contained within the life and work of Sun Ra is a demonstration of performative identity, cultural affiliation and postethnicity, formed through his highly individual conceptualisation of the world, history, race and direction for the future. Sun Ra derived his position from many sources<sup>54</sup>, portraying himself as a being from outer space, outside of Earth-bound racial classification and preconceived notions of identity, to serve as an abolitionist of humanity through his music, film and philosophical musings.

The title of this chapter "Space is the race" here refers to the ways Sun Ra not only utilizes outer-space and cosmogony within his postethnic view of the world, literally portraying himself as a visitor to Earth from outer space, but also conjures up notions of physical and cultural space between ethnic groups, that he critiques for creating difference where it need not necessarily lie. Therefore "space" in this sense is used to refer simultaneously to both the creation of difference; dividing people along racial/ethnic lines born though distortions of truth, oppression, hubris and othering; as

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<sup>54</sup> Including theosophy, the occult, numerology and religion, amongst others.

well as the hope for salvation offered by Sun Ra's views on the possibilities offered by outer space, bringing the ability to think outside of the doomed realities of planet Earth.

Despite Sun Ra and his Arkestra's ability to encompass an incredible variety of Jazz from all periods of its history within the same concert; ranging from the Fletcher Henderson pieces he first gained employment in Chicago to arrange, to the intergalactic symphonies of his later work; Sun Ra fails to get a mention in Burns' *Jazz* series, as he seemingly doesn't match the bill of the neo-traditionalist agenda. His proclamation that he was a visitor from outer space, later a member of the Angel Race<sup>55</sup>, seemingly provided a socio-political commentary which served as too much of a distraction from the intended narrative of the neo-traditionalists, whilst his music is at times is so challenging to the conventions of Jazz that he is stylistically incompatible with the dictates of the African-American canon. There is however contained within Sun Ra's music a Jazz aesthetic that permeates even his most abstract and difficult works which, in combination with a futuristic lens and playful mentality towards etymology and history, challenged racially-tinted views on music and critiqued the racially-veiled class divisions of American societies.

Sun Ra demonstrates the postethnic tendency towards voluntary affiliation when he adopts the twin identities of descendent of the Ancient Egyptians and Saturnian visitor to Earth<sup>56</sup>, whilst remaining ever mindful of the pitfalls of colour-blind thinking; Sun Ra acknowledges that race may be an empty construct, whilst racism is very real. Through combining elements of the past and the future in his internally defined posturing, he is allowed to deconstruct notions of monolithic ethno-racial identities to create an anti-essentialist reading of ethnicity via a process of cogitation; Sun Ra, instead of accepting the realities of American racism, sees that in order to become part of the world one must turn inward, realizing that through this process "[y]ou project your spirit outward and *become* everyone else – you understand them and their needs" (Szwed, p.379). With a self-created and defined ethnic background, claiming that he is not of this world but a visitor from Saturn via Ancient Egypt, Sun Ra is challenging the notions that choice-based affiliations are

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<sup>55</sup> Noting in an early 1990s interview for British radio station, Jazz Fm, that he had been recently promoted to Archangel ("*Travelling the Spaceways: The Cult of Sun Ra*").

<sup>56</sup> Saturn being "the planet of discipline and sacrifice" in Ra's conception (Szwed, p.184).

artificial, or at least lacking in depth compared to those of blood and history (as Hollinger identified, p.113). By destroying his past and refusing to affiliate with his previous life as Herman Poole Blount from Alabama, Sun Ra is allowed to “recast himself in a series of roles in a drama he spent his life creating” (Szwed, p.5) where he is left free to create the present in his own mould, free from the prejudices of everyday life as a black man in America. In doing this Sun Ra reveals the status of African-Americans as an underclass of America, with certain aspects of society such as technology long denied to them and thus preventing their advancement. Crafting himself and his Arkestra as “tone scientists”, where “the objectivity of science offered the means by which the evils of racism could be overcome”, Sun Ra’s postethnic vision incorporates new advancements in technology as part of a futurist-utopian phantasy for all races, whilst realizing that “the tools of scholarship and the arts could also be turned to discovering the hidden truths and decoding the texts” (Szwed, p.62), in a process to reveal the mysteries of life and the road to salvation through the means of music and performance.

Finding inspiration in matters of the occult, through Sun Ra’s unique vision we can see aspects of the modern and the archaic intersect, in a manner similar to the secret societies Sun Ra was reading from and seemingly inspired by. Identifying secret societies by traits such as seclusion, initiatory ordeals, a new name, secret doctrines and a special language (Eliade and Trask, p.76), there is a case to be made for the Arkestra under Sun Ra’s leadership to be qualified as such, where each of these aspects were utilized to build a sense of camaraderie between his band and inspire devotion to his leadership<sup>57</sup>. Another easily identifiable avenue into Ra’s utilization of the occult is Madame Blavatsky’s theosophical views, having been a noted student of her works (Szwed, pp.107-108). One of the most notable ideas put forward in Blavatsky’s works was “[t]o form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color” (Blavatsky, in Abdill), which lays a foundation for the understanding of Sun Ra’s postethnic outlook and music. This outlook was further advanced following Ra’s break with Earth-bound racial constructs in the 1950s, and succeeded by the adoption of an outer space ethnic

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<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the Arkestra are still performing today led by long-time devotee of Sun Ra and alto saxophonist Marshall Allen, aged ninety-one, following the death of John Gilmore in 1995, who had taken over the leadership following Sun Ra’s death in 1993.

affiliation. This allowed Sun Ra to possess the stance of a critical outsider looking inwards at an inherently flawed system of racial prejudice and persecution, which has roots delving much deeper than the bondage of African-Americans ancestry.

A problematization certainly occurs when we accept the fact that only blacks were admitted into the Arkestra. Austerlitz sees this as part of a policy of self-determination (p.11) that temporally matches similar moods of the time, including Malcolm X's policy of emancipation from racism from within your own ethnic group. That is not to say that Sun Ra explicitly endorsed tenets of Black Nationalism, or was in any way a devout believer of ideas put forward by X and other like-minded individuals. Sun Ra's philosophy, racial views, interests and music changed over time<sup>58</sup>, but the fact is there to be seen in the numerous different incarnations of Sun Ra's Arkestra, with members straddling both the pre- and post-civil rights era (Szweid, p.280). Ra does however offer us these words regarding his hiring policy in a monologue during documentary *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*; in order to get into the Arkestra, it is *simply* a matter of:

*Whether they can be accepted into something that is totally pure and eternal. It's not based on righteousness, and it's not based on evil [...] they're teaching that God wants all the righteous and the devil all the unrighteous but they can't get into my band that way...*

Further elaborating: "I basically choose musicians who believe in arkestration [sic], discipline and precision. Not too many musicians have demonstrated that." Here Sun Ra takes his seemingly exclusionary policy of only African-American admittance into his band out of the realm of race, by declaring it is outside of standard American conceptions of the world, themselves rooted in Anglo-Saxon Christianity. He instead demands dedication and discipline<sup>59</sup> from his musicians, something he could only seemingly gather from the pool of musicians he was surrounded with at the time, having been brought up in segregated Alabama before working within African-American communities in Chicago, New York and Philadelphia.

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<sup>58</sup> Indeed here a comparison with X's later inclusionary views is perhaps more pertinent. Sun Ra's views, like X's, developed during the 1960s to move far beyond an ideology of independence through the possibility of separatism, rather than integration as revealed in an 2006 *Down Beat* magazine article by John Corbett (p.36).

<sup>59</sup> The notion of discipline features heavily in Sun Ra's outlook on advancement of African-Americans

Ever the trickster, Sun Ra's later enlightened views are not only countered by his earlier problematic views on race, but are also accompanied by discriminatory views against women amongst others, to the point where he advocated the denial of entry of females into the Jazz Composers Guild he helped to set up in the 1960s, restating the old seaman's belief that having a woman onboard would sink the ship (Gerard, p.92). Unlike later racial commentators such as Cornel West, who see a need to align the various women's, LGBT and racial civil rights movements in a combined front against oppression, Sun Ra simply focuses on racial views of the world. His views on woman may be explained by the fact that he was a lifelong bachelor<sup>60</sup>, and refused to be distracted from his vision of music by matters of love or sex. That is not to say that he was completely derogatory or exclusive in regards to women, with June Tyson becoming a prominent vocal and visual foil to Sun Ra during the Arkestra's increasingly elaborate stage shows from the late 1960s onwards. Sun Ra was also a supporter of the Republican Party, having voted for George Bush in the 1980s and in many respects could be labelled a Conservative (Szwed, p.347). Furthermore he avoided drugs and forbade the band from all forms of drug intoxication and drinking, as well as attempting to issue dictatorial control over his band members dating habits, leading Arkestra members to sneakily practise these things away from his scornful gaze (Szwed, p.117).

All these features lead us to ascertain that Sun Ra is a complex and multi-faceted character, often seemingly contradictory. What is of most interest to me is the postethnic side of Sun Ra's work and philosophy advanced from the late 1950s during his time in Chicago, through to his outer space vision for the salvation of humanity put forward in the 1960s onwards. Sun Ra's spirit, seemingly "too universalistic to stop at the wretched limits of race in human history, too inclusive to settle for art-shock for art-shock's sake", is demonstrated to the world in the way he conceptualizes music, intended to achieve transcendent state of the sublime (Szwed, p.382). I will outline this postethnic vision by looking at aspects of Sun Ra's statements and thoughts on religion/spirituality, and how this is related to his unique views on mythology and history. Further elaboration will be given on Sun Ra's view of philosophy, encompassing elements of his spirituality and adherence to the concepts of myth and

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<sup>60</sup> Possibly owing to a testicular hernia (chryptorchidism) he developed at a young age and caused a great amount of pain (Szwed, p.10).

history, detailing how all of these aspects are related to his musical theories. Closing the subchapter will be a musicological analysis of postethnicity represented in Sun Ra's oeuvre. Firstly though, an analysis of the role mediation plays in the projected image of Sun Ra will be undertaken, with a specific focus on the role film as a medium plays in the performative processes of identity, as well other ways of presenting his identity in the form of stage shows and record sleeves, which allowed Sun Ra to play possess an immense extensive role of agency in creating his outer-space inspired postethnic view of the world.

#### **4.1. Mediation:**

Before elaborating upon the aspects that underpin Sun Ra's postethnic vision for the world, much like Coltrane the aspects of mediation in the projection of Sun Ra's image must be made apparent, as well as how this was utilized by Sun Ra to portray himself to the world on his own terms. Sun Ra performs his ethnic identity and affiliation constantly on a stage, whether that stage is the Chicago Club DeLisa in the 1950s<sup>61</sup>, the El Saturn record covers of the 1960s, the Oakland film studio floor in the 1970s or the Finnish television interview in the 1980s. Sun Ra utilizes the mediums that are available to him in his quest to portray a view of the world un-blinded by the accepted realities of everyday racism in the United States, to demonstrate his view that technology can play a role in the salvation of mankind and to spread his message to the widest audience possible.

Sun Ra had utilized a visual element within his stage shows from at least the early 1960s, in the form of costumes and backdrops that later established itself into a full stage show, replete with dancers performing a seemingly ancient mythic ritual which will be further elaborated upon later. The medium of film however offered the opportunity for Sun Ra to become involved heavily in the creation of his identity, thus allowing Sun Ra to portray himself to the world in exactly the manner he wished to be presented – that of the outer space visitor to Earth and commenter upon the failings of America/Earth's racial hierarchies. Early forays into film offer a much different picture though, as Sun Ra was involved in Ed Bland's 1959 *The Cry of Jazz* starring,

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<sup>61</sup> Now, according to David Wilson, sadly part of Chicago's south-side that is going through a process of gentrification, which serves only to portray and maintain the "othered" status of poor urban African-Americans (p.77).

composing and performing his music with the Arkestra. Sun Ra rarely, if ever, mentioned the film which puts forward the thesis that “Jazz is the cry of the Negro’s joy and suffering”, promoting an essentialist narrative of Jazz history very much in tune with the time of its production. Sun Ra took part in the film as he saw an opportunity to gain publicity for his band, explicitly demanding that as musicians recording the soundtrack for the film they must be given screen time, to which they are displayed resplendent in suits and tuxedos performing Sun Ra’s early Hard-Bop inspired works arranged for medium-sized Jazz band. To focus solely on *The Cry of Jazz* would merely display an anomaly in analyzing Sun Ra’s views on ethnicity and Jazz, indeed he later remarked upon Bland’s thesis that “he was wrong” in his assertions on Jazz as a sound of a negro’s suffering (Szwed, p.162-163). Recorded as early as 1956, Sun Ra’s views change and develop, prompting his decision to cease association with Ed Bland’s film and the ideas portrayed.

This change in thinking is reflected in Sun Ra’s next foray into film *Space is the Place*, which can be seen as part of the “transformative” style of African-American cinema, intended to “create new and different institutions, traditions and practises” as opposed to integrationist and separatist strategies, as identified by William Lyne (p.40). Using images derived from Blaxploitation style, but in a much different way to the promotion and valorisation of negative stereotypes and characteristics, Sun Ra uses the medium of the feature film to give a narrative rendering of his vision for a radical new social order based in outer space, that abandons the institutions of Earth for they are doomed to forever repeat inequalities and injustices. Set against the backdrop a cosmic battle for fate of black Americans against an archetypal pimp/mack character in the form of a magic card game (Zuberi, p.991), Sun Ra visits Earth in his spaceship powered by the music of the Arkestra to identify the need for redemption. Depicted from his native Saturn, Sun Ra elicits the following statement:

*The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth. Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration. We’ll set up a colony for black people here. See what they can do on a planet all their own, without any white people there.*

Seemingly a clarion call for Black Nationalist and separatist sentiment, Sun Ra’s trickster nature turns this view on his head, after revealing that through processes of “isotope teleportation” and “transmolecurization” that even better still, Sun Ra wishes

to “teleport the whole planet here through music”. Far from offering a simple binary split between evil whites and oppressed blacks, Sun Ra is portrayed as coming to Earth to offer salvation for the entire world, free of racial-ethnic constructs, with a first step being the admittance of the prescribed lower class status of African-Americans by an elite white hegemon. Through his music, and acceptance of this as the only vehicle to deliverance, Sun Ra proclaims that the only hope is situated in outer space, far away from a world that has destroyed itself through prejudice and bigotry. Those of a separatist persuasion may choose to focus on the earlier part of Sun Ra’s statement, despite his almost immediate change in view, but what is most interesting in *Space is the Place* is the bringing alive of the Sun Ra ideology to the screen. Plenty of screen time is given to footage of the Arkestra performing on a sound-stage or performing elements of a mythic ritual dressed in their elaborate stage attire, whilst the film also combines visual images of Sun Ra’s love of outer-space and technology with images derived from ancient Egyptian and African-American sources (featuring a subtle critique of the Black Panther movement in one notable scene). This projects the image of Sun Ra by literally allowing him to perform his identity in the medium of film, which demonstrates the affiliations he favours, whilst critiquing those he wishes to abandon, including negative racial stereotypes from the anti-white Black Panther militant to the wise-cracking pimp.

There is a conscious attempt on Sun Ra’s part to retain a high level of control over his image and reception. This begins simply from releasing his own records on his El Saturn imprint, which allowed him to not only retain economic control over his output, but would also feature his own artwork, poetry and photographs to portray “Sun Ra” the performed identity in the way he wished to be received. Film as a medium, also including a documentary feature *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise* which will be discussed of the proceeding subchapters, allowed the Sun Ra stage show to be presented to the world, but also amplified with the greater usage of technology and the usage of film sets and locations offering greater potential that could be achieved in Slug’s Saloon<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore televised interviews allowed him a platform to air his philosophy and views on his own terms as, adorned in whilst his elaborate outer-space inspired costumes, he would tend to dominate the interview by giving long, elaborate

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<sup>62</sup> Where the Arkestra would regularly play, situated among Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

and often impenetrable answers to seemingly simple questions, to give an image of a truly eccentric, articulate and sincere self-made intellectual observer offering a vastly different point of view by contemporary standards. Of course reception places emphasis upon the receiver and their own prejudices, inclinations and tastes to determine the image portrayed. Sun Ra understood this, but tries to maintain a degree of control over his image as he accepts the notion of performed identity outlined by Hollinger's theory of postethnicity. Affiliation here too plays a role, as Sun Ra can display his love of ancient Egypt, Greek philosophical concepts, Wagnerian Romanticism and mythical views of African civilizations in a manner that he is in control of, displaying his fascinations in a prescribed manner to influence his reception for time eternal.

#### **4.2. Religion/Spirituality:**

One facet of Sun Ra's vision for humanity was formed through a pursuit of spirituality<sup>63</sup> and a rejection of the teachings, if not some of the ritualistic elements, of formal religion in the United States. Ra held his contempt in particular for the Protestant and Catholic strains of Christianity and their interpretations of the Biblical New Testament in the wake of the Enlightenment, which in Ra's understanding allowed the easier persecution of minority groups and the establishment of white hegemony. Rollefson sees this as Sun Ra's expression of the view that Western conceptions of humanity and universalism have covered up an "irrational system of racialized hierarchies that inform post-Enlightenment thinking on every level" (p.89). Instead Sun Ra speaks of himself as a spiritual being, member of the Angel race and, like all people of Earth, descended from the Creator<sup>64</sup>. Sun Ra even went as far as to suggest that Lucifer; conceptualized in the demiurgic sense, derived from Gnostic schools of thought; was in fact the Creator (Szwed, pp.296-297), subverting notions of good and evil in the established discourse of white Anglo-American Christianity.

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<sup>63</sup> Sun Ra also made it known that he was aggrieved when John Coltrane absorbed some of the spiritualist ideas from him without giving credit (Kahn, 2006, pp.156-157).

<sup>64</sup> Who is not a God in the traditional Christian sense, but an infinite omnipresence that is neither good nor evil.

In an earlier incarnation as a street preacher; handing out mimeographed excerpts of his individual prose, poetry and musings on matters of interest to him<sup>65</sup>; Sun Ra revealed in a piece entitled *The Negro Problem* that all religions are Ethiopian in origin, but that these same Ethiopians have allowed their religions to be misinterpreted (Corbett, p.113). Seeing all religions as coming from Ethiopian sources (and therefore deriving from black-skinned peoples), in Sun Ra's vision of the world the original Jews are also black. Here Sun Ra demonstrates how in his view there is a tie between the two ethnic minority groups of America, as they are brought ever closer in the wake of the twentieth century, seeing in the millennia of anti-Semitic persecution a similarity with the persecution of African-Americans since the days of slavery. Having both suffered lasting status as a persecuted lower class, facilitated by the hegemonic adherence to the New Testament within the American ruling classes, Sun Ra asserts that adherence to the Old Testament of the Bible would have favoured persecution of whites by blacks (Corbett, pp.113-115). What is clear is that Sun Ra does not skirt around issues of black and white in his vision for the salvation of the world, but instead there is the necessary realization of the Janus faced nature of the Creator and religion as a whole, putting forward the idea that salvation (for either black or white) cannot be realized solely through adherence to a dogmatic religious doctrines.

Sun Ra demanded strict obedience from his musicians, taking on the role of part bandleader and arranger, as well as part spiritual leader. Seeing his devotion paid for through his, at times, extremely discordant yet intricately arranged music, Sun Ra may be seen as a modern day version of a Shaman. Indeed, Sun Ra certainly saw himself as playing a beneficial role in helping his band and the wider society tap into the universal vibrations of the world, in order to bring about the good fortune and salvation of all those who experience it. Victoria Adamenko is a musicologist who traces neo-mythologism throughout the works of twentieth century Classical composers from Europe and America, but her words are also applicable to Sun Ra's unique conception of music that was either inspired by, or running in parallel to, many of the composers Adamenko writes about: "In modern society [...] the composer may take over the Shaman's task of healing reunification and restoring order out of chaos"

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<sup>65</sup> Captured in a fantastic collection entitled *The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcornet Leaflets*, compiled by John Corbett.

(p.170). Perfectly matching Sun Ra's ideology of balancing equations; of applying a scientific method to religion through artistic means (inspired by theosophy). Sun Ra, in this respect, treats chaos and order as the two elements of the world that need to be brought under control, and his control in particular. This is demonstrated in Sun Ra's live performances, where the seemingly chaotic sound of an entire band playing freely improvised solos in a "space key"<sup>66</sup>, each musician vying with each other musician to be heard, will stop playing at the slightest hand movement from Sun Ra and break into a tightly arranged piece from the Arkestra's extensive songbook. Sun Ra's music can demonstrate at times seemingly unstructured chaotic noises elicited from saxophones, trumpets, electronic keyboards and all manner of percussion instruments, free from Jazz, Classical and Popular music structural, melodic, rhythmic or harmonic frameworks, thus rendering the music devoid of ethnically marked musical features. Each musician however is acutely in tune with Sun Ra's command of the band and work together to create the sense of order he demands of their chaos, in a truly unique musical conception.

A dualistic view of the world pervades Sun Ra's ideology and spirituality. Seeing the entire world as a battleground between good and evil; between chaos and order, freedom and discipline, equality and individuality<sup>67</sup>; both elements must be balanced with neither aspect holding greater value over the other. In the documentary film *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, released in 1980, Sun Ra is shown sat in front of the White House in Washington D.C., where he elicits the following words: "You can't have a white house if you don't have a black house. In fact you can't have anything unless you have a comparison. You can't have a good government unless you've got an evil government [...] You can't have anything unless you have it's parallel and opposite. This is something that the people of Earth aren't aware of". Here Sun Ra is critiquing the forced role that black-skinned people have played in American society, by acknowledging the pejorative connotations surrounding the term "black" in so many ways. However by refusing to accept this as the accepted fact, Sun Ra subverts this notion by insisting that there is a necessary balance between the two elements,

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<sup>66</sup> Part of Sun Ra's vocabulary, meaning a tonic drone note, which allows the improviser to play any combination of notes over the top (Szwed, p.127).

<sup>67</sup> Further stating that "[e]quality means nothing to God: everyone he sent here is unique" (Szwed, p.310).

that is vital to a functioning society. In a sense, Sun Ra is utilizing a binary framework in order to criticize the very notion of a racial binary, by instead seeing the two elements needing to be necessarily equal as opposed to an uneven dominance of one over the other. Instead of favouring black over white, (or American societies favour of white over black), Sun Ra sees the need to move beyond racial hierarchical systems if the people of planet Earth are to become aware of their own humanity.

The spirituality of Sun Ra's work is imbued deep within the music itself, arising from the application of his philosophical musings and abstract theories on the nature of the cosmos in a manner reminiscent of Wagnerian *Kunstreligion*, through Sun Ra's concept of the *Cosmo-Drama*. The *Cosmo-Drama* was the name given to the stage shows of the Arkestra from the late 1960s onwards, which would feature the Arkestra dressed in brightly coloured, sequined, silk or bejewelled costumes, all beating their own rhythm in a percussion frenzy on whatever instrument they were assigned, alongside an array of dancers performing what was seemingly elements of an ancient mythic ritual, before June Tyson would announce:

*When the world was in darkness  
Darkness is ignorance  
Along came Ra...*

*The living myth, the living myth  
The living Mister Re*

(Szwed, p.xvi)

Following this exultation, Sun Ra would appear behind his array of electronic keyboards to elicit other-worldly sounds, acting as spiritual leader, conductor and architect of sound in one fell swoop of his wrists across the Moog synthesizer. Inspired by the dramaticism of nineteenth century German Romantics, Sun Ra filters this through other influences (incorporating elements of Ancient mythic rituals, futuristic technological visions of utopia and the vaudeville/cabaret shows he worked in during the 1930s-40s), to take these ideas out of the realm of high culture and thus shut off from lower class African-Americans. Depicting his music as an American take on *Kunstreligion* in an era of increasing globalization, Sun Ra's *Cosmo-Drama* exhibits an aesthetic sacralisation of art, including features derived from Wagnerian Romanticism such as significant length, unprecedented performing forces and the creation of a whole musical world (Adamenko, p.157), yet free from the Wagnerian

impulses towards nationalism, racial purity and racial superiority. Sun Ra elicits tenets of postethnicity in this *Cosmo-Drama*, by utilizing all the resources that have been made available to him, ranging from visions of both the ancient world and an imagined future, to create a present religious experience through the twin mediums of music and performance.

Seeing music as a spiritual language, the greatest viable means to salvation, Sun Ra insists that there are exploitative forces determined to corrupt this pure art form in favour of capitalist profit. Within this process race becomes embodied as part of the system of persecution and exploitation, as music had long been divided into categories of “white” and “black” as record companies began to maximize profits through selective promotion from the 1920s onwards. Sun Ra reveals these musings on the topic:

*The curse on this planet is due to the music that musicians are playing, that they're forced to play, by some who just think of money and don't realize that music is a spiritual language, and it represents the people of Earth. When musicians are compelled to play anything, it goes straight to the throne of the creator of the universe, and that is how he sees you – according to your music. Because see, music is a universal language, and what you call musicians are playing, it's what goes through the creator as your personal ambassador and your personal nemesis.* (from “Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise”)

Here we can see that Sun Ra sees ethnically marking music as leading to, or further extending slavery, clearly referring to Jazz and the Blues and notions of African-Americans having an inherent talent for performance and musical ability, an image created in the eyes of racist white classes of America. Instead, in Sun Ra’s postethnic vision it is a necessity to realize that music is a spiritual language, in order to bring salvation to the world and when Sun Ra states that music represents the people of Earth, he means *all* people, of every shade and hue, background, religion and class. Of course there is the tendency to view Sun Ra’s tirades against the planet as condemnations solely of white Americans, turning his spiritual message into a mere political posture that matched the temporally antagonistic race relations. Certainly Sun Ra viewed Martin Luther King, Jr.’s approach as misguided, due to the heavy emphasis on freedom and equality which, in Sun Ra’s view, were “false idols” (Szwed, p.249). However Sun Ra may have been received at the time, there is still a spiritual message for the entire world contained within his condemnations of the planet, particularly the American society that created these racial structures, and

furthermore maintains them reflexively by continuously pitting races against each other in an unequal power balance. Sun Ra's message takes a postethnic stand by critiquing all aspects of American race relations, seeing them as continuously perpetuating the inequality and access to full citizenship under different guises, with his spiritual path through music offering a route out.

There is more evidence of leanings towards Avant-Garde composers of the Western Classical music traditions, through the shared influences of religion/spirituality, in Sun Ra's work. For instance, the work of Russian composer Alexander Scriabin; too inspired by theosophy, the occult and mysticism to produce densely orchestrated, atonal works; can be seen as an inspiration and predecessor of Sun Ra's eschatological concern<sup>68</sup> and favourable view of demons. Sun Ra uses his music in order to:

*Make judgement day a reality and to realize that neither God nor anybody else is going to judge humanity. They have to do the judging as to what is proper for them to survive. Now they can judge whether I'm telling a lie or whether I'm telling the truth, and if I'm telling lies, is that more profitable to them than the truth that they know? So therefore I'm paving a way for humanity to recognize the myth.*  
(from "Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise")

Here, Sun Ra the composer takes on the mantle of Sun Ra the prophet, revealing to the world that whatever conceptions of morality they may have, judgement day is an imminent reality and each individual must take charge of their destiny by turning inwards and reflecting upon their values. He offers a path to salvation, free from Earth-bound constructs of race, class or religion, through acceptance of his ideology sourced from outside of our planetary consciousness. This takes the form of myth, which will be elaborated upon in the next subchapter.

### 4.3. Mythology:

*Those who live by reality are slaves of truth.*

- Sun Ra, in Szwed, p.317

*There exist profound mythological needs in society, and some are filled by myths borrowed from submerged or alien traditions. Modern society's*

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<sup>68</sup> Much like Scriabin's unrealized *Mysterium*, intended to bring about a new world, free from evil, Sun Ra hoped to achieve what Scriabin could not, through his own music.

*neglect of Cosmic symbolism [...] has provoked certain reactions, such as the continuing interest in astrology. [...] And the huge scientific advances of the twentieth century have given rise to a literature, science fiction, that resembles myth, even down to an eschatological element [...] Secularization in modern society [...] is accompanied by a process whereby new myths are formed.*

- Bolle and Buxton, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry for *Myth and Mythology*, p.721

Anticipating Stuart Hall's insistence that cultural identity is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (p.707), Sun Ra taps into the assembled nature of cultural identity, whether through processes of designation or affiliation, when leaving Herman Blount behind to become Sun Ra. The truth in Ra's eyes is fallible and truly unknowable as it is based in the facets that Hall identifies, bringing with it distortions in the way we perceive our fellow man over time, which ultimately lead to imperfect ideas of racial essence, maintain a state of inequality between different groups in society, and distract us from the accepting the constructed nature of group identities. By maintaining an affiliation with the persecuted classes of African-Americans, whilst positioned as an outsider to the American system of racial prejudice, Sun Ra utilizes the concept of myth to recreate a role for the descendents of bondage in America, free from the given narrative that has long served to deny full equality to them. "Myth" here is derived from a semiotic sense of the term, serving to define a constructed narrative offering hope for the future, much in the same way that founding myths of America were formed (the City on a Hill or "the land of the free" as inscribed in the national anthem, for example) in reaction to social injustices and provided a model to aspire to, whilst inspiring a sense of exceptionality.

Seeing black people as not part of the accepted history, with their role and achievements largely written out of the standard narratives of progress and civilization, Sun Ra asks "[i]f you are not a reality, whose myth are you?" This indicates Sun Ra's suggestion that in order to transform the subjugated status of African-Americans<sup>69</sup> there is a need to move away from accepted modes of thinking (reality) in favour of a utopian vision (myth). Initially favouring a separatist ideology, seeing true equality only available through isolation, Sun Ra's views change to accept a role for all people in a new vision for society; as a white audience began to favour the Arkestra's music there is a shift from purporting an exclusive "Astro-Black

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<sup>69</sup> And furthermore, all oppressed peoples of America.

mythology”, to creating myths of the future for all of mankind. Based in a grandiose vision of outer-space, Sun Ra favours the creation of a utopian myth to seek freedom from prejudice and persecution as “[m]yth was here before history [...] I’m talking about space; I’m talking about not being part of this planet, because it’s not proper”. History had long proven to failed African-Americans, as by looking backwards in search of identity the status of a persecuted ethnic minority would forever be maintained, however in a postethnic turn Sun Ra offers a route out of this societal mentality through the adoption of his concept of the myth:

*Those of the reality have lost their way. Now they must listen to what myth has to say. Those of the reality have been bruised and beaten by the truth. Those of the reality have been slaves of a bad truth. So now there’s nothing left now by the myth. The myth is neither bad nor good. Its potentials are unlimited.*  
(from “Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise”)

This perspective on the concept of myth is crucial to gaining an understanding of Sun Ra’s unique ideology, but could also be seen part of a wider trend identified by Adamenko through her research into the neo-mythologism of late nineteenth and twentieth century Classical music. Seeing composers endeavouring to forge a macrocosmic fusion of history, culture and society in order to make a myth of the world (p.xii), Sun Ra elicits similar workings to contemporary composers working in aesthetically different modes, to achieve the same effects. Sun Ra critiques notions of history by borrowing from cultures outside of his own experience, going back to claim Ancient Egyptian lineage in his own mould, in order to make claims and usher realizations about the state of the society he was escaping from. Indeed, on a visit to Egypt, where the Arkestra fulfilled one of Ra’s ambitions of play in the view of the pyramids, Sun Ra noted that modern Egyptians didn’t appear to be *his* people (Szwed, p.292).

Before allegations of cultural appropriation<sup>70</sup> are levelled against Sun Ra’s adoption of the clothing, aesthetics or even music of cultures outside of his own, it is essential to understand his anti-essentialist stance. Ra is playing with the mythic and stereotyped views of other cultures in order the critique the very notion of a pure

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<sup>70</sup> In this case, the charge being utilizing artifacts and aspects of cultures other than his own with a degree of insincerity.

culture as he performs a new constructed identity, combining varying elements into his unique perspective, encompassing both old and new to create an all-inclusive contemporary reality devoid of the pitfalls of race-thinking and a hierarchy of cultures. For example his views on Africa are based in the mythic images of Africa we are fed; reacting to such stereotypes as the poor impoverished African villager or the land that lacks civilization with scorn, whilst utilizing certain stereotypes such as the megalomaniac despot or the land where inhabitants dress head to toe in colourful clothes to his advantage; or that have been written out of history, such as the black technological society of ancient Egypt. As well as this he incorporates Said's critique of Orientalist portrayals of Eastern cultures in the West, that deems the East as in need of the supreme influence of Western culture as they are racially and culturally inferior, in favour of a view that deems all cultures of the world in need of salvation, primarily from the influence of a techno-utopian vision of outer space. After a performance in London for example, many African émigrés in attendance there noted that Sun Ra was using a vision of Africa that is very different to the contemporary reality, but still accepted his vision as an elder statesmen with a valuable message to bring (Szwed, pp.284-285). Sun Ra does not demonstrate reality, instead offering the myth as a way to escape the negative consequences of antagonistic race-relations in the social sphere. Connected to his spiritual message, salvation in Sun Ra's mind is offered by not only an acceptance of the Creator's status beyond good and evil, but also through an acceptance of the myth as the path to immortality within the Godly realm, where equality for all people can only be achieved, demonstrated in the following extract:

*Somewhere else on the other side of nowhere, there's another place in space, beyond what you know as time. Where the Gods of mythology dwell. Gods that are not real to you. Gods who have created the illusion that they do not exist to the people of planet Earth. These Gods dwell in their mythocracy, opposed to your theocracy, and your democracy, and your monarchracy [sic]. They dwell in their mythocracy, a magic[k] world that makes things to be. These Gods can even offer you immortality.*  
(from "Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise")

Here Sun Ra identifies the mythocracy as supreme, placed in a spiritual realm located in outer space, where true freedom and even athanasia are possible. Outside of Earth-bound classification, Sun Ra utilizes the concept of myth as part of a philosophical and spiritual view to counter political and formal religious attempts at achieving a just society, which have seemingly failed. Instead the myth can provide a narrative for the

future, for all humanity to work towards, free of artificially created divisions, leading into certain other aspects of Sun Ra's philosophical views discussed below.

#### 4.4. Philosophy:

Sun Ra bears certain philosophical aspects to his ideology, which, like the aspects of spirituality and mythology, are drawn from a wide sweep of history and importantly from cultures beyond the realm of "Anglo-Saxon" and "African". The influence of Classical Greek philosophy crops up in Sun Ra's ideology continuously, where we can see examples of Platonic and Pythagorean ideals at work, such as the view that both ideas and music can exist outside of human conception and that even truth itself is an abstraction, reformulated and adapted to match the template Ra creates. Furthermore Platonic ideals of music serve as an early reference point for the philosophical position of Sun Ra, who sees that the universe is not only composed of music, but music is also at the same time a key structural component of the universe, with the ability to bring humans in line with the cosmos (Szwed, p.113). That these ideas are drawn from a land and time far beyond what would have been expected of any low class American, let alone an African-American from Alabama, is especially pertinent when considering how cultural affiliation works within the performative cultural identity of Sun Ra.

Pythagoras<sup>71</sup> put forward the idea that: "[e]ach celestial body, in fact each and every atom, produces a particular sound on account of its movement, its rhythm or vibration. All these sounds and vibrations form a universal harmony in which each element, while having it's own function and character, contributes to the whole" (Hopkins). Sun Ra went as far to literally wear Pythagoras' influence on his sleeve, by featuring a portrait of him in the artwork to *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra, II*, and much like Pythagoras emphasized the need to sharpen ones senses in order to connect with the music of the spheres. Pythagoras was also known as the only man who had heard the music of the spheres, a mode that Ra placed himself in as an interstellar traveller who alone was able to guide humanity into a connection with the vibrations

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<sup>71</sup> Coincidentally the originator of the word "cosmos".

of the planets. Indeed the Arkestra, particularly the notion of “Ra Jail”<sup>72</sup>, bears a certain resemblance to elements of the Pythagorean Brotherhood, where he would test a musician’s willingness to devote themselves entirely to the band, philosophically, mentally and musically in extended periods of isolation from the wider society. Drawing on Pythagoras’ ideas, Sun Ra’s declarations that everything in existence consisted of vibrations<sup>73</sup>, sage-like role at the head of his bands entire life and his utopian vision of outer space, places him as a modern day Pythagorean musical philosopher, that combines elements of hard and soft sciences in his vision for the world, drawn from sources far beyond his temporal, geographical or cultural climate, that coincidentally critiques the notion of culture as a pure lineage passed from generation to generation without any role of agency in affiliation upon the individuals behalf.

Moving from the influence of Ancient Greece to nineteenth century Germany, Sun Ra can be seen as viewing music through Schopenhauer’s gaze, bearing certain similarities in approach that can lead one to ascertain the influence of the German philosophers ideas. To Schopenhauer music is inherently philosophical, highly revered for its potential to act as a universal language and intrinsically concerned with the well-being of the world and its inhabitants (Hall, R., p.2). Sun Ra updates and revitalizes this in his mythic approach to music<sup>74</sup> by revering music as of the highest value and clearest source for bringing the well-being to the world, through it’s ability to connect the spirit with creative processes to defeat the destructive elements on Earth (Szwed, p.111). Furthermore, Ra’s conception of a universe consisted entirely of musical vibrations fits with neatly within Schopenhauer’s conceptualization of music existing outside of the world (Lütkehaus, p.95). Schopenhauer’s views on the fusion of music and theatrics also presented the idea that music is structurally independent of the drama that it accompanies, but once the two are combined the music is allowed to fully present its innermost soul. The true character of Sun Ra’s Cosmo-Drama in this case follows a similar pattern, where the music can stand alone in itself, as Sun Ra’s

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<sup>72</sup> Sun Ra once again subverting notions of freedom by declaring that there were other jails you could live in, as we all have to live in one jail or another, but Ra’s was the best (Szwed, p.118).

<sup>73</sup> Also tapping into Hazrat Inayat Khan’s Sufi teachings, mentioned previously in relation to John Coltrane’s musical-spiritual approach.

<sup>74</sup> Having previously noted Sun Ra’s declaration of music as a universal language, connected to Creator in the subchapter on religion/spirituality, (see p.74).

vast discography certainly presents. Whilst the Arkestra's garishly coloured and sequined costumes may have irked Schopenhauer's sensibilities (Hall, R., pp.16-18), the music in combination with a stage show offers a much different prospect from listening to a record solely<sup>75</sup>; where you can be presented with what seems to be an Ancient Egyptian ritual transmogrified into an outer-space visitation, as dancers present mystic objects to the audience amidst a backdrop of rhythmic explosions, electronic synthesizer blasts and discordant unrelated horn yelps, whilst Sun Ra reads some of his cosmic poetry. Truly another experience than listening to a record, the Cosmo-Drama envelops the listener as their senses become overwhelmed by the sights and sounds they experience, whilst the Arkestra often wandered into the audience mid-performance to allow the viewer to experience music in new ways.

Much like Sun Ra's spiritually-imbued music, the influence of Wagnerian<sup>76</sup> concepts, such as the portrayal of extramusical features, is also worth bearing in mind also when considering the Cosmo-Drama of Sun Ra. Ideas such as the *Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (artwork of the future), to portray poetic visions and narratives through music, and *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork) appealed for a unification and uplifting of the German people through culture in the face of failed revolutions and forced political unification (Moore and Pryor Paré, pp.125-127). Sun Ra's techno-futurist versions of Wagner's ideas present the Cosmo-Drama, which has removed national borders as the era of transnationalism begins, with inspiration from both the divine Creator and outer space that allows Sun Ra to create music and performance for the salvation and unification of the entire planet.

Sun Ra's philosophy also bears tenets of the Apollonian, in contrast to Coltrane's Dionysian character, as constructed in Nietzsche's design. The concern for order, control, individuality and sober thought are all manifest in Sun Ra's value for "discipline" and the recognition of art as "illusion of illusion", through which one can seek Oneness and "redemption through illusion" (Nietzsche, pp.25-26), which certainly bears more than a smattering of similarity to Ra's almost-nihilistic view of

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<sup>75</sup> Of which numerous performances are available on youtube and other video storage websites, as well as available on several DVD selections. Furthermore the Sun Ra Arkestra still regularly performs in Europe to this day, albeit with much of the Cosmo-Drama scaled down as the average age of the Arkestra increases steadily.

<sup>76</sup> Wagner himself a devotee of Schopenhauer's musical philosophy.

the world. An apt example of Sun Ra 's concern for discipline is revealed in *A Joyful Noise* in a segment featuring cut away shots of local teenagers from a largely African-American area of Philadelphia, frequenting the shop ran by the Arkestra, the *Pharoah's Den*, and discussing the role of the Arkestra within the community: "If teenagers are lost it is because they have been bred upon the word 'freedom' rather than 'discipline'". Seeking an abandonment of the planet Earth, in favour of the possibilities of outer space, and an embrace of mythology to provide a counter-narrative to what has long been enforced on people for the worse, Sun Ra elicits Nietzsche's philosophy which becomes manifest through his music and ideology of salvation for not just African-Americans, but the entire world once it loses its ethno-racial constructs.

#### 4.5. History:

*They say that history repeats itself,  
but history is only his story...you haven't heard my story yet.  
My story is different from his story.  
My story is not part of history...  
because history repeats itself, but my story is endless.  
It never repeats itself.  
Why should it?  
A sunset does not repeat itself.  
Neither does a sunrise.  
Nature never repeats itself, Why should I?*

Taken from the film *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, the above poetic excerpt illustrates one aspect of Sun Ra's concern with history, suggesting how certain interpretations can repeat the structural and systemic effects of oppression upon certain groups within a nation. With acceptance of Sun Ra's interpretation of history, based in myth, he offers a solution to the problems of discrimination and oppression. The past, he said, was dead, so by thinking about it in a futuristic manner Sun Ra is able to reconceptualise societal race relations for the better, by advocating a split with all that has happened before and a chance to start afresh as a globe (Szwed, p.96). Beginning with his Arkestra, he wanted members to cut family ties and refuse to recognize their birth, as birth and death are both sides of the eternal binary (Szwed, p.196). Firstly this is an attempt to deny the possibility of physical death, thus bringing everlasting life through rebuffing earth-bound notions of life and expiration, but more abstractly this also harks for the death of the distorted view of the past that perpetuates present

circumstances of ethnic discrimination, whether willing or unconsciously, despite the best intentions. Later in the film, whilst adorned with a purple wig, pearl necklaces, lilac tunic, golden hair net and domino mask, Ra states his view of America's historical record:

*Of all the churches you got, and all the schools you've got, all the governments you've got, you [sic] supposed to have a better planet than this. Well, then man has failed. Spiritually, Educationally, governmentally – he's failed. Well then he should be a good sport and say, "I give up, I need help". I'm right here as a bridge for them to get here. Well they could listen to see what am I [sic] talking about; they might get a surprise 'cause I'm talking about equations that are in their books. Books from way back in Ancient Egypt and Greece and Rome. And the philosophers been talking in church of everything I've been talking.*

Here Sun Ra comments on government attempts to address the imbalance in American society between white Americans and people of colour as flawed. Educationally the policy of busing served as a tokenistic gesture of affirmative action to desegregate classrooms, which failed to address the structural effects of white privilege, as African-Americans still remained unable to gain meaningful access to higher educational facilities through funding and scholarships, as well as facing discrimination from university selection boards. Governmentally the New Deal policies, despite being implemented due the surge in support of the Democratic Party from the African-American minority, failed to address the racial divide despite its promise to do so. Spiritually, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X's attempts to bring civil rights ends in their murder. America, in Sun Ra's view, has a track record of failing to deliver for African-Americans which is why history must be ignored, as it will continually repeat itself, allowing the nation and world to start again on a level playing field devoid of racial prejudices, assumptions and hierarchies.

Anticipating tenets of Afrocentric philosophy, Sun Ra portrays African societies, despite their apparent diversity, as evolving from shared Egyptian roots (Gerard, p.41), reshaping long held historical views that place those of white to tanned hue at the centre of progression and civilization. As Sun Ra saw Ancient Egypt as a black technological society (Kreiss, p.61), he proposes a rejection of the Enlightenment and its implied values, which effectively placed black-skinned Africans in the role of savages and barbarians in need of salvation through the

colonizing effects of Western hegemony<sup>77</sup>. Furthermore, many critics tend to rely on an image of Africa as an ancient and mystical land, that of the changing same, and apply these notions to Jazz because of this mode of post-Enlightenment thinking, which serves to promote African-American exceptionalism as the image of Africa is crafted in a way that benefits African-Americans, and their downtrodden status in American society, over all people of black skin (Whyton, p.121). Sun Ra utilizes these images of a mystical land but in a much different way, that doesn't lead to exceptionalism but issues a message for the entire world. Harking back for the values of a time pre-Enlightenment, that didn't promote or maintain slavery and segregation along purely racial lines, Sun Ra uses ancient civilizations in his view of the world and history to critique eighteenth century ideas of racial purity and profiling, where society would value philosophy, science and religious knowledge over matters of blood and history. It is this postethnic view of history that allows Sun Ra to deny the self-perpetuating reflexive-racialization that has characterised American society from its inception, by denying history's role in ascribing ethnic affiliation as he constructs his own identity beyond these matters.

#### **4.6. Music:**

Sun Ra's music too demonstrates a leaning towards postethnicity, as his work covers not only a broad spectrum of Jazz styles; harking back to the days of Fletcher Henderson, whilst also utilizing elements of Hard Bop, Free Jazz, Modal Jazz and Fusion; but also moves far beyond the realm of Jazz, as his futuristic concern and use of the latest available electronic instruments and technology in both recordings and live performance question the boundaries of Jazz and Avant-Garde Classical music, whilst also critiquing the ways in which ethnicity and music are combined. Early album *Super-Sonic Jazz* of 1957 demonstrates aspects of this concern for new technology, wide varieties of Jazz and ethnically challenging music by blending elements of Classicism and Jazz-like virtuosity, in combination with extensive use of the electric piano. This allows Sun Ra to question perceptions of what constitutes a Jazz piece; partly composed, partly improvised, utilizing his Arkestra whilst making space for solo features; as well as what we expect of a Jazz musician/composer. In

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<sup>77</sup> It must be stated that Sun Ra's views, such as this, were never entirely stable. Instead, his views and enunciations are part of a continuous dialogue with the world, liable to develop and change over time.

pieces such as *Advice to Medics*, a solo electronic piano work, the opening and closing sections consist of Bach-like melodic movement over a rolling ostinato, which are countered with Jazz tinged Rachmaninoff-like sweeps across the range of the instrument in the middle section. *India* evokes a programmatic Eastern setting in its modal harmonic framework set over loping tom-tom rhythms, punctuated by cymbal crashes, rolling timpani and minimal melodic development. Revolving around a single minor chord a full two years before Miles Davis' groundbreaking *Kind of Blue* set modal Jazz into a definable style, Sun Ra anticipates the focus on modality<sup>78</sup> in Jazz to simply evoke a mood within *India*, as opposed to a musical display of familiar sounds, rhythms and development within a Jazz idiom.

On *Super-Sonic Jazz*, there is one track that in particular stands out for offering a path into understanding the postethnic formation of Sun Ra's music: *El is a Sound of Joy*. Features a piano introduction reminiscent of Rimsky-Korsakov, the band is then orchestrated to play a mixture of blues-like figures set against more modernist Classical figures, consisting of chromatic, quartal and whole-tone melodies, with once again a modal backdrop underpinning everything in the piano and bass. Following the piano introduction a figure of chromatically descending major chords is outlined within the horn section, before this stops with a jolt as an ascending modal bass ostinato begins following a shift from tonic major (Eb) to tonic minor. The following blues melody, incorporating the flattened third and fifth extensively, is then played in the lower saxophones in a swung manner:

The musical notation shows a saxophone melody in 4/4 time, key of E-flat major (three flats). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 17, the second at measure 21, and the third at measure 24. The melody is characterized by chromatic descending lines and the use of flattened thirds and fifths, typical of blues phrasing.

**Ex. 6. Blues style phrasing and note choice in the saxophone melody of *El is a Sound of Joy*. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

<sup>78</sup> Derived from reinterpretations of Ancient Greek musical theories and scales.

Notice that beginning in the anacrusis to bar twenty-five there is a chromatic figure beginning on the augmented fifth of the tonic, that too incorporates elements of blues/modal movement by beat three. These blues figures are immediately offered a sharp contrast, as the proceeding seemingly modernist Classical influences are displayed, which are emphasized by a shift from swung to “straight” quavers:



**Ex. 7. Elements of quartal, whole tone and chromatic harmony, demonstrated in horn melody of *El is a Sound of Joy*. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

Featuring a mixture of quartal harmony (bars twenty-seven to thirty-two), whole tone scales (bar thirty-three) and elements of chromaticism (bar thirty-five), Sun Ra places all three elements, derived from Classical theories and experimentation, within a Jazz aesthetic as they form the *head* of his Jazz composition. Juxtaposing elements of typical Jazz/Blues melody (bars seventeen to twenty-six) against more experimental melodic figures, that evoke the influence of Stravinsky, Sun Ra is consciously utilizing exotic scales in an innovative approach to Jazz melody that breaks free of ethnic labelling of the music. By setting the two approaches to melody against each other within the same piece (where typically the Blues is thought of as black and Classicism as white) Sun Ra gives them equal value by showing his affiliation to both, which in turns creates a new musical environment where both are allowed to coexist simultaneously. Furthermore this approach inspires new manners of improvisation within his Arkestra, which allows them to incorporate all twelve tones of the chromatic scale in a variety of new formations outside of the major/minor system of Western musical theory and beyond the flattened third and fifth relationships of blues tonality.

Another piece with a similar approach is *Saturn*, originally released on *Jazz in Sillhouette* of 1959, which begins with an introduction of a simple ostinato based on the tones of an F chords that is neither major nor minor (with the third degree

missing), whilst the following fourteen bar melody emerges, incorporating all twelve chromatic tones in unrelated manners, reminiscent of a Schoenbergian tone row:



**Ex. 8. Intro/Outro figure to *Saturn*. Featuring all twelve tones of the chromatic scale in no seeming relation to the preceding or proceeding note. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

*Saturn* follows this unusual melodic statement by breaking into a typical Jazz thirty-two bar harmonic structure, which is also the basis for improvisations. But within this section, utilized as an intro and outro, is an approach to melody that offers angular relationships that resolve dissonance as they are underpinned by a stable harmonic ostinato on the bass and piano. Here all notes are given equal value whilst the harmonic backdrop of F and C is outlined, offering a potential for humanity to view whether they in harmony with each other. By connecting into something universal and stable, here represented by the bass ostinato, Sun Ra urges us to hear that all notes can be heard in a positive relationship to each other, without being blinded by the culturally derived views of musical harmony. This stands as a symbol of his postethnic view that the worlds troubles are dominated by seemingly incompatible cultural disconnects between different groups of people, who fail to realize the features they maintain in common with others.

Whyton notes the use of the term composition in Jazz can be problematic, as it blurs distinctions between composition and improvisation that can lead ultimately to a political discussion when these two terms are treated as oppositional, particularly when attached to notions of race/ethnicity (p.40). In this politicised view, composition is seemingly the domain of white Classicists, whilst improvisation is representative of Baraka's notions of the Negro's soul and it's ability to encounter new situations in a state of oppression. Sun Ra challenges this notion through offering a conscious

melding of composition and improvisation within his musical approach, that also questions definitions of Jazz. In control of a band that could range from eight to thirty musicians a degree of discipline was necessary from his musicians, but this discipline could sound as chaotic and seemingly unrestrained as is possible, especially when all musicians are compelled to play at the same time. *The Beginning* from *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* offers an athenatic melody on clarinet, with punctuation marks played on trombone and bass clarinet, set over a bed of pulsed, but not metrical, rhythm played by the remaining members of the Arkestra. No bass instrument or harmonic backdrop is maintained, allowing this piece to question matters of style and genre, as it is uneasily classified within the confines of Jazz, yet firmly retains aspects of Jazz aesthetics (in the swung cymbals and rhythmic focus). Athenatic, there is no formally composed aspects, yet the control of Sun Ra is evident in his conducting, where he creates a composed piece of improvisation. The musicians entry points in the piece are chosen by Sun Ra, whilst he retains the power of selection as to who takes the main melodic focus, as well as who is chosen to offer counter melody and on which instruments. Choosing an unmetred structure, elements of improvisation and composition become combined, as working within a pulsed framework the skill lies in the drummer to play a continuous beat that is constantly adapting to the music developing around them. The rhythmic texture is augmented by numerous percussion instruments played by the remaining members of the Arkestra, mostly horn players who have been required to pick up additional hand percussion instrumental duties under Sun Ra's demand for increased rhythmic textures. These percussion interjections offer colour whilst adding to the dense rhythmic texture, with the potential to demonstrate a host of signified notions attached to certain instruments (bongos, chimes, bells), that actually remain detached from their meaning in this new setting, free from easily identifiable ethnic markers in a piece that claims none.

Linked to pieces such as *The Beginning*, as well as notions of rhythm discussed in chapter 2.8, Sun Ra's 1965 recording *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra Vol. II* negates not only musical metre, but also rhythmic pulse. Whilst two of the three pieces, *Sun Myth* and *Cosmic Chaos* at points rely on aspects of metrically free pulse, large portions of all three pieces<sup>79</sup> are removed from any sense of metric

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<sup>79</sup> *House of Beauty* the remaining track.

confines, and a lack of any pulse renders the role of rhythm as less than necessary in favour of a literal creation of space within the music. At points the music could almost be Avant-Garde Classical, particularly in timbres and texture; the sounds of bowed bass, flute, tam tam and electronics, performed in a scaled back version of the Arkestra (a mere eight musicians), explore outer regions which at times sounds more like the work of contemporary German composer Stockhausen than anything a Jazz composer had presented previously, offering an album that isn't easily classified ethnically.

Electronic effects and technology within the recording process had long been a fascination of Sun Ra's<sup>80</sup>, which is utilized to great effect on 1965 release *Art Forms of Dimensions Tomorrow*, particularly on pieces such as *Solar Drums*. Here a delay effect is created within the recording studio and applied in conjunction with reverb and editing techniques to numerous percussion instruments, which has the effect of creating a musical atmosphere rather than a coherent linear piece of music conforming to typical Jazz expectations. The invocation of an outer-space sound is evident upon this recording, as technology is utilized as the means by which we can escape standard conceptions of music, and thus the world. Another album demonstrating Sun Ra's fascination with electronic instruments and effects is *Night of the Purple Moon* of 1970, features electric bass and Rocksichord<sup>81</sup> extensively, with the latter's tone manipulated through electronic tremolo and delay effects to achieve new sounds previously unimagined and thus as yet unable to be ethnically marked. As they offer the potential for futuristic connotations, Sun Ra is utilizing the latest available technology to create new tones and timbres that symbolize his technocratic utopian vision, because they demonstrate new potentials for sound to be taken into through advancing technological progress. Utilizing these new sounds, he plays a mixture of minor blues/hard bop works and pieces with an emphasis on the twin dynamics of volume and timbre in a small band setting (between three to four musicians). This offers an album that isn't quite Jazz or Rock, but consciously in the no-mans land between the two.

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<sup>80</sup> Of which much has been written about the role of the synthesizer as an instrument capable of new sounds, previously unimagined, through electronic signal manipulation. I will avoid discussing this in any detail here though, primarily due to the length of this paper.

<sup>81</sup> An electronic keyboard instrument, that is akin to an amplified harpsichord or clavinet.

Surrounding himself with players could fit not only mainstream modes of playing, in the post-Parker Hard Bop styles, but also players equally adept of playing in the Free Jazz styles (Litweiler, pp.146-147), Sun Ra maintains a musical scope that draws on a long lineage of Jazz and popular music tradition, in conjunction with his techno-centric ideas on the utopian possibilities of the future. As he advanced into the space age, Sun Ra reappraised his music to determine what it could say about the past and what it could offer for the future, in an all-inclusive manner that speaks volumes semiotically. Aside from his attempts to recapture the spirit of his mentor Fletcher Henderson<sup>82</sup> by performing Henderson's material with the Arkestra, or by updating the Arkestra repertoire with pieces derived from Disney animated features, the great American songbook and even venturing into funk and disco<sup>83</sup>, part of Sun Ra's all-encompassing approach to Jazz was the process of constant reinterpretation of his own pieces. *Space is the Place* is a piece that has gone through numerous permutations in the Sun Ra live shows<sup>84</sup>, with versions that can last from a mere minute and a half up to thirty minute long. Initially released on the soundtrack to the feature film of the same name, the original outlines the two features that determine all future versions of the piece: first there is the usage of two startlingly different time signatures overlapped upon one another, including a line always taken by the baritone saxophone in 5/4, which is played across a 4/4 setting outlined in the rhythm section of organ, bass and drum kit, as the sung melody of "Space is the Place" is matched at points by the horn section in strict 4/4 (see ex.9). These jarring rhythms are continually out of sync with each other, yet also complement each other at the same time, offering the potential to see beyond established rhythmical structures and challenge a set of preconceived notions about Jazz. Furthermore these clashing time signatures act as a musical signifier for the resolution of rhythmic (and its implied ethnic features) conflict by rendering the conflict irrelevant in a newly constructed whole, free from established conventions. Rhythmic colouration and heavy reverb is utilized on the soundtrack recording to add to an outer-space atmosphere, but in each live performance and

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<sup>82</sup> Even going so far as to transcribe Henderson pieces from recordings, which were then performed by the Arkestra, complete with mistakes made by the originally performers (Szwed, p.225).

<sup>83</sup> Evident on tracks such as *UFO* from 1979's *On Jupiter*, which simultaneously reveal the influence of and influence upon bands such as Parliament/Funkadelic and Earth Wind and Fire.

<sup>84</sup> Still a staple of the touring incarnation of the Arkestra today.

subsequent version released on record there are numerous different elaborations upon this simple set of source materials.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The first staff is a baritone saxophone melody in 5/4 time, consisting of a series of eighth notes. The second and third staves show a horn/vocal melody in 4/4 time with lyrics: "Space is the place Space is the place" and "Space is the place... yeah Space is the place". The 4/4 melody is constantly out of sync with the 5/4 melody.

**Ex. 9. *Space is the Place*. The second stave demonstrates the Baritone saxophone melody in 5/4. The upper stave demonstrates that horn/vocal melody in 4/4. Constantly out of sync until the 5/4 motif is repeated a great number of times. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

*Watusa* is another piece featured on the *Space is the Place* soundtrack, although originally released on *The Nubians of Plutonia* recorded c.1958, consisting of a multi-parted compositional structure with no room for improvisation as the entire band joins together to play a highly syncopated melody over a strict 6/8 time signature, emphasized by an ostinato in the bass, electric piano and baritone saxophone (see exs. 10-11).

The image shows a single staff of musical notation for a bass ostinato in 6/8 time. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with a 3/4 feel indicated by the phrasing.

**Ex. 10. Bass ostinato to *Watusa*, matched on *Space is the Place* album recording by Baritone saxophone and piano. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

We can see the usage of cross-rhythmic features in this ostinato, indicating a 3/4 feel over the 6/8 time signature outlined in the various percussion instruments. This cross-rhythmic feel is also further complicated by the rhythms played in the main melody sections by the horns:

**Ex.11. Melody from opening section of *Watusa*, as played by horns. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

Notice the cross rhythms in bars 27-33 that disrupt the double downbeat feel of the given 6/8 time signature. Furthermore there are liberal uses of both scotch snaps and swing rhythms (bars 8-15) in this unusual phrasing, as the melody ascends upwards (from bars 12-15) outlining the notes of an E minor to D major triad in a constant shuttle between the two. The middle section (not indicated in ex.10) which reverts to 4/4 Latin style on the original recording, instead on *Space is the Place* becomes a free-form section of percussion, where every Arkestra member is allowed to play their own rhythm on numerous different instruments; including bells, hand drums, trap kit and more; before a restatement of the original melody occurs and an unrestrained outro of percussion and horn solos, eliciting both harsh guttural sounds as well as squeals from the saxophones. Here rhythmic structure is both highly complex and untethered within the same piece, demonstrating levels of discipline and freedom in balance to each other. More importantly, the middle sections rhythmic focus could lead us into assuming Sun Ra is replicating an African drum choir (if we are to follow the typical connotations surrounding an entirely percussion driven section), but the

Arkestra is not playing to any conventions derived from African sources, merely improvising with a musician's skill to the stimulus and orchestration surrounding them. This isn't a complex set of overlapping rhythms in one of many Latin styles, nor a reinterpretation of older West-African drumming performances, but a measure of spontaneity and restraint enacted purely on percussion instruments by the Arkestra under Sun Ra's leadership. Truly devoid of a culturally bound predecessor, the choice of percussion instruments are derived from a wide array of sources that do not determine this section to be spatially, culturally or temporally bound, whilst the constant maintenance of a pulse is overlaid with improvised and loose interpretations of exotic rhythms, constantly changing and never remaining in a state of repetition.

## 5. Conclusions:

In an increasingly multi-polar world hastened by the emergence of new forms of transnationalism beyond the realm of economics, coupled with the emergence of countries such as China and India upon the world's stage, America will no longer be able to claim the cultural capital it has enjoyed for so long in the wake of the twentieth century. As we move further into the twenty-first century we are now at a point where we can re-evaluate the ideas we have long taken for granted on the ethnic labelling of music<sup>85</sup>, as well as the relation between the two concepts of music and ethnicity, as new formations of ethnicity are being constructed beyond monolithic categories. We no longer need to accept myths of essentialism, if ever we did and however they become formulated, or concede to ideas of cultural purity, whilst still being able accepting the importance of cultural heritage in an individual's formation of identity. Instead, if we favour approaches that move beyond these ethnic categories that have created strong foundations, based often in limited historical reach or generalized narratives, we may realize that cultural identities can only exist in and among their own social sphere, with the boundaries self prescribed.

When applied to Jazz music, ethnic features become especially problematic, as it doesn't take into account the multi-ethnic character Jazz was born out of and has maintained since its inception, despite its popularity among, and the overwhelming prevalence of, African-Americans within Jazz's history. Jazz music precisely emphasises the "American" contained within the term "African-American"<sup>86</sup>, allowing new notions of ethnicity to arise as cultural hybridity became accelerated, creating new fusions of cultural practises, societal ideals, religious practises, musical theories and more, which have been explored in the preceding chapters through the life, music and ideology of both John Coltrane and Sun Ra. Furthermore to place ethnic labels upon music such as Jazz doesn't take dynamics of class into full account, where further divisions amongst lower classes are created along lines of colour/ethnicity in the given narratives. This serves only to allow black middle classes to become either resented or

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<sup>85</sup> An issue that I intended to deal with in this paper but found that it was so vast it would form the basis of a Ph.D. I have included in Appendix III a chapter originally set for inclusion, but rather divergent from the thesis' focus on John Coltrane and Sun Ra, based on how to de-ethnify musical values by incorporating the theories of posethnicity and transethnicity, as a basis for future work.

<sup>86</sup> "America" in this sense indicating a site where cultures from across the globe were in constant flow, both in and out, as economic globalisation hastened.

valorised for their role, whilst white lower classes and other ethnic groups can become written out of the narrative altogether, along with the entirety of the white elite. It may be noted that one of the great failures of the American left has been to historically unite people together under the guise of shared values and class, but to still retain class divisions via the means of racial/ethnic difference, teaching that whiteness and Americanism are conflated (Roediger, p.161).

African-American's have long been denied full citizenship from the upper-reaches of American society, and as such there has been a very real need to assert authority and identity in new ways, to make the elite listen to the demands of those suffering from America's nefarious racial hierarchy. Movements such as Black Nationalism, Afrocentricity and the ilk were very necessary at their time, raising the issues of civil rights to a global stage and providing a counter-narrative to the enforced second-class status afforded to them. Far from a colour-blind society today the effects of racism are still felt<sup>87</sup>, but there is increasing awareness that race and ethnicity are not determining factors in cultural heritage or ascribing value. My work explores this by examining counter arguments to the narrative of ethnically embodied music as a self-determining entity, incorporating black authenticity and the reification of racial characteristics, demonstrating how the theories of postethnicity and transethnicity are elicited in the work of two major Jazz musicians. These musicians however both came to prominence during the 1950s, worked throughout the rise of Black Nationalism and have thus become appropriated as symbols of resistance to white authority in a simplistic binary manner. I do not doubt the sincerity of these receptors views, as both Coltrane and Sun Ra's work evokes strong reactions within people, due to them both being multi-faceted characters whose ideals and music are rife with meaning. But that is not to say that their resistance to white authority should simply be placed within a dichotomy of "bad" white influences and "good" black influences. Instead, favouring either ideals of transcendent universalism; inspired by religious and spiritual teachings, to move beyond Earth bound divisions between people and realize that all are one under God; and post-ethnic abandon; where the planet is derided for adhering

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<sup>87</sup> One may be reminded of the recent story of a family in Lindenhurst New York being sent a letter informing them they "don't belong here" as "Lindenhurst is 84% white population"(Tuftt), or the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the deaths of Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, to see that racism is still part of the structural make up of American society.

to faulty structures that have long segregated humanity, rendering the road to deliverance unobtainable unless we abandon long held ethnic conceptions; John Coltrane and Sun Ra respectively offer new ways of defining ethnicity within their philosophical underpinnings, views on religion and spirituality, and most importantly their music.

Through the music and musings of both Sun Ra and Coltrane they reveal that Jazz has been composed of a multi-ethnic character since its very inception, although certainly in an unbalanced power-dynamic, which led to the creation of new forms of cultural hybridity, in the form of Pratt's theory of the *Contact Zone*. One can see Jazz then, or indeed Avant-Garde Jazz in particular, as both transethnic and postethnic: it is clearly a syncretism of musical traditions forged in the heat of economic globalisation, as numerous cultures, classes, races and religions converged, aided by a simultaneous in and out flow of America's south, which renders hard and fast notions of monolithic ethnic identity problematic, as there were constant hybrid formations being assembled. Black freedom and expression certainly becomes attached to musical styles such as Avant-Garde Jazz, which leads to key practitioners Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor apologizing for their reliance on white bass players and conservatoire educations respectively, offering two further lines of enquiry in tracing new formations of ethnicity within Jazz (the role of white musicians in the Jazz Avant-Garde and the influence of conservatoire education). Indeed, as it stands we still haven't reached a point of postethnicity or transethnicity yet, where one may still be left to ponder, like Gerard suggests, whether "jazz belongs to anyone who has the talent to play it, or if it belongs to African Americans" (pp.xii-xiv).

Contained within the music and philosophy of John Coltrane and Sun Ra is but one small aspect of the theories of postethnicity and transethnicity, which can prove vital to build on as part of a framework for a future that brings people together rather than maintains numerous levels of separation, whilst a cultural, economic and political elite<sup>88</sup> stays at the head of society moulding the discourse on their terms. Perhaps one concept to be reappraised due to this is the application of cultural appropriation, which still permeates notions of race and its relation to Jazz, where culture is seen as "a form of property to be owned rather than lived". Characterizing "the anxieties of the

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<sup>88</sup> Composed of record companies, critics, academic institutions and governmental institutions.

moment” as we wish to challenge racist assumptions, the formulation of cultural appropriation often merely “compounds rather than resolves the problems arising from associating ‘race’ with embodied or somatic variation” (Gilroy, p. 24). John Coltrane’s transcendent universalism and Sun Ra’s post-ethnic abandon here become very useful tools in a fight against the maintenance of owned rather than lived culture, which denies new formations of ethnicity. Perhaps upon acceptance of the performed nature of identity, however prescribed or formed through affiliation, we can move beyond the barriers that stir hatred and resentment, to realize the inner humanity that binds us all.

## Appendix I:

Roediger documents a case in the Louisiana state constitutional convention of 1898 where discussions took place on how to not only disenfranchise black skinned Americans, but which “whites” were to be disenfranchised as well. The point is brought up that whilst an Italian’s skin colour may happen to be white, he is still “as black as the blackest negro in existence” (Roediger, p.144). This discussion took place around the time of Jazz’s creation, in the state most commonly associated with Jazz’s creation, so the possibility for looking beyond the narrow confines of “white” and “black” influence is evident, as there was still a discussion of what constituted white at the time.

Philip Tagg notes that the Atlantic triangle model of migration to the United States often doesn’t factor in the degree to which class played a role in the formation of American identity, with up to seventy percent of the migrants being British rural poor indentured as serfs. As the demography of America changed; with the mass arrival of Germans c.1820-1850, the large scale migration of Irish following the potato famine of 1843, through to 1890 when around half of the migrants entering America were from Mediterranean and Slavonic countries (“*Scotch Snaps – The Big Picture*”); what constituted “white”, and therefore acceptable to the ruling elite, has long been a site of changing values over time. Irish, Mediterranean, Slavonic, German and British peoples over time had long been excluded from mainstream society via class divisions enacted upon them by the ruling bourgeoisie. It established a hierarchy that placed “white” at the top, other Europeans in the middle and black-skinned African slaves at the bottom, which “together helped to structure persistent divisions within the working-class population” (Roediger, p.139). Let us just for a moment consider the Definitions of race and ethnicity, taken from the online Oxford English dictionary:

***Race: noun***

*Each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics: people of all races, colours, and creeds*

*[MASS NOUN]*

*The fact or condition of belonging to a racial division or group; the qualities or characteristics associated with this.* (“Definition of Race in English”)

***Ethnicity:*** [MASS NOUN]

*The fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition: the interrelationship between gender, ethnicity, and class.* (“Definition of Ethnicity in English”)

The racial/ethnic issue can become complex, as the terms can become conflated and entangled in cultural/class arguments intensified by the Western hegemonic power that shapes/shaped America’s trajectory

We can see then that the racial-hierarchical reasoning of America’s development through migration in the nineteenth century, leads to a distortion of the terms “race” and “ethnicity” to describe and conceptualize the immigrant experience of people drawn from various culturally different backgrounds, leading to an essentialism that ascribes psychological traits to cultural character. In this reasoning people are excluded from full citizenship and acceptance into the dominant society for the perceived traits of their race, despite their ethnicity and cultures varying wildly. Quite often ethnicity and race are so intertwined that their subtleties are negated and the same logic and reasoning are applied to both, however flawed.

Whilst immigrants from various European countries may not have understood their job prospects upon arriving in America, a notion was formed quickly of how to get ahead in society, by comprehending the advantage of being “not nonwhite” (Roediger, p.154). This racial and ethnic difference therefore becomes accelerated along class lines as the era of globalization, of which Jazz rises hand in hand, as the advantage of gaining “whiteness” allows you the class privilege of full citizenship and acceptance into mainstream society. However those who couldn’t attain the privilege of “white” status were deemed second-class citizens and culturally repugnant, including not only those descended from African slaves, but also European peoples of various ethnic groups. U.S. national identity is therefore culturally dominated by the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) bourgeoisie culture, with various other cultures seemingly below it and therefore historically excluded from full citizenship (Austerlitz, p.6). An ongoing definition of American citizenship has been based upon assumed ethnic characteristics, which are largely a remnant of early modernity, filtered through the lens of racial hierarchy formed in the era of slavery and

extended/adapted through waves of migration from other European nations in the nineteenth century.

## Appendix II:

### 3.5. Drugs:

The following short subchapter deals with the issue of drugs in Coltrane's spiritual progression, furthering his pursuit of revealing the goodness in the world through music. There's an old adage in the blues community that declares "in order to play the blues, you must *live* the blues" (Gerard, p.167), surely a Romantic<sup>89</sup> notion if ever there was one. Much has been written on the role of drugs in black Jazz and Blues musicians lives, often noting that perhaps the alcoholism and drug addiction amongst so many of these musicians was a result of an attempt to escape from the everyday reality of racism in American society, including such nefarious features as segregation and lynching. Unlike tragic figures who died young as a result of drug addiction; typically in combination with other medical conditions heightened by said addiction(s), such as Charlie Parker, Paul Chambers and Fats Navarro; Coltrane rid himself of addiction in 1957 by retreating from public life for around two weeks to quit heroin and alcohol cold turkey. This process eventually forced Coltrane's spiritual awakening, as revealed in the liner notes to *A Love Supreme*, although the damage already done and years of substance abuse would still play a role in Coltrane's early death. Coltrane's death bears somewhat of a martyr narrative in this respect; a man so dedicated to his music to free himself of vice, who still ultimately befalls the fate of so many before him, but not before he's had his chance to bring a message of *agápē* to the world.

What is often missed out of, or glossed over, in the narrative when discussing the role of drugs in Coltrane's life is the usage of LSD, which is mentioned in *The World According to John Coltrane* amongst other discourses, but usually without an exploration of the potential for altered states of consciousness LSD usage can permit. The use of LSD is still largely taboo in the typical narrative regarding Coltrane's life, as it doesn't fit well with either Coltrane's or the present contemporary societal views of drugs (Whyton, p.30). Contained within the LSD experience however is the ability to experience altered states of consciousness, with the ability for spiritual awakenings, whether actually perceived or induced, which can reveal a sense of oneness with the

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<sup>89</sup> Note the capital "R", in reference to the Western Romantic traditions in the arts.

world and an ability to overcome accepted social realities such as the boundaries of race, ethnicity to realize the unity of existence in experience.

The most famously attributed work to Coltrane and the influence of LSD is 1966 recording *Om*. Obviously the degree to which the influence of drugs cannot be determined within the present time, but it has been noted enough times and attributed to the album *Om* that the influence must be noted in tracing a development of a transethnic perspective within Coltrane's music. An extended piece of around thirty minutes, *Om* begins and ends with the same reading, taken from Hindu holy text the Bhagavad-Gita, chanted in unison by Coltrane and one or two other voices. The following quote is taken from the final utterance Coltrane makes on the record, originally sourced from chapter IX verse 17 of the Bhagavad-Gita:

*I am the sire of the world, and this world's mother and grandsire. I am he who awards to each the fruit of his action. I make all things clean. I am Om!*

Contained within these words is a realization that the divine is present in all things, formed through the primal sound *Om*. Contained within the syllable *Om*; an utterance that represents “[a]ll sounds that man can make” (Jost, p.99); is the creation, protection, deserved reward and purification of the world for those who seek a spiritual path. Clearly by acknowledging this principle; by seeing God as an omnipotent force within which all is contained, unifying people of all races, creeds, classes and cultures; the potential for a vision of transcendental universalist take on humanity follows, that allows for a recognition of cultural hybridity in forming individual identity, without the need for allegations of cultural appropriation as the sincerity in the message is clearly present.

### Appendix III:

#### Towards De-Ethnified Music Values:

*[T]he blues is black man's music, and whites diminish it at best or steal it at worst. In any case they have no moral right to use it.*

- Jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason (in Gerard, p.165).

*It is no wonder that so much of the search for identity among American Negroes was championed by Jazz musicians [...] For in the particular struggle of the Negro in America there is something akin to the universal struggle of modern man.*

- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., opening address to the 1964 Berlin Jazz Festival (in Jackson, p.176).

The above epigraphs display two conceptions of music that will be dealt with within this chapter. Both consider how styles of music, such as the Blues or Jazz, can be viewed as cultural property of an ethno-racial group in Gleason's terms, or how in Dr. King's conception music can achieve universal aims to speak for the whole of humanity, regardless of ethnicity, but particularly to those of oppressed classes. Music, as a concept, of course dates back thousands of years, whereas a significant aesthetics of music didn't arise until the nineteenth century (Hermand and Richter, pp.6-7). Nietzsche, a principal leader in ascribing aesthetical value to music, sees aesthetics and ethics as combined (Moore and Pryor Paré, p.124). If we take Nietzsche's idea and apply it to the music of Jazz, we can begin to peruse notions of musicians giving a vision for the world through their music and the philosophy it embodies. Binaries have of course been essential to the mythmaking of Jazz, in portraying it as a natural expression since its earliest days (Whyton, p.11). The reality, as previously discussed, is much more complex than a simple binary of black and white influences in an unequal power structure, that allows myths of natural rhythm and inherent soul to pervade. What this shows is that "[e]thnicity is not as important as experience" and furthermore "[i]f we can understand the experiences that have motivated people to make music in particular ways, then we can get deeply involved in it (Austerlitz, p.179). Perhaps you may hear echoes of Dr. King within Austerlitz's idea of Jazz consciousness; it is experience that can dictate processes of musical reception and reaction. A sound composed via freedom from musical restraints, freedom from ethnic limitations and freedom from the past<sup>90</sup>, allows the listener to transcend these

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<sup>90</sup> Such as the Avant-Garde Jazz music of John Coltrane and Sun Ra

limitations, to reveal an ethical position that race should not determine the existence of African-Americans as second class citizens, within the racially imbued American class structure.

Norwegian anthropologist Frederik Barth asserts “ethnic boundaries persist despite the flow of human beings across borderlines” and are “the very foundation upon which social systems are built” (in Raussert, p.4). The difficulty of balancing the equation in Barth’s reasoning can arise when one considers the musical landscape of North America. Banjos are an African derived instrument, now nearly entirely considered a feature of “white” American musical styles, such as Bluegrass, Country and Old-Time, but introduced to “mountain whites” in a “contact that was more direct” and on a more level playing field class-wise, which furthermore “did not depend on the intervention of minstrelsy” so often seen as the first instance of black-white musical interchange (Wells, p.143). More problematization occurs when we consider other antecedents of Jazz, such as Spirituals, the Blues and Work Songs, which all could be considered as a foundation for ideas of what constitutes “black music”, but all also arise from subtle syncretic cultures formed in America (Austerlitz, p.17). Philip Tagg sees this as indicative of notions of class struggle, where ethnic features become ascribed to music of lower classes of all shades and hues, noting that features usually identified as essential aspects of “black music”; pentatonic modes, flattened 7<sup>th</sup> chords and Swing rhythms; all feature in the music of those indentured serfs arriving in America from the British Isles, people who would never have had the opportunity to hear Handel, brass bands or symphony orchestras (“*Scotch Snaps – The Big Picture*”).

We must now accept that it is not a work’s original culture that defines a work, as modes of listening can be very different to a single text at the same time, dependent upon the receiver’s mind, ethnicity, class and preference, amongst numerous other features. For instance if we consider the receiver’s religious background (a facet that can both encompass and negate ethnicity), and follow the model of head, heart and hara (stomach, or abdomen) listening centres identified by Wilberg (p.1), a Buddhist could see John Coltrane’s music as embodying a combination of hara, in the form of a deeply held conviction, and heart in a spiritual attachment to his music. A Christian may only see the heart as the inner nature of the music, whilst a follower of Judaism or Islam may perhaps see a combination of the head and heart. Furthermore a scientist

might only see the head, in the form of technical mastery and planning as the defining feature of Coltrane's music. Whilst this approach relies on a degree of simplification, the point remains that the different facets that define a receiver's background will also define their listening experience.

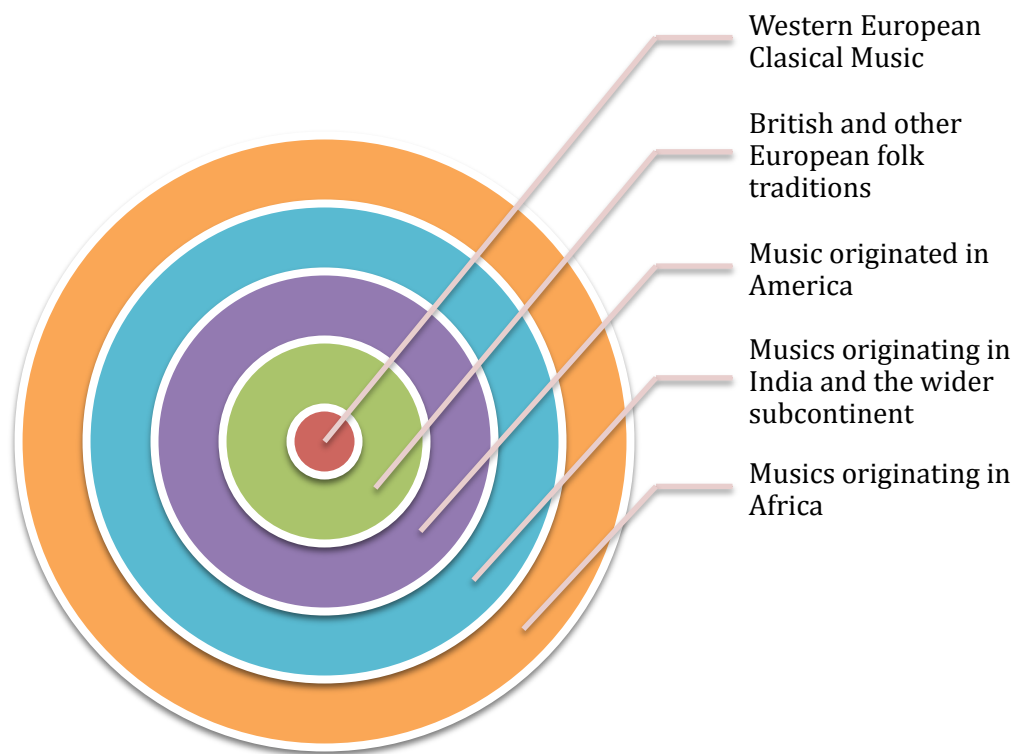
Gerard identifies that "Black music" has provided a socio-political goal to promote the unity of African Americans (p.3), which has led to a view of white musicians as exploiters of African-American talent (p.6) and allowed ideas such as "Crow Jim" to arise. These ideas express the desire to retain a sense of African-American essentialism whilst simultaneously freeing Jazz of un-pure "white" elements and exploitation, still maintained today by neo-traditionalists such as Wynton Marsalis (pp.8-9). We are still told ideas that "[l]iveness, improvisation, and spontaneity" are "key tenets of great jazz performance", which serve only to "separate the music both from the calculated, rational, and, by implication, sterile and contrived world of western classical music, and from the overly produced, predictable and formulaic sounds of popular music" (Whyton, p.21). These features may reveal the levels of American exceptionalism imbued in the discourse of Jazz, but we may then ask how are we to move forward from this approach, to realize that there are fundamental issues of class, incorporating the ways race and ethnicity have been utilized to crystallize these notions, underlying the premise of all of these arguments.

*Music has a position of paramount importance in the world today; at the same time, as an aspect of rapid globalization, there are all kinds to be heard and practised. This is perhaps the main reason for looking at music and musical change from more than one perspective; music today is a field where the hegemony of classical Western music is challenged more than ever – the trend is towards a musical field constituted of a vast number of subfield, each of them claiming its right to exist on an equal footing with others*

- Dag Österberg, p.24

Here Österberg issues a call to challenge Western hegemony when ascribing musical values, but on an equal playing field. This allows musical values to move away from the critics who maintain and expand their power to define sets of norms, based on Euro-American standards of beauty and worth to all forms of music (Brown, p.13). We must do this in order to see musical values as not just culturally specific, or cave in to revering Western hegemony singularly, but also to analyze music from outside of our typical cultural sphere, or range of experience, by modifying our own

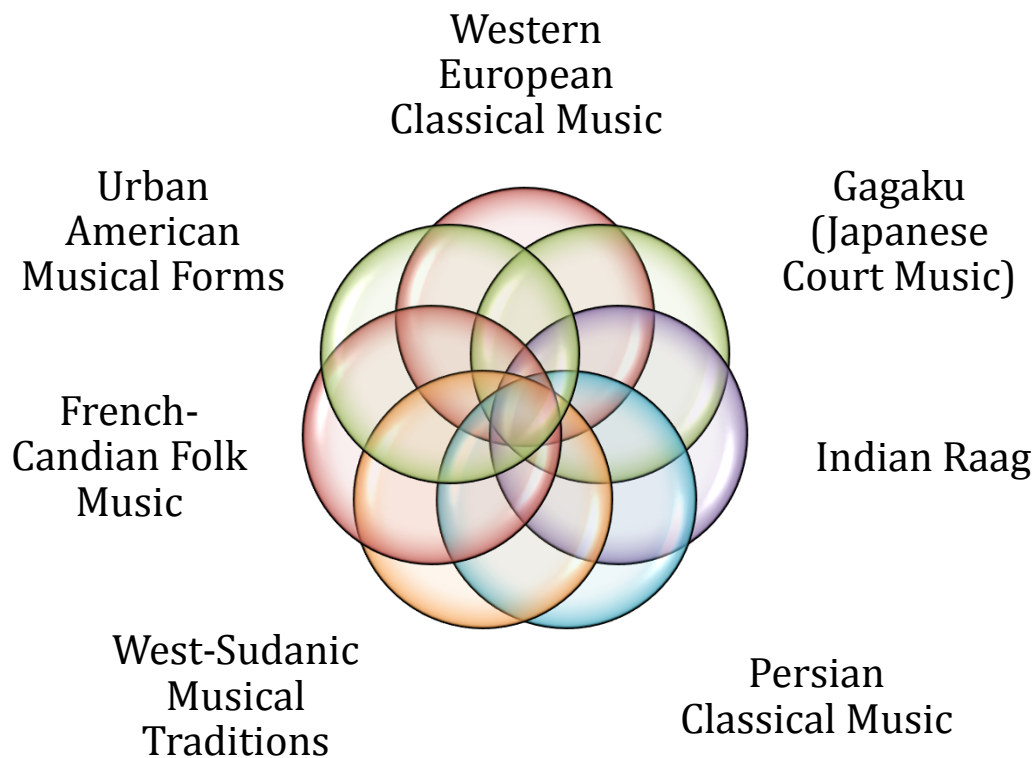
musical values when it is appropriate to do so. It's clear that for so long the perception of musical values has been viewed through this lens:



**Ex. 12. Core and periphery model of musical values. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.**

This manner of ascribing musical values is based on a core and periphery model, with all other musical traditions outside of the Western European Classical sphere arbitrarily forming concentric circles further away from the core values. These concentric circles are allowed to gain closer access to the core values, usually dependent upon the various tastes, styles and times in which musical values arise, or often in attempts to subvert these values by seemingly placing other values in the centre, which has the rather paradoxical logic of allowing Western Classical values to remain in the centre. This idea derives from Derrida, who stated that to reverse a binary is simply “to keep in place the assumptions already constructed by the opposition” (in Whyton, p.27). This is achieved by virtue of the attempted subversion submitting to the acceptance of these values as the initial core, still relying on the same overall framework, and still upholding the same traditions and prohibitions.

Something more appropriate for an objective appreciation and analysis of musical values may look like this:



Ex. 13. Model of new musical values. Source: Nathaniel Mason, 2015.

With our musical values deriving from firmly in the centre, this model allows us to better analyze syncretic musical and cultural exchange, as well as the ability to measure musical similarities alongside differences, whilst refusing to maintain the cultural hegemonic structure, including it's inherent class divisions, that has long dominated the discourse on music such as Jazz. As Coltrane puts it: “[p]eople reach the same end by making a similar discovery at the same time” (Kahn, 2006, p.279). Far from an appeal for finding a paradoxical “universal music”, as music is an aspect of all societies but received in culturally specific ways (Tagg, p.347), it is better to search for links between musical traditions and styles. Utilizing this approach we can analyze music free from the ethnic/racial, class and political restraints that are often imposed, as an ethnic or racial group cannot claim ownership of culture without setting rigid boundaries of difference. This maintenance of differential boundaries

serves to limit the role of cultural hybridity in identity formation, but also diminishes the ability for new identities to be formed.

Central to the ideas of “the black mystique” is the assumption that whites and African-Americans are distinctly different (Gerard, p.97). It is this notion that has reinvented and reified itself, in the process maintaining racial divisions that are based on myths of essential nature. Musically this manifests itself in many forms, including the notions of what constitutes a beautiful voice or timbre, which are portrayed as completely different in Black music to Western music (Washington, p.130). Furthermore ideas continually circulate that a spiritual ethos is the fundamental character of black music, unifying the “various expressions and dimensions of the black experience, connecting the old to the new, the urban to the rural” (Price, p.154). Again, problematic terms such as “Black Music” discredit the spiritual ethos and character of musicians who are attempting to characterise their music with these features, which takes their individual creation out of the music in favour of a reified essential character. Jazz is not colour-blind; rather it is consciously aware of injustice, having developed due to and in spite of exclusion (Austerlitz, p.188). Terms such as “Black music” will remain problematic, particularly when applied to a music such as Jazz, until we have begun to transcend ascribing ethnic features, steeped in myths of difference, to music.

How then does Jazz transcend ethnicity? It is clearly still seen as very deriving from a very culturally specific formulation of music, but after revealing a history free from our own racial demarcation and discrimination, we can see the picture becomes much more complicated. Consider take for example the rise of performance culture that goes hand in hand with the rise of Jazz, this feat allows the prominent role of the soloist to arise within Jazz, with all the mystique that encapsulates, whilst the rise of mass production allows this role to be spread across the world as technology becomes more accessible. More than simply culturally specific this allows people of all background with the musical skill to potentially become a leading star with the right amount of perseverance, luck and positive audience reception.

Using the two theoretical viewpoints of postethnicity and transethnicity we are offered means to illustrate how Jazz transcends ethnicity, to realize that underlying America’s racial obsession is the real issue of punitive class structure, organized along

lines of colour that can and do at times intersect. A postethnic perspective to transcending ethnic values in music would resist grounding our knowledge and moral values in blood and history, but instead “works within the last generations recognition that many of the ideas and values once taken to be universal are specific to certain cultures” (Hollinger, p.3). Similarly, a transethnic perspective resists reformulating racial essence into culturally specific ideas, with an allowance for processes of de- and re-ethnification when necessary, to critique the notion of fixed natures defining musical orientation and value.

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