Into the Arms of the Alien

Navigating Epistemological Marginality with Mudimbe and Sun Ra

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ABSTRACT

In a move to uncover the colonial legacies in the order of discourse that constructs Africa as Other, Mudimbe encounters a deadlock: how to exteriorize oneself from an order of discourse that already constructs Africa as an exteriority? Using Foucault, he demonstrates the shortcomings of liberation discourses that remobilize colonial notions of African alterity. In trying to untangle these legacies with a Foucauldian methodology, Mudimbe ends up reproducing a gesture already foreseen by that order. Motivated by rejection of an imposed marginality and faced with the impossibility to *create* a margin from which to produce an emancipated speech, Mudimbe's philosophy seems to yield only silence. When Sun Ra invests his marginalization, reclaiming his alterity as an African-American person, he goes beyond what Mudimbe criticizes as an idealization of a confabulated Africa. This jazz musician and performer claims to have been sent from space, to the earth, by ancient Egyptians. He remodels the course of history to inscribe Black people in a mythical filiation, that coincides with an outer-space and futuristic outlook. His work appears absurd at first hand but it is, in fact, reproducing the mythical alterity imposed on African-Americans – and by extension Africa, and Black people around the world. Using humor and derision, he pushes the discourses Othering Africa to their extreme and thereby reveals their senselessness. Marginality becomes no longer an imposed burden, but a tool for the dismantling of a disciplinary order of discourse.

KEYWORDS

Sun Ra, Mudimbe, Afrofuturism, Foucault, Marginality

INTRODUCTION

'I am Sun Ra, ambassador from the intergalactic regions of the council of outer space. […] I'm not real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So we are both myths. I do not come to you as a reality. I come to you as the myth, because that is what black people are, myths. […] I came from a dream that the black man dreamed, long ago. I'm actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors.'

Sun Ra in *Space is the Place* (Szwed 1997)

'The "Negro" that the West deals with in its literature as well as
in its imperial enterprise is just a myth'
E.W. Blyden (quoted in Mudimbe 1988, 131)

Sun Ra and Mudimbe engage with two divergent approaches to marginality and its potentiality in striving for an emancipated discourse. While each lived on a different continent and never appear to have encountered the other's works, they are two seminal thinkers for the discursive liberation of Africa and the African-diaspora. Juxtaposing their approaches allows us to appreciate the complexity of their respective strategies in dealing with their marginalization and to explore how Sun Ra's approach may provide a line of flight out of the impasse that Mudimbe reaches. Mudimbe theorizes marginality as a burden imposed by a disciplinary order of discourse from which it is impossible to escape, while Sun Ra confabulates a marginality from which he can reclaim his mythical alterity. Both are grappling with colonial legacies in the order of discourse, but their strategies in undoing the work of these legacies differ greatly.

Mudimbe's writings revolve around a quest for the emancipation of African gnosis.[1] His intention is not to establish the truthfulness of the discourses produced on Africa, but to examine the rules at play in the construction of statements with pretense to truthfulness. He locates a paradox in the discourses of African liberation: in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), Mudimbe points out that they remobilize concepts of alterity stemming from the Western epistemological order. According to him, the use of such concepts cannot lead to a true emancipation of knowledge. Invoking African alterity involves a remobilization and glorification of discursive constructions stemming from and embedded in the Western order of discourse. Ultimately, it will lead to a reproduction and reification of an alterity assigned to Africa by the West – it cannot, therefore, foster emancipation. Mudimbe's own work is, however, not exempt from criticisms, as he points out himself in *l'odeur du Père* (1982). He makes use of a Foucauldian methodology in order to operate a mapping of African knowledge. Foucault, as an author situated in the Western order of discourse, becomes to Mudimbe both a tool for emancipation and a symbol for the order of knowledge that one cannot untie oneself from. Mudimbe thus arrives to a theoretical impasse, since his own quest for an emancipated discourse will necessarily fail. Faced with the impossibility to emancipate African knowledge from a Western order of discourse that constructs Africa as the Other, Mudimbe reaches an epistemological hiatus: either feed into a colonial order of discourse, or resign to silence.

On the other end of the Atlantic is Sun Ra, a prolific African-American musician who, instead of remaining silent, produced musical performances resting on a series of myths. Sun Ra's life,

music and philosophy are intrinsically bound and permeated by two main principles: Egypt was Black, and Black people come from outer space, to which they will eventually return. These principles tend to Sun Ra's categorization as an afro-futuristic artist. Afro-futurism is an artistic movement from the late twentieth century in which the African diaspora is linked to outer space and a utopic future. Contemporary artists such as Black Quantum Futurism or Solange Knowles take up afro-futurist themes or tropes in their interdisciplinary works. Sun Ra considers himself a scientific poet, a medium sent to earth to prepare his people for a departure to space. How does Sun Ra continue to produce a disruptive discourse in the face of an impasse from which Mudimbe only sees silence as possible outcome?

I argue that this contrast is due to their diverging approaches to the potentiality of marginality. Specifically, to how or whether speaking from a margin can give access to an emancipated discourse. This question, voiced by Mudimbe in terms of the Othering of African philosophy, resonates with a large corpus of works. It is therefore important to contextualize the two main approaches outlined here through a juxtaposition of Sun Ra and Mudimbe. Authors such as Souleymane Bachir Diagne or Fabien Eboussi Boulaga too have analyzed the marginalization of Africa in philosophy. However, instead of conducting an archeology of the discourses that have constructed, confabulated, and essentialized the African alterity, they produce texts questioning the notion of authenticity in African philosophy (Boulaga 1977), and reflect on the intellectual circulations of philosophy in Africa and the African-diaspora (Diagne 2013) – thereby providing a decentralized discursive space from which to re-appropriate in their own terms the notion of African philosophy. Others, such as bell hooks or Mbembe, faced with the realization that Black people are marginalized, call for choosing the margins as a space from which to produce a radically freed speech (hooks 1989) and offer the experience of Black marginalization, as depicted in afro-futurism, as template for understanding the alienation and dispossession at work under late capitalism (Mbembe 2014). As I will demonstrate, Sun Ra's afro-futuristic work provides a particularly inventive approach to marginalization since its reclaiming of the margin derails humanist and universalist perspectives. I argue that Sun Ra's exaggeration and mystification of his alterity is a form of *détournement*: through repeating the hegemonic discourses ironically and emphatically, Sun Ra strips these marginalizing discourses of their claim to rationality and reveals their ridicule – he performs a *mis*appropriation of marginality that disrupts the ruling order of discourse.

In order to develop my argument, I will firstly detail what I argue is Mudimbe's stance on marginality and how that brings him to a deadlock. Following this, I will theorize Sun Ra's work through the lens of this deadlock. Sun Ra goes beyond merely reproducing a discourse Othering

Africa and Black people in general. He pushes this discourse to an extreme, revealing its absurdity by reproducing it ironically. In the third section of this paper, I will examine to what extent Sun Ra's senselessness is not another expression of Mudimbe's silence. I will demonstrate that this senselessness is a form of discursive marginality that allows Sun Ra to free himself from the grid of constraints of the Western order of discourse.

MUDIMBE'S ARCHEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Mudimbe operates an archeology of the African gnosis. In other words, he intends to identify the conditions for the emergence of discourses on Africa. By studying the genealogies of current discourses he aims to determine whether it is possible to conceive of an African knowledge disentangled from Western influence. His project is articulated in a corpus of works, two of which will be studied here: *L'odeur du Père*[2] (1982) and *The Invention of Africa* (1988). Reading these two books alongside each other reveals the stress lines that stretch across Mudimbe's works. In the former, Mudimbe explores his relationship to the Foucauldian methodology that he uses in the latter. Indeed, in order to grasp the foundation of the discourses on Africa, Mudimbe uses a Foucauldian method. Foucault too operates an archeology of knowledge. For this purpose, Foucault develops a number of methodological principles, which he lists in *The Order of Discourse* (1970), such as reversal, discontinuity, specificity and exteriority. Mudimbe makes use of these tools and duplicates the method and structure of Foucault's *Order of Things* (1966) in *the Invention of Africa*. This relationship to Foucault however leads Mudimbe into a deadlock. Foucault becomes to Mudimbe both a method for the uncovering of colonial filiations in African gnosis and a symbol of the impossibility of untying oneself from these same filiations. In order to understand Mudimbe's relationship to Foucauldian methodology, I will first outline the genealogy of the West's Othering gesture that Mudimbe operates. Based on this outline I will expose how Mudimbe reaches a paradox in his use of Foucault.

On Othering

Mudimbe (1988) uncovers the grid of constraints that comes into play in the formation of discourses that claim to truth, hereby revealing how Africa has been discursively built as the Other to the West. Mudimbe takes two types of discourses into account; the Africanist discourses produced by the colonizers, and the liberation discourses, produced by Africans themselves. In their construction of Africa, both call upon similar concepts, particularly, that of *alterity.*

De facto, the European colonizer's anthropological and missionary discourses construct a homogenous Africa, confabulated as an Other that represents the West's past or opposite. Based

on a set of binary oppositions between the West and Africa, these discourses marginalize and subordinate Africa. In Mudimbe's words: 'marginality designates the intermediate space between the so-called African tradition and the projected modernity of colonialism' (1988, 17). This dichotomous relationship opposes the Other (Africa) to the 'normal', the 'neutral', the Same (the West) – the Other being a mere negation of the Same. In this setup, the Other becomes that which allows for a construction of the Same. The Other is thereby included in the Same, as its negative double (Mudimbe 1982). Mudimbe argues that, since the Other is not exterior to the Same, making use of these Othering discourses in order to free oneself from that Same can only lead to an impasse. To become radically free from the Western order of discourse, it would be necessary to speak from a position exterior to this relationship, a margin that does not rely on power-laden concepts of Othering in its formation. Based on his archeological research revealing the colonial legacies of Othering discourses, Mudimbe asks how to exteriorize oneself from this order of discourse which is built through one's marginalization, without repeating the gesture of marginalization that this discourse imposes.

Numerous liberation discourses make use of Africa's fabricated marginality, and mystify the African alterity crafted by colonial sciences, with the intention to subvert the imposed alterity in order to inscribe Africa's otherness in a positive history. These liberation discourses – such as Négritude, or pan-Africanism – do not achieve a real emancipation according to Mudimbe who demonstrates them to be inscribed in a Western order of discourse. Indeed, Négritude's response to a systematic devaluing of Africa by the Western order of discourse, is to produce a monolithic and idealized Africa.[3] This discourse thus does not dismantle the alterity imposed on Africa, it merely substitutes negative characteristics with positive ones. In this flawed perspective, knowledge will be categorized as either good or bad, depending on the image of Africa it feeds, instead of operating a thorough critique of the order of knowledge within which these discourses are produced. According to Mudimbe, Cheikh-Anta Diop is a seminal thinker of this group of mystifiers; hence why Mudimbe is particularly critical when it comes to Diop's genealogic project. In *Nations nègres et culture* (1979), Diop establishes ancient Egypt as a Black civilization and as the cradle of humankind. He reviews previous anthropological discourses that constructed an Africa trapped in the past, and subverts them in order to uncover this past as a mythical one. In this process he defines the "true Black identity", hereby, in Mudimbian terms, reproducing the discourses that confabulate an African specificity and contributing to its monolithic character. Although Mudimbe asserts that genealogic phantasms have never interested him, he grants the benefit of the doubt to Diop when referring to Diop's theories as: 'potentially mobilizing myths' (Mudimbe 1988, 110). Indeed, reclaiming and resignifying the myths of otherness could foster a sense of pride and unity that is lacking due to colonial erasure and depreciation. Whether this is

possible without remaining anchored in a Western order of discourse remains to be seen. Through operating a genealogy of the Othering of Africa, Mudimbe uncovers the colonial legacies of Africa's marginality and thereby demonstrates the problematic aspect of discourses on African Otherness – leaving little hope for the success of discursive strategies of liberation based on a re-appropriation of marginalization.

Foucault: a method and a symbol

Mudimbe identifies a critical issue in his use of Foucauldian methodology in order to operate a genealogy of Othering. On the one hand, Foucauldian archeology provides Mudimbe with tools to untangle the intricate relationship of knowledge and power, and to disrupt the ruling order of knowledge. Foucault indeed developed a set of tools to reveal the rules that construct a regime of truth in the Western order of discourse. He thereby uncovers the methods by which that order silences and marginalizes certain discourses. On the other hand, Foucault's work is therefore intrinsically embedded in the Western order of discourse: Foucault studies Western knowledge, from a European perspective, and mobilizes principally European sources in the process. Mudimbe thus bases his critique of Othering on methods and tools that stem from the order of discourse he is trying to delink from; he too falls prey to the pernicious infiltration of the Western order of discourse, as he himself also points out. Not only is the act of conducting an archeology of marginalization that Mudimbe aims to perform already foreseen by Foucault, but it is thereby a gesture embedded in the Western order of discourse; Foucauldian works are not exterior to it, and neither is Mudimbe's work. A quest for an emancipated discourse using Foucault's method to uncover the Western legacies in the African gnosis is therefore doomed to fail.

Foucauldian thought thereby gains a symbolic status in Mudimbe's work. It is no longer solely a method used to reach for emancipation, but becomes the symbol of that from which one cannot come undone. Mudimbe compares his relationship to Foucault to the scent of an abusive father – hence the title of his book *l'odeur du Père.*[4] Smell being volatile, it is impossible to rid oneself of it. Mudimbe announces the impossibility of detaching oneself from the West, an omnipresent and dangerous West 'that thus embraces us could smother us' (Mudimbe 1982, 13). He finds himself trapped in a doubling of the Foucauldian gesture: Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* (1988) repeats the formal structure of Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966), namely opening with a painting analysis to shed light on the invisible structures that control representation. From there, both books operate an archeology of the discourses with pretense to truthfulness with the aim to find methods to unveil their genealogy and disrupt them. Mudimbe repeats the archeological gesture inscribed at the heart of Foucauldian thought and aims to think *with* Foucault, *against* Foucault as inherent part and representative of the Western order of knowledge. This dilemma

that Mudimbe reaches seems to indicate that it is no longer possible to produce a discourse that is not inscribed in the order from which he aims to come undone. Every liberation discourse is rigged from the onset, whether it is because of its use of an Othering of Africa that stems from a colonial order of discourse, or whether it is because, in trying to undo that same order, it only repeats a gesture already included in that order. Liberation discourses thereby fail to produce a true exteriority, one that is not trapped in a Western order of discourse. Mudimbe's realization that he cannot escape the Western order of discourse may bring one to wonder how then to continue producing knowledge? Would it not be better to remain silent?

SUN RA'S MYTHOLOGY

Instead of silence, Sun Ra prefers incessant noise, prolific creations, uninterrupted speech and continuous play. Like Mudimbe for Africa, Sun Ra seeks discursive emancipation for the African diaspora, namely African-Americans. To that end, he permeates his works in mythological and cosmic references to ancient Egypt. While Sun Ra only rarely speaks of his musical work, he extensively explains his philosophy during a number of interviews and two films, one documentary by Robert Mugge, *Sun Ra, A Joyful Noise* (1980), and an afro-futurist movie produced by Sun Ra himself, *Space is the Place* (1974). His life, his philosophy and his musical works are indissociable. Indeed, Sun Ra conceives his work as well as his life as a permanent performance. He derives his philosophical principles from reading mystical authors, drawing from them to craft his own image. That which could appear absurd – his constant references to Egypt, or his claim that Black people come from space – is in fact the outcome of extended research and reflection that brought him to the conclusion that the place Black people are said to come from, as well as their identity in current society, are nothing but myths. The ramifications of Sun Ra's disruption of linear history, through references to Ancient Egypt, will be detailed in a first section. Following this, I will analyze how Sun Ra's claim that afro-descendants come from outer space allows him to highlight the mythical character assigned to Black people in the United States especially.

Reclaiming his-story

Sun Ra reclaims the mythical alterity he had been assigned, and declares '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' (Mugge 1980). It is thus in defiance with 'his' story, in other words, with the West's history, that Sun Ra offers to tell his own story. He is thereby not only referring to himself as an individual, but as a Black man in the United States. Indeed, Sun Ra further states: 'Black people, they back there in the past, a past that somebody manufactured for 'em. It's not their past, it's not

their history' (Eshun 1998). He thereby uncovers the discursive practice that blurs not only the African diaspora's history, but their reality in a contemporary society.

Indeed, due to his readings, Sun Ra takes heed of the fact that the Africa referred to in history is in fact a myth rather than a real place, a confabulated alterity rather than a reality. Like Mudimbe, Sun Ra aims to rid himself of the discourse that produces the Black, African Other as a negativity. To Mudimbe, the rejection of notions of alterity altogether is a necessity. But Sun Ra sees an emancipatory potential in the mythical aspect that alterity confers to Africa and Black people from the diaspora. Thus, while Mudimbe remains critical vis à vis mythical filiations, stating that 'these genealogical phantasms have never interested me' (Bal 2007), Sun Ra on the contrary sets the myth as the cornerstone of his thought. Bearing this in mind, his fascination for ancient Egypt becomes revealing. Just as Cheikh-Anta Diop, Sun Ra defends the idea of a Black Egypt, symbol of a 'civilized' and 'modern' Africa. But he adds a flamboyant mythical facet to Diop's thought in his performances – with costumes referring to ancient Egypt – and in his persona – changing his name several times before deciding to go by Sun Ra due to his affinity to Râ, the Egyptian god of sun. Sun Ra's convictions stem from his readings of Theodore P. Ford and of George Wells Parker (Szwed 1997). They offer him a new perspective on the Black past, where slavery is conceptualized as a mere phase in an otherwise glorious history. In *God Wills the Negro* (1939), Ford even claims that the African-Americans he studies in Chicago are the direct descendants of these mythical Egyptian people and that, through them, the majesty of that people lives on. Sun Ra appropriates this theory and constructs his life philosophy around it: the Black Americans around him too become the descendants of Egyptians – not just any Egyptian, but the pharaohs, the despotic rulers of the past. This allows him to revalorize a certain Black identity, creating a new filiation and a sense of belonging to a great people. However, instead of calling for a return to African roots, and thereby contributing to a discourse reifying an idealized Africa stuck in the past,[5] Sun Ra calls for a departure to Space.

Had Sun Ra merely remobilized concepts of alterity, glorifying and mystifying without surpassing the binary opposition Same–Other, his work would have been subject to the same criticism as Diop's theories, or Négritude. But Sun Ra goes beyond simple historical filiation, and completely undoes the linear progress of history, hereby repeating a gesture of temporal decoupage already operated by colonial discourses. Numerous discourses on Africa blur its history and construct it as a margin between the West's projected modernity and a traditional past. This confabulated Africa does not follow the course of history, it remains trapped in a never-ending night. Infamously in Hegel's words: '[Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.' (Hegel, 1837/2001, 11). Sun Ra exploits this immobility by

establishing African-Americans as direct descendants of the Egyptians. Indeed, if Africa is to be stuck in the past, the African diasporas today are living manifestations of their ancestors. They embody what Mudimbe (1988) characterizes as the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous in the Africa constructed through the Western order of discourse. Further derailing the linear course of history, Sun Ra's Egyptians are also aliens from the future. In a move to rewrite the course of history, Sun Ra makes the past, present and future coincide in his Egyptian filiation that becomes symbol of modernity before colonialism.

Beyond alterity

The cosmos, that Sun Ra accesses through the Egyptian filiation, opens a creative space – both literally and figuratively. As Kodwo Eshun best said it, by claiming that he and his fellow descendants of the African diaspora are in fact not earthlings but extraterrestrial beings, Sun Ra operates a move 'away from alienation. Into the arms of the alien' (1998, 15). And indeed, in an interview on the topic of the space race Sun Ra claims that, as a result of systemic oppressions, a new type of human has appeared: 'the American Black Man. And I should say that he doesn't belong to this earth' (Szwed 1997, 140). Sun Ra comes to the conclusion that the American Black Man comes from outer space. I will analyze the implications of this claim before demonstrating how outer space symbolizes a physical and conceptual margin. I argue that Sun Ra's occupation of this margin allows him to highlight the dispossession faced by afro-descendants in the United States and elsewhere.

By claiming that afro-descendants do not belong to earth, Sun Ra sheds light on the mythical aspects of the construction of the Black person. Here he comes in agreement with Mudimbe, who cites Blyden: 'The 'Negro' that the West deals with in its literature as well as in its imperial enterprise is just a myth' (Mudimbe 1988, 131). Reclaiming this mythical character, Sun Ra no longer identifies as human, but as a mythical being sent to earth bearing a message to Black people: they too are extraterrestrial, mythical beings. As can be seen in the epigraph to this paper, his message is a political claim that Black people do not exist in this society, the proof of it being their lack of equal rights. Their lack of existence is twofold: it is a material reality of precarious life and early deaths as well as an ontological lack of existence, Black people having been erased from history or only visibilized as myths – therefore not as existing individuals. Indeed African-Americans' right to exist is subjected to constant threats, due to institutionalized and systemic violence that the alienating discursive order has normalized. In the United States' racially saturated field of visibility, their survival is more precarious, their lives seem to have less weight than white people's lives – as Butler demonstrates in her reading of Rodney King's beating by the police (Butler 1993). In addition to these dynamics dispossessing Black people from political

subjectivities (Butler and Athanasiou 2013), the consciousness of being a problem as a Black person in the United States, in Du Bois' words (1903), makes for the impossibility of having an un-alienated self-consciousness. As a result, Black people, whose ontological status is a construction of the Western order of discourse, lose reality. They become myths forged by the violence they face: 'The Westerner's gaze, as well as their discourse, that are imposed on or offered to the Black person purely and simply dissolve them. […]. Denied by and in the other's speech, they survive only on the violence borne against them' (Mudimbe 1982, 129). Sun Ra reclaims this liminal existence: if African-Americans are aliens in the white gaze, let them be aliens that come from space.

The African-American person, since they are not part of this world, is not subjected to its norms of discursive control. Outer space becomes literally a new space, a margin from which a radically excommunicated discourse can take shape. Sun Ra thus operates a form of reterritorialization. He re-appropriates his extra-terrestrial mythical identity and turns outer space into a margin of exteriority that transcends the rigger order of discourse. From this margin, he can judge the past and project himself towards a better future, one escaping the ruling order of discourse. Sun Ra plays with this slippage in rationality to leave a certain ambiguity in his speech. Yet, as Mudimbe argues, 'the mystifications that we live are of no help to us […] they are myths that no one really believes in. They run on empty, obscuring the most intelligent and generous' thinkers' (Bal 2007, 6). In this light, Sun Ra's mystical facet appears to serve not only his re-appropriation of a status that has been imposed on Black people, but also to cloud the truth. Hiding under the cover of a myth, Sun Ra's discourse now appears as meaningless. In performing this alterity, does he only free himself in appearance? Is the flamboyance of Sun Ra's irreverent gesture an elaborate cover up of an uncomfortable truth? Does the absurdity with which Sun Ra plays truly differ from Mudimbe's silence: faced with the same impossibility, Mudimbe opts for silence while Sun Ra produces senseless noise.

ON SENSELESSNESS AND IRONY

To critically appreciate the implications of Sun Ra's senselessness, I conceptualize it through the lens of irony. In order to do so, I will first explain how Sun Ra's work can be categorized as lacking sense, before demonstrating how Sun Ra, through refusing to make sense, reclaims his epistemological marginality and thereby emancipates himself from injunctions to produce truthful discourses. Senselessness is a mode for Sun Ra to reclaim the epistemological margin he has been assigned to. To close this first approach on Sun Ra's senselessness, I will argue that Sun Ra's works' sense or senselessness should not be a criteria for judging the significance or value of his

work. Having clarified this, I will move on to expose another layer in Sun Ra's senselessness, namely the fact that his lack of sense is in fact an ironic *mis*appropriation of hegemonic discourses whose fallacies and ridicule he thereby reveals. In this last section I will introduce the notion of *détournement* as analytical tool to shed light on the processes of reversal and ironic reproduction at hand in Sun Ra's works.

Reclaiming the epistemological margin

Sun Ra's work does not produce sense, and it is just that lack of sense that allows him to reclaim his epistemological marginality. His entire discourse is based on sophistic reasoning: the premises on which he builds his argument are incompatible. Sun Ra claims that certain Black people descend from the Egyptian people – a historical, real and terrestrial people – and, coincidentally, that these same people are also coming from space, where they should return to. These two statements are conflicting. Logical reasoning would have it that Black people cannot have these two origins, be both from a future situated in Outer Space and from a historical Egypt. Sun Ra conceals this sophism under a layer of humor and irony. Is senselessness but another strategy to deal with the daunting realization that no discourse can be produced outside the Western order of discourses? Is his prolific production then not in fact reproducing the silence that Mudimbe commends? Underneath the appearances, is Sun Ra too settling for the absence of meaning, for silence?

I argue that Sun Ra does not settle for this nihilistic silence; instead, he reclaims his discursive marginality and uses it as a tool to build a liberated discourse. His discourse's lack of sense allows for a double emancipation out of the western order of discourse. The first is that, by producing an absurd discourse, Sun Ra liberates himself from the imperative to tell the truth. Sun Ra's claims on his origins can thus neither be true, nor false. They exist in an order of discourse which is not bound by these categories. Secondly, in rejecting "making sense", Sun Ra resignifies the margin as a space from which he can continue to produce a discourse, the nonsense of which will not be judged using the criteria of the discourse he is trying to emancipate from. He thereby questions the criteria according to which a discourse can be validated as making sense or not, and demonstrates that in order to break away from this order of discourse, one must break away from that latter's definitions of sense making and senselessness. We thus can neither judge whether Sun Ra tells the truth, nor judge whether he produces sense.

Even if Sun Ra's work would be senseless, it would not make it insignificant. Music and performed arts' significance situates itself beyond their logical validity. Sun Ra's life, his

philosophy, his music, are all part of an elaborate artistic performance whose sense we cannot judge. We can, however, judge the effect it has on the people it targets. Sun Ra himself asserts:

> I believe that every artist should realize that. That his work has no meaning whatsoever unless he helps people with it.
>
> First of all I express sincerity. There's also that sense of humor, by which people sometimes learn to laugh about themselves. I mean, the situation is so serious that the people could go crazy because of it. They need to smile and realize how ridiculous everything is. A race without a sense of humor is in bad shape. A race needs clowns. […] You could call me the jester of the Creator. The whole world, all the disease and misery, it's all ridiculous.
>
> – Sun Ra, in an interview with Bert Vuijsje in 1970 (Swed 1997, 235–36)

He identifies as this marginal figure of the clown, who, by his ridicule performance of everyday actions, allows people to distance themselves from their reality. His work's senselessness and its absurdity allow him to make people laugh in the face of adversity – thereby defusing the tension and offering an alternative approach to the everyday.

*Mis*appropriation and détournement

Sun Ra's work is thus not a resignation to silence as Mudimbe's is, it is a discursive strategy: his lack of sense reproduces and sheds light on the senselessness of society and of the imposed alterity constructed by the Western order of discourse. In reproducing it in a different context, Sun Ra is able to desacralize and turn into derision a certain regime of truth. He thereby subverts it in a way that turns the former order into ridicule and strips it of its disciplining power. This form of systematic derision recalls processes of *détournement*, defined in Debord's words as a "deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose" (Debord and Wolman, 1954, np). From Casey Ryan Kelly's analysis of strategic *détournement* in anticolonial struggles such as the 1969 Alcatraz occupations by the Indians of All Tribes (2014), we can recognize the practice of irreverent, subversive re-appropriation or *mis*appropriation of the dominant language present in Sun Ra's work. As Kelly points out, this rhetoric strategy allows the fostering of 'mockery and ironic distance as alternatives to earnestness and literal engagement with Euro-American discourse' (2014, 15). Through comic parody and ironic repetition, it becomes possible to unmask and desacralize hegemonic discourses such as those constructing Black people as aliens, revealing these discourses' inner fallacies in the process. The marginality that Sun Ra inhabits thus slips

through the breaches of the Western order of discourse. From there Sun Ra produces a speech that reveals the loopholes and shortcoming of that order, and disrupts its claim to universality.

CONCLUSION

Mudimbe's critique can only yield silence since it remains inscribed in the order of discourse from which it is aiming to emancipate. According to Mudimbe, all liberation discourses, including his own, are necessarily trapped. Either they try to reclaim their exteriority by positively remobilizing their assigned marginality, thereby reproducing an Othering of Africa stemming from colonial discourses, or, in the process of untying themselves from these colonial legacies, they repeat a gesture already anchored in that same order of discourse. Mudimbe exposes how his use of Foucault to operate a genealogy of Othering is also a form of epistemological dependence. As he shows from his own work, there can be no marginality that does not remain trapped in the Western order of discourse. In order to nuance this conclusion, I argue, through an analysis of Sun Ra's performances, that this margin may become the locus from which the reigning order of discourse can be stripped of its neutrality. Indeed, speaking from his assigned exteriority, Sun Ra 'spaces-out' the discursive order: he makes it trip over its own nonsense. He claims to be a descendant from the Egyptians, sent from space to inform Black people of their mythical filiation, thereby disassembling and ironically reproducing the discourse of Othering imposed on him. Instead of the reification of the African alterity that Mudimbe feared, Sun Ra remobilizes discourses of alterity ironically. He repeats them to reveal their lack of sense and embraces this lack of sense completely. His absurdity, which could be qualified as a surrender to silence, is in fact a transgression of the codes of discourse, which allows him to re-appropriate his speech. By misappropriating hegemonic discourses, Sun Ra at once unmasks the rhetorical construction of Black people as aliens and provides a distance from which these discourses can be judged and mocked. He thereby defeats these discourses, desacralizes them and strips them of their disciplinary power. It would seem, then, that Sun Ra's marginality, rather than a peripheral phenomenon, is in fact a breach in the order of discourse. From this breach, this re-appropriated and disrupting margin, Sun Ra can produce a discourse that is emancipated from the Western order of discourse: his discourse no longer depends on disciplinary norms imposed by that order. Sun Ra's practice of détournement of his marginalization offers an alternative to Mudimbe's paradox between remobilizing Othering discourses or remaining silent, and creates an exteriority disrupting the well-oiled discursive machine that constructs the hegemony as neutral.

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[1] By African gnosis, Mudimbe refers to 'structured, common, conventional knowledge'(Mudimbe 1988, 9) produced in or on Africa. The use of Africa here is to be understood not as an essentialist approach to a complex and plural continent. Mudimbe makes use of *African* as umbrella term to shed light on the discursive processes at hand in the construction of an imagined unity. Conversely, *the West* is not a place, it is a project in Glissant's words (1997, 14).

[2] *L'odeur du Père* (1982) has only been published in French. The translations of quotations are by the present author.

[3] For diasporic communities living remotely from Africa, this signifies gaining control over the African referent they are assigned to. However, as Glissant notes in *le Discours Antillais* (1997), this confines the identity of the pan-African diaspora to their historical ties to Africa, and does not allow for the taking into account of the plurality of the diasporic experiences and the processes of creolization at hand in these same communities

[4] In English: *the Father's Scent*. This Father figure represents the West but can also be thought to represent the Church. Mudimbe spent his early years preparing to become a priest and wrote profusely on his relationship to religion. Hence his use of quasi-religious vocabulary in his search for a radical exteriority from the Western order of discourse, which he qualifies as a form of excommunication.

[5] Cf. endnote 3 for a critical perspective on the 'Back-to-Africa" movement.