SPACE ODDITIES FOR THE AGE OF SPACE TOURISM

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2009

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ABSTRACT

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This research focuses on musical representations of space in the context of the nascent space tourism industry. The argument contextualizes music as a political practice, one that conceptually constructs spaces and thus could intervene in the colonization of space as produced, largely discursively so far, by transnational entertainment corporations. I specifically focus on the musical texts “Space Oddity” by David Bowie, “Rocketman” by Elton John, and “Space is the Place” by Sun Ra as examples of interventions and revisions of dominant space discourse. Methodologically, the production and reception processes of popular music are used as a template for generating analyses of how particular musical texts might intersect with other culture industry productions such as space tourism. The research concludes that popular music has the capacity to help keep space open for multiplicity, diversity, equity, and, if need be, resistance.
For Beth, Shaun, and Charley
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The greatest debt is owed to my life coach, editor, inspiration, and reality check Beth Ann Kaufka Jr. and our daughters Shaun (who joined us as the PhD process started) and Charley (who joins us as this project draws to a close). My parents Donald and Barbara provided all the right carrots and sticks to prepare me for the opportunity of higher education.

I benefited greatly from intellectual engagement with my fellow students in the American Culture Studies program at Bowling Green State University especially those involved with Culture Club: The Cultural Studies Scholars Association and the Battlegrounds States conferences. As Director of the program, much of the responsibility for the recruitment and retention of such great colleagues and for creating a productive and welcoming atmosphere belongs to Don McQuarie. Turns out he’s a great dissertation advisor as well, with well-timed encouragement and perfectly pitched feedback. Jeremy Wallach provided a valuable model for how to apply ones love of music to cultural study. Ellen Berry accomplished what I thought impossible, making critical theory accessible, fun, and excitedly relevant.

I would also like to recognize the generous support of my colleagues in the Division of University Studies at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. My Contemporary World teammates and Dean Joseph L. Graves Jr. have used the right combination of carrots and sticks to make sure I balance my teaching and my scholarship, and Dr. Gary Bailey organized the Faculty Roundtable where I was able to try out some of these ideas on a friendly and critically engaged audience. Thanks are also due to Scott Simkins and Sandra Totten for helping me access the HBCU Title III Junior Faculty Development Fund.
Finally, to everyone who has ever let me jam with them, hang out in their studio, observe them directing or editing, traded a zine, or made their couch available for crashing – there must be a place for you if space is to be a place worth visiting.

Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION: MUSICAL SUBVERSION OF SPACE TOURISM

Space [...] becomes an empty medium through which the heroic adventurers of science fiction fly to discover the strangeness of aliens or the weirdness of time. Lost to such adventures are the less sublime, more material spaces of social life, and with them the awareness that, for all its apparent vastness, space is socially produced.

Paul Youngquist in “The Space Machine” (336).

Music is prophecy [...] ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code. It makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible [...] it is not only the image of things, but the transcending of the everyday, the herald of the future. For this reason musicians, even when officially recognized, are dangerous, disturbing, and subversive.


Space is not the final frontier. No matter how many times this trope is deployed in popular culture, so long as there is a need for people to imagine a place where things might be different, new, and/or better, there will be places produced as frontiers. The frontier of space shares with previous frontiers - such as the New World or the American West – a mythological construction that serves as a repository for all manner of utopian dreaming and capital scheming. But unlike those previous frontiers, space is still open enough to be constructed differently, to avoid what Alondra Nelson calls the “social science fictions” that reinscribe the worst social inequalities of dominant culture as it seeks new territory to colonize (1).

Space is still relatively non-existent as a place of real significant human occupation, meaning that space as most people know it today has been largely constructed through popular culture. The social, capital, or cultural restraints of our earthly existence need not follow should humanity colonize space in the future. As a place that has been socially but not yet materially produced, the everyday lived experience of people in space is still open to be constructed differently, to be a place where what seems odd to us today may turn out to be a perfectly normal part of everyday life. Importantly, the future of space is still in the hands of anyone who cares to participate in its construction.
The existing discursive construction of space, to which this project is an amendment, valorizes American exceptionalism, normalizes frontier militarism, and perpetuates myths of technological and capitalist superiority. The space of twentieth century popular culture is of both endless opportunity and unlimited danger. From *Star Wars* to the *Star Trek* franchise, the *Alien* trilogy to *Battlestar Galactica*, the combatants and contests may differ but the regime of violent conflict is unchallenged. Even within the discourse of opportunity in space, the opportunities are circumscribed by socially constructed terrestrial limits on who gets to participate, how they do so, and to what ends. In other words, the *Star Trek* franchise may feature ethnically diverse crews and even a female captain in one case, and Trekkies consistently profess tolerant values, but the universalism is wrapped in militarism, the economics are ubiquitously capitalist, and uneasy differences like queerness or class are erased and made invisible.

**Hard Days and Nights**

It may seem premature to be concerned about the impact of the existing representations on future lives in space when there is yet to be any substantial human presence, but given how many of the futuristic imaginings debuted on *Star Trek* have come to pass (such as the cell phone, desktop computing, and remote sensing for example) it may be beneficial to begin the process of imagining space as a real place with real social, cultural, and political beings. In other words, we’ve been shown that officers and doctors would fare well in a *Star Trek*-ian space future, but if you’re one of those generic workers in the red shirts, the ones put in the line of fire but not in the story, you may wish that the concerns of working people were front-loaded into the human colonization of space.
The time for postcolonial analysis of space is before it is colonized any further. As John Hickman suggests,

[...] few space development enthusiasts have given the political economy of their very large space projects serious thought. Instead, they have chosen to describe the exciting science and engineering possibilities while promising the moon and the stars to those who would dare to exploit them. (1)

To flesh out a bit of what Hickman is describing in this admonishment, I would like to share some observations garnered from attendance at the 25th anniversary International Space Development Conference (ISDC) and Space Venturing Forum held in Los Angeles in May 2006. All the major players in the new space race were in attendance. There was much excitement about the near-future of private space development in the aftermath of the suborbital flight of SpaceShipOne. One participant on the Space Business Entrepreneurs panel likened the state of the private space industry to that of the telephone industry at the time that JP Morgan began to fund Alexander Graham Bell’s work. That is, the predominant sentiment among those who are working hardest to make “humanity a spacefaring civilization,” is the science of space travel has finally developed enough for entrepreneurialism to make it fly as a private industry.

The boldest expression of unbridled faith in capitalist exceptionalism I witnessed at the ISDC was a presentation by Lee Valentine of the Space Studies Institute at Princeton University. Since the greatness of America was built on private capital, in Valentine’s view so should space, and tourism is the wedge by which other more profitable space industries will follow. The space hotels necessitated by space tourism, he says, would provide an early market for new commodities like extra-terrestrial water and drive the development of advanced life support systems, for example. He did not mention anything about the living or working conditions of
those who would maintain the plumbing or install the HVAC. He did maintain, however, that
these new markets are not ends in themselves but rather the means to capacitate much more
lucrative ventures in energy, precious metals, and eventually manufacturing. In order to do all
this, space entrepreneurs must be freed of parasitic, bureaucratic, government interference. He
did not add any details about the freedoms that would be enjoyed by the employees of space
entrepreneurs once freed from regulation by parasitic government bureaucracies like the
Occupational Health and Safety Administration or the National Labor Relations Board.
Valentine’s faith in exceptional American entrepreneurialism is, to say the least, a view that
excludes the major actors in real frontier experience, past and future.

By far, the most excitement at the ISDC was generated by the presence of the Virgin
Galactic team. Unlike Valentine’s unbridled faith in capitalism and blindness to a broader
spectrum of concerns like working conditions, environmental protections, democratic
governance, or social inequalities, Virgin Galactic president Will Whitehorn seemed to anticipate
the need to address how Virgin would respond to the costs of making space happen. Citing the
transformation of moribund British Rail by the dynamic hands of Virgin, Whitehorn touted their
accomplishments in using market mechanisms to promote environmental advances such as bio-
ethanol. Most curious was his invocation of the Gaia hypothesis, a theory that promotes a holistic
view of the relationship between people and the earth. Whitehorn stated that Virgin was
promoting a form of Gaia capitalism, a holistic view of economics and environment in which
Virgin would use its investments in new space technologies as an opportunity to solve existing
terrestrial environmental and social problems. Whitehorn defended the high cost of tickets sold
by Virgin Galactic as an investment in democratizing the opportunity to travel in space. This is
all well and good for those wealthy enough to buy a place in space, but what about those who
will clean up after, cook for, and serve space tourists? As will be elaborated further in my discussion of the Space Oddities, these forms of benevolent capitalism have a sordid history of inflicting violence on those who toil and others elided by these rosy caricatures of the space and entrepreneurial frontiers.

Whitehorn concluded Virgin Galactic’s presentation with a short film showing one of their first one hundred paying customers playing with a Buzz Lightyear toy during zero-g training in honor of astronaut Buzz Aldrin (who was also in attendance at the ISDC).

Historically, a mutually beneficial arrangement between popular culture producers and the American space program, starting with the coordinated cooperative promotional arrangement between Disney and rocket pioneer Werner Von Braun, has been very fruitful in producing public support for space exploration (McCurdy, Wright). In the post-Apollo era, however, government space programs have lost luster, relinquished their privileged status at the leading edge of technology and popular consciousness, and are now little more than overly large and bureaucratized inefficient jobs programs (Klerkx). Ready, willing, and able to take the mantle of space exploration from government are the private space entrepreneurs who believe that once unconstricted by allegedly outmoded government regulation, private capital will successfully colonize the space frontier (Klerkx; Berenstien).

As of now, the immense investment barriers to participation in space development mean that only the richest individuals and organizations can participate. The technological barriers are real and great. These factors make it logical that space developers be largely concerned with how to do it and how to pay for it. Given that there isn't yet any binding policy over property rights or environmental protection or governance of any kind, to be concerned about the value of workers rights and socio-cultural equity in a place that does not yet exist may seem pre-mature.
Nevertheless, should humanity ever achieve a significant off-planet presence, it would be better to front load these concerns so that space places are not bleak modernist nightmares like the decrepit workers’ sector depicted in *Total Recall* or the life of a space cadet as rendered by Devo. Even if our species remains earth bound, the efforts to develop space and the resources already invested in doing so are great enough to worthy consideration.

What is glaringly absent from the dominant constructions of space is any sense of what a real community would look like, would work like, in space. There is little danger presented to real lives by these limited visions of unlimited space so far. However, should the aspirations of these space capitalists come to pass, should space ever actually be colonized by real humans, it would behoove us all to have cultivated alternative visions of space that frontload the ideals of equality and processes of community into the structural foundations of space society. In order to begin seriously thinking about space as a place in which real human communities may someday exist, I would like to push forward the process of envisioning space that includes participatory democratic community development. But since a human community in space is still largely a media construct, the realm of space as a mediated popular production is an appropriate place to start.

**On Planet Earth, I’ll Probably Stay**

My first attempt to deal with space as a popular media construction, in my own life, was also my first attempt at using video equipment. By today’s standards, the VHS camcorder and analog editing deck I was able to borrow and learn to use were outrageously bulky and user-unfriendly. At the time though, they seemed to be harbingers of a new age of democratized media production and I was intent on making the most of these amazing hi-tech tools. Being new
to the whole make your own art ethos that would shortly thereafter amalgamate into the DIY (do-it-yourself) movement, and a little unsure I could produce any content that would do justice to these wonderful new tools, I used my favorite song by the innovative 70s pop band, Devo “Planet Earth,” as a thematic template.

My interpretation of “Planet Earth” unintentionally reversed the narrative direction of the original song. The original lyric, as I learned later, when such things became widely available on the Internet, is delivered in the perspective of an alien from elsewhere commenting on mundane everyday life on planet earth. In my debut no-budget video production I took my cues from the tight yet messy, hard edged sounds of the song and from the subversive cultural economy of Devo overall, mixed with a little influence from the parts of Total Recall, the 1990 Paul Verhoeven directed film starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, that give a glimpse into the conditions of the working class in near future space. The characters in my video go elsewhere because they are alienated from mundane everyday life on earth only to find the same alienated quotidian existence behind the shiny technological veneer of their homes and workplaces in space. To ensure the narrative of my video was reflected in the production of its mis-en-scene, to mimic the blend of hi-tech and lo-class, I put a clear plastic sandwich bag over the lens.

I turned to Devo as the aesthetic, productive, and narrative inspiration for this video, and this research project, because my interest in music as something more than entertainment, and the idea of using space as a place through which life on earth can be viewed critically, starts with Devo’s music, videos, and performances. The first time I heard and saw Devo was the 1978 Saturday Night Live performance of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” that Devo band members - as well as those who have written about them such as Theo Cateforis, biographers Jade Dellinger and David Giffels, and Scott Lee Powers - all agree was the pivotal performance of
their early career. The broadcast left me with a sense, proven true over time, that I had witnessed something new and that I would view my world a little differently from then on.

The visual impression hit first. With their yellow jumpsuits they looked like a Hazmat team there to sanitize the stage with some super toxic industrial cleaner. I wondered, at first, if it was an Andy Kaufman sketch unfolding. Then I noticed that the guitars had a bunch of extra stuff attached, some of it jiggling wildly, and all of it homemade adaptation. The opening drum cadence was unlike any other I had yet heard but solid enough to draw attention and shift the mind to the overall sound, together creating anticipation of what kind of song these weirdoes might play. The guitars sounded as broken as they looked, but then the guitar dropped out, the beat of the drum line took hold again, and the demented vocal performance started in full.

It took all the way to the chorus to figure out they were doing “Satisfaction,” even though it was a song I, and anyone else with a radio in the 70s, was very familiar with. Upon making the connection to the original song, I remember assessing the similarities and differences. This mind game kept me invested in what was going on even though I didn’t like what they were doing and didn’t enjoy listening. When they reached the skipping record sounds of the “Baby, baby, baby…” bridge, I realized that they were trying to be funny…and succeeding. Cateforis describes the performance as follows:

[…] a collection of five identical automatons. Moving their bodies in a series of sharp, jerky motions, they proceeded to reduce one of rock’s most sacred cows, the Rolling Stones’ “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction,” to an absurd procession of minimalist stunted riffs and nervous vocals. To many, the band’s performance was a bewildering, antagonizing intrusion into their weekend entertainment. (564-5)
Conversely, I felt doors to a whole new world swing open. I didn’t understand until much later (right about now) how powerfully this performance set my tastes in performance, art, and the cultural politics of music. Devo did not put out enough songs or have enough breadth of style to be something I listen to excitedly anymore, but they were the vehicle that conveyed my impressionable pre-teen mind to the art and politics of alternative cultures of resistance like Dada, the Situationists, and the Church of the Subgenius.

Devo is a long-running art project whose members constituted themselves as a popular music group to promote their subversive films. They were early adopters of video and digital technologies and deployed them with strong senses of humor and purpose to launch a cogent cutting critique of class, labor, and art in the space age. Devo is short for de-evolution, their theory of twentieth century capital and technology yielding, as promised, the pinnacle of human social and cultural evolution…which inevitably means that we must regress from there on out. The Devo discourse on notions of American exceptionalism and technological progress exploits and intertextualizes discourses of the early space age to belie the impossibility of the promises proffered. Where the space of dominant hegemonic discourses is a utopian frontier of possibility, Devo space is always already screwed up and cheerfully constructed of mundane mishaps and dangerous detritus.

Even though their legendary status, productive might, subversive art, cultural and economic capital, endurance, innovation, and ideas earn them the status of a significant site for cultural production analysis (and a place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame), there is precious little scholarship working with Devo. In fact, there is a severe deficit of scholarship in general that takes popular music seriously, approaches it with sufficient depth, and discusses it in a germane register, especially considering the prominent position of popular music in everyday life
and in the culture industries. Not that there aren’t many good people, in and out of the academy, working very hard to understand popular music—how it works and what it can do—but the field is woefully underdeveloped relative to say film studies or even television studies. Like these other media-centric fields of study, the border between fan and scholar is a challenging negotiation not always handled deftly. Moreover, like many subfields of popular culture studies, the process of developing the field and responding to the pressure to validate taking our entertainments seriously as sites where society and culture are produced has skewed the scholarship towards more established academic approaches. Conversely there are not enough experimental (and fun) approaches that would more closely tie the forms of analysis to the functions of the subjects and objects of study.

Not that there are no exceptional neo-canonical works of popular music studies, and I am sure there are others in the works, but where are the profound scholarly monographs on The Clash, The Rolling Stones, Public Enemy, Bruce Springsteen, Tupac Shakur or insert-your-favorite-band-here? Where is the body of journal articles proportionate in quantity and quality to the place popular music has in capitalist entertainment production and everyday life? A plethora of biographies, popular criticism, and heroic efforts to establish a discipline by the pioneers in the field notwithstanding, the biggest most influential popular music producers simply have not had enough good scholarship performed on them. Most groups have produced more albums than scholars have produced articles on them. Consequently, outside of Theo Cateforis’ 2004 *American Music* article using Devo as a site through which to interrogate the whiteness of New Wave, and Dellinger and Giffels’ biography *Are We Not Men? We Are Devo!*⁴, DEVO has been largely left out of critical academic analysis.
I would like to honor one notable pioneering effort to extend the reach of traditional scholarship into taking our entertainments seriously, the 1981 Kent State University Masters Thesis on Devo entitled *Music: The Relationship Between Innovator and Opinion Leader* by Scott Lee Powers. Powers’ work catches both the underdeveloped state of popular music studies at the time and captures Devo as they were making the transition between amateur and professional. Powers enjoyed a high level of immediate access to band members and his interview data is extremely insightful and well presented. However, as can be ascertained by the rather dry title, Powers was working against disciplinary notions of proper scholarship that did not adequately serve the novelty and dynamism of his subject. Having read Powers’ journalistic writing, I am convinced that had popular music studies been at a more advanced stage at the time, his new and innovative subject would not have been constrained by existing theory and methodology, and we would have a much more interesting document of a critical stage in Devo’s evolution.

I would like to ensure that analysis of the roles music may play in the colonization of space is fully developed before space is colonized. Rather than wait until there is a large-scale human occupation of space and then perform postcolonial analyses, I prefer to intervene in the construction of space at the pre-colonial stage. Music, as the harbinger of the future Attali describes in the epigram, is an accessible and fruitful point of entry into the contemporary and near-future construction of space. As source material for constructing space differently, I turn to musically-produced alternative visions of space from the period during which humans were beginning to colonize space. The corporatization of rock music also happened during this period and so I view these texts as speaking of and from a position relevant to twenty-first century space tourism produced by private entertainment corporations. Along the way towards redirecting the
construction of space towards being a more equitable place than it will be if left to the devices of corporate culture, I aspire to add momentum to the trajectory of music as an organic, holistic, and entertaining means to perform relevant cultural study and practice.

For this project, I have chosen to examine three specific musical texts that challenge the dominant views of space: David Bowie’s “Space Oddity,” Elton John and Bernie Taupin’s “Rocketman,” and Sun Ra’s “Space is the Place.” Through my analysis of these three space oddities in music I will attempt to model an approach to the study of popular music more in keeping with the transformative power of the medium, one that expands how music can be used in the production of cultural studies more broadly, and that is derived from individual everyday productive experience of music.

Rock Space

The choice of music as the means to cultivate subversions of the dominant discursive constructions of space is not intended to necessarily privilege one medium over others. Firstly, all of the musical texts I work with here communicate their meanings through multiple media forms, and to varying degrees I draw from other mediations of the songs to construct my alternative visions for the colonization of space. Secondly, other modes of art and artistic production can and do align well with the work this project attempts (Masiello). This project could have been just as valuable an amendment to the dominant discourses of space colonization by turning to critical science fiction literature or to science fiction film. A productive line of inquiry might have been to interrogate films derived from Philip K. Dick stories (*Blade Runner, Total Recall, Minority Report, A Scanner Darkly*, etc.). These are transmediate texts in which future times and places are conjured in such a way as to free Dick’s critiques of the here and now
from being blocked by contemporary ideological gatekeeping. But, as will be discussed in more
detail later, scholarly analysis of literature and film is far more advanced than popular music as a
discipline. Even when limiting attention to the sub-genre of science fiction within literature and
film, there is still a larger body of critical work than for all genres of music scholarship
combined.

Ultimately though, the choice to use music in this fashion comes from a combination of a
DIY philosophy of production and from the notion of starting with where you are. Following
Hakim Bey’s idea, developed in his anarchist rant promoting The Temporary Autonomous Zone
(TAZ) as a place where future utopias are prematurely incited and enacted, of music as an
organizing principle (124), I attempt to infuse my scholarly work with the means and modes of
musical production and reception. This means of understanding the world through the organizing
principles of musical experience is pushed forward by Henri Lefebvre in his latter treatise,
*Rhythmanalysis*. Lefebvre suggests that a musically rhythmic view of the world, particularly the
built environment, can “change our perspective on surroundings, because it changes our
conception” of the dominant philosophies that traditionally guide our understandings of space
and place (17, emphasis in original).

I came to this view on the role music can play initially, not through Bey, Lefebvre, Attali
or other cultural philosophers, but through the mass market paperback biography of The Doors’
Jim Morrison, *No One Here Gets Out Alive* by Danny Sugerman and Jerry Hopkins. Morrison
was well known for his ability to manipulate audiences through his performance, a skill
developed, according to Sugerman and Hopkins, in a Mass Psychology course taken as an
undergraduate film student. Reading this as a freshman student and aspiring rock star, I decided
that I could do even better than Morrison if I dedicated *all* my coursework to subjects that would
assist the development of my rock skills. This is how I came to be an early adopter of interdisciplinary education and began what should not be but is a precarious balancing act of music and scholarship.

It did not seem to matter that I had never had a music lesson, did not have a very good voice, and had yet to write a song – these things could be learned. More significantly, these things could be self-taught. Again, without privileging music over other media, I found music to be a way for me to generate my own self-produced access to cultural politics and social capital. Lawrence Grossberg echoes this approach to the use of music as a tool to critically engage culture more broadly when he theorizes that,

\[\ldots\] popular music offered a particularly powerful place to enter into the fields of culture and power because, however naively, I thought that it had at least the potential to serve as an organizing site, if not force, of resistance and alternatives. (100)

Music, from this view, has the capacity to move culture and society because it has the power to move bodies and minds. Even when consumed in the atomized isolation of personal audio players, reception and production of music happen in community, real and/or imagined. Like any community, the space of musical experience is contested space. John Street, for one, calls for discrimination between political texts and effective art works in order to parse out its effectiveness as a community development tool.

This means tracing more closely the ways in which political meanings are derived from cultural consumption, to see how memories and myths are contained within popular music, and how each tells a different version of the imagined communities which animate people’s lives. (Street 251)
The contest can be between art and politics, or more ubiquitously, between the mainstream and its oppositions. These contests create the fissures in dominant culture necessary to provide access to alternatives, and because the mainstream needs newness to progress, it also must concomitantly cultivate dynamic cultural arts that it cannot control. Frith describes this dynamic as follows,

[…] popular music culture isn’t the effect of popular music industry; rather, the music industry is an aspect of popular music culture. The industry has a significant role to play in that culture, but it doesn’t control it and, indeed, has constantly to respond to changes within it. (“The Popular Music Industry,” 27)

Importantly, music today is a part and product of global flows of economic and cultural capital and thus the objects and subjects of musical analysis occupy shifting, mutable, hybrid, polyvalent subject positions. From karaoke tourists (Drew) to salsa dancers in Colombia (Waxer) to the dangdut producers, retailers, and consumers of Indonesia (Wallach), music offers local individuals a way to make global culture their own and to make their own culture available worldwide. Since this project ostensibly deploys music as an intervention into the evolution of global capitalism as it evolves towards its next realm of colonization, the connection between music and globalization is particularly useful.

Given the theoretical roots and political goals of this analysis, it may be helpful then to read this work not as an academic tome but as notes to strike, stages to dive off, tunes to carry, or performances to play. My examination of these three musical texts of space oddity works from existing discursive constructions of space in popular music. Music has the ability to construct, not just mental maps of places real and imagined, but to actually participate in new
territorializations of space and place. This research deploys “the fact of musical space-making” or as Doyle also calls it, “the whimsical, elusive, inexhaustible ability of the song to remake space” (37). Though the spaces Doyle works with are those produced by the use of echo and reverb effects in rock ‘n’ roll pre-1960, ultimately I find this type of territorialization to function throughout the history of the genre in a broad array of texts. Following a multiplicitous invocation of star to mean both the celestial body and the rock celebrity, space as a general geographic concept and space as a contextual repository for open-ended speculation on the future of humanity and space as the specific place where plans for space tourism are projected are all invoked here, their differences purposely undelineated. This is not to be deliberately confusing, but because as Carson suggests in his discussion of David Bowie, my “interest is in drawing connections, inventing parallels [and] playing with context” (388).

While on the subject of music creating space, I would like to spend a moment playing Doyle’s conception of the territory created through musical production, which he borrows from Deleuze and Guattari (1983; 1987). The kinetic nomadic style of Deleuze-Guattarian thought offers extreme challenges in terms of conceptual inventiveness and radical purpose. With critical generosity, I suggest that this mode of theorizing is not intended to obfuscate, as the intellectual antithetical or theoretically disinclined might claim, but because the complex constitution of their subjects and fields of inquiry demand an equal or greater response. With a little work and inventiveness of ones own, as Doyle has done, several concepts developed by Deleuze and Guattari can be usefully appropriated, adapted, and concretely deployed. Moreover, as they suggest in On the Line, and as they model in A Thousand Plateaus, such theorizing often productively parallels the means, methods, and inspirational capacity of music. I borrow here their sense of musical experience as a critical methodology.
Doyle invokes the Deleuze and Guattarian thought that “music, through the agency of repetition and the refrain, is part of a larger process of the continual creation and dissolution of space” (Doyle 16). Deleuze and Guattari use the singing of birds as an analogy for how music generates a “territorial assemblage” or the coming together of “chaos, terrestrial forces, and cosmic forces [that] confront each other and converge in the territorial refrain” (*Plateaus* 312). The spaces territorialized by these forces are defined by “the emergence of matters of expression” (*Plateaus* 315), and these expressions “enter shifting relations with one another that ‘express’ the relation of the territory they draw to the interior milieu of impulses and exterior milieu of circumstances” (*Plateaus* 317, emphasis in original). This notion of the relation between interiority and exteriority in musical expression, echoed by Doyle, Whiteley, and Auslander, is key to the possibility of “territory [as] a result of art” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 316). Following this line of flight, where the artist, the musician in particular, is an active agent in coordinating the forces of chaos to create space(s), Doyle appropriates the Delueze and Guattarian conceptions of “territorialization,” “deterritorialization,” and “reterritorialization” to “describe this constant making, unmaking, and remaking of territory” (Doyle 16).

Deterritorialization disconnects us from our natural constituencies and each other, and such modes of production favor those who control the most tools. Nevertheless, in the hands of deliberately cartographic musicians, territorialization and reterritorialization become tools to make and remake space, tools applicable to the construction of spaces that surreptitiously disrupt the spatial regime of dominant culture. This is another advantage of a musical approach to cultural critique – the portability of the medium and its ability to reterritorialize render no space inaccessible to music as a method of reconstruction.
Given this capacity for art, and specifically music, to create territory, I wish to perform musical cartography, the capacity to territorialize and reterritorialize space with music, to keep some territory in the future production of space open socio-economically. I draw this map of space to claim territory within the space(s) of space tourism production for the prophetic subversive potential of music as incited by the French cultural critic Jacques Attali (1985). I do not mean to suggest that songs alone directly alter the future material conditions of workers in space or elsewhere. I do however attempt to map critical slippages onto the dominant discursive constructions of space, drawing instability onto the territory of popular space production. Working with space oddities, I am trying to alter space at the conceptual level in anticipation of the material production of space tourism and the subsequent standards of labor and leisure in the space service worker community.

Ken McLeod’s 2003 *Popular Music* article “Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music” suggests that space themes in rock music have been a consistent source of empowerment for marginalized voices where outsider voices are given a safe forum for the exploration of new modes of identity (337). Since McLeod is “concerned not just with the politics of music and the construction of identity but also with the politics of potential of who we might become” (339) he is one echo of the interventionary strategy I am seeking to produce. Space themes in rock have long been involved in the real and imagined colonization of space (McLeod 338). Constructing space with music can generate empowerment by creating “an embodied but imaginary space that mediates our internal space (feelings, desires, dreams) with external space (the physical, the experienced)” (McLeod 337). Since rock and roll developed on roughly the same timeline as human space exploration and the rise of science fiction, mediations
between internal and external space(s) recur throughout the history of the form and across genres (McLeod 340).

Sheila Whiteley, in her 1992 examination of the late 60s counter-culture of progressive rock in *The Space Between the Notes: Rock and the Counter-Culture*, concurs with McLeod on the function of space within rock in regards to the relationship between popular music, cultural production, and the liberatory potential of music as a symbolic act (3). In her discussion of the sub-genre of space rock within psychedelia, instrumentation, production technologies, and song structures (or perceived lack thereof) serve to “create an aural experience of the cosmos” but that “the established logic of the chord sequence provides an underlying sense of control” (Whitely 31). This tension between chaos and control, and the frictional energy generated at the intersections, is echoed by Walser (1993) in his discussion of heavy metal and by Hughes (2006) in his examination of an early Nirvana performance. Hughes, invoking Walser, writes that “if an overdriven system communicates power […] than a dangerously overdriven system communicates power that is too great to be controlled” (167). As will be elaborated further, manipulating (playing with, gaining control of, losing control of) the sounds of chaos can construct aural narratives of power, control, and/or resistance.

If one follows Whiteley’s suggestion of a homology between the spaced out experimentation of progressive rock and the counter-cultural attempts to shape an alternative society (2), the power produced by overdriven amplification in progressive, psychedelic, and space rock does not remain confined to the text. Rock is uniquely poised to play this broader cultural experimentation role, as Keir Keightley argues, because of the distinctive role of rock in late twentieth century history and culture and its position as an “‘oppositional’ form of popular culture … born within the mainstream” (126). Though Keightley attributes the unique status of
rock to the demographic anomaly of the baby boom, the originary conditions of the medium have allowed rock to maintain an oppositional stance from within the realm of mainstream production (139). My choices for space oddities are texts that work in this dynamic arena somewhere between cultural industry determinism (Adorno and Horkheimer) and sociological optimism (Frith *Sound Effects*) along the lines of Keightley’s Bourdieuan assertion that:

> Once rock broke the symbolic link between mass culture and mindless conformity, it became possible to build new distinctions within and upon the terrain of the popular, to express oppositional sensibilities via commercial, mass mediated culture. (141)

John Street concurs with this assessment of the tension between the mainstream and its oppositions, between entrepreneurialism and idealism. Using the Isle of Wight festival as an archetypal example of musicians and those who profit from them being caught “between belief and bottom line” Street’s contention is that “it is this tension which actually generates pop’s finest moments and its truest politics” (244). Street also cautions against reducing the politics of a song text to lyrical analysis suggesting instead that other elements of production and context contribute to meaning. Rather than just in the lyrics, “The politics lies in the sounds and their structures, in the way they refuse or embrace musical orthodoxies, in the way they follow and disturb expectations. The message can be in the mix” (Street 248). If the message is in the mix, then the author of a song becomes a greater entity than the composer and performer, and is rather a broadly shared endeavor between “the singer, instrumentalists, songwriter, arranger, recording engineer, promotional photographer, video clip director, and possibly others” (Brackett 127). I argue, by extension, that the texts produced in response to and in conversation with a song can, with intentionality, be part of the mix. Following this line of thinking, the politics of music are
thus also to be found, very productively, in the ways that individuals and communities
(re)appropriate musical texts, musical production, and musical thinking.

The Space Oddities: An Experimental Culture Studies Methodology

[…] cultural studies has a political agenda, which is to usher in a more egalitarian society
[and] is always about transforming social relations of exploitation and oppression […].
Angie Chabram-Dernersesian in “Critical Dialogues on Chicana/o Cultural
Studies” (56).

Faced with a difficult problem and/or a fun idea, the go-to methodology for an indie-rocker
worth their ironic used t-shirt collection is to start a band. For a sense of what is made possible
through this methodology – DIY⁶ networks of bands, friends, communities making zines,
records, tours, and scenes – see Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie
Underground 1981-1991 by Michael Azerrad for one small set of examples. The DIY ethos
chronicled by Azerrad was derived of necessity and/or aesthetic. In either case, the successes and
failures of pre-alternative post-punk indie-rock happened at the margins of corporate hegemony
and showed that the most amazing things can flower from the minutest toehold crack in
industrial concrete.

One result of the happenstancial cultural milieu of the American Indie Underground is
that most of the greatest bands of the era never strayed beyond their initial conception on the
grubby couches of college town living rooms, let alone found their way onto a performance
stage. These fly-by-night fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants bands were about playing with ideas:
their career trajectory always already broken up, the impermanence of the band a necessary
precondition to inoculate against commodification, against being valued by mainstream culture.
The band must not live long so that the idea might.
Creating these ephemeral diversionary bands is primarily an exercise in creative fun but also serves as a means to collectively hone interesting concepts. Intense debates erupt over the ethos, look, sound, and potential membership of the band. The title and art design for the first album often precedes the writing of the first song. The driving artistic concept behind the bands’ existence is the primary act of creation and might productively include a made-up history and discography. Wild combinations of incongruous genre elements and novel instrumentation yield unusual new sonic possibilities that on occasion might even seep into the sounds of an actual working band. As produce of community imagination, actualization of or even the ability to exercise such plans is inconsequential so long as the concept is fully played out.

In other words, the process of dreaming up a band is an exercise in theory. I now propose to test this tried and true methodology in a new context. But instead of forming the group with good friends, I am forming it with good theories. The Space Oddities are my supergroup and Rock Open Space is their flagship production. Rock Open Space may also be thought of as the soundtrack to the written text the reader and I are presently engaging.

The Space Oddities record for a label that is part of a trans-national corporation seeking hegemonic domination of the first phase of space tourism development. Some of their core fan base is dismayed by the devil’s bargain represented in such a corporate relationship and are suspicious of the economics underlying the band’s assertion that signing with a major label was done to expand their range of potential audiences for their music and ideas and to position themselves to be the first rock band to play in space. This debate causes (productive) tension within the band as well. Devo is mustered as primary evidence for the side that wins this argument.
The hyperbolic fake biography in the liner notes says they met as petulant (domestic and foreign exchange) students in Paris in May 1968, rode the crest of the arena/corporate rock era of the early seventies, and went through a wannabe-Grunge makeover and comeback in the early nineties: think Spinal Tap for nerds. They are superficially timeless but their best work took place in and because of the immediate aftermath of the dawn of human spacefaring, roughly 1969-74.

The Space Oddities’ sound is a blend of genres and their influences are too numerous to list. Contemporary gatekeepers of underground sub-genre boundaries sometimes resist older influences and it may seem incongruous to make claims of newness using such dated ingredients. True enough, but it is essential to remember first that incongruity is unavoidable and desirable, and secondly, that there is no indie-rock without classic rock to rebel against and steal resources from. Furthermore, as Marcus shows in Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (1989), radical avant-garde conceptions of culture and society bloom and wilt in irregular non-linear chronologies and geographies. What makes something new, in music or scholarship, is not how recent its invention or the chronology of the popularity but how well it informs the new contexts in which it is deployed.

Membership in The Space Oddities is inclusive and fluid but the fan favorite classic lineup that recorded Rock Open Space is as follows:7

- Rhythm Guitar: Patricia Nelson Limerick’s New Historicist Frontier
- Lead Guitar: Constance Penley’s “Slash” of NASA/Trek
- Keyboards: De Witt Douglas Kilgore’s alternative Astrofuturism
- Drums: Jean Baudrillard’s Precession of Simulacra
- Bass: Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding
Manager: Situationist International’s Psychogeography

A good rhythm guitar player can be the central node in the assemblage of a band (at least those with more than one guitar). The rhythm guitar locks into the rhythms produced by the bass and drums and works to sustain them, but also interacts with lead instruments – lead guitar, vocals, keyboards variously – in a supporting and propulsive role. The rhythm player is a constant presence though usually mixed lower relative to the lead instruments. In other words, rhythm guitar playing at its best should be both omnipresent and imperceptible. Patricia Nelson Limerick’s New Historicist Frontier was selected to play rhythm guitar to contribute to the music of The Space Oddities her problematization of the frontier myth as applied to space.

Limerick is best known for *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, in which she deconstructs the traditional myths of the frontier American West. *Legacy of Conquest* is considered a canonical early work of New Historicism for its expansion of the historical subject to include views from the bottom up, a view from which “[…] the intersection of ethnic diversity with property allocation unifies western history” (27). Limerick shows that the reality of the frontier features the same inequitable distribution of economic resources based on socially constructed racial formations as other historical periods and American places. In refocusing the lens through which we look at the American West away from the Generals, the railroad and land barons, the politicians and policy-makers, Limerick introduced historians, as if for the first time, to regular folks like farmers, trappers, women, Asians and Hispanics, and others left out of the mainstream frontier thesis. The frontier American West had been traditionally thought of as a process, one that had famously ended once a critical mass of Anglos had settled, whereas Limerick asks us to read the frontier as a place. A place endures, and is geographically connected to other places and the flows of ideas, peoples, and cultures of those
places. Viewed as a place, the present and the past are linked and thus the political, social, economic, and environmental patterns established during Anglo settlement of the West continue to resonate today.

Her notion of an “Unbroken Past” recognizes that the social and economic structures of the frontier American West have antecedents and descendants – in other words, the frontier American West was unexceptional, quotidian, mundane, and far less spectacular and more like other places and times than its popular constructions represent. Belying the myth of frontier individualism, the American West is always already vitally connected with the outside world and its varied peoples and cultures. Nevertheless, conquest stereotypes are “valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern [ethnic, class, and political] troubles” (19) and thus the frontier ideal became a crucible for faith in progress. The frontier, says Limerick, is “An unsubtle concept in a subtle world” (25) and her work goes a long way towards complicating the concept.⁸

Of more relevance to The Space Oddities is Limerick’s later consultation work with NASA. One such example of this latter work is her service as chair of a session entitled “What is the Cultural Value of Space Exploration” at a 1994 NASA sponsored symposium. In the opening remarks, Limerick acknowledges that the frontier metaphor is dynamic and helps captures the attention and imagination of space stakeholders, but that the perception of frontier history proceeding in linear fashion from Manifest Destiny through the frontier American West and out into space should be taken more seriously than a boosterist legend. Rather, space enthusiasts should look at the reality of the frontier American West and apply those lessons accordingly in plans for the space frontier:
Leaving home and going West proved to be a very ineffective way of leaving…problems behind and an even less effective way of solving those problems…The American West proved to be no escape at all from ethnic and racial tensions, from urban and industrial conflicts, from the…depletion of natural resources…or from frustration and failure. (13)

Limerick goes on to point out that those who promote the notion of space exploration as a technical cure for social ills should pay attention to the stark realities of frontier expansion in which expediency rules and “the ideals and practices of democracy” suffer (14). Thus, if while listening to Rock Open Space one were to isolate the rhythm guitar track, the following would be a consistent refrain:

Space boosters promise a wide and open distribution of benefits [but] in situations of colonization and settlement, occasions in which everyone gains and no one loses have been extremely rare. (13)

As she showed with her groundbreaking work on the frontier American West, utopian frontier images that do not account for the diversity of people and their real experiences, the urban nature of much frontier life, and the highly subsidized and capitalized settling of space risk a dangerous divorce from reality.

Among other possibilities, lead guitar in The Space Oddities is primarily about riffing. Riffs can be the signature of a rock band’s sound and take center stage in the overall mix. A good riff has to be rooted in the overall rhythm of a track from where it then can launch the song towards new, creative, and hopefully catchy engagement. If the song becomes memorable, it will likely be the riff that sticks in the listeners mind more than any other single contribution to the song. The riff would also be the starting place for someone to learn the song for themselves
(even when the riff is beyond the technical capacity of the imitator). Feminist film scholar Constance Penley’s theory of the “slash” that joins NASA and Star Trek plays lead guitar for The Space Oddities. NASA/TREK, her neologism for the popular science of space mutually constructed by governmental space agencies and popular culture representations, is her signature riff on Rock Open Space.

Penley begins *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America* (1997), with the claim that “going into space” – both the actuality of it and its science fiction realization – has become the prime metaphor through which we try to make sense of the world of science and technology and imagine a place for ourselves in it. (4)

Penley argues that the National Aeronautics and Space Agency (NASA) and Star Trek (TREK) have been the two most dominant cultural producers of popular representations of space since the advent of space travel. As Penley states, “NASA/TREK […] is a collectively elaborated story that weaves together science and science fiction to help write, think, and launch us into space” (9). Another way Penley suggests NASA/TREK might be riffed off is to work from the idea that “Star Trek is the theory, NASA is the practice” (19). Written while NASA was the hegemonic producer of space, I suspect that newer producers of space-faring are also the practice of which Penley speaks and that the interaction between representations of space in popular culture and the production of space may grow even tighter.

As a new market for private space tourism develops and production shifts away from NASA to the TNeCs (Trans-National entertainment Corporation)⁹, popular conceptions of space travel should undergo significant revision. While this happens, we would be well advised to consider the slash (/) in NASA/TREK as an opportunity for generating hybrid critical responses
to the dominant normativities of popular space. As Penley shows in her analysis of homoerotic Kirk/Spock slash fiction produced largely by women Star Trek fans who wish to expand Star Trek’s unwittingly limited inclusive ethos, the dynamic interaction of alternative and popular productions of space can be a fruitful avenue for making changes. If slash fiction can impact the Trek franchise and in turn NASA in this fashion, which Penley shows to have happened, perhaps critical inclusive visions produced in relation to the spacefaring TNeCs can have similar effects on the production of real space. Penley hopes there is just such a collective opportunity presented by slash writers and their reappropriative works:

Slash writing devotes as much time to inner space as outer space, emphasizes women’s inclusion and creative control, and offers a much more satisfying utopian solution than NASA has yet been able to conceive. [...] It is an experiment in imagining new forms of sexual and racial equality, democracy, and a fully human relation to the world of science and technology. NASA/TREK is a much needed utopian narrative of and for our time. (148)

Penley notes that slash writers read NASA/TREK technologies not just as high-tech gadgetry, but also as technologies of the body in everyday life. Thus, the techno-utopian imaginings of slash writers differ from mainstream space futures because they work with

[...] a notion of technology that sees everything in the world (and out of this world) as interrelated and subject to influence by more utopian and imaginative desire than those embodied in existing technological hardware. (Penley 118)

Moreover, the simplicity of design in the Star Trek universe allows those who appropriate from this source text more ample room on these surfaces on which to project their own interpretations.
That the Trek universe is rendered rudimentary makes any complex reading of it a function of the reader rather than residing in the text itself.

There is some significant evidence supporting the possibility that Penley’s NASA/ TREK riff might be heard in the places created by space tourism. The *Star Trek* franchise is a dominant producer of premeditated perceptions of spacefaring and generated a generation of tech-savvy fans. Tech-savvy Trekkies have attempted to realize *Star Trek* derived technologies in real concrete material form and many of them have had remarkable world-changing success. A recent History Channel program, *How William Shatner Changed the World*, documents the inspirational connection and technological template provided by *Star Trek* to the inventors of invaluable innovative technologies such as the cell phone, non-invasive surgery, remote sensing, computer voice recognition, desktop computing, and virtual reality. Another direct lineage from *Star Trek* to real spacefaring is that is was Paul Allen’s investment firm Vulcan Ventures, named after *Star Trek*’s race of space logicians, that financed the construction of SpaceShipOne. Virgin Galactic is building a commercial spaceliner, the VSS Enterprise, named after the *Star Trek* franchise flagship, the USS Enterprise.¹⁰

Given the prominent place of guitars in rock, the role of keyboards is highly contested, particularly the synthesizer. Among some sub-genres, there is such a strong bias for guitar sounds that the use of digital instruments is, to say the least, discouraged. On the other hand, some of the most productive sub-genres of the late capitalist era, in terms of innovation and DIY production, have been rooted largely and in some cases exclusively in sounds created by samplers and synthesizers. Even bands known for their guitar sound are likely to deploy some keyboard instruments to help fill the background sonic spectrum. The keyboard can play riffs, provide percussion, sample and manipulate pre-existing sounds, double the background
vocal, and just about anything else a band might need to flesh out its sound. The diverse capacities of keyboard instruments, from the piano to the Moog, means that there is almost always a job to be done for a well-versed keyboard player. In the sound of The Space Oddities the keyboard most often doubles with the rhythm guitar or foregrounds the lead guitar, with a hi-tech tonal edge in either case.

De Witt Douglas Kilgore’s alternative astrofuturism, as described in *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*, is the keyboard player for The Space Oddities. Kilgore defines astrofuturism as follows:

> Devoted to breaking the limits placed on humanity by the surface of this planet, astrofuturism forecasts an escape from terrestrial history. Its roots lie in the nineteenth-century Euro-American preoccupation with imperial expansion and utopian speculation, which it recasts in the elsewhere and elsewhen of outer space (1, emphasis in original).

As scholar of literature, Kilgore is most interested in “[…] the tradition of speculative fiction and science writing inaugurated by scientists and science popularizers during the space race” (2). Kilgore views the astrofuturist space frontier in much the same terms as Limerick in that the unproblematized myth is constructed as “an endless frontier that would redeem the past and transform the present,” though Kilgore’s astrofuturists are wedded to technology more than geography as the means of escape (3). Also in sync with Limerick’s deconstruction of space frontier ideology is Kilgore’s interest in resurfacing the invaluable contributions of ethnic and gendered others left out of traditional mainstream frontier myths.

After establishing the mainstream consensus view of astrofuturism, Kilgore devotes much of the text to those who, like Penley’s slash authors, have repurposed astrofuturism to
more inclusive ends responding “to the claims of marginalized peoples” (222). Specifically, Kilgore claims that despite their segregation from spacefaring, astrofuturism provides opportunities for women and racial minorities to express alternatives to the status quo. Kilgore invokes reappropriated astrofuturism as a form of Foucaultian heterotopia and a counter to George Lipsitz’s conception of the “possessive investment in whiteness,” suggesting that engagement with astrofuturism has the potential to yield spaces of greater freedom and equality (226-7). Kilgore concludes with a powerfully hopeful statement of the potential for reappropriated astrofuturism to produce such a future:

The astrofuturism of the spaceflight movement is by turns an extension of exploratory dramas that celebrate conquest and exploitation and those that seek wildernesses that are free from the powerful hierarchies of our world. We might consider what help there is in this tradition for communities suffering the political and economic consequences of mendacity, bigotry, and greed. Their engagements exemplify our ability to imagine just social orders using the materials at hand, seizing help from unexpected quarters. It is through this kind of imaginative work that we develop the tools we need to change the future. (238)

Kilgore’s reconstituted progressive astrofuturism pushes the boundaries of convention and has the capacity to repurpose dominant power towards subversive ends, for as Kilgore notes, “even the most conservative and obdurate instruments of power have in them potential that can be tuned to other agendas” (238).

Rock drummers are a strange lot. They are required to be consistent, pounding, dynamic, driving, and omnipresent but not in the lead. They are occasionally asked to be creative, but are rarely given the opportunity to lead the band. In all but the rarest of cases though, the drummer is
nonetheless indispensable. Between their rock and the hard place of an essential but supporting role, solid rock drummers can be the most unstable personality in a band. Finding someone good enough to keep a solid beat but humble and secure enough to enjoy a rearguard position is a difficult proposition, and the really good ones know it. In addition to unique personality quirks, good solid rock drummers often feel empowered to engage in behaviors – strange demands, non-consensual interpretations of time, intoxicated outbursts, untenable innovations – that would get players of other instruments tossed from the lineup. The prototype of this kind of player is the late Keith Moon of The Who, whose pounding simulation of a (murmured) heartbeat was inventive, humorous, bitter, and unsustainable, yet all the while sustaining the beat.

On the drums for The Space Oddities is the Precession of Simulacra as developed by Sci-fi postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard. As Baudrillard sees things, we live in a world of illusion far removed from reality. This illusory science-fiction world is built of simulacra – “a copy of a copy of a copy” where the original no longer exists. Furthermore, the simulacra eventually erases the evidence that the original ever existed. In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Jean Baudrillard outlines the historical process for arriving in a contemporary moment so dominated by signs and images that we no longer experience reality, but rather a simulation of reality.

There are three stages in the precession of simulacra. The first is associated with pre-modernity where the representation/image clearly stands in for the real thing, e.g. the map is explicitly only a representation of an actual geography. The second order corresponds to the industrial revolution and mass-production of images, the ability to copy. In this second stage, the copy’s capacity to faithfully imitate the original drives the dissolution of “reality” as an opposition to the simulation. And most importantly, for the purposes of this project, the third order of the precession deals with the postmodern epoch, where the simulacrum precedes the
original – here there is nothing but the simulacrum, and the boundaries between the real and representation go beyond being blurred and insignificant, the real is rendered effectively nonexistent. Now, we are left with a copy of a copy of a copy, where the original no longer exists, leaving only the simulacrum, the copied copy, which not only stands in for the real, but actually becomes understood as the “real” thing. In the end, the simulacra of the real occlude the fact that the real ever existed.

Baudrillard cites Disneyland as an exemplary case. He argues,

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real…to make us believe that the adults are everywhere, in the ‘real’ world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere […]. (352)

In other words, the representation masks the real and allows us to believe only in the representation as actuality. Regarding the essential contest or struggle Baudrillard engages, Sadie Plant argues that,

His battle lines are drawn between all pretenders to truth, subjectivity, meaning, and the whole gamut of desiring and impassioned struggles for real experience on the one hand, and all blatant declarations of simulation, commodification, seduction, and artifice on the other. The world has in some sense has shifted to this last camp, and it is here, in the surfaces and secrets of mediation, that the truly irrecuperable gestures are finally to be found. (166)

If we apply critical view of this embrace of the mediated artifice to space, it might be said that the simulacric construction of space conceals our reality here on earth (which might accommodate some of the critiques of space travel; i.e. that we need to invest the resources we
are spending on space development on the real problems in our communities such as poverty, hunger, and war. Although this seems like an easy precession of simulacra (from the imagist representation of the real to the loss of the real to be replaced by the representation), the model actually does not so easily accommodate the contemporary space development industry because, simply, there has never been relatively much of a reality of space travel for humans – there have only been simulacra. The nascent space tourism industry could thus reverse the order of the precession, moving from the simulation (through popular culture representations of a human future in space) to the real (actual material constructions of space technologies and travel technologies).

The other essential piece of the rhythm section is the bass. The bass, as the name suggests, holds down the bottom end and ideally locks in with the bass drum. Ironically, though the bass player and the drummer need to synchronize more than any other two players in the band, they are often at opposite ends of the personality spectrum. The archetype of the bass player is the stoic solid rock, always there and always reliable. They are the root, the solid foundation on which the rest of the sound is built. The bass may go unnoticed relative to the lead instruments but its absence would be unmistakable.

On bass for The Space Oddities is Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding. As a founding figure in the field of cultural studies, and like a good bass player, Hall provides a solid foundation strongly rooted in the best traditions of the discipline. Hall’s membership in the band helps make sure that the everyday concerns of everyday working people are never far from the minds of the players, making sure that cultural theory and political questions are considered in tandem. In particular, Hall provides a grounded counterweight to the antics of Baudrillard by constantly
reminding the band members, and their audiences, to ask themselves if their work is having a concrete effect on real people in the real world.

In his essay, “Encoding, Decoding,” Stuart Hall is concerned with the dominant discourse as it is embedded in televisual texts. Although Hall is specifically commenting on television, his argument is useful to The Space Oddities at the level of discourse as it is invested with ideology and connotative meaning. So far, a human future in space is for the most part only constructed discursively. Recall the import of involvement of television representations of space and of entertainment corporations in contemporary constructions of space: Star Trek, Rebel Billionaire, Virgin Galactic, Disney, etc. Hall notes that the televisual sign, in particular, “is an iconic sign…because it ‘possesses some of the properties of the thing represented’” (511). But, as discussed with Baudrillard, space presents a different challenge in that “the thing represented” has not yet been real (though it “always already” may be).

Hall argues that within this circuit of communication, patterns of dominance are problematically reproduced. In other words: at production, the dominant-hegemonic discourse is encoded into the text. Then, the text (or its performance) is distributed, to be decoded (or consumed) by the viewer who then recognizes the dominant discourse, and once again internalizes the values inherent in the discourse. The viewer, then, reproduces this discourse in her/his material lived lives and communities. Importantly, Hall recognizes spaces in the process for subverting, or at least resisting, hegemony. He lays out three viewer positions.

1) In the dominant-hegemonic position, the viewer “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded” (515). This is the obvious reading in which the viewer receives the message at face value. The
multiplicitous (re)iterations of a mainstream source text like “Rocketman” operate on this level.

2) The negotiated code or position “contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule” (516). Major Tom as constructed by David Bowie in “Space Oddity” works from this position.

3) In the oppositional code or position, “it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contradictory way.” The viewer understands the dominant-hegemonic coding and can recode or “retotalize the message” in one’s own preferred framework for use and understanding (517). This is the realm in which Sun Ra constructs space as the/a place.

Every band, especially one that positions itself more about art than commerce, needs a manager to perform the work Bernard Rhodes did for The Clash, Malcolm McClaren did for The Sex Pistols, Hank Shocklee did for Public Enemy, John Sinclair did for the MC5, and Sun Ra did for himself – someone whose job is to generate and enforce artistic and ideological talking points and performative paradigms for the band. Situationist International’s Psychogeography manages The Space Oddities. As an organization hoisted on the petard of its own ideological purges, Situationist International’s Psychogeography is not allowed to make personnel decisions but nevertheless crafts the band’s aesthetic, manages their career, and organizers their touring.
Psychogeography is an artistic practice fused with critical urban theory and experience to understand and reconfigure the mental mapping that humans experience in cities. At the same time, the practice of psychogeography was an intentional effort to take artistic experience and theory out of the conventional space of museums and galleries and instead be “playful, cheap, and populist, an artistic activity carried out in the everyday space of the street” (Sadler 69). According to Simon Sadler in *The Situationist City*, psychogeographers make sense of the urban environment, particularly how people use the city,

through their use, their history, and their collective and associative generation of meaning and mood, like words in poetry; it inferred a poetic rather than analytical response to the environment … Anyone who has really lived understands psychogeography, it was assumed [by situationist psychogeographers], and anyone will understand it once they have experienced *real life*. (160, emphasis in original)

Of particular relevance to the work of producing space differently is Sadler’s assertion that, particularly for communities outside dominant culture, the deployment of psychogeography in the urban environment “could momentarily defy the white patriarchy of urban space-time” (81). As Alastair Bonnett defines it,

Psychogeography is about the instinctual exploration of the emotional contours of one’s environment. It aims to discover and create subversive and anti-authoritarian places and journeys that can be used in the development of new, more liberating, kinds of locales. (198)

For the Association of Autonomous Astronauts (AAA) psychogeography “is used as an Exit Strategy to leave this society behind” (*Space 1999*, 27).
Situationist International’s Psychogeography opens each show ranting from a 1969 *Internationale Situationniste #12* article “The Conquest of Space in the Time of Power” and berating the audience:

[Ladies and Gentleman!] The conquest of space is part of the planetary hope of an economic system which, saturated with commodities, spectacles, and power, ejaculates into space when it arrives at the end of the noose of its terrestrial contradictions. Functioning as a new “America,” space must serve the states as a new territory for wars and colonies – a new territory to which to send producer-consumers and thus enable the system to break out of the planet’s limitations.

[Let’s have a spectacular round of applause for…The Space Oddities!]. (Rothe, paragraph 10)

The Space Oddities then launch into the driving beat of the titular original composition on *Rock Open Space*. They are full of energy and bombast as they rush out onto the stage. They seem about to lose control of the tune as they jump about kicking out the jam until in unison but not in sync they step up to the microphone and shout:

We’re gonna rock open space  
Make sure it’s an autonomous place  
Produce new lives and work on the face  
Of the moon and a planet or two  

We’re gonna rock open space  
In a ship built by the AAA  
A pop situation that is real and ok  
Music is our fuel and theory is our tool  
To rock open space  

First Rough Mixes
This description of The Space Oddities in performance has established who might indeed theoretically rock open space. Subsequent chapters will examine how, what, and where, respectively, The Space Oddities might play. On their first track, or chapter, The Space Oddities play their eponymous hit, David Bowie’s “Space Oddity.” The chapter develops a method of musical analysis built on a holistic view of a musical text that de-privileges the primacy of both lyrical analysis and the need for the specialized ability to read musical notation. A majority of popular music studies rely too heavily on either lyrics or notation while not giving enough credence to the lived experience of the text in which the receiver attentively listens to the song over and over and over, getting ever deeper into the world created within the text. The analysis of David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” thus relies on lived musical experience available to anyone who spends significant time and exerts dedicated energy to deconstructing a musical text with the goal of creating something new, some new space, from it. This chapter models how a study of popular culture with deep focus on a single popular music text might be used to produce alternative meanings of use in premeditating space differently. In other words, I listened to the song on constant repeat for weeks on end until the ideas for this project emerged from the headphones.

When The Space Oddities play “Space Oddity” Baudrillard pushes the other band members to be weirder, to go out there a little more, and to embrace Major Tom as simulacra. To do so, Baudrillard tries to rein in some of the excess in his own playing while retaining his trademark exuberance. Or as Hall described in an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, Baudrillard is “involved, not simply in identifying new trends or tendencies, new cultural configurations, but in learning to love them” (“Stuart Hall” 131), and it is this love of the new territory the band covers with this song that animates their playing of it. Hall is particularly
challenged, and Baudrillard’s attitude particularly helpful, on “Space Oddity” as the unrooted bass of the original is not compatible with his usual solid thumping style. Baudrillard eventually inspires Hall to embrace the idea of playing as if “there’s always something decentered about the medium of culture” (Hall “Cultural Studies,” 105). The other players face a similar challenge but since most of the instruments are mixed relatively low compared to the bombast of their originals, the guitars and keys feel comfortable enough to freely explore and noodle.

Next The Space Oddities play Elton John’s “Rocketman” to explore how mainstream popular music texts can be creatively reworked to (re)construct new subversive texts. When carried out into space by those who have appropriated the text, “Rocketman” is an example of how subversive potential can ride along as a stowaway on wings of mainstream popularity. In other words, the mainstream popularity of “Rocketman” may provide fuel and cover for the subversive potential latent in the original and serve as a demonstration project for the kinds of interventions I am developing for use in space tourism. The work performed by “Rocketman” is that of individual resistance launched subtly from deep within the realm of TNeC production. Hall, Penley, and Kilgore like the idea of playing a new version of such a mainstream hit because of the way the song surreptitiously disrupts dominant identity constructions:

[which] placed, positioned, stabilized, and allowed us to understand and read, almost as a code, the imperatives of the individual self: the great social identities of class, of race, of nation, of gender, [sexuality,] and of the West. (Hall “Old and New Identities,” 146).

In the rough mix of The Space Oddities version of “Rocketman” Limerick is mixed lower relative to Penley so that the reappropriative nature of the slash can take a more prominent place. Baudrillard again has hard time restraining his exuberance for pop effect, and wants to really
push hard to maximize further iterations of Rocketman as a simulacric meme, as William Shatner, Chris Elliot, *The Family Guy*, and Beck all do. Hall is more interested in what Kate Bush does with the song, disrupting and resignifying the original representations of masculinity in particular. Kilgore wants to be turned up, since the original “Rocketman” is a sonic homology of the astrofuturist literature he holds so dear, at once embracing the space age and steering it elsewhere. Psychogeography wants the band to problematize notions of “home” and “out here” in Bernie Taupin’s lyric – where exactly does Rocketman go and how might the band exploit the liberatory effects of being and going there? During the rehearsals, Deleuze and Guattari stop by the studio to inquire if they can help push the “timeless flight” in the original lyric further afield.

Finally, The Space Oddities begin the process of using music to create new space places, following the prototypical DIY production ethos espoused by Sun Ra in the film *Space is the Place*. Unlike Bowie and John, Sun Ra produced his music and his vision of space in and of community, and outside TNeC production. In this research, Sun Ra is the musician with the longest lasting, most highly developed vision of the relationship between the possibilities of open space and terrestrial realities of inequality, and the transformative capacity of making music. The spaces Sun Ra creates, however, are much less popular than either John or Bowie but nevertheless can and should be profitably pressed into the service of keeping space open. Oddly though, Sun Ra is one musician on whom there is a great deal of critical literature, and so this chapter is split between a more traditional review of the literature on and an examination of Sun Ra’s signature film *Space is the Place*.

The Space Oddities are initially at a loss as to how they, as a rock band, are going to apply themselves to playing a jazz tune. Moreover, no two performances of “Space is the Place” are the same as Sun Ra conducts the Arkestra situationally, responding in real time to the
geographic, spiritual, and psychological context of the moment. Situationist Psychogeography gets very excited about The Space Oddities taking on Sun Ra and rises to the occasion of this challenge.

Situationist Psychogeography strongly suggests to the band that they stretch themselves and to be extra creative about how to approach “Space is the Place” and recommended that they stage a parade and record the song live. Remember that Sun Ra uses his music as a means to create space, as a concept and as a place. Situationist Psychogeography relays the story of Sun Ra’s performance of the song in Paris in the aftermath of May 68. According to Szwed, Paris police blocked a crowd of around four thousand gathered outside the venue from seeing the show (Szwed 81). Sun Ra led the Arkestra and the crowd inside in a parade, “marching straight through the police phalanx and down the street” and by the time they circled the block, with much of the police brigade in tow, police officials relented and everyone enjoyed the show (Szwed 81). Using the power of their musical performance, the Arkestra was able to transform a place of confrontation into a space of participation. This is exactly the kind of cultural activity Psychogeography seeks to promote and build upon, or as Bonnett declares of the psychogeographic project, “we shouldn’t just aspire to create temporary geographies of disruption but also serious and workable ideas/models for the transformation of urban (and rural) living” (200). Adding heft to the effort of The Space Oddities’ manager to get them to use their music in the service of social space Bonnett continues, “It is towards precisely this task that the situationists’ psychogeographical investigations were directed and may be used today by those seeking to develop the challenge to everyday space” (200). Plant elaborates on the psychogeographic plan being,
a means of showing the concealed potential of experimentation, pleasure, and play in everyday life, the situationists considered a little chaos to be a valuable means of exposing the way in which the experiences made possible by capitalist production could be appropriated within a new and enabling system of social relations. (60)

Situationist Psychogeography claims that the significance of the story is not just the transformation of public space in defiance of official state authority or even how such activity portends the future, but that the place in question is the Les Halles neighborhood, a hallowed place in Situationist lore. At hearing this, Baudrillard perks up. Les Halles was once a vibrant street market with a diversity of spontaneous social interactions of the sort valorized by the original Situationists, the kind of space Psychogeography was devised to create. It is also, perversely, the site of Situationism’s harshest recuperation. “Beaubourg!” shouts Baudrillard. Beaubourg is the colloquial name for the Centre Pompidou modern art museum, which was built on the ruins of Les Halles. As Sadler describes it, “If, as the situationists claimed, the May events were evidence of a popular will, then the Centre Pompidou looked like a blatant attempt to manage that will” (68). And to add insult to injury, “In 1989, the Beaubourg hosted the retrospective exhibition on the Situationist International” (Sadler 68).

“Not so fast,” says Baudrillard. In “The Beaubourg Effect: Impulsion and Deterrence” Baudrillard predicts that the efforts of the state to recuperate artistic subversion will implode, the massive weight of the effort to control meaning yielding, ultimately, the kind of collapse of meaning on which he likes to ride. Situationist Psychogeography would prefer that The Space Oddities re-recuperate the former space of Les Halles following Mark Wigley’s description of such efforts:
Every transformation of the space, no matter how minor, is understood as a direct intervention in social life that sets off a ‘chain reaction’ of responses. New forms of behavior evolve, only to be challenged by the next spatial move, and so on. (14).

The band argues a bit about why they should record “Space is the Place” live in this place/space, and then ultimately agrees with Situationist Psychogeography that it would be a good idea to parade around the Centre Pompidiou Plaza and let the situation and the collective of spontaneous parade participants determine if and what meaning comes of the event.

The encore presentation of The Space Oddities will point to what the kinds of spaces opened by the three previous chapters might actually look like. Following Sun Ra’s invocation of space as the place, I draw on Devo and the Association of Autonomous Astronauts in the final chapter to begin imagining what might be created in space. These new space places, created through the confluence of popular music and space tourism within the sphere of corporate entertainment production, will hopefully be fashioned in a manner that precludes the space frontier from replicating the inequalities of previous frontiers. Rather than wait until material space actually exists to perform retrospective post-colonial analysis, in sum the efforts expended here attempt a proactive pre-colonial analysis of the production of space that hopes to keep space open to equality and diversity through drawing upon the work of visionary thinkers and musical performers.

I ask the reader to now drop the needle on The Space Oddities Rock Open Space record and spend some time at the apex of the sonic space age, when popular music was imaginatively responding to the arrival of real human beings in space. Listen to their covers of David Bowie’s “Space Oddity,” Elton John’s “Rocketman,” and Sun Ra’s “Space Is The Place” and consider
this methodology section the liner notes. While reading these liner notes, please listen to the songs repeatedly – alternately with hyper-attentiveness and as casual background noise. I am interested in what might happen if the reader then would imagine singing along, and then perhaps forming a cover band in which the reader might play a new instrument. Rock some open space or rock some space open – make space something different, something special, something fun we all might enjoy someday. Under these conducive conditions, I hope the reader might then try, like Devo and the Association of Autonomous Astronauts have, to use the practices of detournment and psychogeography to draw maps of space that might imagine real, new, different places yet unseen but always already possible.

1 A few resources of note are available for those interested in the contemporary state of the field. I recommend starting with the International Association for the Study of Popular Music at <www.iaspm.net> where one can find information on conferences, reviews, and other useful resources. A particularly useful link to some popular music studies bibliographies can be found at <iismc.cini.it/>. Some more bibliographic resources and general surveys of the field can be found in Holt 2007, Bennett, Shank, and Toynbee 2006, Clayton, Herbert, and Middleton 2003, Frith, Straw, and Street 2001, Middleton 2000, Negus 1996, Shuker 1994, Swiss, Sloop, and Herman 1998 and others.

2 It should be noted that key members of Devo dispute many of the facts of Dellinger and Giffels’ account. See <www.earcandymag.com/devo-2005.htm> accessed 8-8-08.

3 Powers is currently entertainment editor for the Chicago Tribune.


5 See also Tim Taylor’s discussion of a similar function produced in relation to technology in the space-age pop of the 1950s in Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture (2001).

6 Do It Yourself

7 The lineup of the Space Oddities is slightly arbitrary and many other “players” could audition for the band or instruments could be switched should the reader like to reform the group for their own purposes and/or applications. The position descriptions are stereotypical and not meant to represent the full spectrum of ways these instruments are/can be used. A helpful way to understand the “instrumentation” would be to use Appadurai’s ‘scapes’ schema – guitarscape, drumscape, etc. – and think about the roles in terms of global cultural flows (2). The same holds for the description of each “player” – there is not space, nor is it the goal here, to interrogate these theories with any meaningful level of precision. The realm of thinking I hope the reader engages here is a “bandscape” which means that the reader, like the listener, will take their interpretation as far afield as they wish based on the suggestions given by the band. I wish to invoke not a definitive meaning but the protean possibilities including a broad set of contested
interpretations. A band or a song cannot do much more than give the listener a suggestive signpost. For a more precise or deeper view of the theories or theorists that make the band, I refer the reader to the original works from which my use of them is distilled.

8 For an engaging survey of how science fiction literature has projected the frontier past into the future, see Carl Abbott’s *Frontiers Past and Future: Science Fiction and the American West* (2006).

9 TNeCs are transnational corporations with entertainments at their core, unlike traditional military/industrial complex TNCs. TNeCs like Disney and Virgin could be the leading edge of the next iteration of capitalism and if so, space tourism will be a productive site for examining this significant shift in power.

10 The fictional starship Enterprise in turn was named for the USS Enterprise, a US Navy vessel that once carried Sen. John McCain as a crew member.
CHAPTER I. FLOATING IN A MOST PECULIAR WAY

He [David Bowie], almost single-handedly, moved rock and roll into a new era – redefining rebellion as entertainment, and entertainment as subversion, changing forever his audience's perception of the form, and opening it up to possibilities heretofore unimaginable.

Tom Carson in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll* (389).

Time and life might move on, and the current participants might go with it, but the fact of musical space-making, of territory-creating (rather than the specific attributes of any particular territory), once discovered, was there to be rediscovered and reinvented by others, in other places, at other times, for other purposes.


With our coordinates set for open space, this chapter summons the subversive potential of music to intervene in the production of new space places. At a time when human occupation of space is shifting from science fiction to science fact, I ask that we imagine new possibilities for place making, and what such place making might sound like. This project calls on David Bowie’s “Space Oddity” to serve as one intervention in the future production of space.

David Bowie built his long career on multivalent performances that greatly expand the capacity of music to construct identity and difference. Major Tom, Bowie’s alter ego in “Space Oddity,” marks his first attempt to wear the mask of an enacted persona or alter ego (Cagle 113; Auslander 4). Questioning of identity within a sonic science fiction context gets a trial run in the form of Major Tom and later emerges fully fledged in the form of “Starman,” “Lady Stardust,” *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, and Bowie’s star turn in the Nicholas Roeg film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, to name but a few.

Bowie’s early career is an important tipping point in the evolution of rock after which the genre “would have to proceed on different economic, political, social, and cultural bases” (Auslander 9). This assessment of Bowie’s significance is in part derived from the fact that he straddles, and is implicated in, the transition from counter-cultural production to corporatized
commercialization (Goodman 1997). Another change Auslander marks is the transition from psychedelic rock as a dominant genre to the glam rock pioneered by Bowie as a shift of focus in popular music from the global to the individual (7-10). Though glam fans may have thwarted and rejected the communitarianism of psychedelic counter-culture, glam’s consumer fashion based individuality ushered in cultural critiques that slipped past corporate and mainstream gatekeepers, flying under the radar as a consumer’s individual entertainment choice. As a similar regime of individual consumer entertainment choice, might space tourism also let these gates down, allowing texts like “Space Oddity” to freely infiltrate corporate cultural production?

Concomitant with increased individualism and commodification of rock at the waning of sixties counter-culture is a shift in the possibilities for new constructions of identity. Bowie is famously regarded as a transgressor of gender borders, an image he manipulated to great artistic, commercial, and cultural success. John Gill, however, laments the contradictory nature of Bowie’s gender identity manipulation, suggesting that “If history has any sense of justice, it will record the fact that the first pop star to cause a controversy by publicly asserting his homosexuality was, in irony of ironies, heterosexual all along” (106). Through his deployment of feminine markers (in the form of make-up, dress, comportment, etc.) within the masculinized arena of rock, Bowie deliberately cultivated a queer image that performed a popular denormalizing of heterosexuality. According to Gill, Bowie was so exceptionally adept at image construction, a “bricoleur and self-mythifier” without equal, that the fact of his predominant heterosexuality does not deter a lasting association with queerness (107). It is from this self-constructed foundation that Bowie launches “a sea-change in social attitudes” in the realm of popular gender identification (Gill 108).
Space technology themes in music have been a consistent source of empowerment through which marginalized voices are given a safe forum for the exploration of new modes of identity (McLeod; Taylor). The empowering potential of space in rock music combined with the fact that these space themes have a long history of interaction with the real colonization of space, is the source of popular music’s potential for to help imagine and produce space (McLeod).

Furthermore, musical space interventions like “Space Oddity” are created sonically as much as lyrically. The multivalent “Space Oddity” narrative is thus more than the lyric or the song alone but also its performance, arrangement, recording, promotion, film, video, and other expressions. Furthermore, if the text is produced in multiplicity, then by extension, it exists in multiplicity and is thus more open to appropriation by multiple constituencies.

Before proceeding to my interpretation of “Space Oddity” I would like to briefly share a couple existing viewpoints that focus on technophobia. Van Cagle’s reading of “Space Oddity” focuses on “the dangers of technological nihilism and alienation in a society that had increasingly become dehumanized” (112). Cagle’s focus on technodistopic view of “Space Oddity” leads him to conclude that Major Tom is a suicidal luddite:

In an act of technological treason, the major disconnects the transmitters in the spacecraft, purposely barring his communication with Earth. While the rocket spins uncontrollably, he proclaims that his situation is hopeless. Alone and absorbed in his suicidal destiny he mockingly screams the viewpoint of his commanders in charge, as if he is boasting about, yet damning, his act of anarchy. Such a message suggests an odd sense of irony in Major Tom’s decision; he is to spend his last days of human existence differently from all those who have died before him, as he will terminate his life in space – by his own hand. (112)
Though Auslander’s view is much less fatalistic, he does also speak of “Space Oddity” as a statement of counter-cultural technophobia:

A sense that the technology is in the hands of people who do not have Major Tom’s best interests at heart emerges when the first thing he is asked after entering orbit is to endorse a brand of shirts; here, the song reflects the counterculture’s general suspicion of commodity culture and its relationship to the military-industrial complex . . . The consequence is that Major Tom is rendered helpless to address the world’s ills. (Auslander 128)

The readings offered by Auslander (2006) and Cagle (1995) are reasonably derived conclusions from the lyrical narrative, but they do not explicitly question nor decenter identity, authority, or the dominant narratives of space as would be suggested by a more expansive understanding of “Space Oddity.” Rather, the song can be deployed as an experiment using popular music to create new openings in normative identity construction.

Bowie’s performance of identity, according to Auslander, is intentionally revealed as a performance which, “rather than raising questions of his own sexuality … threw the sexuality of rock into question” (135). Bowie does not clearly identify with his constructed personae, but rather uses changes in voice to mark the multiple different subject positions from which he sings/speaks (Auslander 106). In concert with other/Othered “voices” deployed in the song, “Space Oddity” offers a broader, and I contend, lasting critique. While the technophobia Auslander and Cagle see in “Space Oddity” is certainly operative, I will show that when the lyrical narrative is amplified by the sonic, performative, and visual elements of a more holistic reading of a popular music text, Space Oddity can be more than a technophobic lament, or even a
precursor to the questioning of normative sexuality, but rather an opening for a more thorough and generalized questioning of human existence in the space age.

I would like to conclude this preamble with a caveat recognizing the shortcomings of using a white, male, heterosexual, wealthy rock star like David Bowie to generate a cultural intervention. Jerry Casale of Devo, whom Bowie wanted to produce in the mid-70s, assesses Bowie as “the most charming reptile I have ever met” (quoted in Dellenger and Giffels 138). Without knowing him personally, I cannot make the following claim definitively, but it seems that personal aggrandizement is the end of Bowie’s artistic production; socio-cultural change, creating space for difference, opening new modes of identity construction, pushing artistic boundaries, or planting seeds for the creation of an amendment to dominant discourses of space are unintended or auxiliary consequences subordinate to his own stardom. In other words, any interventionary potential Bowie generates is not his own but rather a position ascribed to him externally. But as Penley (1997) has shown in NASA/TREK, progressive reinterpretation of dominant discourses by outsiders can feedback into constructions of popular space with or without the intentionality of the original producer.

To be clear on the limits of using Bowie as a pre-colonial intervention in space, I would like to briefly turn to a critique of Bowie’s postcolonialism. In a 1993 Popular Music article, Ellie Hisama takes Bowie to task for his performance of Orientalizing Asiaphilia. Focusing on Bowie’s 80s hit “China Girl,” Hisama argues that while the song appears on the surface to be “sensitive to the domination and corruption by white men of Asian women, it nevertheless homogenizes Asian female identity” and does so in way that she considers more an enactment of patronizing neo-colonialism than a critical intervention (95). That this neo-colonial work is performed from the perspective of someone who seems to be aware of and hostile towards
traditional colonial power only serves to mask a new, and possibly more sinister, form of domination; “he eagerly wants to explore her world, and invariably ends up exoticising it” (Hisama 96). As Hisama suggests:

Bowie appears to allow an Other to speak, but the ‘dialogue’ only underscores his authority to represent, and at the same time confers upon himself the role of hero in a Kevin Costner-style rescue fantasy, thereby enacting a new form of colonialism. (95)

It is not much of a stretch to suggest that, in slightly different terms, the form of Other-philia and cultural appropriation described by Hisama operates within Bowie’s queerness. Though much of John Gill’s analysis of Bowie is dedicated to positive contributions to the “sea-change in social attitudes” around homosexuality in the 1970s (108), he is also keen to point out that “David Bowie the ‘out’ gay was just another role for Bowie” (107). As Casales (quoted in Dellinger and Giffels 138), Hisama (2003), Gill (1995), and the substantial anti-corporate rock faction of the indie-rock community would suggest, my use of Bowie should be limited and circumscribed. Given these problems and the goals of this analysis, it may be helpful then to read the rest of this chapter as notes to strike, stages to dive off, tunes to carry, or performances to play.

Commencing Countdown, Engines On

What really mattered as an artist … was not what you did but what you were, and Bowie became a blank canvas on which consumers write their dreams. Frith and Horne in Art into Pop (115).

It is now time to write my “Space Oddity” ‘dream’ of constructing odd space(s) using the song. As mentioned previously, the following analysis draws from the production, performance, instrumentation, and arrangement, expanding the narrative construction beyond the realm of the
lyric alone but stopping short of specialist technical analysis inaccessible to the general listener. This approach yields multiple meanings, and should any individual seek to amplify my findings, I have left space(s) in the analysis for alternative construction(s). I will start by asking where the song is situated.

The song fades in at the beginning and out at the end, evoking a sense that the song is in orbit around the relatively fixed point of view of the listener. Moreover, this bookended fade implies timelessness and perspectival relativity in that “Space Oddity” precedes and endures the consciousness of the listener. As the deliberately paced percussive strum of a solo acoustic twelve-string guitar arrives, the faint martial rat-a-tat-tat of the snare drum becomes regular and grows louder. This spare funereal march is eventually joined by wheezy strains of a Mellotron. In the era of the song’s origination, prior to the popularization of digital synthesizers and when sampling and tape loops were not yet common or sophisticated in their use in popular music, the discomforted wheeze generated by the Mellotron would have originally registered as even more “out there” or spacey than it does now.

With a discomforted and distant setting established, Ground Control declares its presence… pauses a beat… and then reiterates the declaration. The tone of the communication from Ground Control is bureaucratic and bored, as if issuing commands is a regrettable but required component of everyday official conduct. Mundanely authoritative, Ground Control speaks clearly in a single voice, mixed loud in this introductory section of the lyric to stand alone atop the other instruments.

Major Tom then receives his first set of instructions, a basic health and safety reminder to use his prescribed drugs and protective gear. The purpose and composition of his protein pills is left ambiguous but, given the socio-cultural context, can be reasonably assumed to be standing in
for psychedelic drugs and may also refer to the popular official drug regime of psychiatric rehabilitation. Either way, Ground Control is inciting its subject to alter his body chemistry. The coercive power in the incitement is revealed through a second, subservient voice of the Ground Control narrator, which is higher in pitch, softer, and mixed a little lower and behind the first. Two voices together remind Major Tom that the earlier single voice represents an institutional and social power greater than that of an individual.

The initial single voice of Ground Control then returns and reissues its declaration of presence, but this time the subordinated other voice counts backwards from ten. As the engines ignite on Ground Control’s command, the parting note to Major Tom is a blessing of God’s love. The lyric then pauses, the drums stutter, and the synthesizer warbles a few beats. I suggest that this synthesized warble functions as the sonic analog of the wavey dissolve used in narrative film and video to signify the boundaries of a dream sequence, flashback, or premonition. Here this effect also doubles as an electronically synthesized lift off joined by lofty flute runs, a reverberating electric guitar note upon take off, and a truncated allusion to the famous discombobulated orchestral crescendo in The Beatles “A Day in the Life.”

Bowie also overlaps lyrical positions of “Space Oddity” with “A Day in the Life” (Respectively “You’ve really made the grade. And the papers want to know whose shirts you wear.” and “I read the news today, oh boy. About a lucky man who made the grade.”). The referencer reverses the order of the referenced, so that in making the reference more metonymic than mimetic, the arbitrary constructedness and subjectivity of the process is revealed. Bowie’s version of the orchestral crescendo from “A Day in the Life” is used to signify the propulsion system of Major Tom’s “tin can” spaceship and introduce the potential for mechanical malfunction. The new text is close enough to the original to drag along some of its powerful
associations, such as that of uncontrollable cultural chaos, but stands alone enough to do its own new and different work as well. Borrowing this lyric and orchestral crescendo from a text so integral to the idea of the studio, and that its newest recording technologies would fundamentally expand the productive socio-cultural and artistic capacity of the rock performer, would mark Bowie with technophilia rather than technophobia. Bowie’s reconfiguration of the crescendo truncates the chaos of the original, amplifying the stress and strain, while retaining the sense of decadent decay of the “holocaust ending” of “A Day in the Life” (Whiteley 54).²

Once the protagonist arrives in this space, the pace of the song picks up as signaled by the percussive strumming of the acoustic guitar and the slow driving boom-boom splash boom-boom splash of the drums. Major Tom’s tin can is now in motion; the journey has been joined. Ground Control speaks in both voices at once all the way through this section of the song. Everything but the voices is mixed a little louder so that the noise of the engine competes equally with the basic track. The narrative tone of Ground Control is congratulatory, but seems slightly desperate as it informs Major Tom of his celebrity, consumer status, and commercial potential. All Major Tom has to do to complete the lucrative deal is to have the daring to leave the safety and comfort of his capsule. The vocal tone of Ground Control sounds both confident of compliance and cognizant that there are now limits to their power. The direct coercion available before take-off is no longer an option. However, the self-produced panoptic subject is operative and incitement still possible, so Ground Control performs from the privilege of the un-self-critical colonial overlord. Ground Control can’t force Major Tom to leave the capsule, and so rather appeals to his sense of daring, promising to make him a celebrity if he complies.

We are nearly forty percent through the song chronologically before we hear from Major Tom. His voice is strong and confident, double tracked to evoke a more powerful singularity, but
not enough to mask unease and uncertainty. He first calmly follows communication protocol by
announcing his identity as the speaker. He then declares that he indeed intends to leave the
capsule, as Ground Control has dared him.

The Stars Look Very Different, Today

At this point, we arrive at the point of peak multivalence. What might Bowie invoke
when singing “And I’m floating in a most peculiar way, and the stars look very different, today?”
One reading centers on the rendering of celestial ethereality in which the backing instruments fill
an extremely large range of the listening spectrum, big in the ear but still in the background. The
voice shifts here from singular centered to multiple stereo, an unusual recording technique at the
time which, according to Pegg (198), Bowie insisted on against the objections of his producer.
The synthesized celestiality and the stereo vocals figure Major Tom as a universal cosmopolitan
speaking uneasily for, of, and to multiplicitous positions.

When Bowie pronounces “in a most peculiar way” in a most peculiar way, he stumbles
between “most” and “peculiar” so that it comes to the ear pronounced most a-peculiar (or most
uh-peculiar). The a/uh utterance preceding peculiar may work as a countering incitation of
resistance against the reiteration of the exceptionalist dominant discourses of space exploration.
Interpreted from this position, Major Tom’s floatation is not strange or extraordinary at all, but a-
peculiar, not-different, mundane, quotidian, everyday. Major Tom’s experience of space, from
this point of view, becomes startlingly unremarkable. If this were to be the case, then what
happens to the meaning of the next line, “the stars look very different, today?” The easy
interpretation is that the stars look different because Tom’s³ journey is a metaphor for a drug trip
and so at first reading, the line would seem (since “very different” invokes the exceptional) to
belie the supposition that Tom’s peculiar floatation signifies the mundane. However, the strained force with which Bowie sings “today” at the end of the line is another clue pointing to the possibility that these lines – those following “stepping through the door” – mark Tom’s turn towards resistance. “Today” follows a micropause at the end of “different.” Spit out of both of the doubled vocal tracks, “today” can be heard here like weary protest marchers answering to the staple: “What do we want...? When do we want it?” (What do we want? Different stars. When do we want it? Today!).

So if the way Tom is floating is not peculiar but a-peculiar and “today” marks a resistant immediacy, what is different about the appearance of the stars? From the perspective of the notion that Tom is performing some form of resistance, combined with the prospect that space travel turns out to be disappointingly regular, it is not the appearance of the stars themselves that is different but rather Tom’s altered consciousness and subsequent counter-hegemonic subject position after his epiphinal decision to resist his construction at the hands of Ground Control. His newly resistant consciousness transforms the way the stars register and how they are understood. Having broken free of Ground Control upon “stepping through the door” Tom is seeing the stars, his environment, and perhaps even his own power to resist, in a new way. What is significant here is not the exact nature of this new way of seeing the stars but rather the fact of seeing them differently, of becoming different. New possibilities for seeing and experiencing space become possible and are animated by Tom’s newly asserted agency. Nevertheless, some space here will commence to speculate on what cultural conditions might be producible in the territory Tom creates once he steps through the door.

Reinforcing this sense of liberated movement and difference is the manner of bass playing. Whereas the bass is usually a grounding presence in rock songs generally, the bass
throughout the song, and with increased emphasis beginning in this section, is consistently irregular, as if searching for somewhere to be rooted. Throughout its kinetic journey, the bass remains solid, more confident than desperate, but completely unsettled at the same time. The bass simultaneously does its traditional job of holding down the low end of the overall sound while its place in the mix draws attention to the fact that the bass is keeping location mobile and indeterminate.

Tom’s voice shifts from forcefully declarative when he is speaking defiance to Control to sadly resigned as he turns to a more personal reflection on his own new status. Having defied Ground Control, Tom finds himself alone, “sitting in a tin can, far above the world.” It is worth pausing for a moment to consider why Tom refers to his spaceship, an artifact of the leading edge of military-industrial/capitalist technological production, as a tin can. Certainly, the shape and construction materials of his vehicle are associable to a tin can but in the context of his recent declaration of resistance, his diminished assessment of space travel technology can be read against the grain of the dominant ideologies of astrofuturism. Tom views his tin can not as a triumph of advanced engineering but a confining container for cheap meat.

Flutes swirl celestially throughout this section, continuing the sense of strange motion building since takeoff. The percussion taps quickly on the cymbals to quicken the pace of movement and, as the tinniest of sounds available in a standard rock drum kit, to possibly reinforce the tin can reference. Meanwhile, the bass continues it’s meandering search for a home. In the next line, completing this section of the lyric, Tom melancholically notes that “planet earth is blue, and there’s nothing I can do” as his voice trails off into an instrumental break. Two points are clearly operating in this line:
1. That Bowie is referring to the seminal whole earth photo taken the year before by Apollo 8 astronaut William Anders. This famous photo was the first time people had the opportunity to see the earth as a whole and as an integrated system that transcends political borders. This view of our common home inspired the term “spaceship earth” and contributed significantly to the popularization of the then nascent ecology movement (Baird 2007).

2. That the word “blue” in the line is intended to have double meaning – the color, and the emotion.

These points, layered on each other in the song, should be considered together. By creating an association with something as broadly shared as the “planet blue” photo, Bowie expands Tom’s journey from an individual experience to a perspective with a much greater potential constituency. It is at this point that the song becomes a critical metaphor for human spacefaring more generally. So, though Tom is alone in his tin can, Bowie’s invocation of spaceship earth allows space for his critiques to be as much about the human condition generally as about humans in space specifically. The sense of Tom standing in for humanity generally is reinforced by the multi-tracked voice.

The later line “though I’ve crossed one hundred thousand miles, I’m feeling very still, I think my spaceship knows which way to go” seen in this light, could again signify spaceship earth. On what other spacecraft can one travel such great distance without the need for navigation, while retaining a feeling of stillness? Within this possibility, the second meaning of blue in “planet earth is blue,” Tom and an interpolated humanity acutely feel a melancholy sadness specifically attached to a growing awareness of the alienation that results from breaking with hegemonic social structures. In other words, stepping through the door, breaking from
ground control, separating oneself from the dominant social structure, and challenging capitalism, entails a not insignificant personal cost.

The first price paid by Tom, and anyone else who steps through the door, is isolation – from those who remain inside and from the rewards of compliant acquiescence. So, contrary to the popular reading of the song that suggests Tom commits suicide, I suggest, rather, that he commits a metaphorical social suicide. Much like the end days of the sixties counterculture, against which Bowie positions himself at this early stage of his artistic career, placing oneself counter to the dominant culture severs connections with mainstream society, and ones grounding in the material realities of the majority is lost. This critique of the cost of resistance, and of the shortcomings of sixties counterculture relative to the coming corporatization of rock (a project to which Bowie becomes a significant contributor), can also be read in the instrumental break that follows this section of the lyric.

As I describe the instrumental break, keep in mind that Auslander and others consider Bowie to be a bridge from the communalism of the sixties to the individualism of the seventies. The section starts with a solo acoustic guitar, strummed percussively and interspersed with a double clap that alternates stereo channels, first left then right. This acoustic guitar is reminiscent of the sixties folk tradition of the singer songwriter, typical of the guitar work on the rest of the album as well as Bowie’s previous recordings. “Space Oddity” is Bowie’s first successful experimentation in finding his own voice outside of the established conventions of this tradition. Bowie then repeats the reference to “A Day in the Life” from the earlier instrumental break, only this time there is no building crescendo. Overlain on the strings and tape loops is a truncated and undistorted guitar solo consisting of just a few noodled notes largely buried in the mix of the overall orchestration. This restrained guitar playing here would have flown in the face of
emerging guitar solo conventions of the time, those pioneered by Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and Eric Clapton to name just a few, in which the virtuoso manipulation of blues scales and electric amplification signaled the rise of the rock virtuoso and the valorization of individual (white/male) power. To solidify Bowie’s dig at guitar virtuosity and the waning conventions of psychedelic sixties counterculture, distortion is added to only the last four notes of the guitar solo. But instead of sounding powerful and in control of the awesome power of electric amplification technology, and by metaphoric extension, technology in general, these four notes are decaying and feel out of control and lost.

The last new lyric in the song is a final transmission from Ground Control; “your circuits’ dead, there’s something wrong.” As Ground Control repeats it’s final query, the voice sounds slightly confused or unbelieving, unable to come to terms with Tom’s actions. “Can you hear me Major Tom” is repeated three times with diminishing presence in the mix creating distance between Ground Control and Tom. The ground and control fade into the distance and the “hear” in the final plea doubles as ‘here.’ Tom takes back the vocal and redeclares his presence in his tin can. The remainder of the song repeats the line from “sitting in my tin can” to “planet earth is blue…” and concludes with an extended version of the preceding instrumental break. Finally, the world turns, the listener remains behind, and Tom fades into the distance.

Message from the Action Man

Over the next several years, Bowie would continue to explore and develop the idea of space and those who live in or come from space as metaphors for popular culture productions and the notion of the rock star, always milking as much multiplicity of meaning from the words “star” and “space” as possible. and most refined iteration of the critiques launched by “Space
“Space Oddity” is intertextualized throughout Bowie’s career. It is one of the notable performances in the Ziggy Stardust concert film and experienced a second climb up the pop charts several years after its initial release this time rising to #4 in America. For the analysis here, the most relevant intertextualization of “Space Oddity” occurs in the lyric to “Ashes to Ashes” from the 1980 Scary Monsters album. Scary Monsters comes at one of many significant turning points in Bowie’s career. As Bowie molts his last fully formed alternate self he revisits Major Tom, only this time, Tom is more clearly standing in not only for humanity generally, but for Bowie the rock star as well.

The bass playing and percussion in “Ashes to Ashes” is an early foray into the more danceable material to come from Bowie in the 80s when he avails himself of the R&B production aesthetics of Chic’s Nile Rodgers. In the time between the recording of “Space Oddity” and “Ashes to Ashes” the methods used to produce sonic space shifted from out-there and experimental to standard popular music industry practice. Rather cleverly, the synthesizers in “Ashes to Ashes” rest comfortably within the contemporary range of their use while at the same time intertextualizing and updating the outlandish sounds of space on “Space Oddity.” So while the sonic narrative of “Ashes to Ashes” marks the 80s Bowie as a contemporary phenomenon in tune with the times, the lyrical narrative returns to the timelessness of space and Major Tom’s place in it.

In the first stanza of “Ashes to Ashes,” Bowie hears “a rumor from Ground Control” that he fears may be true:

They got a message from the action man
I’m happy, hope you’re happy too
I’ve loved all I’ve needed loving
Sordid details following.

My contention that Major Tom is an active agent in resisting Ground Control is reinforced by Bowie’s invocation of Tom as “the action man.” An action man is not likely to have been the passive victim of a technological mishap, nor driven to suicide by technophobia. Though Tom does report that he is happy, he does so in the form of a generic greeting that may be more perfunctory than revelatory. After all, there are “sordid details” that he alludes to but does not share. “I’ve loved all I’ve needed loving” can easily be folded into Bowie’s bisexual mythmaking. On Tom’s return journey, he sees a glowing earth rather than the blueness of the planet invoked in “Space Oddity.”

This section of the song confuses point of view; who is speaking in this section, Tom, Major Tom, Bowie, or a new character? More narrative possibilities are opened by confusing Bowie’s self and his character from “Space Oddity” – the “guy that’s been in such an early song” as Tom is referred to in “Ashes to Ashes.” Tom/Bowie loving all needing love, when connected with Tom’s parting salutation in “Space Oddity,” “tell my wife I love her very much she knows,” reiterates the possibility that Tom is figuratively leaving behind monogamous heterosexual normativity and that his peculiar floating is experimentation with sexuality as well as with drugs and autonomy. Read in this way, Tom/Bowie is creating space as a queered space.

When the song reaches the chorus, we learn that “Major Tom’s a junkie, strung out on heaven’s high, feeling that all time low” and this information is positioned as something “we [all] know.” Revisiting Major Tom, the “guy that’s been in such an early song,” Bowie treats the costs of resistance, of creating ones own space, as self-evident. As we’ve seen already in “Space Oddity,” Bowie consistently uses vocal performance, arrangement, instrumentation, and recording to invoke multiplicity, and thus the caution incited in “Ashes to Ashes” is more than
one against the addictive pitfalls of narcissistic rock stardom. I suggest that he also offers the same rebuke to individual acts of resistance that take place outside the bounds of community. What good is Tom’s resistance to Ground Control if the price is the loss of ones spouse and a descent to an “all time low?” The fact that Tom suffers for his decision to defy Ground Control makes his story more real, and more useful as a tool for amending the dominant discourses of corporatized space tourism development.

I Think My Spaceship Knows Which Way to Go

Though I have gone to great lengths to outline some of the subversive potential represented in Major Tom, it is worth considering a potentially contradictory meaning of the concluding section of “Ashes to Ashes” in which Bowie repeats, mantra like, the line “my momma said, to get things done, you better not mess with Major Tom.” I see two main ways to interpret these lines. One is that the narrator is an apologist for Ground Control who views Tom as a subversive enemy of progress and that the song is a warning, launched in the late 70s by an established progenitor of corporate rock, against a return to the sixties politics of countercultural possibility. Another way to look at the lyric is as a more personal reconsideration of late 60s political action in which Major Tom is, like a Weatherman for example, an impetuous individual actor who puts one’s own need for immediate resistance ahead of a more considered long term strategy developed with and in a broader community of stakeholders.

As evidence of this latter position, that Tom suffers adverse consequences from his lone resistant actions, I turn to Bowie’s recapitulation of Tom as social actor in the final verse of “Ashes to Ashes.” In the earlier verses of the song, the voice is performed in a strained and delicate falsetto with a twinge of sadness, whereas in the final lines transitioning into the bridge
the voice is multiplied and stronger. By contrast, the final verse (see below) revisits the voicing Tom uses to declare that he was “stepping through the door” in “Space Oddity,” a forced forcefulness that is powerfully resistant but that also presages a resignation to the social costs of political resistance. The lyrical narrative, though sung with force, is stuck between accepting ones past actions and wanting at the same time to alter the ultimate outcome.

I never done good things
I never done bad things
I never did anything out of the blue, whoa-o-oh
Want an axe to break the ice
Wanna come down right now.

In this retrospective on his actions, Tom is neither hero to the counterculture nor petulant agitator against the dominant power structure. He has not done good or bad, but rather has acted the way anyone would have in his position and has, in his opinion, done so with consideration of predictable mainstream values and reason; he has done nothing “out of the blue.” But there are some additional possibilities to consider here given the polyvalent meaning held by “blue” in “Space Oddity.” Recall that blue was used to signify both sadness and the trope of spaceship earth, the vulnerable and interconnected home to all humanity. Tom “never did anything” outside the purvey of the earthbound values of humanity, except of course that he is floating out in space by himself; cold, alone, and increasingly frustrated by the impossibility of return. Whereas he sounded alternately defiant and melancholy in “Space Oddity,” in “Ashes to Ashes” Tom sounds persecuted. And whereas he started this journey with the relatively passive action of stepping through a door, ten years on he is frustrated and lonely enough to consider picking up an axe to resolve his increasingly untenable situation.
As Bowie sings elsewhere (in the song “Heroes” for example), heroism has a very short shelf life. Furthermore, when resistance and counter-cultural production is of an individual acting out their own sense of exceptionalism, as does Tom, the action will stand alone and the actor will be alone. Thus, if and when human beings begin to live and work in space in significant numbers, those pioneers would be well advised not just to create space differently, but to do so in community. While working in community may be messier, slower, and more difficult, it is ultimately more sustainable. When individual action fails (or succeeds) the individual suffers their fate alone. Should one step through the door acting in, of, and for community, at the very least they would be in good company.

From Rocketman to Sun Ra, space is not a place for unproblematized heroes, but it is a place where problematized stars might open space that works against future “social science fictions” (Nelson 1). The impending real development of space, in its early stages especially, may not be hospitable territory for unrecapitulable resistant cultural production. I position “Space Oddity” as a text that provides a potential intervention at the confluence of human spacefaring and popular music production. The new space race, on its present trajectory, may produce the most corporatized and panoptically surveilled places ever created, and so it is useful for “Space Oddity” to travel under cover of mainstream popularity. The reading performed and deployed here will hopefully travel with company. I thus ask others to also test the applicability of lived music experiences, like my listening to “Space Oddity,” to the critique of late capitalist post-colonial techno-cultural production. Together we can open all kinds of odd space.

1 Ken Scott, the studio engineer on “Space Oddity” “cut his teeth at Abbey Road with George Martin and The Beatles” (Pegg 25).
2 Bowie again invokes “A Day in the Life” in the last verse of “Young Americans”. After the backing vocalists sing the opening line from “A Day in the Life”, “I read the news today oh
boy,” Bowie asks a series of negatively framed questions concluding with the final statement of
the song, “Ain’t there one damn song to make you, Break down and cry.”
3 Once Major Tom steps “through the door,” he acts as an individual named Tom. As such, I
honor his choice to resist Ground Control by ceasing to use his official appellation.
4 See Walser (1993) and Waksman (1999) for a description of the power available in this style of
guitar work fully flowered.
In its 2004 survey of unbearably bad songs, *Blender* magazine voted Starship’s “We Built This City” as the worst song ever. According to the *Blender* staff, the chief sonic crime committed by Starship is that they:

[…] spend the song carrying on as if they invented rock & roll rebellion, while churning out music that encapsulates all that was wrong with rock in the ’80s: Sexless and corporate, it sounds less like a song than something built in a lab by a team of record-company executives.

“We Built This City” is thoroughly uninventive and though the lyrics put rock and roll rebellion on a pedestal, there is not a single sound on the entire record outside the corporate formula for hit-making in the 80s. Sonically and lyrically, there is nothing strange, odd, dissonant, weird, difficult, or challenging available. The construction is absolutely unthreatening and so seamless that there are no interesting gaps in which the listener might find themselves inspired, questioning, or interested – there are no notable cover versions of the song in which a fan has made something of their own of the song.

There is, sadly, no shortage of records demonstrative of the banality resulting from corporate rock production divorced from the subversive potential of music, but what makes Starship’s crime so heinous is that it speaks so directly about rebellion while simultaneously erasing all traces of said rebellion. *Blender*’s astute observation of what can go wrong when a song is crafted through corporate imperatives divorced from creative artistic expression resonates with the central concern driving my interest in space tourism: that space will always already be degraded if the same ‘lab’ that concocted “We Built This City” produces places of everyday life and work. Rather than an astrofuturist utopia, human space under such a regime would be a
“sexless and corporate” simulacrum of rock and roll rebellion, the real thing rendered impossible, replaced by a sanitized, inhospitable environment for any countercultural expression that goes deeper than a haircut or a catchphrase. I am working alternatives because if we build (space) cities on Starship’s kind of rock and roll, Rocketmen and Rocketwomen will be stuck living in a minimum security surveillant assemblage of real work and simulated leisure; the space analog of an undersized exurb apartment in a stucco monstrosity behind a strip mall far from work and convenient transportation with opportunities for healthy social interaction precluded by ill psychogeography.

Paul Kantner must have smelled “We Built This City” coming when he sued the members of Starship to disallow the latter day members of Jefferson Starship (those who went on to form Starship but were not part of the more radical antecedent band, Jefferson Airplane) from further degrading his considerable legacy of countercultural production. It was Kantner who put together a supergroup of psychedelic era San Francisco musicians to record Blows Against the Empire (1970), an album-length space age exodus story about a group of hippies who hijack a spaceship to create a utopian colony elsewhere. It was also Kantner who updated the name from Jefferson Airplane to Jefferson Starship as the band entered the space age.

I work here with the idea that a corporate rock text can be successfully detourned to different productive purposes and that popular music could provide the means and method, the strategy and the tactics. The evolution of Jefferson Airplane to Jefferson Starship to Starship is an example of a rock band following Baudrillard’s precession of simulacra. I suggest that it may be possible to see this process reversed by using popular music differently in the context of space tourism. Starship, freed by legal fiat from any connection to its origins in countercultural rock and roll rebellion or any remotely Jeffersonian social politics, turned their productive capacity
towards hit making devoid of and destructive to the redemptive potential of popular music producing – a text of reactionary disinformation. This is the common sense story of corporate rock and its ability to co-opt dissent; it happens this way more often than not. Starship is not remarkable. (That does not mean that popular music does not also release alternative genies that are well worth the difficulty of chasing.)

Lacking their own songwriters in the post-Jefferson configuration of the band, Starship turned to one of the most successful songwriters of the corporate rock era, Bernie Taupin. Best known as the lyricist half of the songwriting team that produced a long series of hits for Elton John, Taupin and John’s “Rocketman” will work as my representative sample of the intersection of corporate rock and astrofuturism. “Rocketman” serves this project as a representative production of the corporatized simulation of rock rebellion, as well as a signpost for a trail leading to re-recuperated meaning of the place of popular music in the discursive construction of space. After surveying some relevant scholarship at the nexus of popular music and postmodern cultural production, where gaps in mainstream texts invite subversion, I will look at how contemporary gatekeepers of corporate rock (Viacom’s VH1 Classic in this instance) valorize “Rocketman” and follow up by examining a small sample of “Rocketman” reinterpretations pointing to the possibility that corporate rock contains fragile seeds of its own undoing.

A Thousand More Voices

As I pointed out in the introduction, popular music studies has a lot of room to grow if it is going to close the gap between its place in everyday life and its status as a field of scholarship. The benefits of further extending and implicating popular music studies into the academy (and the
explanations for why it has not yet arrived there) are too numerous to mention here. As such, success in this grand collective project would enliven the lives and works of scholars, students, and possibly even musicians, in new and exciting ways. This point is too obvious to those who agree and untenable for those who don’t and so I will not belabor it further except to add that at this stage in the evolution of such studies, exemplary works should be celebrated and closely examined.

As the selection of texts I cover in this work show, I favor the use of exemplary suggestive examples over a broader, more comprehensive survey. Perhaps the temptation to list every song or artist that touches on the subject at hand (musical interventions in the future colonization of space) is attractive when 1) there are so many productive musical texts available; and 2) there is such a large void to fill between the volume of text available for our analysis and the number of good analyses conducted so far. On this latter point, I wish to say affirmatively that the existing work in popular music studies has shouldered a heavy burden for all who come next and thus the field’s founding scholars thus always be thanked heartily for making a future of popular music studies possible, but nonetheless we have immense room for growth.

To introduce this section of the project then, I would like to briefly discuss a work of popular music studies that inspires the kind and range of connections I work from and exemplifies a node in the field around which I would like to see a lot more activity. *The Beatles, Popular Music and Society: A Thousand Voices*, the polyvalent collection edited by Ian Inglis, occupies the same place in my academic career that Devo (as described in the first chapter) did for my performance career – the light bulb of possibility turned on, the political/artistic/theoretical model for action enacted, the template of production absorbed in my personal ethos. I do not mean to suggest that *The Beatles, Popular Music and Society: A*
*Thousand Voices* is an isolated example of the kind of scholarly text I appreciate most, just that it is a good example of which we could use many, many more – *A Thousand* [more] *Voices.*

Perhaps the point I am trying to make here can be summed up by the fact that no such work appeared until after the end of the twentieth century, which begs the question; how could the Beatles, the biggest and most influential band in the world, having radically transformed so many different critical elements of all of our lives (fans and non-fans alike), the practice and production of all subsequent musicians, and all central enterprises of the culture industry, NOT have been the subject of an edited collection of scholarly essays of this stature prior to the year 2000. Compounding my consternation is that a forest of trees has been sacrificed to popular accounts of the Beatles – the band, the musicians, their lives, loves, etc. – as well as to lesser lights in other mediums such as innumerable auteur studies of less influential film directors. The gap between popular and academic accounts of music needs closing, as does the distance between popular music studies and sister fields of cultural study like film and television.

Rather than lament the tardiness of a serious scholarly attempt to come to terms with the impact of the Beatles, I prefer to celebrate the substantial good deeds of *The Beatles, Popular Music and Society: A Thousand Voices.* Primary among the book’s accomplishments, in my particular view, is that it presented a range of in-depth analytical approaches to a single band, by authors both established and emerging, that resonates with my own sense of how to look at popular music production as more than entertainment, but rather as an integral and under-understood part of everyone’s everyday lives. I regret to admit that as a young punk in the 1980s I was not particularly fond of the Beatles (there, I said it) and in the (unnecessarily reductionist) debate that divides the world into Beatles or Rolling Stones people, I had always sided against the Beatles as too poppy, insufficiently gritty, and too universally loved. The Inglis volume
inspired, for me, a thorough reconsideration of Beatles music. Cook and Mercer’s assertion of
the Beatles’ “linguistic sensitivity to social change” (104), for one example, and a new awareness
of their progressive political journey generally has altered my earlier views and framed my
estimation of the Stones as woefully going in the opposite direction, particularly in the form of
their unacceptable expressions of misogyny. I suspect Keith Richards’ guitar will always make
me want to play along, but I am no longer comfortable singing too many of their regressively
macho lyrics.

Despite the temptation otherwise, I will not review all of The Beatles, Popular Music and
Society: A Thousand Voices. I will, however, briefly sketch an outline of the territories covered
by the text concluding with of Ed Whitley’s chapter examining “The White Album” as a
quintessential postmodern text. Whitley’s analysis sets up the connections I will then try to make
between popular music, postmodern art, and open space.

As Inglis suggests in his introduction, the themes illuminated through his collection of
articles examines the Beatles “in their appropriate political, cultural and sociological contexts,
and to recognize and emphasize the reciprocal influences between the Beatles, popular music,
and the broader social environment” (xviii). Inglis divides the selections into four sections:
though the analyses of their place in the context of their times, our times, and their career
trajectory overall are enlightening and insightful, I found the section on their music most
influential.

In the first selection from the section focused specifically on the Beatles’ music, Jon
Fitzgerald undertakes a hybrid quantitative and qualitative comparative content analysis of the
Beatles’ musical productions relative to that of their British Invasion counterparts. The
quantitative tables and musical notations are sufficiently translated and contextualized to benefit
those untrained in the two specialized discourses. Fitzgerald’s analysis is broad and deep, accessible to the casual fan yet detailed enough to provide new insights and information to omnivorous fans and experienced popular music analysts. Nearly equal justice is given to lyric, melody, rhythm, harmony, form, and production.

The British Invasion is roughly broken into two waves – the Beatles and Dave Clark Five dominating the first, the Rolling Stones and Kinks arriving in the second – cleaved around 1965. Using *Billboard* US Top 40 chart figures to determine the sample population categorized as the top four selling British songwriters-performers – Lennon-McCartney (Beatles), Jagger-Richards (Rolling Stones), Clark et al. (Dave Clark Five), and Davies (Kinks) – Fitzgerald focuses on the songwriters rather than performers so that songs written for and/or performed by others are also included. Lennon-McCartney and Clark dominated the first phase of the British Invasion, while Jagger-Richards and Davies were ascendant in the second phase. The first phase was wedded more closely to the means and methods of the older system of music industry production, and though Lennon-McCartney shattered the previous convention against performers writing their own songs (and controlling their artistic and commercial production) the songwriting in this period consciously mimicked the styles and conventions of established writers from the Brill Building and Motown\(^3\) stables. Thus, lyrically and sonically, songs in this period departed not radically but more adaptively from the conventions of traditional late 1950s-early 1960s pop love songs.

Building on these unprecedented chart successes, songwriting in the second phase began to “feature social commentary and/or satire” with Davies as a “detached observer” and Jagger-Richards purveying a “sense of personal frustration or rebellion” (78). The songwriting in this second period also departs from the first by the use of rhythmic-chordal riffs (think
“Satisfaction” or “You Really Got Me”) that are closely linked to (borrowed from) long-standing African-American musical traditions. In addition to these stylistic evolutions, Fitzgerald attributes the advances in the Beatles’ songwriting complexity and topicality largely to an increasingly experiential self-reflexivity resulting from the influence of Bob Dylan and the maturing experimental production partnership with George Martin.

Cook and Mercer’s chapter “From Me to You: Austerity to Profligacy in the Language of the Beatles” furthers Fitzgerald’s assertions regarding the Beatles’ evolving songwriting. The first half of the title, “From Me to You,” is a nice intertextual crystallization of Cook and Mercer’s conclusion that the Beatles’ shifted their subjective focus over time from the self to others. Beginning the chapter with an invitation to comparatively imagine hearing “Love Me Do” live in 1962 and “A Day In The Life” on disc in 1967 leads the reader into a deeper and highly contextualized understanding of a seemingly common sense conclusion about the different experiences of live and recorded performance. The authors also did a good job of selecting their sample texts, dividing them into early and later periods divided by *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* (1966). This scheme is sufficient, though to be more precise I would suggest separating out *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* into a separate third category, the transition period. I view the two works together as very similar albums wherein the changes Cook and Mercer (and many of the other chapters in the book) note can be seen in the process of changing from a band trying to make it in the music industry to artists trying to remake the relationship of culture, cultural production, and the culture industries. These changes were not yet apparent in the early 1960s recordings and were fully flowered in the later (late 60s – early 70s) ones, and thus including one of these very similar transitional pieces in each of the two otherwise very divergent categories doesn’t work for me as well as the analysis of the firmly early and later
works. This assessment is based on perceptions derived from my own listening what happen to be my two personal favorite Beatles records, perhaps precisely because of the abundant evidence of the transition happening there. Cook and Mercer’s discursive analysis, focusing on the lyric, shows equal evidence supporting and contradicting my assertion of similarity between the two transitional texts. Perhaps I belabor this point so much because I hope that in hindsight, The Beatles, Popular Music and Society: A Thousand Voices, may one day be viewed as doing similar work for popular music studies to that accomplished by Rubber Soul and Revolver for popular music generally, a pleasurably consumed enlightening example of a transition from a simpler early period to a more multivalent later phase.

The chapter of The Beatles, Popular Music and Society: A Thousand Voices that best contributes to the current project may be Ed Whitley’s reinterpretation of The Beatles (referred to colloquially and forthwith as The White Album) to expose the album as a quintessentially multivalent postmodern text. Whitley agrees that “viewed within conventional aesthetic boundaries” the consensus popular critical opinion of The White Album – rambling, unfinished, underpolished, fragmented, sloppy, failed – is a justifiable position (105). However, when viewed as a postmodern text, as Whitley suggests, these ‘failings’ “create a zone where meaning can be opened and where readers can participate in the discussion of what this album – and by extension all pop music – does in contemporary society” (105).

Without attempting a restrictive definition of postmodernism, Whitley does tie several key aesthetic components of postmodern theory with the work performed in and by The White Album, specifically anti-representation, bricolage, fragmentation, plurality, and meta-art. Whitely views postmodernism as “an aesthetic of disturbance” that seeks not to explicate meaning but to disrupt standard interpretive frameworks enough to allow space in the text for the reader to
participate, actively. The White Album’s perceived lack of coherence serves for Whitley as the location of the gaps through which the reader can enter into a dynamic discourse with the text, a process that not only disrupts cultural hegemony, but also democratizes the consumptive process. In other words, it is precisely those things that critics see as unusually faulty that Whitley frames as invitational opportunities produced by The Beatles as a means by which discourses of popular music, especially of Beatlemania, can be de- and re-constructed.

Whitley rather successfully makes the case for “The Postmodern White Album” but the more significant meta-accomplishment of his chapter is the model provided for an underutilized analytical methodology for popular culture studies – the deployment of a popular and accessible text (The White Album in this case) to concretely illustrate a difficult, slippery, contested theory or concept (postmodernism in this case). This method moves powerfully and productively beyond the simpler tradition of drawing out the representational regime of a given popular text and leaving the analysis there without strong enough connection to a useful theory, an active social movement, or some other avenue to a tangible outcome. Since there is a postmodernism for everyone who wants one, Whitley picks one that works for his purposes and one multivalent text that readily lends itself to illuminating the concepts the author finds relevant. Whitley’s postmodernism is largely one of aesthetics – of plurality, bricolage, meta-art, anti-representation, and fragmentation – that works productively on and with notions of critical social change but is not as overtly political as some might like. As Whitley concludes:

The album deconstructs itself, pop music, the Beatles themselves, and their own musical history. By not meaning anything, the White Album is then able to do something; and what it does is to clear a space in which the reader is able to
participate in a negotiated discourse about the role(s) of popular music within Western culture. (123, emphasis in original)

There is a there there, and by the end of this work I hope we find ourselves in that place. Though I disagree with Whitley on the notion that the *White Album* is without meaning, he makes a convincing and compelling case for openness in the text that allows the reader to do something of his or her own with it. To me, this is the root substance of reception-based DIY and some of the tactics on display in this project is less defined than it might appear in other places to maintain such openness. To further understand how a postmodern approach to reading popular music texts for openings through which the reader can do something different, I now turn to an assessment of some of the open possibilities for difference within the example of the divergent flight of “Rocketman.” Since there is no there yet in space, since all we have is a discursive construction – a map made of premeditated simulations of what life in space might be like – is it possible to produce free, autonomous, open territory in space? If so, a map of the journey taken by Rocketman is an illustrative place to start looking for gaps in late-capitalist hegemonic representation in which to give difference a toehold.

Maybe Not Such a “Long… Long… Time”

Technology, however awe inspiring and anxiety producing it may seem to be upon its introduction to the realm of human social life, quickly becomes part of social life, naturalized into quotidian normality as it helps people do things they have always done: communicate, create, labor, remember, experience pleasure, and of course, make and listen to music.

Tim Taylor in *Strange Sounds* (206).

Elton John and Bernie Taupin’s “Rocketman” was played at the 1977 launch of the space shuttle Discovery, the voyage that returned John Glenn to space. This is one of many points of contact between the Elton John/Bernie Taupin hit song and the construction of a human space future. As
a text appropriated for the recapitulation of late-capitalist space production at the site of the intersection of real space flight and its popular culture representation, “Rocketman” is the kind of deployment of difference within the mainstream of dominant culture that may present an entry portal for alternative constructions of space. There is already a Disney *Rocketman* (1997) film appropriating the text for mainstream astrofuturist purposes so there is no time to waste strengthening and reinforcing the inroads along which popular space can be kept open.

After briefly pulling out some salient features of “Rocketman” the 1972 hit song by Elton John and Bernie Taupin, I will start a lipstick trail up space mountain using an assemblage of meaning from “Rocketman.” Kate Bush’s cover of the song is used to demonstrate how different arrangement and instrumentation can also open the text to new possibilities of meaning. I will then turn to William Shatner’s performance of at the 1978 Science Fiction Film Awards ceremony to break more ground. Following the trail of the Rocketman franchise to this Shatner site seems sensible given that one of the authors of the source text, Bernie Tuapin, directly suggests the possibility in his personal introduction of Shatner’s performance. At this event, *Star Trek*’s referential weight and Bernie Taupin’s lyric assemble together to extend each other further into the foundations of popular conceptions of space. The next turn on the trail is Chris Eliot’s rendering of the Shatner performance as a skit on *Late Night With David Letterman* in which he simultaneously pays homage to Shatner and ridicules and normalizes the show businessness of the Shatner “Rocketman” text and its constructions of both pop stardom and space.

Any analysis having to do with popular culture, amateur or professional, is influenced by personal taste. Elton John was one of the world’s biggest pop stars at the time I was first becoming aware of music as a social force. I have always found Elton John a dynamic character
but my feelings about his music are equivocal – the greatest hits of his early career are some of the most beautiful pop songs ever written and yet his more recent works are largely unlistenable. He now gives me the same feeling I get from Sting, Paul McCartney, Metallica, and Flavor Flav: the latter-day version is so unappealing that it is easy to forget how great the younger version once was. He has now become better known for his collaboration with Disney on the racially infantilizing film *The Lion King*, for being half of England’s first official same-sex marriage, and for his eulogy of Princess Di. In fact, a preponderance of non-biographical literature on Elton John is centered on the revised version of “Candle in the Wind” originally written in homage to Marilyn Monroe and performed at Diana Spencer’s funeral.

Elton John and Bernie Taupin’s songwriting partnership began in response to a newspaper ad. The structure of their relationship was highly compartmentalized from the beginning; Taupin wrote the lyrics and submitted them to John, who then selected those to which he could put melodies and arranged them into fully-fledged beautiful pop songs. The hits, especially those on his first *Greatest Hits* compilation, remain compelling. The first song on Elton John’s first greatest hits album is “Rocketman,” a song “[…] concerning an astronaut sent to colonize Mars” (Wessels and Collins). In general, John and Taupin are considered masters of the rock ballad. Simon Frith suggests that John’s vocal style is marked by “a hesitancy, and introversion, an intimacy which contrasts markedly with the full, extrovert, confident vocal tone [of earlier balladeers]” (93). Frith further places their songwriting in a longer tradition of sentimental songs:

They took the sentimental song (as commercialized in the late nineteenth century), keeping its easy melodic lines, its use of rising pitch to unleash emotion,
its lyrical sense of expansive self-pity, but giving it a new rock-based dynamism (in terms of rhythm and application). (93) As such, David Harker suggests that John is as underappreciated by critics as he is loved by fans. Harker suggests that those who seek to define rock in the seventies miss the boat by dismissing John:

As it turns out there is a figure who has some claim to being the single most representative ‘sound of the seventies’, but you will not find him or his work studied (or, sometimes, even mentioned) in the work of the better-known anglophone ‘rock’ critics. (243)

For an official authorized version of Elton John’s life, music, and place in popular culture, as well as a telling glimpse into the place “Rocketman” holds in his canon, the late-capitalist culture industry, and popular culture generally, I suggest turning to the VH1 Rock Doc, 2008’s Elton John: Me Myself and I (EJ:MMI). Cleverly produced with a lively mise-en-scene reminiscent of the aesthetic appeal of his early performances, EJ:MMI features the Elton of today Forrest Gumped into historical film footage of his younger self. Today’s Sir Elton laughingly scolds seventies Rock Star Elton for such foolishness as hubris, hurting others, and his rock star drug and promiscuity problems. For fans of his music and/or the stylistic era in which he sold the most records, the archival footage is abundant, interestingly contextualized by Sir Elton himself, and well captures the brilliance and fun of his performances.

The film opens with general wide shots of the Las Vegas strip with billboards for an Elton John performance at Caesars Palace prominently figured in the composition. Las Vegas is billed as a place where anything can happen, things that do not happen elsewhere, things you can make happen only there. The reality, however, is that the surveillant security apparatus and
consumer architecture ensures that nothing happens outside of a narrow set of predetermined activities, each designed to provide the illusion of freedom in leisure. Just try actually doing something other than drink, gamble, shop, or watch the sexual spectacle unfold and see how tightly and violently the boundaries are enforced. The false sense of possibility that makes Las Vegas attractive then is but a large scale manifestation of the final stage of simulacra but one in which the consumer retains some semblance of awareness of the constructed nature of the experiences and thus becomes more willing accomplice than unwitting dupe. We all know that the New York, New York hotel in Las Vegas is not actually New York, but that didn’t stop people from creating an impromptu 9/11 memorial at the gates.

As *EJ:MMI* continues, a few piano chords are struck as a meteoric fireball descends from across the horizon of the Vegas Strip. The piano becomes recognizable as the intro to the chorus of “Rocketman” – “… and I think it’s gonna be a long long time …” – the camera cuts to a long shot of the Caesars Palace stage and then a head shot of John at the piano. Though his dress is subdued, in relative Elton John terms, there is a conspicuously large safety pin holding his simple black rectangle frame glasses together as a nod to fashion iconoclasm. The opening setting, the intended first impression of the film, is that Elton John occupies an exalted position at the center of an entertainment simulacra whose establishment credentials are so solid that a once-punk image like the safety pin can fit seamlessly on his face while on stage at a venue like Caesar’s Palace.

As John proceeds further into the chorus the view alternates between the bright staging and flowery light show, the adoring, docile, and homogenous audience, and a rocket reminiscent of the iconic logo of nineties alternative rockers Rocket From The Crypt. When the rocket lands on the Vegas stage just after John sings “… burning out his fuse up here alone …” John blurts
out a bleeped out expletive and mimics surprise and awe not unlike cheesy fifties sci-fi movie earthlings encountering an alien landing. The rays which are used to bring Elton on board are very similar to those emitted by Sun Ra’s spaceship Justice upon its initial arrival on Earth in *Space is The Place*. In the space of under a minute, the film has already superficially and intertextually sutured together sci-fi film, psychedelic light shows, punk/fashion iconography, an alternative rock band, Sun Ra, and alien abduction. Las Vegas is so spectacular a place that a rocket could land on a stage and kidnap the performer without arousing any discomfort, shock, or even suspicions in the audience.

With Elton on board, the rocket takes off to the sound of the opening piano riff from his cover of The Who’s “Pinball Wizard.” This positions John among the classic rock canon and references his appearance in *Tommy*, his one previous foray into acting, as well as placing him inside a space vehicle. The inside of the rocket is clearly marked as a set piece from B-movie sci-fi. Elton adopts the minimal acting chops characteristic of the genre as he pilots the craft from a control panel of blinking lights and banks of toggle switches. He peppers the soundtrack with “Whoah”’s and “WeeHoo”’s of the kind one might expect from someone pretending to be on a roller coaster.

The craft circles earth before leaving the atmosphere. Upon arrival in space, the scene cuts to a vista of rock stars in an all too obvious attempt to underscore the double-meaning of the word *star*. Among these celestial bodies are Freddie Mercury, Rod Stewart, John Lennon, Princess Di, and other pop characters prominently featured later in the film. After passing through this field of stars, John comes upon another cluster of stars, this time consisting of a collage of retrospective Elton John images. John in the spaceship grows apprehensive at the sight of his former selves and protests “Oh No, Oh No” as the ship draws closer. Looking smilingly
over this field of celestial Eltons from above and behind is a giant image of contemporary Elton, the safety pinned glasses indicating some as yet unknown relationship between the pilot of the rocket and its destination. The rocket zips past big Elton’s ear and down the back of his pants as pilot Elton shrieks “Oh Dear God!” Cut to a close head shot of big celestial Elton with a sudden startled look accompanied by a cartoonish cork-popping sound, followed by a big sheepish smile. The rocketship becomes an anal entry probe coursing through Elton’s inner space until finally crash landing in a big brain. The soundtrack shifts to sirens – of the emergency evacuation variety rather than law enforcement – that segue into the eponymous section of his eighties comeback hit “I’m Still Standing” a song that serves as a testament to self-fulfilling prophecy. Elton John was barely able to stand when the song was recorded but got his act together and revitalized his career in the wake of “I’m Still Standing.” The scene then cuts to the inside of the brain where Pilot Elton disembarks from the rocket that is now large in the frame against a bright white background and shot from below.

The rocket, larger and visually dominating the scene in this new perspective, has slightly transmogrified and smoke pours out and up from the rear engine. Upon closer inspection, the rocket is shaped to make reference to a double-ended drug delivery device: the smoke of the rear engine curls up very much like that of a marijuana cigarette and the nose of the ship comes to syringe point.4

Finally an official external narrator begins to formally introduce the overall documentary text, announcing that the film is going to stay firmly in the generic groove of rock documentaries: genius hitmaker slowly works towards stardom, makes it big, overindulges in decadence, and finally either dies or reinvents him/herself into the center of culture industry history. While the introduction and body of Me, Myself, and I is inventive in its aesthetic
presentation, its narrative structure is standard pop fodder. Just as Elton John produced
spectacular performances for huge audiences without ever problematizing, well, anything, *Me, Myself, and I* is a lightweight and fun exercise in reinscribing the borders around the superficial non-threatening center of the music industry. So while Elton John may humorously refer to his queerness or his drug use in this autobiography, nowhere it seems has he offered any challenge to any structure of power greater than his personal struggle to mature as a person. For example, there is a segment in which he insinuates John Lennon’s life into his autobiography through their collaboration on Lennon’s hit single “Whatever Gets You Through the Night.” Though Elton is keen to associate himself with Lennon as a pop figure, he completely elides Lennon’s socio-cultural politics. Addressing Lennon as little more than another trinket in John’s collection of famous friends, ignoring Lennon’s much greater contributions to culture and society, John rejects Lennon’s dedication to community, using him instead to augment John’s own story of exemplary individualistic exceptionalism.

Where the story of most great songwriting teams can be read as allegory for the costs and benefits of working in community, Taupin and John worked in complete isolation from each other, rarely even meeting together in their songwriting process. Rather they are separate atomized cogs in an impersonal industrial hit single assembly line, Taupin writing lyrics over here and sending them off to John to screw on a melody over there. In this industrial assembly line configuration, “Rocketman” is their Model T. But like the Model T, others would later adapt the vehicle substantially while still maintaining the basic original design.

Very up to date in presentation style and narrative themes generally, Elton John’s piano playing reinscribes piano not just as melodic and/or percussive instrument, but as a tool to provide the driving force in a pop song, taking back this mantle from shredding guitars and/or
pounding drums dominant in this era of early corporate rock. Though synthesizer is played on “Rocketman,” it is a slide guitar with the primary responsibility of sounding the take-off of Rocketman’s space vehicle. The engines of Rocketman’s spacecraft run on much more simplified fuel than Sun Ra’s or Major Tom’s, a slow linear electric guitar slide up the neck. The backing vocals in the chorus carry the primary burden of generating the sense of celestiality, a job also performed by other instruments for Sun Ra and David Bowie.

If the slide guitar is sounding the engine of Rocketman’s rocket, the background vocals are its exhaust. The boys-choirish accompaniment to the eponymous line starts louder than the lead on “Ro-” and then decays across “-cket-” and especially “-man” until celestially blended with the rapidly fading rear horizon. The backing vocal is left behind as the rocket soars on.

Before moving on to a few of the hundreds of places “Rocketman” has soared on to in cover song form (there are over one hundred different versions available on iTunes alone), I would like to focus in on one telling line and draw connections to consider in relation to open space.

All the science, I don’t understand
It’s just my job five days a week

That a rocket man would not understand the science that propels his vehicle breaks with the established sci-fi conventions ascribing technology as male (Sobchack). As such, John misses the opportunity to “drop science,” an alternative information distribution system described by Tricia Rose to mean:

[…] sharing knowledge, knowledge that is generally inaccessible to people, together with a fearlessness about stating what you believe to be the truth. There’s also the implication that the information you’re imparting is going to
revolutionize things because this is the truth that has been deliberately and systematically denied. (Rose in Dery 213)

Allen Andrews is sympathetic to the fact that Taupin and John, as songwriters, do not understand the rocket science they evoke and applauds their success in capturing “the expression of alienation” from astrofuturist science. Regarding “Rocketman”’s ignorance Andrews suggests that he is just another part of the vast machinery produced by twentieth century scientific advancements:

The astronaut hero understands very little of the technological complex that propels him into space. An electronic nerve center on the ground calculates his every move and activity. Encapsulated in his missile or space suit, the rocket man is a fleshly cog in an enterprise that epitomizes man's development and application of the methods of science.

Science, particularly space science in this instance, then is better left for the technical experts and “Rocketman” need not concern himself with understanding neither his environment nor the produce of his labor. Though five of his seven days a week are spent executing his prescribed role, it is preferable to “be high as a kite by then” than to critically examine his labor relations. “Rocketman” senses his own alienation, and that it is somehow connected to the parts of his job he doesn’t understand and to his estrangement from community, but he is only empowered to the limited point of self-medicated escapism and nostalgia for the comforts home. This is the mundane, quotidian, everyday life that awaits workers in space under a late-capitalist regime, not the weightless sexcapades and exploration of the sublime promised by space tourism providers.
Like all mundane, quotidian, everyday life, hegemonic power entices the consumer to play along by offering the idea of escape to another place, another culture, or sometimes both. Consider the following account by Philip Hayward of a 1977 Clash gig in London during which exoticized cultural expression developed at the margins of the British empire is appropriated for use at the center of the empire, and further exoticized by mixing it with science-fiction:

The white punk association with a version of the *Star Wars* theme is significant in that … Hollywood Sci-Fi music even works in the environment of a Clash gig, in which both popular music culture [“No Elvis, Beatles or Rolling Stones in 1977” (“1977”)] and American cultural imperialism [“I’m so bored with the USA” (eponymous)] are triumphantly disavowed in favour of cultural allusions and affinities to Jamaican roots reggae and Rastafarianism. As ever, the loops and transmutations of popular culture are nothing if not complex (Hayward 1).

The musical assemblage of The Clash, *Star Wars*, and Jamaica brings together the exoticized sounds of popular sci-fi film with the exotification of an ethnically othered post-colonial cultural form at the point where punk aesthetic meets corporate production. As an example of the type of trail that can be constructed across space mountain I offer a similarly complex assemblage of slow viral cultural production and representational accumulation, the Rocketman Assemblage.

The next text I would like to add to the Rocketman Assemblage is Kate Bush’s cover of the song. Released in 1991, the commercial success of Bush’s version of “Rocketman” helped usher in the most lucrative phase of her long career in music and performance. Holly Kruse notes that innovative experimental artists tend to have greater success in Great Britain than in America, suggesting that this fact helps explain how Kate Bush became their “most commercially
successful female recording artist.” According to Kruse, “Kate Bush's music integrates intellectually challenging subject matter into complex and often experimental instrumental arrangements” and that in addition to a greater tolerance for avant-garde style in the UK, Bush benefited from openings created in the music industry by punk singers.

In 2007, readers of The Observer newspaper in the UK voted Bush’s “Rocketman” number one in their poll of the greatest cover songs (coincidentally, The Clash’s cover of Junior Marvin’s reggae song “Police and Thieves,” highly likely to have been played at the show Hayward references, comes in third). The Observer describes Bush’s performance as follows:

This cover is swathed in mystery, adding yet more layers to a song that is, depending on your interpretation, either about an astronaut pining for his wife or a wealthy rock star whose life is one big lie […] Then again, the kooky queen has never been easy, and here, on the only 'reggae' cover in her canon, which she sings from the perspective of a bloke, Bush is, unquestionably, more other than ever.

Through the introduction and first verse, Bush is largely faithful to the original. Notably, Bush does not regender the character, as mainstream female singers would, preferring to sing, “I miss my wife” and “I’m not the man they think I am at home” near to the original but slightly whispered. The instrumentation is differently marked first by a wheezy little accordion through the first verse shifting to a lilting reggae beat with a touch of ukulele at the chorus. The reggae touches mark this version with the same kind of cultural mixing Hayward describes above. In my view, mixing the happier connotations of the reggae arrangement with the melancholy lament of the original also could be a way to analogize the post-colonial tourist experience of the Caribbean with future space tourism experiences.
While Bush’s “Rocketman” is a campy jest that teases the masculinity of rock and space, other versions are pure comic relief. The instrumentation and arrangement during the introduction and first verse of Bush’s “Rocketman” intertextualize not the original sparse piano, but the awkward spacey synthesizers of William Shatner’s famous cover version of the song. Shatner’s version is noted in *The Observer*’s assessment of the Bush cover. *The Observer* accurately describes Shatner’s version as follows:

> At the Science Fiction Film Awards in 1978, in front of an audience of greying, bemused 'suits', he performed a 'spoken word' version of the song while smoking, self-consciously, an untipped cigarette and enacting a Method masterclass in which he dramatised the Rocket Man's displeasure as he prepares to journey through the clouds.

*Star Trek* actress Nichelle Nichols helped astronaut Mae Jamison break barriers (Penley). George Takei is known for his activism in the Asian American community and more recently for being the most high profile person to take advantage of California’s fleeting sanctioning gay marriage (Georgetakei.com). William Shatner, on the other hand, has parlayed his stilted acting, self-deprecating humor, and his over-the-top cheesiness into a long and illustrious career as an entertainer. Shatner is so interwoven in the popular construction of popular space that Richard Branson offered him a free ticket on Virgin Galactic’s VSS Enterprise. Ironically, Shatner declined, admitting he found the prospect nauseating and unsafe. Said Shatner, “I do want to go up but I need guarantees I'll definitely come back” (Daily Mail).

In the period between the cancellation of the original series and the production of the first *Star Trek* film, Shatner still comported himself as a serious actor with Shakespearian aspirations. Buoyed by the iconic status given him through the acclaim the original series was enjoying
during syndication, Shatner’s lame seriousness in the mid-seventies appears woefully silly in light of his latter day embrace of his inner hack. His performance of “Rocketman” at the 1978 Science Fiction Film Awards puts the tension between his still serious aspirations, his growing iconic popularity, and his ease with cheeze on full display. More significant, in terms of my thesis of keeping space open, is that Shatner’s performance sets off a chain of interpretation that I propose can work like a music version of the Kirk/Spock fan fiction described by Penley in *NASA/TREK*, a process she suggests has the power to alter the material production of space.

Also significant is that this performance not only brings *Star Trek* and “Rocketman” together, but that it is done so in the context of the Science Fiction Film Awards program and is introduced by a deadpan Bernie Taupin himself. The context and content of Taupin’s introduction enshrine “Rocketman” as a key, and malleable, text at the heart of the popular music sector of the culture industry and the conceptual production of human spacefaring:

In 1972, when Elton John and I wrote “Rocketman,” it became very popular among the listeners. Due to the interest in the meaning of this song, now in 1978, at the Science Fiction Film Awards, I am truly proud, once again, to present my “Rocketman” as interpreted by our host, William Shatner.

According to Taupin’s self-mythologizing, “Rocketman” is an open text, the meaning of which resonates with “the listeners” long after the song’s original release.

Shatner looks and speaks with a dire seriousness as he delivers the first two lines unaccompanied. As mentioned previously, Shatner’s version substitutes an odd synthesizer for the stark piano in the original introduction, but the synthesizer does not appear until the third line, “And I’m gonna be high as a kite by then.” The word ‘high’ soars loftily from the mouth of Elton John so that the double meaning of drug effect and physical elevation are equivocally
evoked. Shatner’s delivery of the word is a harsh and raspy declaration that does without the non-drug meaning, a sense that is accentuated by exaggerated inhalation and the movements of the cigarette in his hand.

Through blue screen magic, there are multiple interpretations of the song available within Shatner’s version. When Shatner gets to the “Burning out his fuse out here alone” part of the second chorus, he places added emphasis on ‘alone.’ As he stares plaintively at his cigarette, a second smaller Shatner emerges from his left shoulder blade and after looking around bewildered and then regaining self-confidence begins to recite the “I think it’s gonna be a long, long time” section. This second Shatner is visually identical but sans-cigarette and speaks boldly while staring off into the distance when he says, “I’m a Rocketman” as if he is boldly going somewhere. Between the end of the chorus and beginning of the next verse, second Shatner is cut to a close head shot so that the entire frame becomes reminiscent of those seventies professional portraits in which the subject appears to be dreaming of itself. The two Shatners interact call and response style in this verse but by the next chorus, second Shatner regrows his body but loses some of his assuredness. When second Shatner reaches ‘alone’ a third Shatner appears, this one disheveled, tie hanging undone and collar loosened. Third Shatner begins a to dance a crooner’s shimmy, wiggling his hips and arms slowly and slightly. Third Shatner wants to party but the first two look at him like he’s out of his mind. Second Shatner takes over at the start of the repeating “I think it’s gonna be a long, long time” outro, then each takes a turn at a line until finally the three are reintegrated and the original whispers the final line.

That Shatner gives the reader three different opportunities to take one’s interpretation elsewhere indicates how open the text can be. The three perspectives he shares can be summed up in the way each Shatner emphasizes the word ‘Rocketman.’
1) Rocket-MAN. Shatner One places the emphasis on his own masculinity and humanity.

2) ROCKET-man. Second Shatner is pleased with the job he does “five days a week” and though he doesn’t understand the science, he takes pride in his ability to deploy it.

3) Rock-It-Man. Third Shatner wants to party like a rock star in the stars.

The original “Rocketman” a text open enough text to inspire a plethora of interpretations by numerous artists, the Taupin-sanctioned and Science Fiction Film Awards broadcasted triplicitous Shatner version has inspired yet another thread of reinterpretation. Among them is an intertextualization of the Shatner performance by Beck in the video for his hit “Where It’s At” in which he accurately mimics the triplicate Shatner visually, while distortedly singing the words to his own chorus. A master of stylistic pastiche and digital sampling, could Beck also be looking for the postmodern “there” when he asks/declares “Where It’s At?”

There is also a 2001 episode of the Fox sitcom Family Guy in which cartoon character Stewie Griffin covers the Shatner version faithfully. The most interesting, or at least funniest rendition is a 1991 Chris Elliot spoof of the Shatner performance on Late Night with David Letterman. Letterman introduces Elliot’s “dramatic interpretation” without reference to the Shatner version but the visual cues make the origins of Elliot’s version unmistakable. Elliot doesn’t have much work to do to make his interpretation funny. Unmoored from its original context, the Shatner version is humorous without embellishment. Elliot accentuates the irony of the original by offering slight modifications that serve to highlight the absurdity of Shatner’s performance.
The audience is giggling before Elliot even starts. His first modification is to overdramatize the lighting of his cigarette but he then delivers the first two lines faithfully. At “Zero hour 9am,” in forced nonchalance that calls attention to the performativity of the construction, Elliot adds the detail of “I don’t know though, I forgot to look at my watch.” He then overemphasizes ‘high’ to the point of ridiculousness, exaggerating on the inhale and coughing slightly on the exhale. Elliot then calls attention to the hypermasculinity of Shatner’s version when he adds ‘too’ at the end of “I miss the earth so much, I miss my wife.” In other versions, the place of earth comes before that of Rocketman’s spouse, and that this goes unnoticed and normalized is fodder for Elliot’s critique. Elliot also exaggerates the mystery of space in his whispery awestruck pronunciation of “outer space.” Where Second Shatner is boldly confident and capable of going where no one has gone before, Second Elliot is neurotic when assessing the livability of Mars. When Third Elliot pops out, the first two Elliot’s seem interested in joining the party as opposed to the stoic dismissive response reception given the Third Shatner.

Whatever one makes of the many different takes on “Rocketman,” the significant thing here is that there are so many different responses, and that many of them do something different – different from the original, different from the hegemonic discourse of traditional astrofuturism, different from the dictates of culture industry production. “Rocketman” was produced to sell records, not to help keep space open. Nevertheless, Taupin and John tap the dark side of astrofuturist discourse, and in doing so created a dynamic open text available for (re)appropriation and (re)interpretation by others. I only wish to demonstrate in this chapter that participation in this process is possible and that the TNeC origins of the production could be as much an opportunity to create open space as it has also been a tool of late-capitalist hegemony.
have not to this point provided much detail on how a popular song might actually open space, but
the next chapter, working on “Space Oddity,” will try to outline a method.

Build This City on Rock and Roll

When David Bowie recorded his 1972 BBC session he gives a shout out to Elton John’s
“Rocketman” at the segue from the punctuating acoustic guitar break to the “Though I’ve passed
one hundred thousand miles” verse of “Space Oddity.” Bowie whispers, “I’m just a rocketman.”
While it is entirely probable that Bowie is calculatedly trying to create an association with a hit
song (# Two UK, # Six US) in preparation for the American re-release of “Space Oddity,”
Bowie’s reference to “Rocketman” edifies their relationship and puts into play a productive
intertextuality marking a trailhead leading around contested referential signifiers of musically
produced space.

I have constructed Elton John, Bernie Taupin, and “Rocketman” as tools of a popular
music industry whose product is consuming subjects. They may be read as contributing very
little more substantial than candy to our ears and a new business model for rock in the early
corporate era. I stand by this characterization of their cultural work, but perhaps more useful here
is to read the text for evidence of subversive capacity. “Rocketman” has been taken so many
different places by those who have covered it that John and Taupin have to at least be given
credit for creating an open text. Closer and closer readings of texts from the first generation of
corporate rock/human spacefaring like “Rocketman” may unravel latent and powerful agencies
for difference that we may work to manifest in the context of space tourism.

Since “Rocketman” is an open text available for reappropriation and reinvention, as my
small sample of (re)interpretations show, perhaps the fact that it is a mainstream product also
provides the opportunity for difference to mole deep into the heart of late-capitalist cultural production of space instead of only banging away at well-policed margins. And if Taupin is able to erect such a scaffold with “Rocketman” (an unexpected research result) than perhaps there is some subversive potential latent in “We Built this City” worthy of reconsideration. Furthermore, in the context of space, Rocketperson may build something different should the time come to build places for everyday work and life in space.

Maybe Rocketperson really could build a city on rock and roll, in space. Even though there is a risk it would be all cookie-cutter Hard Rock Cafes and generic Houses of Blues, there is more opportunity for difference to play a part than in other more traditional frontier establishments. Rocketperson need not pilot his/her rocket from the Las Vegas stage, through a constellation of rock stars, and up into Elton John, remaining all the while in late-capitalist space. Rocketperson could set the controls for open space. Perhaps Rocketperson is named Tom…or Sun Ra.

1 According to the VH1 Classic Rockumentary Elton John: Me, Myself, and I, Taupin and John were the biggest selling songwriting team of the era after Lennon and McCartney.
2 Rock rebellion was recuperated by corporate power in the 70s, and thus efforts to take this power back again are labeled here as re-recuperated.
3 The Brill Building in New York and the Motown studios in Detroit operated on an industrial production model that atomized writing, recording, and performance into separate specialties. This model of production dominated the pop charts during the pre-British Invasion era of rock and roll.
4 Rock star drug use is so trite as to be cliché, but it is worth noting briefly that far from rebellious or mind-expanding, drug use contextualized in this too typical fashion serves a dangerous reactionary function. That is to induce potential and actual rock stars to uncritically incorporate unhealthy, addictive, and illegal practices into their identity-construct that can make them vulnerable and easily manipulated by their management should the star stray too far into the politics or economics of their productive milieu. While drug use should be a personal choice and can have beneficial effects for some creative personalities sometimes, clichéd rock star drug abuse is an industry sanctioned method of control that should not be celebrated further.
5 Shatner’s breakout camp hit was his 1968 interpretation of the Beatles’ “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” which Elton John himself would later cover in 1974.
CHAPTER III. SUN RA’S SPACE IS THE PLACE OF YOUR ALTER-DESTINY

[...] we can listen profitably to the futurology evident in black popular cultures and interpret their comments on science and technology as having some bearing upon ethical and even political matters.

Paul Gilroy in Against Race (341).

[Sun Ra] exemplifies artistic permission to go out there a minute. He is an incitement to try harder, do better, go further.

Kodwo Eshun in “Interstellar Overdrive.”

Ra’s pedagogy, I’ve been trying to suggest, is about the need to deterritorialize institutionalized forms of cultural domination. But it also points to the possibilities of both individual agency and collective solidarity.

Ajay Heble in Landing on the Wrong Note (130).

Jazz critic Stanley Crouch suggests that “More than any other musician … Sun Ra had found a way to combine entertainment with the avant-garde” (127). By that, I believe Crouch is trying to say that Sun Ra was exceptionally adept at pushing and challenging all manner of sonic and social boundaries while retaining a sense of joy that invited his audiences into his unique vision of the cosmos. For the extraordinary details of his long and colorful life, I suggest readers turn to John Szwed’s excellent biography, Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra. Here, I am largely concerned with how Sun Ra’s experience here on earth informs his vision of space as a place, what kind of place is space as Sun Ra constructs it, and how these ideas are communicated in the film Space is the Place.

As a progenitor of DIY means and methods and a large body of work produced outside dominant culture, I want to perform less of my own appropriation of Sun Ra and let him speak for himself (or through existing interpretations) more than I have David Bowie or Elton John. The greater body of critical literature on Sun Ra than on Bowie or John, particularly on his signature statement the film Space is the Place, combined with Sun Ra’s deliberate resistance to appropriation, suggests that I perform less of my own interpretation than in other chapters. This
chapter is able to review more of the literature than the previous two, analyze some of the existing interpretive possibilities, and identify some of the opportunities and shortcomings of Sun Ra’s unique construction of space as a place. I am particularly interested in the different conception of community put forth by Sun Ra and how this vision might play out in the context of space.

I feel comfortable putting my own spin on privileged mainstream artists like Elton John and David Bowie, appropriating them for my own uses. Their art and their lives were not shaped as much by victimization. If I make a mistake in interpretation or an error in judgement related to John or Bowie, it does not become another of the thousand little cuts that hurt oppressed populations. The life and works of Herman Blount/Sun Ra, on the other hand, were inextricably intertwined with the oppressions visited him on the basis of his race and sexuality. Thus I err on the side of caution and elect not to directly reappropriate him, and instead either let him speak for himself or rely on the analysis of others.

Sun Ra claimed to be from Saturn. According to the lyric to “Space is the Place,” the song that forms the basis of the film of the same name, “Saturn is a place of discipline/ Saturn is a great task-master.” No freewheeling hippie, Sun Ra went “out there” without drugs, without sex, without mainstream cultural capital. Sun Ra’s Solar Myth Arkestra (one of many cosmic wordplay monikers he applied to his group) was a tightly run ship with a “great task-master” at the helm. Sun Ra frames Saturn, and space in general, not as strange, odd, or incomprehensible but as a place of discipline and hard work. In Sun Ra’s ominiverse, one must work at play (and play at work). He may have made this claim of extraterrestrial origins to work as an artistic performance, to position his brand of innovative free Jazz as the most “out there” possible, to incite discourses of otherness, or perhaps because, as some would uncharitably claim, he was out
of his mind. Regardless of the disposition of the question of his origins, Sun Ra meant himself to be taken seriously.

Sun Ra never slipped out of character, and so I treat his claims of extraterrestrial origins at face value. I have no interest in establishing the veracity of his claim; rather, I use the ideas engendered by the possibilities and the processes he launched in making the claim as one splendid model of how to re-make corporate space into Open Space. I take this cue, that of treating Sun Ra’s claims of extraterrestriality at face value, from a story Ajay Heble writes of involving an exchange Sun Ra once had with a customs official while on tour. When Sun Ra was asked to identify his place of origin upon arrival at the border he replied, in all seriousness and without a hint of humor or irony, “Saturn.” Like Heble, I may be asking this brief exchange to do too much work, but I also think it entirely possible that

[…] encoded somewhere in this little example might be a model for cultural listening. For isn’t Ra, in refusing to homogenize frameworks of knowledge, pushing us here, as in his music, to recognize the importance, indeed the necessity, of crossing cultural borders? (Heble 136)

I am borrowing from Sun Ra the capacity to cross the border between earth and space, between the spaces exclusively of/and for dominant culture and a more free space emerging from the flow between the social and artistic margins to the centers of industrial cultural production.

Sun Ra produced himself, his community, and his mythology as erasure of the pains endured by Herman Blount (Sun Ra’s earthly given name) at the hands of racists, homophobes, and squares through their ignorance, misplaced traditions, prejudice, or misunderstanding. Sun Ra adopted DIY methodologies and tactics as an economic, political, and aesthetic strategy. He needed an effective strategy to cope with the socio-economic inequalities of his subject position
in his time, a gay black genius in the Jim Crow south. He did his own thing, in part because he had the imagination and talent to make it so, but essentially because he lacked the comportment necessary to gain patronage opportunities. Playing with history, black power, jazz, and space, Sun Ra fashioned for himself a holistic approach to suturing together a livable response to inequality, one constructed from scratch using the tools and talents on hand.

Sun Ra was no Major Tom. All the way up until Tom stepped through the metaphorical door, he spent his life as a valued member of dominant society and standard bearer for mainstream values in the technological vanguard. Conversely, Herman Blount stepped through Tom’s door the day he was born and is thought by many to have floated through our world in some of the most peculiar ways available. Where Tom’s flight to space generated great interest from official media, in the process of becoming Sun Ra, no paper wanted to know what shirts Herman Blount wore, whether he took his protein pills, or if he put his helmet on. Not being from “here,” Sun Ra was never employed in the service of Control, Ground or otherwise. Unlike Major Tom, “God’s Love” was certainly not wished upon him. Those in power were interested in Sun Ra only so far as the occasions on which they took the opportunity to reify dominant power and attempt to put him in his “place.” He refused the limits of the place made for him, and space was the only place left for him to make an alternative destiny, or to use his parlance, an “Alter-destiny.”

It is useful to contrast David Bowie, playing with the tension between high art and mass commerce, with Sun Ra’s organic response to marginalization from mass circulation. In this light, the difference between Bowie and Sun Ra is more about method and production than genre or sound (though there are significant differences in genre and sound that are not disconnected from the two artists’ relative subject positions). The relative access to mass production afforded
these two musicians was regulated by social constructions of Otherness. Whereas Bowie could play with existing mass media, Sun Ra had to create his own media from scratch: he organized his own record label, designed his own album art, and hand produced a long running stream of alternative street propaganda promoting his astro-black mythology.\(^2\)

For Sun Ra, self-invention was a strategy for survival, not merely artistic play. Bowie can wear his oddities, space and otherwise, as a mask or façade and while we may never know which Bowie character is closest to the real David Jones, it is clear that each is a construction and not the real thing. On the other hand, Sun Ra is not a character; Herman Blount does not wear a mask or façade for artistic and commercial purposes. Sun Ra is the butterfly that the caterpillar Herman Blount became; his self-made astro-black mythology – his music – is the chrysalis. This difference may be subtle, but it is significant. Once Herman Blount was Sun Ra, he did not have the luxury of dropping the persona according to fashion like Bowie. Sun Ra should be considered an “authentic,” real, holistically-lived identity. Where Bowie can be accused of hubris, Sun Ra instead has gravitas.

The social and cultural constraints of mid-twentieth century Jim Crow America required of Sun Ra compliance and conformity, acquiescence and erasure, and to endure all manner of violences all too frequently. Unable to bend his brilliant queer pacifist black self to such unreasonable expectations, he cut and pasted together a place where there were no limitations to human potential, especially his own. He located this place in past and future mythologies and made highly spirited discipline a prerequisite of occupation. Space is the place and Sun Ra’s 1974 film *Space is the Place* is the primary transportation media on which this chapter rides.

Sun Ra uses space and music as methods for dealing with the problems of his life on earth – he makes different music, different ways to make music, different tools to make music, to
make space a place of difference. To set up my analysis of what kind of place Sun Ra’s space might be, I will first examine the literature on Afrofuturist science fiction as it relates to Sun Ra, particularly how his experience as an ‘other’ on earth produces his construction of space, the development of his musical methods, and his “astro-black mythology.” Then I will describe the evidence in two key scenes from *Space is the Place* that make the case for the kind of place space is for Sun Ra.

Sun Ra, Science Fiction, and Afrofuturism

Black science fiction begins by affirming the blackness of space, the material space of social life rather than the transparent space of imperialist expansion. It’s the space of this world, and not of the galaxy, that needs a change. Black science fiction dares to imagine such possibilities.

Paul Youngquist in “The Space Machine” (333)

Sun Ra’s pioneering adoption of and experimentation with avant-garde electronic equipment qualify him as a skilled technician but in musically reworking traditional Astrofuturism, like the literary producers documented by Kilgore (2003), Sun Ra is godfather to both Afro-futurism (Nelson) and DIY production and performance practices. He was not acceptable in the world made by dominant culture, and so with elbow grease and duct-tape he cobbled together a place where he could be himself. His music was made as the means of getting between here and there, or as Zuberi describes it, his “music is the special effect that can transport black people into a higher state of consciousness and being” (92, emphasis in original). Sun Ra may have actively recruited others to join him there in space, to follow their “alter-destiny,” but he was not overly concerned, other than being dismissively sorry for their unwillingness or inability to escape their earthly oppressions, for those who chose not to break free with him.
If one wished to assign a genre, other than jazz, to Sun Ra’s music, it would rightly be Science Fiction (Sci-Fi or SF), which according to Philip Hayward’s definition “is a cultural genre concerned with aspects of futurism, imagined technologies and/or inter-planetarism” (3). Deriving his assessment from Sun Ra’s “sustained engagements with Sci-Fi themes and images” combined with the Arkestra’s “explorations of emergent musical technologies such as synthesizers,” Hayward contends that Sun Ra specifically exemplifies “the radical black interpretation of Science Fiction known as ‘Afrofuturism’ (15). Afrofuturism is largely a movement within science fiction with “other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come” (Nelson 9) and is built on exploration of the notion of “black space” Youngquist refers to in “The Space Machine.”

Perhaps Sun Ra claimed he was a visitor to this planet because he could not otherwise explain the oppressions visited upon him. Sun Ra wanted nothing to do with Earth, a place he viewed as ruled by cruelty, and thus space provided him a respite from human foibles.

The only reason I’m here is that the Creator got me here against my will. If I can get out of in any way enlightening this planet I’ll do so with the greatest of pleasure and let them stay in their darkness, cruelty, hatred, ignorance, and the other things they got in their houses of deceit. (Sun Ra quoted in Szwed 365)

Rather than laugh off, lodge a counter-claim of insanity, or otherwise dismiss Sun Ra’s assertions of extraterrestriality, let us first consider some critical views of Ra’s survival strategy. In Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton (1999), Graham Lock suggests that Ra’s claim to be from space was “[…] designed not to raise questions about our or Sun Ra’s sanity but to initiate a discourse on Otherness” (Lock 62). Sun Ra “declared himself not mad but alien” (Lock 62: emphasis in
original), because in Lock’s view “Extraterrestriality … represents a vision of greater sanity” than the shameful logic of Jim Crow legislation and practices (Lock 58: emphasis in original). Thus the burden of insanity should be born by the producers and employers of institutionalized racism and Sun Ra’s self-declaration of extraterrestrial alterity considered the sane choice.

Much of the scholarship on Sun Ra discusses his space mythology as a means of locating himself elsewhere from the marginalized place in society constructed for him by dominant white culture. Along these lines, John Corbett links Sun Ra with George Clinton and Lee “Scratch” Perry as artists that construct disorientating images to metaphorically mimic the marginalization commonly experienced by African Americans. “Staking their claim on this ec-centric margin – a place that simultaneously eludes and frightens the oppressive, centered subjectivity – the three of them reconstitute it [the eccentric margin] as a place of creation” (Corbett Extended Play, 18). Sexton further explains that Sun Ra’s embrace of Sci-Fi motifs and new technologies are part of his attempt to rewrite the histories that African Americans had been “virtually written out of” and are why he constructed space as the place where African Americans could be free to “engineer … their own futures, rather than letting whites construct them” (Sexton 200). The denial of black contributions to western civilization by white historians prompted Sun Ra “to distrust official history, to argue that it was only his story, and instead to focus more of his attention on ‘mystery,’ or my story” (Sexton 200, emphasis in original). Over time, says Lock, Sun Ra’s eccentricities in discourse and style were woven together until the “confluence of music, science, and utopia was being expressed by Sun Ra almost exclusively in terms of space travel” (Lock 27). But though Sun Ra’s alleged strangeness was far from unintelligible and deeply connected with history and his real experiences of marginalization, mainstream critics dismiss his (re)construction of self, reducing his politics and aesthetics to shallow showmanship:
[...] Sun Ra appears determined to simultaneously befuddle and beguile all who would speak to him. To that end, he talks *a fluttering mumbo-jumbo* that combines everything from astrology to ethnic nationalism and justifies his sequins, wigs, robes, and the outer-space showboat he brings to the stage. (Crouch 125, emphasis added)

What does Crouch mean by “a fluttering mumbo-jumbo,” and why does he assume Sun Ra’s intent was to “befuddle and beguile.” Though I cannot answer for Crouch’s interpretation completely, I suggest some relevant clues to understanding Sun Ra and his relationship to the mainstream are operating in the dismissive assessment above. While Sun Ra does not intentionally “befuddle and beguile” he is also not at all invested in whether others, especially his critics, can understand him. It is not that Sun Ra intentionally obfuscates so much as he demands that the audience *work* at reception. His space is a place that requires discipline of mind and practice and so Sun Ra requires of anyone who would like to share his space that they exercise some of the discipline he and the Arkestra put into it’s creation. Crouch’s assessment is itself superficial, derived without the effort asks he for and can, perhaps, be read as symptomatic of the kind of problematic/dismissive world Sun Ra was responding to in the first place. To understand Sun Ra requires not so much suspension of disbelief but rather an earnest attempt to meet him halfway intellectually, to work towards ones own understanding of the complexities of Sun Ra’s work.

No mere coping strategy, making a place in space was also a means of actively combating both “white denial of black history (e.g., Egypt) and white denial of access to the future (e.g. outer space)” (Lock 61). Sun Ra’s assertions of alien-ness are read by Lock “as a deliberate riposte to the history of white American refusal to treat black Americans as human
beings” and likens terrestrial Herman Blount’s transformation into the extraterrestrial Sun Ra as akin to coming out of slavery, “an experience that entailed not only a change in status but virtually a whole new way of being” (Lock 5). Ajay Heble concurs with Lock in regards to the assessment that, far from the product of insanity, Sun Ra’s space is produced to strategically counteract oppression.

[…] his wigged-out space themes all suggest a desire to opt out of the very codes of representation and intelligibility, the very frameworks of interpretation and assumption, which have legitimized the workings of dominant culture. Ra’s space-age futurism, [may] mark a shift in postcolonial struggles for identity formation: rather than critically interrogating the dominant ideology’s misrepresentation of black history (and consequently seeking to correct the historical record), Ra’s space sounds, philosophy, and paraphernalia invite us to envision new models for an aesthetic of resistance, to generate a space outside the very framework of domination. (Heble 125)

Corbett concurs, suggesting that treating Sun Ra as insane rather than taking him seriously “may indicate the insanity of its maker, it also cuts back the other direction, suggesting the fundamental unreality of existence for people imported into the New World servitude and then disenfranchised into poverty” (Corbett Extended Play 8, emphasis in original). This helps explain the earth/space dichotomy deployed by Sun Ra wherein tradition and reason are associated with earth from which flights of fancy depart when going “out there.” Corbett further suggests that Sun Ra’s space metaphors are thinly veiled references to the slave trade:

Referring to the destruction of diverse, distinct African histories and their subsumption in the “melting pot” of miscegenation and history-without-
genealogy, he [Sun Ra] suggests a creative alternative: “We came from nowhere here, why can’t we go somewhere there?” (Corbett *Extended Play*, 17).

Sexton suggests that Sun Ra’s vision of “outer space utopias” (199) works in concert with what Sun Ra’s biographer John Szwed terms his ‘black cosmic vision’ and links it directly to

[...] the theme of travel, of journey, of exodus, of escape which dominates African-American narratives; of people who could fly back to Africa, travel in the spirit, visit or be visited by the dead; of chariots and trains to heaven, the Underground Railroad; Marcus Garvey’s steamship line, Rosa Parks on the Mobile Bus, freedom riders. (Szwed 134)

Mark Dery concurs, elaborating on the double meaning of *alien* in African American culture and suggesting that history easily explains the use of alien metaphors in African American cultural production.

[...] the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). (Dery 180)

Following this connection between alien metaphors and the African American experience, Davis suggests that Sun Ra’s proselytizing about outer space is equally as Afrocentric as his songs of mythic Egypt since “Both came from his conviction that he was from somewhere else and had little in common with most of those around him – a sense of cultural displacement shared by many African-Americans, but taken to extremes by Ra” (Davis 161).
Heble posits a relationship between performances of Sun Ra’s “mythology and uninhibited vision” and empowering post-colonial signification, representation, and production practices (123). In this system of knowledge production, “Space becomes a site for the recovery and the articulation of other histories, epistemologies, identities, and possibilities” (Heble 132). And in this post-colonial configuration of black history and culture, Sun Ra looks to space as a site of a new and radically revised model of knowledge production that counters the “dominant myths, values, and behaviors that have become institutionalized, authorized, and naturalized in American society” (Heble 132).

Creating a ‘living myth’ that revises the past and redeems the future is, according to Eshun, why Sun Ra’s “poetics of autonomy, conceived in sonic, social, aesthetic and economic terms, … continues to resonate with musicians today” (“Interstellar Overdrive”). Sun Ra’s myth-making also ties him to the use of Science Fiction by the Astrofuturists. In an interview with Mark Dery outlining the concerns of Afrofuturism, Greg Tate explains that the genre devices typically and generally deployed by science fiction writers – incongruous and disorienting travel from past to future, characters that find themselves dropped into an alien culture – mimics the alienating experienced of being black in America concluding that “Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine” (Tate in Dery 212).

There is a consistent strain in discussions of Sun Ra that suggest he actively inverted traditional, naturalized, dominant views on race and technology to counter the sentiment shared by Dery that “the unreal estate of the future [is] already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers – white to a man [sic] – who have engineered our collective fantasies” (Dery 180). Or as Younquist suggests, Sun Ra’s astro-black mythology “[…] is a sophisticated political response to a techno-scientific culture he viewed as primitive, destructive,
benighted” (Youngquist 341). Furthermore, this mode of rendering and referencing the future is a popular motif deployed “in order to counter assumptions that blackness equals opposition to progress” (Sexton 203).

Corbett suggests that a serious attempt to understand Sun Ra’s music and myth-making must start “with the acceptance of this impossible suggestion of outer-space origins, with believing, for a start, that Sun Ra was not of this world” (Extended Play, 8), the forthcoming analysis of Space is the Place will take seriously the work Sun Ra’s claim of celestial origination performs in producing space differently. Rather than follow a progressive technocratic space agenda that erases or excludes black people, Youngquist asserts that, “Sun Ra’s music materializes black space. It rescinds the transparency of blackness posited by cosmic liberalism and asserts, simply and boldly, that space is the place for black people” (Youngquist 341). Blackness is not counter-progressive, according to the group of African American science fictionists who are developing the field of Afrofuturism to explore the blackness of space; it is a source for a new kind of space that seeks to redress the “social science fictions” (Nelson) that do not include black culture(s) in the future of space exploration. Afrofuturism asserts that:

Space is black. Check out any episode of Star Trek. When Captain Kirk and his faithful crew go boldly where no man has gone before, it’s a journey into blackness, punctuated with a few bright and shining stars. […] Approach the question culturally, and it becomes obvious that space is more than just a transparent black background for the space race and its colonialist Enterprise. When Sun Ra, the great theorist and master mage of astro-black mythology, says, “Space is the Place,” he means that it’s the place of blackness: black space.

(Youngquist 333)
Having explored some in this section the connections between Sun Ra’s astro-black mythology, afrofuturism, and the historical and contemporary African American experience generally, we can now begin to take a look at the construction materials made available through *Space is the Place*.

**An Alter-Destiny**

Enthralling on its own idiosyncratic terms, *Space is the Place* doubles as an intriguing introduction to the mythos of its inspiration and raison d’être: Sun Ra, one of the greatest visionary composers of the postwar era.

Kodwo Eshun in “Interstellar Overdrive.”

Sun Ra’s central message in *Space is the Place* is … that music is the special effect that can transport black people into a higher state of consciousness and being.

Nabeel Zuberi in “The Transmolecularization of Black Folk” (emphasis in original).

The homepage of outerspacewaysinc.com, the official website of *Space is the Place*, describes the film as such:

Sun Ra … saw the film as an opportunity to make a statement about conditions of black people on planet earth – and as a powerful medium for his music as a vehicle for lifting them out of their collective misery.

During a 1979 performance Sun Ra told his audience that they had outlived the Bible and declared “[…] we’re living in a science fiction film now” (quoted in Lock 41). Sun Ra positions his mythology relative to the larger context of popular Sci-Fi films of the 70s. Francis Davis quotes Sun Ra suggesting that such films are faithful renditions of the space he is from - “Did you ever see *Star Wars*? It was very accurate” (159). In the introduction to his edited volume on the relationship between music and science fiction films, *Off The Planet: Music, Sound and Science Fiction Cinema*, Hayward also ties *Star Wars* to Sun Ra’s alien ethos, noting “that one of
the few moments of infra-diegetic music in *Star Wars* is the cantina scene in which aliens play a
form of ‘weird jazz’ on weird instruments” (24). Gill makes a similar association between music
and sci-fi film in his observation that “Ra and his Arkestra looked like they were waiting to be
picked up by the mothership from *Close Encounters* […]” (60).

Of course, as a proto-DIY project in aesthetic and production terms, *Space is the Place*
did not have the budget, distribution, or film-making talent of these Hollywood blockbusters on
hand. Zuberi points to the film’s existence on “the relatively unprofitable margins of the early
1970s New Hollywood system” and suggests that this helps establish the viral nature of the
film’s reception (90). Occupying this marginal space allows for “a more mutable, modular and
recombinant sense of genre within which we can accommodate *Space is the Place* and make
sense of later re-mediated appropriations of the film and Sun Ra” (Zuberi 90). Sexton connects
the film to underground film culture and filmmakers, implying a continuity between Sun Ra’s
aesthetic strategies and underground films of the 60s that “merged avant-garde and trash
elements, such as the films of Jack Smith, George and Mike Kuchar, and even some films
associated with Andy Warhol” (209). Moreover, Sexton says that *Space is the Place* employs
“the iconography of blaxploitation [but] the repressed political underbelly [of the genre] is
negated in favor of science-fiction” (Sexton 206). He further sees *Space is the Place* as a non-
linear biopic based on Sun Ra’s beliefs and self-mythology, an “excessively collage-like” work
of “intense hybridity” and as such can be considered transgressive cult film because the “[…]
content, attitude, or style […] feature subjects who are ‘other’; the filmmaker may attempt to
shock through a transgressive attitude […]” (205, emphasis in original). Zuberi finds the film
performing a multivalent genre hopping in that:
The film ‘signifies’ across and between a number of recognizable film genres and modes such as Sci-Fi, the musical, the urban youth film and the documentary in the style of African diasporic vernacular expression and media production. (78)

Eshun credits director John Coney with bringing many of these diverse genre elements to the production aesthetic, particularly,

Catwomen of Outer Space-style cheesy sci-fi, Black Caesar-style blaxploitation and the carefree porn of contemporaneous flicks such as *Behind the Green Door*, with which *Space is the Place* shared a shooting stage and an actor or two. (“Interstellar Overdrive”)

The mixing of visual styles, according to Eshun, helps give the film “a kind of home-made majesty … which feels true to the antique futurism of his homespun cosmology.” Sun Ra himself, particularly his “dreamy yet determined personality,” is the unifying force that holds all the disparate elements together and “gives the movie its distinctive mood of mysticism and militancy, riddle and confrontation” (Eshun “Interstellar Overdrive”). However, Szwed and Zuberi see the genre mixing as genre confusion resulting not from Sun Ra’s vision but that “the film became a mishmash of genres due to the different, often conflicting inputs of [producer] Newman, screenwriter Joshua Smith, director John Coney and Sun Ra himself” (Zuberi 89).

But while recognizing that *Space is the Place* taps into and aggressively remixes (whether with intention or not) the motifs of a number of established Hollywood genres, Zuberi also finds elements that parody Hollywood representations of media.

*Space is the Place* parodies the representation of media in Hollywood film while ambivalently acknowledging the power of radio, television cameras, newspapers and magazines to disseminate Sun Ra’s subversive message. (Zuberi 87)
Noting the conspiratorial kidnapping sub-plot, Sexton also comments that *Space is the Place* critiques media technologies, particularly surveillance technologies, linking the film thematically to 1970s conspiracy thrillers like *The Conversation* (208). Zuberi and Sexton both also refer to the film as a cult film. The film’s cult status is transmediate, in Sexton’s view, meaning that the cult status of the film is “by proxy,” or derived from the Arkestra’s status in another media form, music. Though the film collages a number of marginal genres and is superficially humorous, Zuberi warns that the film and its messages should be taken seriously (though not as seriously as Sun Ra’s most die hard fans). Along with the film’s “utopian aspirations,” *Space is the Place’s* humor is a central component of its “‘disintegrating’ power” (Zuberi 91).

The film is a non-linear and somewhat unconventional example of genre mixing that does not deliver its meanings in easily peeled away gift-wrapping. For example, “We are never clear where the Arkestra is – if it’s in the space ship or in the sonic motor of the spaceship itself” (Zuberi 88). Overall the film’s “mix of signifyin(g) humour [sic], space-age prophecy and various generic elements are hardly beyond comprehension” (Zuberi 89), unless one makes the same mistake as those who don’t consider Sun Ra to be sane. Rather, according to Eshun, in the film Sun Ra offers an “alter-destiny” – a chance to reclaim for oneself history that had previously been made by others.

Nearly every serious analysis of Sun Ra’s Omniverse (multiple universe) puts *Space is the Place* in orbit, using the film as a site of analysis to understand Sun Ra’s ouvre. The regularity with which *Space is the Place* is referenced indicates that those who have examined Sun Ra’s cultural work in depth consider the text to be worthy of attention because of a perceived fidelity between the film and the vision(ary). Also, it may be that they find film a medium capable of clearer communication and greater understanding than music. Music is the
fuel by which space is constructed and traversed, but at this juncture I am interested in the spaces
Sun Ra constructed. I want to use them as a foundation for social movement, a proposed
architectural blueprint, urban plat, or city plan for opening space to difference. And so I turn to
the film *Space Is The Place* (1974). *Space Is The Place* is perhaps the best represented
summation and crystallization of Sun Ra’s vision for space (Corbett, Szwed, Zuberi).

Since the playing of the Arkestra, at the direction of Sun Ra’s conducting and leadership,
is improvisational – responding to and interacting with the moods, capacities, environments,
politics, identities, and discreet situations of the moment for the performers, audience, and Sun
Ra himself – each performance and arrangement I have heard of the song “Space is the Place” is
radically divergent in tone, tempo, timbre, and temperament. Thus, another reason I have chosen
the film as my primary text of analysis is because of its fixity. It would not be possible to analyze
each iteration of the song, nor would it be reasonable to expect that whatever version I chose
would necessarily be available to anyone wishing to follow up on my analysis or interrogate the
text themselves. The film, by contrast, exists in only one publicly released form that is relatively
well distributed for a film of its time and kind.³ As a more collaborative and collective, but also
more static and highly capitalized process, the film *Space is the Place* can serve as prototype for
constructing space differently from but in conjunction with mainstream astrofuturism. In *Space
is the Place*, Sun Ra’s self-reconstructive myth making meets the myth industry. *Space is the
Place* is a DIY aesthetic wrapped in a mass entertainment form.

Sun Ra arranges and composes the music and image of the Arkestra to fit changing
contextual particularities, producing performances that meet the perceived pedagogical needs of
his audiences and players. Assessment of real-time moods and capacities pairs with Sun Ra’s
socio-political agenda to facilitate adaptive environments of possibility and opportunity. Sun
Ra’s discipline and playfulness match needed tools for the construction of a different kind of space, one where Sun Ra could feel at home.

Take the opening sequence of *Space is the Place* for an example of how Sun Ra constructs a space apart from the spaces of dominant culture. The film starts with a yellow object moving onto a field of stars from the right frame accompanied by synthesized pulsing low engine sounds. The yellow object is Sun Ra’s space ship and as the audience later learns during an early exchange in the tarot-like card game contest between Sun Ra and The Overseer, the ship is a vehicle named Judgement. To create a cognitive map of the territory being musiced the soundtrack is heavily reverbed and distorted on the low end, effects that slightly jiggle the foundations of groundedness. The film is going… out… somewhere.

“It’s after the end of the world, don’t you know that yet?” chants a solo female voice twice before being joined by a backgrounded and slightly discombobulated male chorus. Soft but persistent horns run in between the engine pulses and the chanting grows louder and then stops.

Cut to a cartoonish landscape evocative of perhaps a colorized version of the mis-en-scene of Melies’ *Trip to the Moon* and pan across while the pulsing engine sounds and horns are joined by a handful of other noodling instruments and a very slow single bongo beat. Then cut to a forested scene. As an expressively wobbling camera backtracks through the woods, it lingers meditatively on a variety of small pop art objects and new age brick-a-brac placed in the scenery along the way. The focus starts soft and blurred and then zooms and sharpens on Ra. Ra appears in Egyptian garb, his headdress topped with a large golden globe framed by two posts resembling gilded ribbed semi-truck exhaust pipes.

Sun Ra is trailed throughout this scene by a mirror-faced mute draped in black cloth. Judging from its position relative to the location of our primary focus, the mirror is there for the
viewer to project themselves onto Sun Ra’s world: this is what you look like if you follow along with Sun Ra. The mirror brings limitless retrospection. However, when specific images are visible in the mirror, they are of the lush trees and bushes representing “the beauty of this planet.”

Then Sun Ra lets go of a glassed brain/nervous system machine that floats disconnectedly near Ra and the mirror-face. The brain/nervous system accompanies them through the remainder of the opening scene. Throughout the ensuing introductory speech, Sun Ra’s face features a softly pleased smirk. His speech is slow and clear, with a deliberate comfort. He alternates between direct address to the camera and setting his gaze to the far distance in a manner that appears introspective.

Finally we hear the first sounds from Sun Ra himself, a convocation of his opening monologue that consists of humming a slightly sacred sounding six note melody. He pauses, then speaks:

The music is different here.

The vibrations are different, not like planet Earth.

Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration.

There was no one we can talk to on planet Earth that would understand.

Sun Ra wastes no time establishing that his space is a place of difference, right down to molecular level movements, and that these differences are in opposition to what happens on Earth. Existence in Sun Ra’s space lacks the violences of Earth. Social isolation on Earth compounds and is compounded by a lack of understanding of how different the experience of living on Earth is for those who belong and those who are made to feel that they don’t have a place in dominant culture. He continues:
We’ll set up a colony here for black people here.

We’ll see what they can do on a planet all their own without any white people there.

They can drink up the beauty of this planet. It would affect their vibrations… for the better of course.

Blackness here is performed as exclusive rather than excluded. And though his discourse is that of colonization it is of the form that seeks a place to escape from domination rather than seeking a new place to extend existing dominant social structures as with traditional colonialism. Sun Ra sits on a large rock, gently and calmly kicking his feet a little, expressing a bit of excitedness at the thought of this better, more beautiful world absent whiteness and free of external oppressions.

Another place in the universe, up under different stars.

That would be where the alter-destiny would come in.

Like the stars that look “very different today” in “Space Oddity” these different stars may not so much be different as appear different from the new subject position of the star-gazer, once exited from the orbit of dominant culture. As Sun Ra utters this phrase, the camera cuts to a wider shot that places Sun Ra far to the left and centers on the interactions of the mirror-faced figure and the floating brain/nervous system.

Equation wise, the first thing to do is to…consider time as officially ended.

The camera returns to a close shot as Sun Ra offers an emphasizing gesture toward the viewer with his cane.

We work on the other side of time.

We’ll bring them here through either isotope teleportation, transmolecularization.
Zuberi may have been thinking of this statement when he wrote “sounds [produced by the theramin and synthesizers in 70s Sci-Fi] and their cultural associations … are semiotically charged with rematerialization (or transmolecularization), if you will” (84). In time with the beat between the words ‘teleportation’ and ‘transmolecularization,’ the screen dissolves and, visually at least, demolecularizes to black. Then, faint traces of blue and silver move into the frame from the top left roughly where Sun Ra’s figure stood before the dissolve. A moment later the glitter of what becomes Sun Ra’s now silver cap twinkles in the top left corner, then Sun Ra’s silhouetted face rotates in to the field of view counter-clockwise as he continues his monologue:

Or better still, teleport the whole planet here, through… music.

Ra pauses a beat before speaking the word music. As he says “music,” *Space Is The Place* flashes onto the screen in a large bolded sans-serif yellow not unlike a spacey neon near apogee of the camera’s brief flight. This timing of word and image reiterates that music is essential to the place that space is in *Space is the Place*. Cut to an overhead camera on a medium-close up shot of Ra looking up from against a solid black background, arms folded and body wrapped in muslin evoking the figure of the Egyptian mummy. The camera pans back, twisting slightly counter-clockwise, effectively invoking the sense that it is taking off and leaving Sun Ra behind. At first, the mummy figure suggests he may be laid to rest but then when the camera view shifts to looking down from above his head, he gazes up and gives a look as if now prepared to conduct some serious business. In this shot Sun Ra looks like the launching pad for the film that ensues. This last shot of the opening scene is rhymed throughout the film each time Sun Ra delivers one of his monologues.

With the politics and aesthetics of the film firmly established by the speech and image of the opening sequence, the film cuts to one of two scenes ubiquitously discussed by those who
have written about the film previously. Set in a 1940s Chicago dance club, Sun Ra sits at a piano
providing accompaniment first to base entertainments, and then to their disruption by sound. I
agree with Zuberi’s assessment of the role that sound takes in the first full passage of the film.

The scene that immediately follows the space colony opening of the film is as
close a Sci-Fi example of music as disruptive noise to the regime of
‘representation’ as Jaques Attali (1985) could wish for” (85).

Noise, in this scene, is used as a power to destroy. Sun Ra blithely noodles away at his piano to
the chagrin of the host of the show, a crowd-pleaser aiming to satisfy the soldiers and drinkers in
the crowd, all of whom are disinterested in music as anything more than a beat against which the
dancers can gyrate. Sexton’s summary of the scene alludes to the power of improvised music to
transform situations of control and dominance:

Ra shows stubborn resistance at this unfolding of events by playing improvised
music, which elicits confused looks from the dancers (who are waiting to enter the
stage) and the audience, sending the compere into a state of nervous exasperation.
Eventually, Ra plays the appropriate accompaniment, but, as the dancers begin to
go through their routines, he launches into a fierce attack upon his piano. This
leads to panic and confusion, with everyone bar Ra and the Overseer evacuating
the club. (Sexton 207)

Zuberi’s analysis of this scene also draws attention to the role played by Sun Ra’s noise making,
connecting his approach to noise in the arts generally.

The scene is an electro be bop paean to Luigi Russolo and the Italian Futurists’ art
of noises. It captures the Dionysian impetus for entropy entrenched in rock and
roll aesthetics and other modernist discourses of art. White noise, white light, white heat. Noise annoys and destroys. Sun Ra brings the noise. (Zuberi 86)

The Chicago dance hall scene introduces Ra’s methodology of using music to materially affect the world around him but does not say much about why it should change or what changes should be made.

I Noticed They Didn’t Invite Any of You

At times, Sun Ra would position himself as dangerously in opposition to traditional power. His recollection of an alleged kidnapping attempt he experienced in Germany in 1988 is exemplary of his view of himself in relationship to official powers. His biographer John Szwed describes the event as follows:

He was leaning on a car, when several men he was talking to inside pulled him in, the car driving off into the night with the door still open. The band looked for him for hours, and they began to panic. Then suddenly he was back. He said he had been taken to a planetarium for an interview by people who had said they were a reviewer and photographer. They wanted to know the secret of the black space program. (359)

In *Bebop and Nothingness: Jazz and Pop at the end of the Century*, Sun Ra describes the incident to Francis Davis in more detail. His kidnappers/interrogators wanted to know things like:

[…] how did I intend to get black people off of this planet. What kind of ship was I going to use. What kind of rocket fuel. I told them I wasn’t using any gasoline. I’m usin’ sound. Scientists haven’t reached that stage yet, where you can run your
car or heat your home with a cassette. But it will happen – with the right kind of
music, of course. (Sun Ra quoted in Davis 162)

Neither Ra, Szwed, nor Davis mentions that this alleged kidnapping event matches very closely
with a scene created for *Space is the Place* over a decade earlier. Some might suggest that this
longitudinal congruency indicates that in Sun Ra’s space, fact and fiction exist somewhat
interchangeably. If one’s goal were to prove that Sun Ra does not distinguish well between the
real and the imagined, the confusion of his life and his life in the film would help make the case.
But, as is my task, if one is scavenging construction materials from space age popular culture
with which to construct space differently, then the take-home messages of Sun Ra’s alleged
kidnapping are:

- The power to transport people to space is “the right kind” of music, sounds that
  mainstream science cannot understand.
- Officials of mainstream dominance (the FBI and NASA in the film) don’t understand,
  are afraid of, and work to prevent off-message space constructions.
- Space is a place where black people don’t have to adapt themselves to whiteness.

One other scene frequently addressed in the scholarly literature on *Space is the Place* is
when Sun Ra addresses a group of hip revolutionary African Americans at an Oakland youth
center. The camera’s attention lingers on the large afros, hip fashions, and especially the
abundant posters of black nationalist political and cultural figures like Huey Newton. LeRoi
Jones/Amiri Baraka’s *Black Music* is the one book seen being read by the Oakland scenesters.
Though Youngquist and others have made addressed the connection between Baraka and Sun Ra
(mutual reverence and complimentary though far from identical politics), that *Black Music* is the
only written text to be found in a location of ostensible cultural education indicates a deliberate
move on the part of the filmmakers to emphasize the association between Amiri Baraka and Sun Ra.

The Oakland youth tease Sun Ra for his clothes and strange appearance at first but grow interested as he echoes some themes of Black Power rhetoric. Sun Ra keeps cool and issues a challenge to the youth to resist dominant power in the context of space. Tying space development to the terrestrial political concerns on display at the Oakland Youth Center, Sun Ra asks the youth if they’ve noticed that none of them have been invited to space. The youth continue to see Ra as strange, but it become a strangeness akin to their own estrangement from dominant culture and socio-economic equality. Sun Ra suggests to the youth that the space to which he invites them is a place where they might realize their utopian longings, but he is clear that they will need to comport themselves with a serious and proud discipline.

Sun Ra runs a tight (space) ship with a disciplined communalism necessitated by environmental confinements of space. His enforcement of discipline in the band is both social and musical. According to Szwed, he was intolerant of the typical trappings of musician life, forbidding the Arkestra from using drugs or playing with other combos. Though his sound was ever changing to respond to the existential conditions of the moment, it was not free improvisation but rather a disciplined practice of staying tuned with the universe while playing. This free discipline may seem contradictory, and it is, but it allowed the Arkestra to be coherent in its experimentation. Music is the fuel for Sun Ra’s astrotravel, and the Arkestra are lashed to the oars of the ship in a hierarchical labor structure in which Sun Ra is a benevolent dictator.

Sun Ra’s space is not without its social problems. He and the filmmakers are overly comfortable using misogynist images and otherwise exclude women. Other than Arkestra member June Tyson and the young women in the youth center, all the women in the film are of
marginal social status and objects of scorn and even physical violence. Zuberi notices this problem, and states that “Apart from Tyson’s powerful shamanic presence, women are mostly signs of male power in the film. Tellingly, only black men get to go to Outer Space with Ra” (Zuberi 95). While much is made of the African American-ness of Sun Ra’s astro-black mythology, Herman Blount and Sun Ra both encountered near complete erasure of their sexuality. Bowie could wear his constructed queerness openly, commercially. Sun Ra, on the other hand, died in the closet. “Sun Ra died and was buried […] a plump elderly heterosexual in a Mardi Gras frock, and the queer Herman Blount was duly Disappeared [sic] in the obituary columns” (Gill 61). Szwed, Gill, and Heble all allude to the irony of Sun Ra being so far “out” about so many things (Egyptian ancestry, extraterrestriality, musical improvisation) but not about his sexual orientation. That his blackness and his music are exoticized and his queerness erased calls into question whether space is still a place that reinscribes his oppressions. After all, suggests Heble,

[…] for all his insistence that African Americans turn to outer space to seize control of their futures, to assert their role in the narrative of science and progress, and, in effect, to decolonize planet Earth, Ra himself uses the word “colony” in the film Space Is the Place to describe the separate planet he plans to set up for blacks. (134)

Can colonization happen differently or is colonization an inherently repressive process? Is it worth building a place in space that is more open to racial and musical difference if gender and sexuality are repressed in the process? In other words, Sun Ra’s space may be a model for constructing space differently from the dominant discourses on the space frontier but his construction of space as a place is not without universally unproblematic. I am concerned about
those issues on which Sun Ra may fall short of delivering a perfect utopia, but not enough to
discount his positive contributions. Rather, this greater awareness of Sun Ra as a whole human
plays the role of keeping him a real, imperfect, yet nonetheless inspirational person. Judgments
on his alleged shortcomings are at the core of his oppressions and are not going to be reiterated
here other than to suggest that we be very careful about our interpretations of such a figure
difference as Sun Ra.

We can be assured that someone as aesthetically unique and creatively intelligent as Sun
Ra will be misunderstood. One example of how easy it is to misunderstand Sun Ra is the
following snippet from an article in which Jazz critic Stanley Crouch declares Sun Ra to be “The
Last of the Great Bandleaders.”

Of course, there were “cosmic” homilies sandwiched between performances, all
of which gave his work the flavor of a backwoods church social and are probably
the source of the stamina that has enabled him to continue his crusade for
uniqueness with a science-fiction flavor. (Crouch 127)

Even though, as Heble suggests, Sun Ra’s mythology and music “[…] constitute an attempt to
read against the “white” grain of institutionalized jazz history, to reveal the extent to which
swing has been commodified in the service of dominant white interests and to reclaim that
history in the context of black cultural practice” (Heble 128), critics like Crouch have
consistently misread Sun Ra (Szwed). To take one minor example, having lived in America’s
biggest cities, Chicago, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, Sun Ra’s entire life has been urban.
Even Birmingham, the place of his birth, though smaller than the places he spent the rest of his
life is a large regional metropolis known for steel production is far from any rural “backwoods”
flavor. So why would Crouch invoke rurality in his assessment of Ra’s “homilies” other than to
reify his otherness and his status outside the dominant norms of behavior, and I would argue sound, for which Crouch is a gatekeeper? Certainly, Sun Ra sometimes plays with reworked African American themes and motifs derived from Southern church performances but these are just as commonly urban as anything else. Could it be that for Crouch and the traditions of Jazz criticism I am unfairly allowing him to stand in for, Ra can be from the city but he could never be urbane.

More importantly, Sun Ra’s “cosmic” crusade is a quest for belonging, not uniqueness. Consistently ostracized, across the long trajectory of life he endured forced categorizations as unique. His blackness, queerness, even his conscientious objector status during World War Two sealed his fate as one without acceptance and belonging in mainstream society, long before he began to construct, position, and incite himself as from elsewhere. Space is the place, not because he wanted to be unique, but because he needed to make a place where his internal self-identity and his socially constructed self could live as one. Those who told Herman Blount who he should be and where his proper place was were not welcome in the space Sun Ra made. They wouldn’t understand anyway.

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1 Sun Ra prefers the multivalent term omni-verse over the restrictively singular uni-verse.
3 Szwed suggests that Sun Ra worked on an alternative edit that never saw the light of day.
CONCLUSION: IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE END

The boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.
Donna Haraway in “The Cyborg Manifesto”

Hollywood has to reaffirm the status quo, of course, but trust me when I tell you that just by opening those gates, they’re creating a rupture they may not be able to suture.
Tricia Rose in “Black to the Future”

Devo is a return to the point of origin for the ideas presented in this dissertation. Devo represents an opening of possibilities that are centered on bringing together the fun and enlightening entertainment of musical experience with the avant-garde ideas of society and culture that fuel the best (i.e., most subversive) intermedia musical artists. The cultural subversions of Devo frame the kinds of possibilities and alternative constructions of space that I have sought to open through this research. This last point does not imply that the subversion necessarily be produced by Trans-National entertainment Corporations (TNeCs) but rather like Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces*, that there is a path from their grass-roots creation in community to the furthest reaches of late capitalism, i.e., space in this case.

According to Dellinger and Giffels, Devo was formed by Dadaist art students at Kent State University. They did not start out as musicians, but after witnessing the death of friends at the hands of National Guardsmen during the famous Kent State shootings of May 4, 1970, they decided to create a soundtrack for their theory of De-evolution, “the notion that humans are evolving in reverse” (10). Cateforis describes de-evolution as “a deliberately vague theory that posited that society was not evolving but regressing, and becoming less human and more robotic in the process” (565). Singer Mark Mothersbaugh confirms that the band was conceived as merely a medium to promote their videos and the social critiques of contemporary society within them rather than an end in itself:
[Devo] were not really pop musicians; we were scientists, we were musical reporters [...] we saw the whole world and technology and all things natural and unnatural as potential material for getting our message across. (quoted in Dellinger and Giffels, 124)

The content of their video work can be summed up as follows:

By combining elements of horror, science fiction, and social satire with low budget techniques in a conscious aesthetic, everyday life on earth is portrayed as life on ‘another planet’ (Dellinger and Giffels, 185).

Cateforis echoes the primary role of film and video in Devo performances:

So central were these films to Devo’s conceptual aims and critical reputation that typically they would screen them at the beginning of their live shows before the band even took the stage. The minority of these films stepped outside the tradition of the performance-oriented promotional clip to draw on elements of high art collage, fragmented narration, parody, and pastiche (577).

Just after Devo’s pivotal Saturday Night Live performance and just before signing to a major label and recording the band’s records, two established entities that figure prominently in the popular representations of space, David Bowie and Richard Branson, fought for the right to appropriate Devo for their own purposes. Bowie saw kindred artistic spirits in the band and offered them key support, eventually brokering the deal to have them record with his friend Brian Eno. Dellinger and Giffels describe Bowie’s interest:

Devo appealed to just about every aesthetic Bowie held dear. Their songs were artful; their performance was provocative. They were intellectuals who could also rock with intensity. They were thoughtful adventurers, just like him. He told them
he was interested in producing an album. And, just to cement an already clear mythology, he asked to introduce them at Max’s. “This is the band of the future,” [Bowie] announced in his cultured tone. (134)

Their association with Bowie helped gain them new, bigger audiences, as Powers documents in an interview with a fan:

When I first heard of them in one of the rock magazines, I heard that they were David Bowie’s protégés. He liked them a lot and was going to produce them. And about two weeks after that, I read an ad that said, ‘David Bowie’s Devo’ was in town. (115)

This fan’s iteration of the relationship between Bowie and Devo and the contest over Devo between Virgin and Bowie concentrate a number of the threads of this research in one bundle. The Lipstick Traces drawn by Marcus show that the cultural subversions that best countered the culture industries of the twentieth century, from Dada to the Situationists to the Sex Pistols, bloom, wither, and re-flower across irregular time and geography. In building the Virgin corporate empire, Branson has tilled a good deal of fertile soil for these rhizomatic perennials.

In 1996, twenty years after their initial association with Virgin Records, Devo released a children’s album and DVD, DEVO 2.0, on Disney Music. DEVO 2.0 serves here as an example of how art and music with subversive intent can be productive within the realm of the TNeCs, and that this power sharing arrangement can ferry such critiques across time. There are also, however, some not insignificant costs paid when exchanging cultural and economic capital in such a way. As “imagineered” on their website, Disney marketing discourse incites the production of the DEVO 2.0 subject as follows:
DEVO, one of the most innovative bands of the '80s, has teamed up with DEVO 2.0, a group of five talented kids. Together they cover DEVO hits in a whole new way.

Disney credits Devo with innovation, but leaves out the innovations in critical artistic practice and theory connected with new media technologies they pioneered in the 70s. This “whole new way” is sanitized of the overt subversions of the original, but is concurrently a fully flowered realization of their original thesis on the relationship between the political work of their art and the mass access of working with a major media corporation like Disney. For reasons well documented in the literature on disneyfication (Sorkin et al, Sundberg), Devo strikes a devils bargain working with the mouseketeers. Devo’s counter-imagineering nevertheless playfully disrupts Disney’s cultural hegemony at the level of the children’s music market.

DEVO 2.0 is a thread that sutures the art and commerce of the culture industry together. In producing DEVO 2.0, Disney and Devo partner in a tense and productive multi-media project in which both brands compete for the attentions of our children. The art of DEVO 2.0 retains the subversive aesthetic and cultural politics of the original Devo. However, in the translation for children by Disney, Devo’s subversions lose their socio-cultural moorings. The jerky colorful robotism of Devo’s visual and sonic performance, so essential to their subversive performance, is reduced to being enjoyably silly and catchy. It is unclear which will win over the coming generation of rebel consumers, Devo’s subversion or Disney’s hegemony.

“I like the songs,” says my child.

I am thrilled that she likes the songs, ecstatic that we share a love of Devo, and enjoy that DEVO 2.0 inspires her to make up her own music. At the same time, I am nervous about the ends Disney seeks when using these means. There are millions of Devo fans around the world,
scores of which have followed up their fandom with some form of subversion of their own. On the other hand, over the thirty years since I first saw Devo on Saturday Night Live Trans-National Corporate power has grown exponentially and practically unchecked while avant-garde art is too often an unrecognized afterthought in popular culture tapped for cultural capital and left to wither.

Luckily, this contest between corporate power and its subversions is not a zero sum game. While corporate power has won the day at this very late stage in the evolution of capitalism, the TNeCs continue to provide access to at least some artists. I still believe that when those artists are able to encode their message in a way that sneaks past corporate entertainment gatekeepers, as great music invariably does at least in part, that they are producing the infrastructure for what comes after late capitalism. On this question, I may be wrong; but I have nothing to lose by proceeding as though it may be so.

The ability of music to ferry subversive art across the deserts of extreme commodification is especially relevant to the future of space. After all, it is the heads of the world’s largest entertainment and new technology corporations that are attempting to make space tourism happen, and through space tourism a potentially large-scale permanent human presence in space.

“Space Oddity” or “Rocketman” (though not “Space is the Place”) are often the soundtrack to mediations of actual space launches. The ideas and processes I have deployed in this project may very well find their way out to space on the power of these launch soundtrack staples. The question is whether we just sit and listen as others produce space, or if, as the Association of Autonomous Astronauts does, we get involved in constructing space differently,
now, before it has been materially colonized. We don’t yet need a rocket, or a space station, or a space suit to do so, just more ideas about what to put in them.

On Such a Timeless Flight: The Patient Rhizomes of Space Oddities

In this examination of popular music in the age of space tourism, we’ve explored some possibilities for a quirky band made of up useful socio-political theories/theoreticians, and we’ve examined the multivalent ways space has been represented in three musical texts. I have shared my methodological experiment of a holistic deep reading of “Space Oddity.” In the end, Tom’s rebellion against Ground Control results in social isolation; the earth keeps spinning without him.

The moral of his story is that individual acts of resistance are short-lived and come at great personal cost to the rebel, and thus, in turn, effective resistance to hegemonic power must be generated in community to be sustainable. We have also examined the potential of a text like Elton John and Bernie Taupin’s “Rocketman” to serve as an internal subversive critique of life in space from deep within the sphere of trans-national corporate entertainment production. Such a solidly mainstream text may have little appeal, on the surface, as a source of resistance. But as the text is appropriated by others over time, “Rocketman” becomes a musical model for slashing (tweaking a dominant source text to do different cultural work) as Penley shows Kirk/Spock fanfiction to have done with Star Trek. Through Sun Ra and “Space is the Place” we have begun to explore some of the possibilities presented by an outsiders community-based critique of the dominant hegemonic constructions of space. Sun Ra’s space is a place where a hard-working collection of outsiders can create a sustainable community that productively pushes the boundaries of music, performance, and communitarianism; a place where astro-black mythology becomes real and earthly oppressions are rendered alien.
But, in the end, we need to answer the question: So What? So what if we creatively play around with interesting theories as to construct an imaginary band with a clever name and song lyrics? So what if three musicians have represented space in three different and interesting ways (especially when two – Bowie and John – are situated in the past and have become so popularized to near-meaninglessness in the dominant discourse as to lose political relevance in the way that classic rock, a traditionally rebellious form, has been neutralized of much of its resistant power – or when the third – Sun Ra – has been perversely obscured, mostly lost in a historic moment?) So what?

First, I intended for this project to have some methodological relevance for future studies in popular music and American culture studies. Though all art, media, politics, and culture occupy multiple positions of interventionary potential, for the purposes of this research I have narrowed my focus largely to different spaces produced through music. In essence, I am asking music, as understood through my owned lived experience, to produce alternative space discourses that may counter-premeditate the dominant astrofuturist constructions of space, and by extension intervene in capitalism at the leading edge of its evolution.

The dominant hegemonic culture being produced by TNeCs depends on the ideas generated in avant-garde communities to retain an aura of freshness in its products. Sometimes the resistant critiques sneak in under the radar. Other times they are misunderstood and interpreted as unthreatening, or that enough of the rough edges have been shaved off so as to render the critique harmless, and sometimes the subversion is willingly allowed to infuse a dialectical dynamism into a particular market. In each case, the TNeC performs a cost-benefit analysis that views any potential threat of subversion they allow in on the wings of resistant art to be outweighed by the potential profit and power of its appropriation for mainstream purposes.
Devo makes its deal with Disney, thinking that they are warping the minds of children, and Disney makes the deal to brand future loyal consumers of their brand.

In the end, I believe the power of music, its communicative prowess and its communitarian impulses, all of which predate corporate culture, will triumph. I am interested in space tourism because I think it will be a good crucible for testing whether music can actually play the positive transformative role I think it will. This project sought to be what I say music can do. Before and during my review of the literature or the writing of this text, I listened to “Space Oddity” on constant repeat, day after day, week after week, until the song and my experience of it told me what this project was about. Rather than boring or torturous, I grew refreshingly excited as I tunneled down to the finer grains of the song where I found new meanings rich with productive power. I do, however, recommend this approach only be used with a pleasurable tune with enough sonic and narrative layers to maintain enjoyable listening lest the experience become like that of Malcolm McDowell’s character in *A Clockwork Orange*, his eyes forcibly peeled back while repeatedly viewing unpleasant violent imagery. Nevertheless, if one person’s experience of this one song can yield a work as fun and productive as this has been for me, I have great hopes for what can be generated as the method is repeated, by myself and others, over a longer period of time, with other songs, with intent to intervene in other issues.

One of the explicit drawbacks to this mode of inquiry is that my findings are not generalizable, my interpretations are subjective, and thus the entire project is too closely tied to the experience of the author. But I would argue that these problems are also opportunities. I have enough faith in the process that unfolds when music is seriously engaged with such intent that I
do not care that the findings are unrepeatable. I am satisfied to have had the experience, but
would be thrilled if others would pick up the method for their own purposes.

There is no shortage of other artists that could have been chosen for this study and I hope
everyone who suggested one to me in this process address my shortcomings in the range of texts.
But it was very important for me to limit the number of texts I dealt with. This is because my
objective was to try to deal with the total experience of the texts I chose as an antidote to the
common problem of projects that survey too many texts and leave out too many elements in their
analysis. Rather than take on additional texts, and limit the scope of vectors connected to each
text, I chose to limit the number of texts I discuss while taking as many ways in and out of the
text as I could find. “Space Oddity” I chose simply because it is a personal favorite and the song
I first thought of when looking for a song about space. “Rocketman” was chosen because it is the
song that came up most often when describing the objectives of this project to others. “Space is
the Place” was chosen because I could not talk about difference in space and rely so heavily on
productions by artists who represented the dominant popular culture. There are many other artists
who could have served this purpose but preliminary research revealed Sun Ra to be the most
dynamic, fun, multivalent, and germane.

Secondly, I’d like to conclude with a brief real-world context for the import of the work I
attempt in this project, particularly as it has the political potential to affect the existing discursive
constructions of space as the discourse invariably affects the real, material construction of space,
via the TNeCs taking charge in the construction of a viable space tourism industry. The potential
to transform the theoretical exploration in this dissertation into a larger work with more political
influence will be handled in the near future. In short, my future work also hopes to model how
music might be worked with, as a tool of cultural studies, to intervene in pressing social, political, and material economies of the future.

One shortcoming of this work that will need to be addressed as this project proceeds into the future will be to draw more from queer studies and from concrete alternative political practice. I did not set out to work with only with queer texts, but the fact that a complicated relationship with queerness – Bowie’s inauthentic exploitation and popularization of bisexuality, John’s journey out of the closet and contributions towards mainstream queer normalization, Ra’s complete erasure of his sexuality – is common to the producers of all three of my main texts, demands further investigation into the contributions that the academic field of queer studies might make to producing space differently. Another shortcoming is that, given the trans-national nature of twenty-first century space exploration, follow up research should look beyond England and the United States. India, China, Russia, Japan and other nations are actively moving forward with space exploration and colonization and I am sure that there are extremely productive cultural resources for use in making space differently made available by mainstream and subversive artists working in those countries.

Trans-National Entertainment: It Is All Just Wind in Sails

Spacefaring is no longer a dream for sci-fi geeks, NASA, or academic theoreticians; space tourism, as a tangible and profitable industry, is taking real shape in the form of real spaceship developments such as Virgin Galactic’s VSS Enterprise, venture capital firms like Paul Allen’s Vulcan Ventures, and trips to the International Space Station aboard Russian Soyuz rockets arranged by Space Adventures. As the science fictions of human spacefaring become transformed into the facts of the nascent space tourism industry, expect to see the Trans-National
entertainment Corporations (TNeCs) directing the development of space to muster all their available resources to discursively premeditate space. All of the leading space tourism enterprises are tech-savvy multi-media corporations adept at using their advanced tools to build markets, consumers, and even places. But while many science fiction visions render the outcome of such an amalgam of corporate power in distopic terms, in my opinion, the relationship between corporate entertainment production and avant-garde art also dialectically presents an opportunity to construct space differently. Following Tricia Rose’s assessment in the epigraph above, the gates to space are opening and it behooves us to produce different social relations in the ruptures of TNeC space. In other words, the work engaged in here can potentially use musical tools to redirect the production of what afrofuturist author Alondra Nelson calls the “social science fictions” of previous frontiers toward more equitable outcomes.

Space tourism is a cultural production at the leading edge of late-capitalist evolution. There is a long history of intentionally productive interaction between real material space and discursive popular culture space. One such early example is the productive partnership between Disney and rocket pioneer Werner Von Braun that yielded a series of television programs promulgating the benefits of space exploration in the 1950s (McCurdy). Another example of the productive interactions between real space and popular culture space is the long list of technologies, many central to the contemporary global information economy like the cell phone, desktop computing, and remote sensing, developed by tech savvy Star Trek fans who endeavored to make real the technologies imagined on the television show.

Space, as traditionally produced by government space agencies and their associated military-industrial complexes, is being outpaced by a new generation of private space entrepreneurs and the vehicles they are competing to build (Klerxx). Through the latter half of
the twentieth century, human presence in space was restricted to crew-cut white male soldiers performing in a cold war chess match. The new private space race is capitalized largely through technologies advancing new social and economic arrangements. The biggest players so far in the new private space race made their money inventing the culture industry technologies of late capitalism – desktop computing, internet commerce, and corporate rock, for example.

Assume you are Paul Allen, and you are dreaming of going to space one day. How would you make it happen? You are flush with cash from helping to invent Microsoft, have the imaginative power to change the world, and real world experience of having actually done so. You might, as Allen really did, fund the development and construction of SpaceShipOne, the first private spacecraft. Space privateers are banking that SpaceShipOne has the kind of impact for space tourism that the Spirit of St. Louis had on commercial aviation, to jump start the industry by establishing critical infrastructure development. These two ships are currently parked next to each other in the Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian Institution, marking a tight relationship between the dawn of commercial aviation and the dawn of commercial space-faring. More significant for the future of this line of research though is that Allen built both the Science Fiction Museum and Experience Music Project in Seattle, codifying cultural conceptions of the future in the former and the way music has been lived in the latter.

We can speculate with some confidence how the late-capitalist TNeCs are going to work the conceptual construction of space in the coming decade. They will muster all their branding tools, each and every one of the media types available to them from anywhere among the tentacles of their corporate family. There will be happy meals, with New Space appropriate toys, commercials, and summer blockbuster tie-ins. The blockbuster will render space either as something to be afraid of and protected from by the right stuff or as a majestic starscape
featuring endless vistas of territory and possibility but available only to the pluckiest members of the dominant culture. There will be giveaways, large and small, connected to the Super Bowl, an automaker, and your next eligible purchase of a 20oz carbonated high-fructose corn syrup beverage. In magazine interviews, tabloid news, and at charity events, the stars of the blockbuster will casually brand space, confessing that their dreams were constructed by childhood consumption of astrofuturist propaganda in the form of Star Trek or a ride in Disney’s Tomorrowland. The interviewer might also host a reality TV show where there will be contestant challenges and rewards that intertextualize New Space. Together, these kinds of TNeC productions will colonize the minds of future space tourism consumers, powerfully premeditating the experience of space.

Take the branding of Virgin Galactic by company founder and CEO Richard Branson as an example of Virgin’s spectacular imagineering and promotional synergy acumen. Virgin Galactic is a space tourism company that has already sold 200 tickets, at $200,000 each, for a suborbital space flight and has plans to vastly expand the market and infrastructure for a global commercial space travel industry. Rather than advertise Virgin Galactic in the traditional manner, Branson deployed pop situationist (Frith and Horne) practices (borrowed through his association with Malcolm McClaren and the Sex Pistols) to put his vision of space in the public imagination. In October 2004, SpaceShipOne won the X-Prize and Virgin Galactic licensed the technology to build a fleet of space vehicles. Within weeks the FOX reality television series Rebel Billionaire: Branson’s Quest for the Best debuted starring chair of Virgin Worldwide’s Richard Branson. The final challenge in penultimate episode of Rebel Billionaire required the contestants to devise a marketing strategy for the launch of Virgin Galactic and featured the
contestants experiencing a simulated space environment much as they would on board the VSS Enterprise.

Since its inception as a student publishing co-op, music store, and record label, Virgin has relied on spectacular promotions rather than buying commercial advertising, preferring attention-getting stunts that are shown on the news and create buzz over paid advertisements. When Virgin does appear in paid commercials it is often with partners, like during the 2005 American professional football championship telecast when Volvo advertised a promotional deal to win a trip into space with Virgin Galactic. 7-Up offered a similar promotion on its plastic beverage bottles shortly thereafter. The brief snapshot above is limited to tactics already deployed. There will be new adaptations we should keep an eye out for, of course. Fortunately, with the reduced ambient distortion in space, new developments may be readily detected. To reduce the distortion further, I will elaborate briefly on the subversive roots of Virgin’s branding tactics.

Where did Virgin’s pop subversions come from? In Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century, Greil Marcus works with the notion that small moments of cultural resistance often go unnoticed in cultural epochs of violent wars and revolutions. But, Marcus notes, these acts of resistance may sporadically reemerge later, with spectacular results, like “a bomb, unnoticed in its own time, which would explode decades later” (22). The lipstick traces he follows start with the Dadaist movement, fade, reappear among the Lettrists, fade, reappear as the Situationist International, fade once more, and culminate in the explosive cultural outburst of the Sex Pistols. Regarding the Sex Pistols performance, Marcus marks the brief tenure of the Sex Pistols as a lynchpin moment in twentieth century culture:
[...] a voice that denied all social facts, and in that denial affirmed that everything was possible. It remains something new because rock ‘n’ roll has not caught up with it. Nothing like it had been heard before, and nothing like it has been heard since – though, for a time, once heard, that voice seemed available to anyone with the nerve to use it. (2)

After the band had burned through a succession of record companies, Richard Branson was the only one left with the nerve to promote The Sex Pistols’ voice, signing them to Virgin. Marcus misses out on the fact that Branson not only heard that voice but exploited it as well, appropriating the power of that voice to generate his own brand of corporate situationism. Branson appropriated from The Sex Pistols the spectacular critiques of situationism and repurposed them toward creating his own spectacle – but for profit. As such, he produced the corporate empire of Virgin Worldwide on the wings of subversive counter-cultural art. I do not intend to assess here whether Branson’s appropriation of the arts of resistance was merely cynical capitalism or drew on a long range vision of subverting capitalism from within, though it is most likely the case that Branson’s constituted some hybrid composite. It is sufficient for the purposes of this work that, for whatever reason, Branson smuggled this form of artistic subversion across the stark cultural desert of late-capitalism hidden in the fabric of his corporate empire.

Since the Virgin corporate empire and other similar TNeCs are at the forefront of space tourism, they provide the portal through which popular music may construct space differently. The goal of this work, keeping space open to equality and difference, depends on the fact that pop subversions are at the core of the leading TNeC producers of private space. By incorporating
spectacle into the structures of Virgin Galactic, Branson may have (inadvertently or not) provided the opportunity to use popular music to construct space differently.

In 1976, Richard Branson, as head of Virgin Music (sister company of Virgin Galactic and the core enterprise of TNeC Virgin Worldwide), was looking for an act to follow up the breakout success he had enjoyed with the Sex Pistols. According to Dellinger and Giffels, Branson initially tried to interest Devo in becoming the post-Sex Pistols backing band for singer Johnny Rotten (the man with the ‘voice that denied all social facts,’ as described by Marcus). Though Devo wound up splitting their recording and distribution commitments between Branson and David Bowie they nevertheless encoded Devo’s critiques of culture and society into the DNA of Virgin Galactic.

We thus have the following chain of related events, constituting their own hidden cultural history. Marcus draws the intermittent lipstick traces of artistic critiques of spectacular culture across the twentieth century and deposits them with The Sex Pistols. Branson and Virgin then appropriate these ideas to build a music company and identify Devo as the next iteration of pop situationism. Using the cultural capital gained through the popularity of their radical innovations in performance, video, and digital technology, Devo subversively imbricates their critical vision of life in the space age into the center of the culture industry. Meanwhile, Virgin Music develops into the global corporate empire Virgin Worldwide and leverages its considerable resources to a position at the leading edge of TNeC production and the colonization of space.

Given that Devo, Bowie, Branson, *Star Trek*, Disney, and situationism have produced these intertwining vectors through the discourses of space in popular culture, a central thrust of my future research will be to examine more closely the TNeC production of space tourism. Particularly in the event that space tourism succeeds in colonizing space for broader human
occupation, I believe the critical urban theories and practices of the situationists, especially detournment\(^2\) and psychogeography,\(^3\) may be an excellent vehicles to examine how popular music impacts the material construction of space places and the everyday experience of those who live and work in these places.

Conclusion

Space is big enough for everyone but so far the only private citizens to travel there are six space tourists who paid $20 million each to Space Adventures for a brief vacation on the International Space Station. More than two hundred people have bought $200,000 tickets for flights on the VSS Enterprise, a spaceship currently under construction for Virgin Galactic in the Mojave Desert. The price is coming down but is a long way from the long promised democratization of access to space. Worse is that despite existing plans for orbiting hotels, there has not yet been enough work done to ensure that the everyday quotidian life of the workers who would service space tourist facilities is better than miserable. My efforts in the next stage of this research will be to use music to keep space open, and to open space equitably, although, in reality, my personal preference would be that the resources spent on building vehicles for space travel and orbiting hotels were redirected towards improving in terrestrial travel and other more pressing needs such as poverty eradication, green energy, and post-carbon terrestrial transit infrastructure. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that space travel, real and imagined, is a popular repository for utopian longings, longings imagineered through popular culture producers such as Disney and Star Trek (McCurdy, Penley, Kilgore). Moreover, the utopian political economy visions of some space entrepreneurs, particularly that the technology investments for space travel may construct new and improved terrestrial infrastructures for energy,
transportation, health, and safety indeed hold a large measure of promise. However, should the pattern of development of previous frontiers hold, the costs and benefits of new space technologies will not be equitably distributed. While I am ever hopeful of improved material conditions, I would rather work to foreclose human inequality in space before it happens than trust that new technologies will solve such problems.

Private space entrepreneurs produce evolving cultural economies as they move operations out into space. The TNeCs are boldly going where none, or at least few, have gone before. The question here is: what problematic baggage do they bring along as they venture into space, and what opportunities might evolve to produced our political, cultural, social, and material economies differently? The conclusions of this work suggest that 1) at present, the future of the space frontier is not likely to be very different from frontiers past without more intervention on the behalf of social, cultural, and economic equity, and; 2) the centrality of entertainment to TNeC production presents a critical opportunity to use subversive theories of art and cultural resistance to intervene in the future of global (and universal) capitalism. My basic research hypothesis for the next iteration of this work is: As the production of space (and capitalism generally) shifts from Military-Industrial TNCs to Trans-National entertainment Corporations, there will be more opportunity for artists to intervene on behalf of socio-economic equity. And so I ask what popular culture might be able to do to forestall the “social science fictions” of previous frontiers on the space frontier.

As a model, we can turn to the Association of Autonomous Astronauts (AAA), a community based space development program working to expand and egalitarianize access to space in the age of space tourism. In 1996, the AAA launched a five-year plan that “demonstrated the possibilities of a well-planned assault against the state, corporate, and military
monopoly of space exploration” (See You in Space, 6). Their community-based space
development mission is summed up as follows:

The Association of Autonomous Astronauts is opposed to the commercial and
military exploitation of space. We really don’t think it’s worth all the effort of
getting into space just to live by the same rules as on earth. What attracts us to
space exploration is the possibility of doing things differently. We are not
interested in finding out what it’s like to work in space, to find new ways of
killing. We want to find out what dancing or sex feels like in zero gravity, to find
new ways of living. (AAA, 9)

The AAA rejects discourses of space as a “final frontier” and as the logical extension of
terrestrial “free markets,” myths that they find are “designed to mask the social forces that
actually shape the present-day state, corporate and military monopoly of space travel” (AAA
1997, 8). The AAA labels the dominant discursive constructions of space as “The Baudrillard-
arse-NASA-Disney conspiracy” (AAA 1997, 34) and, conversely, considers Space is the Place
to be “[…] essential viewing for any would-be astronaut” (AAA 2000, 15). The AAA five-year
plan to develop a community based space program has evolved to become,

[…] a social movement that developed a complex toolbox of techniques
for exploring the new social relations that are created by autonomous
communities in space. These tools can be used by anyone (AAA 2000,
50).
I hope the work I have produced here adds to the AAA toolbox, and that others interested in more fully opening the space frontier find my analysis useful in constructing space differently.

For once, space is a place where it is not too late to forestall domination by an inequitable system. Rather, the time is now to make space a place of community-based social, cultural, and economic development. A flowering of subversive art and resistant culture is still possible in space – may we stop and smell the roses.

**Postlude: Foucaultian Power--The Replacement Drummer**

Think of the [space] ship: it is a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite […] the greatest reserve of imagination for our civilization […]. The [space] ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations where it is lacking, dreams dry up, adventure is replaced by espionage, and privateers by the police.

Michel Foucault in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (356)

Drums are often the most difficult position to fill with a stable productive presence, and the problem is exacerbated by the fact that most good drummers know that they are difficult to
replace. This difficult personnel dynamic, I speculate, explains more about the rise in demand and popularity of the drum machine than the actual capabilities of the tool itself. It is not uncommon for drummers like, say, Jean Baudrillard’s *Precession of Simulacra* to generate an inverse proportional relationship between their social role in the band and their musical contribution. Hence the near ubiquity of “The Replacement Drummer.”

The real world experience I bring to bear on my analysis of music and its contexts derives from my own experiences as The Replacement Drummer. Without skill or experience, luck and practice afforded me the opportunity to be the temporary drummer of an underground band that went from recording live one-track cassettes in their garage to the 64-track BBC studios in a matter of months. The personality quirks of their drummer became unsustainable under the new pressures and close quarters of professional touring. From my throne as The Replacement Drummer I could clearly see the interplay of grass roots DIY production and its corporate recuperation, allowing me to develop a clear vision of the limits and possibilities of working within the mainstream culture industry, a perspective I have intentionally deployed throughout this work.

Similarly, in the end, Jean Baudrillard’s *Precession of Simulacra* cannot muster the congenial communitarianism that buffers enduring bands from the excesses of touring and has to be let go, for social reasons as much as “creative differences.” With the exploratory playing performed by the more melodic instruments, The Space Oddities need a solid rhythm section and, over time, Hall could no longer deal with Baudrillard. For Hall, the work of The Space Oddities should analyze “the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death” (Hall “Cultural Studies,” 107). Given his strong commitment to placing serious analysis of
representation(s) and signification at the core of cultural studies, Hall became particularly troubled by Baudrillard’s nihilistic abandonment of real life concerns, as if to engage reality legitimizes the unreality of images created to mask reality. Hall insists on more direct intervention and finds abhorrent Baudrillard’s if/then strategy that justifies the embrace of simulacra as a necessary step in the march towards a new history of human/image relations. These are some of the same political choices that alienated Hall from Marxism, justifying broken eggs in the hopes that an omelet might emerge, and a tension he was no longer willing to put up with in his band. Hall confided to Lawrence Grossberg that,

Baudrillard is right to treat the surface as where things are really happening, but goes too far. To say “that there is nothing except what is immediately there on the surface” gives too much power to the construction, and misses out on the effects of technologies of spectacle. (Hall in Grossberg “History, Politics and Postmodernism,” 136)

Dishing further, Hall said that,

Baudrillard’s theory of the simulacrum confuses the collapse of a particular ideology of the real for the collapse of reality; it confuses the collapse of a particular ideology of the social with the end of the social. […] allowing him to assume that only a refusal of any difference constitutes struggle. (Hall in Grossberg “History, Politics and Postmodernism,” 169)

Hall had held his frustration in too long and thus spoke with an unusual lack of critical generosity when opening up about his dissatisfaction with Baudrillard. Further dismissing Baudrillard, but not allowing his own complicity in privileging the realm of representation off the hook, Hall said that “Reality is not quite as unreal as we have imagined it” (in Grossberg
“History, Politics and Postmodernism,” 141). Hall’s last dig at Baudrillard cast a net as wide as all postmodernism:

[...] postmodernism has yet to think through and engage the question of the masses. I think Baudrillard needs to join the masses for a while, to be silent for two-thirds of a century, just to see what it feels like. (in Grossberg “History, Politics and Postmodernism,” 141)

John Fiske echoes Hall’s entreaty to Baudrillard vis-à-vis social reality: “Hall respects those social groups that Baudrillard lumps dismissively under the term ‘the masses’. Hall respects the cultural resistance of the disempowered and subordinated” (emphasis in original, 219).

Fortunately, the band has found an appropriate Replacement Drummer for The Space Oddities’ Rock Open Space tour: Foucaultian Power. Where Precession of Simulacra played inventively wild like Keith Moon, Foucaultian Power brings the steady pounding of Led Zeppelin’s John Bonham. Like Bonham, Foucaultian Power is broadly imitated, appropriated, and sampled. With Foucaultian Power on drums, The Space Oddities new productive foundation brings out the best sonic tendencies of the lead players. Fiske approves of the move, homologizing the difference between the two as like the difference between structuralism and post-structuralism but cautions that, “The discourse of the repressed is never as repressed as Foucault implies” (emphasis in original, 219).

Fiske’s worry notwithstanding, in the same Grossberg interview in which he badmouths Baudrillard, Hall is effusive in his praise of Foucault and his potential contributions to The Space Oddities project, saying that Foucault’s

[...] combination of regime of truth plus normalization/regulation/surveillance is not all that far from the notions of dominance in ideology that I’m trying to work
with. [His move from a] base/superstructure paradigm into the domain of the discursive is a very positive one. ("History, Politics and Postmodernism," 131)

To Foucault, power is not a thing, but a dynamic and productive system of relations. It is not held exclusively by those in high positions of authority, such as government and the elite classes, but something that operates at every level of society in dynamic, omnipresent ways, i.e. it is not just power from above that controls those found in lower levels of the social hierarchy. In other words, power does not emanate only from above, but works from and in all directions. As such, power is not only a mechanism of repression, but ultimately a productive and dynamic force of potential empowerment as well. For example, in his discussion of the relationship between power-knowledge, power produces different kinds of knowledge, via language, which affect the ways people relate to each other, and understand the world and their experiences of it. When official power attempts to regulate social behavior through control of discourse, the net effect is not just a proliferation of unofficial discourses but, more significantly, the institutional incitement of discourses produced as part of the official effort to control the censored discourse produces more discourse of the subject than if official power had not attempted to control it in the first place. Foucaultian Power asks:

How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? (Foucault “Enlightenment?,” 49)

The Space Oddities respond to these questions from Foucaltian Power by playing Rock Open Space in new ways and to broader, more diverse audiences. The interplay of Foucaultian Power and the riffing of Penley’s Slash allows The Space Oddities to suture grass-roots creative
reappropriations directly into the future structures of space tourism. Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding on bass can solidify the groove now that the beat is always there and no longer needs to be chased. Stronger beats bring out stronger performance of the creative productivity of the band as a whole. With Encoding/Decoding and Foucaultian Power forming a solid rhythm section, The Space Oddities are able to occupy multivalent subject positions throughout their traverse the interplay of production and reception. This empowering productive capacity will hopefully prove useful to the fan community of The Space Oddities should space travel become a mass culture product and the egalitarian promises of the space tourism industry come to pass.

1 Premediation is a term devised by Richard Grusin to describe the ability of mediated images to colonize consciousness so that a real experience is interpreted through its prior mediation.
2 Detournment is a situationist tactic that “means deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose” (Bureau of Public Secrets; Sadler 17). “Détournment can be translated most simply as ‘diversion,’ though at the loss of the nuances encoded in the original French – ‘rerouting,’ ‘hijacking,’ ‘embezzlement,’ ‘misappropriation,’ ‘corruption,’ all acts implicit in the situationist use of society’s ‘preexisting aesthetic elements’” (Sadler 17).
3 Psychogeography reworks landscapes to meet the needs of humanist psychology rather than the demands of commerce (Sadler). Psychogeography, as a situationist tactic, is defined by Sadler as something that “[…] comprehended buildings through their use, their history, and their collective and associative generation of meaning and mood, like words in poetry; it inferred a poetic rather than analytical response to the environment […] Anyone who has really lived understands psychogeography, it was assumed, and anyone will understand it once they have experienced real life” (160). Bonnett defines psychogeography as being “about the instinctual exploration of the emotional contours of one’s environment. It aims to discover and create subversive and anti-authoritarian planes and journeys that can be used in the development of new, more liberating, kinds of locales” (198).
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