

IS SPACE THE PLACE?

Eva Díaz on Feminist Futures in the Anthropocene

A long time ago, at least culturally speaking, people dreamt of leaving the Earth, and with it, all of the injustices and paradoxes that could be found there. Where did this wish come from, this desire for planetary emigration? And why did it appear at the twilight of the generation most devoted to free love and personal liberation?

Somewhere along the way, the dream might have been infected with the same viruses – sexism, gender inequality – that spawned the desire to go elsewhere. And what of that desire today? Eva Díaz revisits the contradictions of the recent past and investigates some new takes on an old dream – a better world.

The motivations for leaving Earth are complex and contradictory, all the more so when understood as a cluster of interwoven social, military, technological, and political needs and desires. In the context of ignored or disenfranchised populations within the US – women, racial minorities, and the poor – or populations of the global South who have not benefitted from the economic wealth that funded first-world nations' space exploration programs, the desire to leave the Earth is rife with longings for a better world that can unravel the dominion of patriarchy and white supremacy and reveal and heal histories of oppression. Returning to R. Buckminster Fuller's influential concept of "Spaceship Earth" and his "we are all astronauts" rhetoric of engineered bodies and technologized nature, popularized by his acolyte Stewart Brand, the founder of the "Whole Earth Catalog" (1968) and editor of "Space Colonies" (1977), can help us understand these aspirations as they have been taken up in contemporary art. But just as important to contemporary artists today is the legacy of musician and impresario Sun Ra's space fascination in the 1960s and 1970s. In promoting a separatist vision of African American culture as anti-capitalist and technologically-savvy, Sun Ra

turned the function of black music and culture, traditionally exploited as entertainment, into a conduit for black advancement beyond white domination.

Drawing on the reception in the 1960s and 1970s of Fuller's and Ra's campaigns to explore space, a post-Apollo missions generation of artists today reckons with its own belatedness to a humanistic conception of space colonies as an aim of public culture. Artists like Martine Syms reconsider how technologies used in near and outer space, once billed as progressive and explorative, are today rife with the negative effects of resource depletion and privatization, economic inequality, and racial and gender discrimination.¹ Given the many artists working on the topic of environmental damage prompting climate migrations and possible off-planet colonization, space travel and space architectures have become central preoccupations of artworks made in the last decade or so. Connecting the imperative to unsustainably extract resources from nature with the domination of women's bodies, many are exploring the interconnections between scientific exploration and colonialism, capitalist exploitation and sexism.

Of course any work about the future is speculative, yet will image the unknown by drawing on available cultural references. Syms's text "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto," published in 2013, represents a search for a "means of speculation [to] assert a different set of values with which to re-imagine the future."² She expresses caution about how tropes of futurity – "metallic colors," "magical negros," "jive-talking aliens" – create crutch fictions about how society can be transformed. Among her concerns are that "magic interstellar travel and/or the wondrous

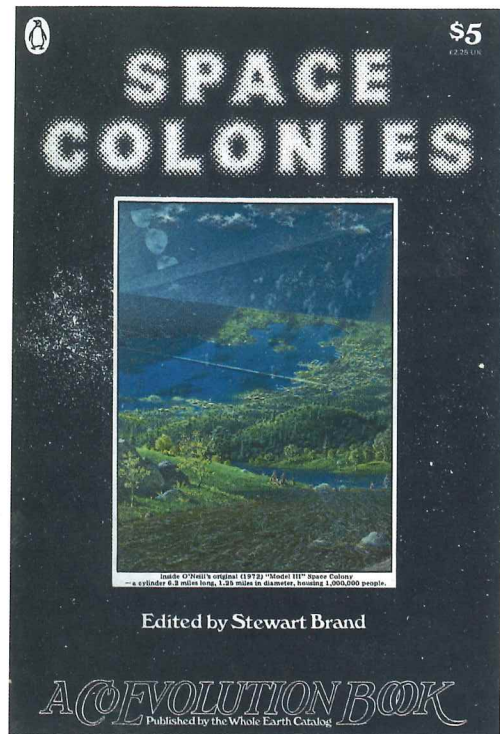


Crew of the Apollo 17, „Blue Marble“, 1972

communication grid can lead to an illusion of outer space and cyberspace as egalitarian," and that "this dream of utopia can encourage us to forget that outer space will not save us from injustice." Sanguine projections distract from "the imaginative challenge that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?"³

Syms's question "What will we do with it?" points to a central conundrum of space travel: the

divide between stewardship of the Earth and its present inhabitants, and the expense to search for, travel to, and possibly colonize extraterrestrial sites. Among the first to enter the fray of this debate was Stewart Brand, who founded the *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968. After discontinuing the wildly successful *Catalog* in 1974, he published the volume "Space Colonies" in 1977, a collection of essays, interviews, and debates he solicited about the merits and plausibility of inhabiting extra-

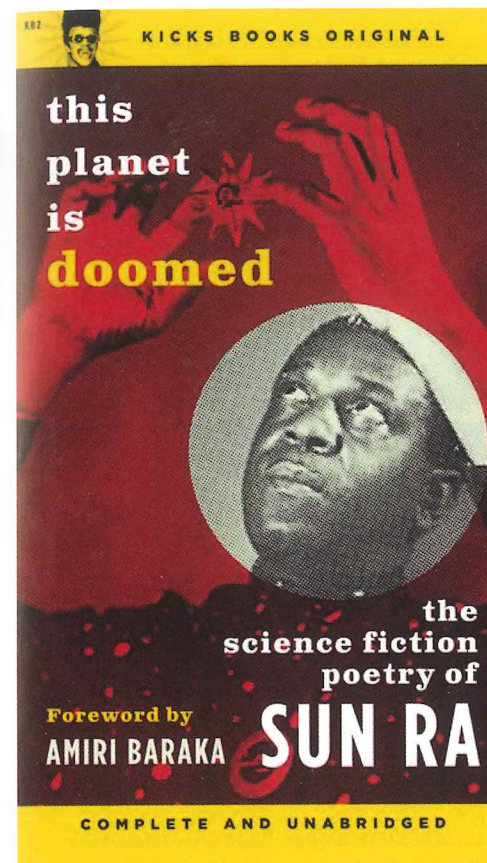


terrestrial sites.⁴ Brand was enthusiastic about leaving the sanctuary of the Earth's atmosphere, and had been particularly taken with the notion of "Spaceship Earth." He hoped, like Fuller, to reorient mundane life toward a greater awareness of Earth as embedded in the wider cosmos. The inaugural issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog* had been dedicated to Fuller, and quoted him to that effect in its introductory "Understanding Whole Systems" pages: "You belong to the Universe."⁵

It's fitting that it was Brand, the consummate seeker, who would pursue the type of inquiry about life in outer space that "Space Colonies" represented. As early as 1966 he was wearing

and distributing a homemade button that asked: "Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?" Brand later explained that such an image would be a powerful symbol, that it "gave the sense that Earth's an island, surrounded by a lot of inhospitable space. And it's so graphic, this little blue, white, green and brown jewel-like icon amongst a quite featureless black vacuum."⁶ Representing its fragility was paramount. Brand wrote to important academics, US senators, and members of the US and Soviet space programs advocating for the release of satellite images of the Earth seen from outer space. (Of these, only Fuller responded, writing: "Dear boy, it's a charming notion but you must realize you can never see more than half the Earth from any particular point in space.")⁷

To Brand, a picture of the whole Earth could supplant the figure of the mushroom cloud as the ur-image of the postwar period. When NASA finally released pictures taken from space, each cover of the *Whole Earth Catalog* featured a view of Earth photographed like a marble against the blackness of space. This sense of exposure, of representing the Earth as vulnerable, had mixed effects, just as space travel was and continues to be a divisive issue. Proponents of space travel often employ the rhetoric of exploration as a kind of liberation from Earth-bound constraints, as though scarcity and want will miraculously disappear in a new environment without human history. It is worth considering, as Diedrich Diederichsen and Anselm Franke have, that when "space travel produced an image that replaced the mushroom cloud as the icon of our worldview," that image may not be one of plentitude supplanting anxiety, but rather a transmutation of the problems of nuclear catastrophe into modes



of technological dependency in off-planet life.⁸ Many contributors to "Space Colonies" argued that scarce resources could be better allocated to helping people on Earth than fueling implausible techno-conjectures about colonization. In particular, some argued, presciently, that the extension of the logic of the Cold War arms race would lead to the militarization, and privatization, of space.

Brand's advocacy of Fuller's technological exceptionalism was galvanic, and his proposals for human settlements in outer space triggered heated controversy. With an eclectic group of contributors such as Fuller, former astronaut Gerald O'Neill, the Merry Prankster Ken Kesey,

poets Gary Snyder, Richard Brautigan, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, urban planner Louis Mumford, environmental activists Wendell Berry, Wilson Clark, and Stephanie Mills, and astronomer Carl Sagan, "Space Colonies" became a clearinghouse for debates for and against inhabiting outer space. The passion with which Brand advocated for the development of space colonies paralleled his sense that freedom would only increase with the proliferation of individuated technologies such as home computers. Brand's sense of "free" space, characteristic of his libertarianism, posited individuals' political freedoms as a product of increased economic freedom. Brand's moment of confidence about the integration of the human and cosmic in a capitalism of space of course anticipates the New Space language that space is not so much a destination as "an enabler of profit," a site for primitive accumulation of unclaimed resources. In contrast, Syms's call to care for the Earth, as one commentator has noted, "Reminds us not to get too far-out with ideas of the future when there is still so much change that desperately needs to happen now."⁹ Grounding the discussion of transformation in "ourselves and this planet," to Syms, "is the ultimate laboratory for worldbuilding outside of imperialist, capitalist, white patriarchy."

As Syms points out, imperialism, capitalism, racism, and male domination were and continue to be the problems of most places on Earth, and therefore will haunt any future human culture in outer space. Even when equality is the goal, injustice can still be pervasive. For example, Sun Ra was notoriously suspicious of women, and when he incorporated female dancers and singers into Arkestra shows, initially June Tyson in 1968, he just as often viewed them as a problem. Tyson

was sometimes asked not to be present during recording sessions, with Ra proclaiming “I can’t create with women in my environment.”¹⁰ While in Ra’s mythology outer space was understood as liberatory for black men, women were nonetheless considered supplemental at best, as they were more generally in mainstream space technologies. Just as the naive adoption of the language of space as a “frontier” fails to address the fraught nature of the historical project of colonialization, the notion of “penetrating” or “conquering” outer space does not account for the way in which gender has been mapped onto the project of exploration. The masculine orientation of space travel, coming as it did out of military programs utilizing male fighter pilots as astronauts, has been challenged by women artists in recent years who are calling for feminist futures in space.

Aeronautic, climate control, and other technological tools for the betterment of the human condition have also had terrible effects on the Earth’s ecology, and the impulse to leave Earth must not be monopolized by those who bear a great responsibility to alleviate the suffering caused by capitalism and its destructive exploitation of natural resources.¹¹ There may be no better time for reckoning with technology than the present, given its uses and abuses in the hands of the powerful. As Ra warned, “The space age is here to stay. Ain’t no place that you can runaway.”¹²

Notes

- 1 A longer version of this essay includes a discussion of work by artists Dawn DeDeaux, Sylvie Fleury, and Aleksandra Mir.
- 2 Martine Syms, “The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto,” rhizome.org/editorial/2013/dec/17/mundane-afrofuturist-manifesto.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Stewart Brand (ed.), *Space Colonies* (A CoEvolution Book), New York 1977.
- 5 “Thoughts of Buckminster Fuller,” in: *Whole Earth Catalog*, Fall 1968. Brand’s interest in space and space exploration was contemporaneous with other art and architecture groups investigating space exploration by way of Fuller, such as Superstudio, Archigram, Ant Farm, and Experiments in Art Technology.
- 6 Stewart Brand, interview by Jennifer Leonard, *Massive Change Radio*, November 25, 2003 (broadcast March 2, 2004). *Massive Change Radio* is a project by Jennifer Leonard, Bruce Mau Design, the Institute without Boundaries, and CIUT FM, Toronto. Interview available at www.massivechange.com/media/INF_StewartBrand.pdf.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Diederich Diederichsen/Anselm Franke, “The Whole Earth: California and the Disappearance of the Outside,” in: Diederichsen/Franke (eds.), *The Whole Earth*, Berlin 2013, p. 8.
- 9 Alison Pezanoski-Browne, “Black to the Future: How Women in Pop Are Carrying the Mantle of Afrofuturism,” <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/black-to-the-future-afrofuturism-feminism-music-janelle-monae-kelis-ebony-bones-theesatisfaction>.
- 10 John Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, Cambridge, Mass. 1998, p. 250.
- 11 See Bruno Latour’s recent book *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Cambridge, UK 2017, particularly Chapter 6 on modernity as catastrophe, apocalyptic thinking, and the rush to “end times.”
- 12 Sun Ra, lyrics to “Rocket Number Nine,” 1968. See Szwed, p. 261.

