

Reclaiming the Legends

Myth & the Black Arts Movement

17 January - 17 February, 2017
English Faculty Building, First Floor Lobby

*Dropping his history books,
a young man, lined against the horizon
like an exclamation point with nothing to assert,
stumbles into the dance.*

- "Death as History" by Jay Wright

RECLAIMING THE LEGENDS: MYTH & THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT finds inspiration in the anti-historical world described by Wright. Its mysterious dance is the "cabinet of curiosities": the defiance of categorical boundaries, the assembling of varied objects, the powerfully mythic rather than the historical, the rhythmic rather than the calculated. The exhibition also "plead[s]" like Wright's dance. It asks visitors to abandon traditional epistemologies and participate in the microcosm it has created. This exhibition-world is a miscellany of anthropological & egyptological studies, revisionist histories, spiritualist & esoteric writings, books of poetry, and music record. It intimates some organizational principle, but finds time operating synchronically. Traditional chronology, here, is corrupted: Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Lorenzo Thomas, Bob Kaufman, Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, and Marvin X appear alongside Gerald Massey, George James, and Theodore P. Ford. Like Wright's dance, its form is ritualized and its theme is mythical.



RECLAIMING THE LEGENDS: MYTH & THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT follows the example of its subject: it rejects historical fixity for the elasticity of myth. Most profiles of the Black Arts Movement (BAM), on the other hand, highlight and organize themselves by an opposite force: the historical-political. BAM occurred over a ten year period (from 1965 to 1975/6); the context of the Movement was one of major socio-political disruption; BAM was the aesthetic wing of Black Power politics. Although the exhibition aims to look above and beyond these "facts" ("visionary-wise"), it is from this historical-political vantage point (the tangible) where we must begin.

The "symbolic birth" of BAM occurred in the spring of 1965. Not long after the assassination of Malcom X, LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] (1934-2014)—poet, critic,

playwright—moved from Manhattan’s Lower East Side to Harlem. Although Jones’s move marked the formal beginnings of BAM, the political and aesthetic ideas of the Movement had their origin in the earlier bohemian and proto-nationalist projects of the late-1950s and early-1960s. Of particular significance was the Umbra Workshop of the Lower East Side. The Umbra Workshop was a collective of black writers founded in 1962. The group’s major members—Tom Dent (1932-1998), David Henderson (1942-), Calvin C. Hernton (1932-2001), Ishmael Reed (1938-), Askia Touré (1938-), Lorenzo Thomas (1944-2005), and Archie Shepp (1937-) among others—, then young men, would later become critical to the theoretical and aesthetic shape of BAM. In 1964, the Umbra Workshop broke up after disputes over whether they were primarily a political group or an artistic one. Some members went on to form overtly nationalist groups (ex. Uptown Writers Movement), while others continued writing without such apparent affiliations.

In 1965, the centre of black arts moved from the Lower East Side to Harlem. After Jones’s move uptown, he, Charles Patterson, William Patterson, Clarence Reed, Johnny Moore, and a few other black artists opened the Black Arts Repertory Theatre / School (BARTS). The theatre produced a number of important plays by Jones as well as host poetry readings and concerts for local artists. The activities of BARTS represented the highest institutional organization of the black arts scene in New York; until, only one year later, the New York City Police raided the BARTS building. There, they discovered rifles, ammunition, and a practice shooting range. After the police raid, Jones moved back to his hometown of Newark. BAM, at that point, settled into a diverse movement. Artists, journals, and institutions spread across a number of major American cities: Detroit, Chicago, Washington D.C., San Francisco, New Orleans, Atlanta, and New York.

The “symbolic death” of BAM began in the mid-1970s as a result of both external and internal pressures. Repressive government measures (ex. COINTELPRO) disrupted black political organizations like Baraka’s Congress of African People (CAP). President Richard Nixon’s strategy of pushing Black Capitalism as a response to Black Power also contributed to a decline in black nationalist sentiments and community involvement. At the same time, many BAM thinkers began to gravitate towards Marxist ideas rather than nationalist ones. In October 1974, CAP officially changed from a “Pan Afrikan Nationalist” to a “Marxist Leninist” organization.

The period between the “symbolic birth” and “symbolic death” of BAM (1965-1974) was time of significant socio-political upheaval. BAM was largely a decentralized movement; yet, its artists and thinkers did have a common political foundation: nationalism. James Edward Smethurst writes, “the common thread between nearly all

the groups was a belief that African Americans were a people, a nation, entitled to (needing, really) self-determination of its own destiny" (15). Although opinions varied over what that destiny would look like, there was a common sense that African Americans needed to confront the cultural values of racist America and define their world in their own terms. BAM, then, though diverse, was firmly rooted in Black Power politics. In Larry Neal's famous words, the Movement was "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (28). These political values can largely be seen in the community work of its institutions. Theatres like "The New Lafayette Theatre," "National Black Theatre," and "Spirit House" functioned as cultural community centres; journals like *Freedomways*, *Liberator*, *Black Dialogue*, and *Soulbook* disseminated the work of black artists and thinkers; and presses like "Broadside Press" and "Third World Press" supported black writers on large scales.



The socio-political concerns of BAM bespeak of the radical significance of their historical moment. Yet, "history" (as such) does not figure in the poetry and drama of BAM as much as one might expect. In fact, many of BAM's thinkers equated history, as Jay Wright states, with "death." History was the story and culture propounded by the tyrannical power of the white-West. BAM and Black Power politics wanted to change or, better, to drop "history" altogether. Neal writes, "the cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible." What was needed, Neal continues, was "a whole new system of ideas." This system would be alternative, it would be black, and it would be "mythic."

The poetry and drama of BAM often served to build this alternative myth-world. In BAM's literature, allusions to Akhenaten, Moses, Zipporah, warriors, gods, spirits, and orishas appear with more frequency than figures of recent history (Patrice Lumumba and Malcom X included). Symbols like the ankh or Egyptian hieroglyphs can often be seen integrated in artworks or poems. Ancient Egypt and Ethiopia regularly appear as the settings of a prosperous black past, now suppressed by white historians. If "history" distorted and oppressed, "myth" empowered. It had the ability to provide both the contents and the structure of BAM's self-determined alter-world. In *The Black Arts Movement* (2005), Smethurst elaborates on BAM's mythic reinterpretation of historical movement:

...the poetry and drama of the Black Arts Movement [...] are often marked and linked by a sort of Edenic story of implicit paradise, fall, and potential salvation.

As in the first version of the Eden tale, the fall is rendered as a fall into history that needs to be transcended. (77)

In “A Poem of Destiny,” for example, Baraka pinpoints enslavement and the middle passage to America as occasioning both a literal (the slaves are brought below deck) and a mythical fall: “Tortured Slaves / below decks / Chain / in Shit / & / Vomit.” Now occupying a fallen world, the African American must break from the bondage of history and find salvation. For BAM writers like Baraka, the path to redemption and salvation, as Smethurst writes, “lie[s] in the escape from history into a mythical counter history or antihistory.” This Edenic anti-history is often portrayed as a space free from the fixity and cruelty of time. In anti-history, in other words, time functions synchronically: its occupants freely move backwards (to the glory she/he once was) and forwards (to the glory she/he will be) in time. In Baraka’s poem, salvation is figured to come in the form of a “New Ark” (a “Ship / of / Zion”), which, on the one hand, has a triangular sail (“Like a pyramid”) and, on the other, directs itself to outer-space, towards the sun.



RECLAIMING THE LEGENDS: MYTH & THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT is a journey through the synchronic alter-world of BAM. With the capacity to move backwards and forwards without constraint, it decides to explore the former. The first display case (THE PAST MADE PRESENT) dwells there, in the past. On the far left of the display case lie two books: Gerald Massey’s *The Light of the World* (1907) [1] and George James’s *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy* (1954) [2]. Both Massey and James’s texts reconsider the accepted history of Western tradition, concluding that a number of the West’s philosophical and religious ideas have ancient Egyptian origins. As Massey and James’s texts assert the cultural influence of Africa, the three works in the middle of the display case encourage their readers to use this African knowledge as a means of self-empowerment. Theodore P. Ford’s *God Wills the Negro* (1939) [3], for example, ends with the call to find strength in “the accumulated folk-wisdom and social experience of a hundred centuries of civilization.” Amiri Baraka, in his interview with Austin Clarke, [4] makes a similar gesture when he encourages the “black man” to repossess his ancient “life-force”—the force that “made Egypt, [...] Ghana, [...] Timbuktu.”—and flourish as he used to. In “The Bathers” (1981) [5], Lorenzo Thomas aims to describe this ancient life-force at work. Set in the 1963 Birmingham Civil Rights demonstrations, a young boy, hit by a high-pressure hose, “[transforms] into a lion” whose powerful “tail is vau the symbol of love.”

The most influential example of ancient myth being used as a means of self-empowerment occurs in jazz music. On the video monitor beside the first display case,

the visitor can watch musical performances by Pharoah Sanders, Cecil Taylor, Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, and The Art Ensemble of Chicago as well as readings by Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Askia Touré. Many of the performances find their energy in ritual-like percussion or rhythmic phrasing, dance, and costume. Turning back to the first display case, the visitor now sees three objects of a similar theme. Henry Dumas's "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" (1974) [6] tells the story of an ancient horn so powerful that it kills a group of uninitiated white listeners. In "East Fifth Street (NY)" (1965) [7], Bob Kaufman describes jazz as having the capacity to cause "time" to "[cry] out" from "the skin of an African drum." At the very end of the first display case is Sun Ra & Henry Dumas's *The Ark and the Ankh* (1966) [8]. During the course of their interview, Ra describes music as the bridge to a world beyond death, destruction, and time.

Following Ra, the exhibition's second display case (LOOKING AHEAD, VISIONARY-WISE) positions itself in the future. On the left hand side of the display case, the visitor sees three texts that explore the theme of death bringing about new life. E.A. Wallis Budge's translation of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* [1] contains a series of "magic spells" with the capacity to determine the afterlife of the deceased. In "Egyptian Book of the Dead" (1970) [2], David Henderson uses metaphors like magic spells to transform a deceased New York City into an Edenic ancient Egypt. In his ode to the legacy of Malcolm X (1968) [3], Marvin X turns Malcolm's assassination into something affirmative, bringing with it strength, hope, blackness, and black power. While death brings about new life, myth and magic provide models of what that new life may look like. Reed's "Neo-HooDoo" mixture of fact and fiction, history and myth, in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) [4] provides the reader with an aesthetic and cultural model antithetical to the West's. In "The True Way to Life" (2006) [5], Sun Ra uses intuitive logic to reinterpret history, decode biblical scripture, and reveal the secret path to everlasting life. In *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (1968) [6], Amiri Baraka provides examples of how sensationalism, surrealist symbolism, and mythology can be placed in the service of political protest. The exhibition ends with two explorations of what may be called the future-present. In "to Morani/Mungu" (1971) [7], Sonia Sanchez puts "peace" in the hands of a loving mother and has her assert that it is in the present that African Americans—particularly children—can actualize their dreams. Lastly, *Space is the Place* (1972) [8], is a musical exploration of Sun Ra's space world. After journeying through a world of cacophonous horns, off-kilter piano, and energetic percussion, the album ends with the electronic beeps and bops of Ra's spaceship taking off for another voyage.

Event

FROM SWING TO AFRO-FUTURISM: A Series of Film Screenings

Tuesday, January 31:

Imagine the Sound dir. Ron Mann (1981)

Tuesday, February 7:

"The Cry of Jazz" dir. Edward Bland (1959)

&

"The Last Angel of History" dir. John Akomfrah (1996)

Tuesday, February 14:

Space is the Place dir. John Coney (1974)

Location: Judith E. Wilson Drama Studio (Basement), English Faculty Building

Time: 7.15 pm - 9 pm

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Items on Display

VIDEO MONITOR

1. Pharoah Sanders - Live (1968)
 2. Amiri Baraka - "Wailers" (1981)
 3. Cecil Taylor - Live (1984)
 4. Nikki Giovanni - "Nikki-Rosa" (2006)
 5. Albert Ayler - Live (1966)
 6. Backstage at the New Lafayette Theatre (late-1960s)
 7. Archie Shepp - Live (1969)
 8. Askia Touré - "A Few Words in Passing" (2015)
 9. Sun Ra & his Intergalactic Arkestra - Live (1972)
 10. Art Ensemble of Chicago - Live (1983)
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FIRST DISPLAY CASE: THE PAST MADE PRESENT

○ STOLEN LEGACIES ○

1. *Gerald Massey, "The Jesus-Legend in Rome," The Light of the World (1907)*

Thomas Gerald Massey (1828-1907), poet and scholar, was born in Tring, Hertfordshire. At the age of eight, Massey left school to work full-time in a silk factory and, later, as a straw plaiter. He devoted his spare hours to reading religious and literary texts, instilling in himself a lifelong appreciation of both. Massey left Tring for London in early-1840. In 1847, he published a collection of poetry entitled *Poems and Chansons*. His poems, in both this volume and others, are politically-driven pleas for the working class. Their political nature stem from Massey's ideological associations with reform movements of the nineteenth century, namely Chartism and Christian Socialism. After 1860, Massey gradually turned away from politics. While working as a journalist, lecturer, and scholar, his interest and faith in spiritualism began to monopolize his attention.

In his later years, he devoted his time to the study of ancient Egypt, believing it to be the source of many modern spiritualist ideas. In the year of his death, Massey published *The Light of the World (1907)*. On display is a page from Book 12, "The Jesus-Legend Traced in Egypt for Ten Thousand Years." An Egyptian image of an annunciation is shown to support Massey's controversial claim that the Jesus-legend has roots in the Egyptian Horus myth. In the mid-20th century, archeological studies like Massey's provided afrocentric thinkers with a way of establishing a historical narrative that both stemmed from the geographical landmass of Africa (usually Egypt and/or Ethiopia) and structured itself on a black cultural paradigm.

2. *George James, Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy (1954)*

George Granville Monah James ([?]-1954), writer and scholar, was born in Georgetown, Guyana. He studied at Durham University and, after a period at the University of London, received a doctoral degree from Columbia University. James went on to receive professorships at Livingston College, Johnson C. Smith University, Georgia State College, Alabama A. & M. College, and the University of Arkansas. In 1954, he published a controversial book entitled *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*. On display is a facsimile edition of the original Philosophical Library press (New York) publication. In *Stolen Legacy*, James argues that classical Greek philosophy came from an ancient Egyptian mystery tradition. His attacks on the Greek foundation of Western culture have since been discredited as pseudo-history; yet, his outwardly afrocentric (re-)examination of the philosophic tradition inspired a generation of black thinkers, most notably Lorenzo Thomas and Sun Ra.

○ RECLAIMING THE LEGENDS ○

3. *Theodore P. Ford, God Wills the Negro. An Anthropological and Geographical Restoration of the Lost History of the American Negro People, Being in Part a Theological Interpretation of Egyptian and Ethiopian Backgrounds (1939)*

The authorship of *God Wills the Negro* has yet to be confirmed. Some scholars connect the name "Theodore P. Ford" to Wallace D. Fard (c.1877 - 1934[?])*: the founder of the Nation of Islam (NOI). The link ironically tells us very little. In spite of claims that he was born in the city of Mecca, a police record states that Fard was born and raised in Portland, while a U.S. Consensus report and a WWI draft card state that he was born in New Zealand and Shinka, Afghanistan, respectively. Little is known of Fard's life prior to his move to Detroit in 1930. There, he made a living selling goods to African Americans. He also began to promote his "new faith": he preached against Christianity and for Islam, against whites and for blacks, and encouraged his followers to form a religious community.

Following a rapid increase in membership, Fard began to organize the NOI. *God Wills the Negro* is, perhaps, the result of his efforts to create a coherent philosophical position. On display is a facsimile edition of the original Geographical Institute publication. The opening chapters of the book draw a series of links between the modern African American and the ancient Egyptian: first in their appearance and then in their myths and rituals. The book also gives a pseudo-history of the African American, beginning in ancient Egypt and—after fleeing into Sudan and then being sold into slavery by "war-like" West Africans—ending in the American South. The book proceeds to connect this history to biblical prophecy and, finally, concludes with a call to the African American: find strength in "the accumulated folk-wisdom and social experience of a hundred centuries of civilization" and respect "the will of god."

*A few things make me doubt the connection. First, *God Wills the Negro* was published five years after Fard's mysterious disappearance. Second, the book was published in Chicago, a city to which Fard had no connection. Third, the book's anti-sectarian perspective seems counter to Fard's Islamic one. Fourth, the author of *God Wills the Negro* calls himself a Hoodoo spiritualist and so claims some connection to the American South. Fard had no connection to Hoodooism nor to the South. Nevertheless, some of the contents of this book are so fantastical that it is hard to deny or confirm the Ford-Fard connection.

4. Amiri Baraka, "An Interview with LeRoi Jones by Austin Clarke, 1968," *Conversations with Amiri Baraka* (1994)

Amiri Baraka [formerly LeRoi Jones] (1934-2014), poet, playwright, and essayist, was born in Newark, New Jersey. After attending Barringer High School, Baraka studied at Rutgers University and Howard University. Jones went on to serve in the Air Force, but was later discharged for possessing communist literature. In 1958, he took up residence in Greenwich Village, started Totem Press and *Yugen* magazine, and affiliated himself with N.Y.'s Beat Scene. After becoming disillusioned with their lack of political engagement, Baraka severed his ties with the Beats and became a member of the Umbra Workshop. Jones's poetry became increasingly political and race-conscious during this period. In 1965, Jones, moved to Harlem and started the "Black Arts Repertory Theatre / School." After a police raid on BARTS, Jones left New York for Newark and opened "Spirit House." In 1967, Jones visited Maulana Kerenga, became an advocate of his philosophy of Kawaida, and adopted the name Imamu Amear Baraka.

On display is an interview from the time Baraka was at his political and spiritual apogee. Austin Clarke directs his interview towards spiritual topics. Baraka makes his message clear: "the black man," he says, must "[cut] through the mass of lies and distortions [he] has been subjected to here in the West." By doing so, he will discover his "real life-force": the "religious tendency" that exists at his very core. This process of self-discovery will not only involve a journey inwards, but also a journey backwards. The black man will find himself in a time when "he was powerful" and had the freedom to use this life-force. Baraka calls on black man to repossess "the skills and sciences" that developed from his life-force, "the ones which Europeans have told us are of no value," and use these skills to determine his future.

* cf. ll. 6. for more Baraka.

5. Lorenzo Thomas, "The Bathers," *The Bathers* (1981)

Lorenzo Thomas (1944-2005), poet and essayist, was born in the Republic of Panama and grew up in New York City. While attending Queens College, Thomas became a member of the Umbra Workshop: a group of emerging Black Nationalist writers in the Lower East Side. During their weekly meetings, he exchanged ideas with the likes of Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, Askia Touré, and Tom Dent, among others. The group's interest in both the avant-garde and racial politics deeply influenced Thomas. In 1968, Thomas joined the United States Navy. After spending a tour in Vietnam, Thomas settled in the American South. He worked a variety of jobs in writing (writer-in-residence at Texas Southern University, writing teacher at the Black Arts Centre) and publishing (a correspondent for *Living Blues* magazine), and continued to write poetry.

In 1981, Thomas published *The Bathers*: a chronological presentation of his poetry. On display are the opening lines of the title poem, "The Bathers." The poem treats the brutal treatment of black protestors during the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama Civil Rights demonstrations. During these demonstrations, police and fire safety forces used high pressure hoses to attack protestors. In Thomas's poem, the water from these hoses goes through a kind of metaphorical inversion to become an image of baptism. After the victims are hit, a primordial force is stirred within them, culminating in the poem's use of Egyptian hieroglyphs as an expression of this force. The ancient force is, like Baraka's, both combative and transformative: it reaches into the ancient past, challenges the inequalities of the present, and encourages change in the future.

○ AN ANCIENT MUSIC ○

6. *Henry Dumas, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Ark of Bones & Other Stories (ed. Eugene B. Redmond) (1974)*

Henry Dumas (1934-1968), poet and short story writer, was born in Sweet Home, Arkansas. At the age of eleven, Dumas moved to Harlem. After graduating from Commerce High School, he joined the Air Force and was stationed at the Lackland Base in San Antonio, Texas. In 1957, he was discharged from military service and, shortly thereafter, enrolled at Rutgers University. Dumas worked a number of jobs to support his family and, being unable to acquire any degree, then moved to Illinois. There, he taught at Southern Illinois University. On 23 May 1968, Dumas was killed at the hands of a white policeman on the southbound platform of the 125th Street Station in Harlem. According to some sources, Dumas was seen threatening another man with a knife. When an officer ordered him to drop the knife, Dumas attacked him. The officer shot at Dumas three times. Other sources claim he was killed in a case of "mistaken identity."

On display is a short story called "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" from the posthumous collection *Ark of Bones & Other Stories*. Dumas's story centres on three white music-fans who finagle their way into a Harlem jazz club. The black patrons warn them that, inside the club, an ancient horn is being played that "[vibrates] the freedom of freedom." The scene becomes chaotic as focus turns to the jazz band. After the horn stops sounding, the uninitiated white listeners are found dead. Like Baraka and Thomas's "life-force," the ancient horn is a force antithetical to the white power-structure: its origins are in ancient Africa and its effect is to maintain black spaces in the future.

7. *Bob Kaufman, "East Fifth Street (NY)," Solitudes Crowded With Loneliness (1965)*

Robert Garnell Kaufman (1925-1986), poet and performer, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. At the age of eighteen, he joined a marine union known for its racial egalitarianism and communist sympathies. In the early-1940s, Kaufman settled in San Francisco's North Beach. He spent a short and chaotic period in New York, studying and spending time with a number of the Beats and Black Arts literati. Before finishing his studies, Kaufman returned to San Francisco. There, he distinguished himself as one of the central figures of the Bay Area's New American Poetry scene. He published six collections of poetry, four of them with the famed City Lights Bookstore, and was one of the founders of the influential *Beatitude* magazine. After the assassination of John F. Kennedy (1963), Kaufman lived in self-imposed isolation. After years of poverty and substance abuse, he died in 1986.

Although he never directly involved himself in the Black Arts Movement, the writers associated with BAM did consider him one of their forebears: his interest in black art, myth, ancient Africa, voodooism, jazz, the avant-garde, and progressive politics aligned with many of their own. On display is a poem called "East Fifth Street (NY)." Like Dumas's "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?," Kaufman's poem describes the music being played in a jazz club, this time in the East Village. The music is, like Dumas's, religious and African: it is a "Jacob's song," but with a "Caribbe emphasis." Its sounds are also natural: like stones thrown at tenement buildings, winds gently flinging the curls of infant rabbis, or waves splashing a crowded harbour. The music, returning from this journey into the world of metaphor, comes back as an echo. The echo, once conflating space, now conflates time. We listen as "TIME CRIES OUT, ON THE SKIN OF AN African drum."

8. *Sun Ra & Henry Dumas, The Ark and the Ankh [LP] (1966)*

Sun Ra and Henry Dumas's *The Ark and the Ankh* is a meeting of minds and mediums: music and writing. In 1961, Sun Ra and his core group of musicians (Marshall Allen, John Gilmore, and Ronnie Boykins) left Chicago for New York. At first, Ra's group (the Arkestra) had difficulty finding work in the city. Ra spent much of his time in the Lower East Side, conversing with religious figures and members of the Umbra Workshop. In 1966, the Arkestra secured regular gigs at Slug's Saloon. There, they found new audiences and gained worldwide recognition. The experimentation that characterizes this period in the Arkestra's music can be heard in background of *The Ark and the Ankh*. As Dumas conducts his interview with Ra, the Arkestra's music occasionally heightens to drown their voices.

The interview begins in media res: we hear Sun Ra say, "looking ahead visionary-wise, it kinda messes up the scheme of things, the way folks is thinking musicians should be." Responding to this statement about listeners' expectations of jazz, Dumas asks Ra about the "forces" keeping "music suppressed." The "forces of the earth," Ra responds. The world was set up for death and destruction, he says, and the world's death-forces keep music's message from being heard. Music is the bridge to a world beyond death, destruction, and time. For "the black man," the bridge can lead him to the past ("to being what he was") and, at the same time, to the future ("to something greater than he was"). In infinity, "it doesn't matter which way [he goes]," for in either direction he will find free and ever-lasting life.

*cf. I. 6. for more Dumas. *cf. II. 5. and II. 8. for more Ra.

SECOND DISPLAY CASE: LOOKING AHEAD, VISIONARY-WISE

o LIFE & REBIRTH o

1. *The Book of the Dead. Trans. E.A. Wallis Budge (1895)*

Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge (1857-1934), egyptologist, orientalist, collector, and philologist, was born in Bodmin, Cornwall. At a young age, he showed an interest in languages and the ancient Near East. Though he left school at the age of twelve, Budge spent his spare time learning Hebrew, Syriac, and Assyrian. Between 1878 and 1883, Budge studied Semitic languages at the University of Cambridge. After completing his studies, Budge began a career in the British Museum's Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities. In the late-1880s, Budge travelled to Iraq and Egypt to establish ties with local antiquity dealers. He returned from his trip with a large collection of cuneiform tablets, manuscripts, and hieroglyphic papyri, including the Papyrus of Ani, a *Book of the Dead*, and a copy of Aristotle's "Constitution of Athens."

During the early part of his tenure as the Department's Assistant Keeper, Budge worked on translating the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. On display is an early edition of his translation of the ancient Egyptian funerary text. *The Book of the Dead* is made up of a series of illustrations and "magic spells." The spells serve a number of purposes: to ensure the elements of the deceased are preserved and reunited in the afterlife, to give the deceased mystical knowledge, or to give the deceased control over the world around him. These spells also equipped their owner with a unique power over both life and death. After

its publication, students of the occult and spiritualism showed deep interest in the text. For thinkers associated with BAM, the book's African origin as well as its idea that language could create and determine the world around a speaker made it a critical part of the Black Arts imagination.

2. *David Henderson, "Egyptian Book of the Dead," De Mayor of Harlem (1970)*

David Henderson (1942 -), poet and scholar, was born and raised in Harlem, New York. After moving to the Lower East Side, Henderson became an active participant in black nationalist, anti-war, and arts movements. In 1962, Henderson, along with a number of other black writers, founded the Umbra Workshop. Umbra became a major force in publishing and promoting black writers. Its journals and communal ethos established the pattern for much of the BAM project(s). In 1967, Henderson published his first collection of poetry: a chapbook entitled *Felix of the Silent Forest*. He has since released three collections of poems, including *De Mayor of Harlem (1970)*, and been featured in numerous anthologies. In 1981, his biography of Jimi Hendrix, *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky*, received wide critical acclaim.

On display is a poem from Henderson's second book of poetry, *De Mayor of Harlem*. In "Egyptian Book of the Dead," New York and ancient Egypt appear as one. The city's rooftops are "old testaments" of a time past; a "tribe" of people smoke on a street corner; and people drink "wine from palms" and "beer from bananas." Here, death is a beautiful thing. It comes in a "blaze of trumpets" and a "blossom of fire" to free the people from a world of "incarnate computers." Though it speaks of death, the poem brings with it new beginnings. By using metaphors like magic spells, the speaker (performing a kind of funerary rite) brings a deceased modern city—a city that understands humans as "factors on a graph"—into an Edenic afterlife.

3. *Marvin E. Jackmon [Marvin X], "That Old Time Religion," Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing [ed. Amiri Baraka & Larry Neal] (1968)*

Marvin Ellis Jackmon [Marvin X] (1944-), poet, playwright, and essayist was born in Fowler, California. Jackmon grew up in an activist household: his parents published the black-owned *Fresno Voice*. After graduating from Thomas Alva Edison High School, Jackmon attended Oakland City College (Merritt College). There, he met Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale—the future founders of the Black Panther Party—and became involved in black nationalist politics. Jackmon went on to study at San Francisco State University, produce his first play *Flowers for the Trashman*, and emerge as an important voice of BAM. In 1966, Jackmon left the university to establish the "Black Arts/West Theatre" with Ed Bullins. The following year, Jackmon co-founded the "Black House" with Eldridge Cleaver and joined the Nation of Islam. He changed his name to El Muhajir and began using the moniker Marvin X.

On display is one of X's poems, "That Old Time Religion," published in the BAM-defining anthology *Black Fire*. X's poem is an ode to Malcom X. To become a great political leader, X writes, Malcom threw away the fear that lies "behind our skulls" and caught, instead, "something greater": life. Yet, catching life comes with a price: death. Malcom X went unprotected—"a lost leader"—to spread his message of black power. He told his listeners that man was the beast and, as it would happen, it was by the beast's hands that the unprotected Malcom would die. Marvin X turns this death into an affirmative: now, behind the skulls of Malcolm's disciples, there lies Malcom's spirit of strength and life. Blackness and black power, like the sun, shines over the land.

○ MYTH & MAGIC: MODELS OF THE FUTURE○

4. *Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (1972)*

Ishmael Reed (1938-), novelist, dramatist, poet, and essayist, was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee and grew up in Buffalo, New York. In 1960, he was awarded a BA in American Studies at the University of Buffalo. In 1962, Reed moved to New York. There, he co-founded the *East Village Other* with Walter Bowart, became a member of the Umbra Workshop, and frequently met with black literati, including Langston Hughes. He published his first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, in 1966. In 1970, Reed released his first collection of poetry, *catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church*. That year, Reed also moved to the West Coast to begin a teaching career at the University of California, Berkeley. After 35 of teaching, Reed retired and now serves as a Visiting Scholar at California College of the Arts.

On display is his most famous novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*. As the clearest articulation of Reed's aesthetic, "Neo-HooDoo," *Mumbo Jumbo* mingles fiction and fact, history and myth, the present and the past to turn the text into a kind of spiritual artifact. The resultant artifact is a satiric deconstruction of Western culture, that also provides the reader with an aesthetic and cultural model antithetical to the West's. Reed sets his novel in 1920s New York. Jes Grew—an ancient force that periodically expresses itself (occasionally at bubonic rates) as distinct and alternative cultural phenomena (loas, the blues, ragtime, jazz, the jitterbug, for example)—is "plaguing" Americans. White America is ready to respond. Hinckle Von Vampton, a member of the Wallflower Order, devises a plan to develop a "Talking Android": a black man who will encourage African Americans to reject their culture in favour of monotheism, cold reason, and European values.

5. *Sun Ra, "The True Way to Life," The Wisdom of Sun Ra: Sun Ra's Polemical Broadsheets and Streetcorner Leaflets (2006)*

Herman Poole Blount [Le Sony'r Ra, Sun Ra] (1914-1993), composer, bandleader, pianist, poet, and philosopher, was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. Blount showed promise as a musician from a young age, composing and sight reading by 11 or 12. In 1934, Blount was offered a full time job with Ethel Harper. After Harper left, Blount took over her group and changed its name to the "Sonny Blount Orchestra." Blount went on to study at the Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical University. There, Blount had a visionary experience—he landed on the planet Saturn and talked to extraterrestrials—that would have a long-term influence on him. After WWII (Blount declared himself a conscious objector), Blount moved to Chicago. By 1952, Blount was leading "The Space Trio": a band with drummer Tommy Hunter and saxophonist Pat Patrick. John Gilmore (tenor sax) and Marshall Allen (alto sax) and Ronnie Boykins (bass) soon joined the group. They eventually became known as the "Arkestra."

In the mid-50s, Blount also met Alton Abraham: the Arkestra's future business manager and founder of El Saturn Records. By then, Blount had already changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra and was going by the moniker Sun Ra. Like himself, Abraham was a student of both music and mysticism. Abraham and Ra formed Thmei Research: a book club dedicated to religious and esoteric ideas. On display is "The True Way to Life," a facsimile of one of the many pamphlets and broadsides printed and distributed (in Chicago's Washington Park) by Thmei Research. The text is typical of Thmei's thinking in its use of intuitive logic to decode history and biblical scripture and in its central message of ever-lasting life.

6. *Amiri Baraka, Four Black Revolutionary Plays (1969)*

Four Black Revolutionary Plays is a testament to Baraka's political seriousness—often manifesting itself as pain and anger in these plays—as well as his commitment to linguistic innovation and aesthetic revolution. In "Experimental Death Unit #1," "A Black Mass," "Madheart," and "Great Goodness of Life," Baraka provides examples of how sensationalism, surrealist symbolism, and mythology can be placed in the service of political protest and social change. In "A Black Mass" (1966), for example, Baraka uses the Nation of Islam's Yakub myth to explore issues of racial harmony, religious responsibility, and sexual corruption. The play begins in a fantastical chemical laboratory. Three black magicians in long robes—Nasafi, Tanzil, and Jacoub—are busy completing their respective inventions. Jacoub, having just invented time, now works on a new organism. He ignores his colleagues' pleas to reconsider and creates a ghastly beast. The only words the beast utters are "I white. White. White. White." As the beast gains strength, he attacks the people around him and transform them into soulless white beasts like himself. Baraka ends his play with a "call to arms": the narrator, in his only lines, declares Holy War, Jihad, against the white beasts that are colonizing the world. When the play closes, audience members leave with the phrase *Izm-el-Azam* echoing in their heads and dreams of a changed future.

* cf. l. 4. for more Baraka

○ A NEW DAY ○

7. *Sonia Sanchez, "to Morani/Mungu," It's a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistuhs (1971)*

Wilsonia Benita Driver [Sonia Sanchez] (1934-), poet and playwright, was born in Birmingham, Alabama. After her mother died, Driver spent several year moving between different relatives. In 1943, Driver moved to New York to live with her father, sister, and step-mother. She went on to receive a BA in political science from Hunter College and complete postgraduate work at New York University. Driver's first marriage was to Albert Sanchez and, though the marriage did not last, Sanchez continued to use his last name. In the 1960s, Sanchez began a career in teaching, first at Downtown Community School and, later, at a number of American universities. In 1966, Sanchez introduced a Black Studies course at San Francisco State University. While teaching, Sanchez became involved in black activist projects like CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) and became an important female voice in the male-dominated Black Arts Movement. Two year later, she joined the Nation of Islam, but would leave three years later in protest of its discriminatory attitudes towards women. In 1977, Sanchez started to teach at Temple University, where she would become Presidential Fellow until her retirement in 1999.

On display is a poem entitled "to Morani/Mungu." The poem comes from a collection of poetry for young adults, published a year before Sanchez joined the NOI, called *It's a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistuhs*. Already showing signs of NOI-sympathies, Sanchez begins the poem with a greeting of peace: "As-Salaam-Alaikum my black princes // the morning awaits u. // the world // awaits yo / young / blackness // sun / children // of our tomorrow." Unlike Sun Ra in his broadsheets or Amiri Baraka in "A Black Mass," Sanchez does not displace "peace," but puts it in the hands of a loving mother. Here, the Edenic future is not something to be longed for; rather, it is the present that is the space in which African Americans—particularly children—can actualize their dreams.

8. *Sun Ra, Space is the Place [LP] (1973)*

Space is the Place—an exploration of the outer reaches of jazz—is one of Sun Ra’s clearest expressions of his space age philosophy (frequently called afro-futurism). The opening song, “Space is the Place,” is a 21-minute hymn to outer space. After a series of electronic beeps and bops mimicking a spaceship taking off, Ra and his Arkestra transport the listener into a space world filled with loud horns, squealing saxophones, swelling organs, odd electronic sounds (including a Farfisa Profession, which the liner notes call a “space organ”), and the incantatory repetition of the phrase “space is the place” (sung by “The Space Ethnic Voices”: June Tyson, Ruth Wright, Cheryl Banks, and Judith Holton). Having arrived in the infinite alter-world of space, the album freely moves back and forth in time: “Images” and “Discipline” harken back to traditional big band, while “Sea of Sound” visits the future sounds of free jazz. The album then ends with “Rocket Number Nine.” The song is a dizzying chant. A chorus of voices repeat “rocket number nine take off for the planet visit” until they reach a state of near lunacy. Finally, the song crescendos into the electronic beeps and bops of Ra’s spaceship taking off on another voyage.

cf. I. 8. and II. 5. for more Ra

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