

# Reclaiming the Legends

## Myth & the Black Arts Movement

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

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*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.

Although the exhibition looks above and beyond "history" ("visionary-wise"), it is from there where we 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) moved from Manhattan's Lower East Side to Harlem, where he, Larry Neal and others co-organised the Black Arts Repertory Theater / School. BAM (its artists, journals, and institutions) would soon spread across a number of major American cities—Detroit, Chicago, Washington D.C., San Francisco, and New York—; however, under repressive government measures like COINTELPRO, President Nixon's strategy of pushing Black Capitalism as a response to Black Power, and an ideological shift towards Marxism, BAM began to decline by around 1974.

Although BAM was largely a decentralized movement, 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). BAM's socio-political concerns bespeak of the radical significance of their historical moment. Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, "history" (as such) did not figure in the poetry and drama of BAM. In fact, many of BAM's thinkers equated history, as 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." What was needed, Neal continues, was "a whole new system of ideas": a system that would be alternative, black, and "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. For BAM, this mythic past was also as an image of the future. Time, in the alter-world, functioned synchronically: its occupants could freely move backwards (to the glory she/he once was) or forwards (to the glory she/he will be). In infinity, as Sun Ra states "it doesn't matter which way you go"—you will find free and everlasting life in all directions.

RECLAIMING THE LEGENDS: MYTH & THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT is a journey through the synchronic alter-world of BAM. The first display case (THE PAST MADE PRESENT) decides to position itself 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 its 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] 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 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 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 a 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 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 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.

## Items on Display

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### 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 in Algiers, with Touareg Musicians (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)*

Gerald Massey (1828-1907) began his adult life as a poet and scholar devoted to reform movements of the nineteenth century, namely Chartism and Christian Socialism. After 1860, a growing interest and faith in spiritualism monopolized his attention. Massey began to devote his studies to Ancient Egypt, which he believed to be the source of many modern spiritualist ideas. In "The Jesus-Legend in Rome," Massey makes one of his more controversial claims: the Jesus-legend has roots in the Egyptian Horus myth. Massey's work would later be cited by BAM writers such as Lorenzo Thomas.

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

George James ([?]-1954) was a scholar from Georgetown, Guyana. After a long period of academic study, James took on a number of teaching posts at notable American universities. During his posting at the University of Arkansas, James published the controversial *Stolen Legacy*: a pseudo-historical study of the Egyptian origins of classical Greek philosophy. Irrespective of its verity, his outwardly afrocentric (re-)examination of the western philosophic tradition inspired a generation of black thinkers, namely 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)*

While some scholars link the name Theodore P. Ford to Wallace D. Fard (the founder of the Nation of Islam), the authorship of *God Wills the Negro* has yet to be confirmed. The book is typical of mid-century afrocentric texts. It draws a series of links between the ancient Egyptian and the modern African American, finding similarities in their appearances, myths, and rituals and creating pseudo-historical links between them. The book concludes with a call to find strength in “the accumulated folk-wisdom and social experience of a hundred centuries of civilization” and to respect “the will of god.”

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

Amiri Baraka [formerly Le Roi Jones] (1934-2014) was a poet, playwright, and essayist. After moving to Harlem in 1965, Baraka became one of the major architects of BAM. His projects, Totem Press and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School, supported black artists by giving them publishing and performance space. This interview from 1968 exemplifies the spiritual discourse of much Black Arts rhetoric. Strongly influenced by the Nation of Islam, Maulana Karenga's philosophy of Kawaida, and afrocentric histories, Baraka urges the “black man” to repossess his “life-force” and determine his own future.

5. *Lorenzo Thomas, “The Bathers,” The Bathers (1981)*

Lorenzo Thomas (1944-2005), one of the leading members of the Umbra Workshop, was born in Panama and grew up in New York. “The Bathers,” the title poem to a collection published in 1981, concerns the brutal police treatment of black protestors during the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama Civil Rights demonstrations. Thomas juxtaposes this treatment with images drawn from Christianity, Islam, and ancient Egypt to tell of an ancient life-force which, like Baraka's, is both combative and transformative: it reaches into the 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 from Sweet Home, Arkansas and grew up in Harlem. After being discharged from the U.S. Air Force, Dumas studied, worked a number of jobs, and taught at Southern Illinois University. His life was cut short when a white policeman shot him dead in Harlem's 125th Street Station. “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” tells the story of a group of white music-fans who finagle their way into a Harlem jazz club. Inside, one of the musicians plays an ancient horn that “[vibrates] the freedom of freedom.” After it is done sounding, the white listeners are found dead.

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

Bob Kaufman (1925-1986) was a poet and performer from New Orleans, Louisiana. Although he never directly involved himself in BAM, many of the Movement's writers posited him as one of their forebears. "East Fifth Street (NY)," describes the music of a jazz club in the Lower East Side. The music is religious and black: it is "Jacob's song" with a "Caribbe emphasis." It is also natural: like a stone, wind, or waves. The music, returning from this journey into the world of metaphors, 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)*

*The Ark and the Ankh* is a meeting of minds and mediums: music and writing. In 1961, Sun Ra (1914-1993) and his band moved from Chicago to New York, where he would influence poets such as the members of the Umbra Workshop and participate in Baraka's Black Arts Theatre experiment in Harlem. In this recording of Henry Dumas (see 6) interviewing Ra, Ra describes music as a bridge to a world beyond death, destruction, and time. For "the black man," this music-bridge may take him to either the past or the future. In infinity, Ra states, "it doesn't matter which way [he goes]," in either direction, he will find free and ever-lasting life.

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## SECOND DISPLAY CASE: LOOKING AHEAD, VISIONARY-WISE

### o LIFE & REBIRTH o

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

E.A. Wallis Budge (1857-1934) was an egyptologist known for his career in the British Museum's Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, which Budge translated in 1895, is made up of a series of illustrations and "magic spells." The spells serve a number of purposes related to the fate of the deceased. They also equip their owner with a unique power over both life and death. For thinkers associated with BAM, the book's African origin as well as its idea that language can determine a speaker's environment 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 - ) is a poet, scholar, and former member of the Umbra Workshop. In "Egyptian Book of the Dead," New York and ancient Egypt appear as one. The city's rooftops are "old testaments" and a "tribe" of people drink "wine from palms" and beer "from bananas." Here, death is beautiful. 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 brings a deceased modern city 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 X (1944- ) is a poet, playwright, and essayist from Fowler, California. While attending Oakland City College, X met Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale (founders of the Black Panther Party) and became involved in Black Power politics. X went on to become one of BAM's major architects, co-founding two of its premier West Coast venues: San Francisco's "Black Arts/West Theatre" and Oakland's "Black House." "That Old Time Religion" is an ode to the legacy of Malcom X. The poem turns Malcom's death into an affirmative. His death, X writes, brings with it life: blackness and black power now shine over the land.

○ MYTH & MAGIC: MODELS OF THE FUTURE ○

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

Ishmael Reed (1938- ) is a novelist, dramatist, poet, and essayist from Chattanooga, Tennessee. As the clearest articulation of Reed's "Neo-HooDoo" aesthetic, *Mumbo Jumbo* mingles fiction and fact, history and myth, 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. The novel is set in 1920s New York. An "anti-plague," Jes Grew, is infecting Americans. Two all-white secret societies set out to stop Jes Grew with doses 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)

The mid-1950s was a period of intense musical and intellectual exploration for Sun Ra (1914-1993). After moving to Chicago, Ra met Alton Abraham. In addition to forming many musical ties, Ra and Abraham started Thmei Research: a book club dedicated to religious and esoteric ideas. "The True Way to Life" is 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 Amiri Baraka's political seriousness—manifesting itself as pain and, often, 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. In "A Black Mass" (1966), for example, Baraka uses the Nation of Islam's Yakub myth—in which white people are created by a mad scientist—to explore issues of racial harmony, religious responsibility, and sexual corruption. The play ends with a "call to arms": a holy war against white supremacy.

○ A NEW DAY ○

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

Sonia Sanchez (1934- ) was a strong female voice in the male-dominated BAM. In 1972, Sanchez converted to the Nation of Islam, leaving three years later over their position on women's rights. Already showing signs of NOI-sympathies, Sanchez begins her poem with a greeting of peace. Unlike Ra in his broadsheets or 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. The title song is a 21-minute hymn that transports its listeners into a world of electronic beeps and bops, cacophonous horns, and energetic percussion. Having arrived in the infinity 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 ends with "Rocket Number Nine": a dizzying chant that culminates in Ra's spaceship taking off for another voyage.

\* *Find extended information at: [www.english.cam.ac.uk/cmt/](http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cmt/) \**

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