

Black Death: The Long Riotous 60's, Henry Dumas, and Resurrection

by

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Her thesis is entitled “the first panthers: the black panther parties in new york city 1966-1971” and addresses the work and repression of the two black panther parties in new york during that era.

“sooner or late, eventually everybody gets destroyed, so the whole thing, the whole goal of humanity is to be destroyed”—sun ra, *the ark and the ankh*, 1966

In 1966, the visionary poet henry dumas interviewed futuristic jazz musician sun ra at slug's saloon in new york city's lower east side. A recording was produced from that session called “the ark and the ankh” in which the two men discuss the similarities of music and poetry, the direction of humanity, and rap about some of sun ra's philosophical equations. The title of the record references two symbols representing the two men: sun ra was the ankh, the ancient egyptian symbol of life eternal, and dumas was the ark, the ship of salvage and salvation in a time of chaos and peril. The interview track is also mixed over with screeching horns, sporadic percussion and other ambient sounds. Early on in the conversation, sun ra states that the goal of humanity is to be destroyed; this propensity for destruction refuses the promise of the ankh. When dumas asks ra how he knows this is true, sun ra replies “cuz that's what ends up in the cemetery”¹, alluding perhaps to the funerary practices as a remembrance of a finite life, which venerates the body in death as opposed to the immortal life of the soul. Dumas later asks “what do you think is the problem with the black man” to which ra replies “he can't see me yet”². While it may not be possible to fully comprehend sun ra's meaning, he implies that the black man is so mired in death he cannot fully understand the extent of sun ra's message of creation over destruction. Both the ark and the ankh are symbolic of refuge from the violence and mayhem that marked the mid 1960's, and ended henry dumas' life in may of 1968. While dumas died young, his writings were compiled and preserved by eugene redmond and widely published and prefaced with the assistance of toni morrison, amiri baraka, poet jay wright and others.

In this way, dumas became a kind of osiris figure; his body of works was re-membered by those who knew him in life and those who came to recognize the importance of his writings in the wake of his murder. Stephen e. Henderson invoked osiris' name in regard to dumas in 1988³, while ishmael reed called him "the poet of resurrection"⁴. Indeed, in this arc of mythology, eugene redmond became isis, but the progeny of this resurrection was not a child, but the publication of dumas' oeuvre. Dumas' aesthetic defies classification. His prose can read like sheet music, though often the musical notes are hieroglyphs, where the pauses are ghosts that strike and fade. His short story "fon" in *ark of bones* is an excellent example of this. The narrative transitions are smooth, and yet fon, the character for whom the story is titled, is a mysterious sorcerer intent who escapes a lynch mob with a kind of unspoken conjuring and kinship with some unseen archer. At other times dumas' prose borders on non-fiction, as james de jongh has pointed out about the short stories "the marchers" and "harlem" from dumas' *rope of wind*⁵. While his work defies the ability to rigidly categorize it, dumas exemplified larry neal's idea of the black aesthetic. Neal wrote that "the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world." Dumas, did that with his own writing, and wrote about that aesthetic itself in stories like "will the circle be unbroken?" Wherein the sound of african horn kills a white musicologist who has demanded entrance into a jazz club in order to hear it. It is in this way that dumas' work is unapologetic/black/magic. In order to fully appreciate dumas' significance, it is crucial to contextualize his work and his death historically.

Sun ra's interpretation of man's binary choice between life and death in *the ark and the ankh* reflects something intrinsic to cold war culture: humanity had invented a sure fire way to destroy itself, and which had a polarizing effect on the prevailing cultural paradigm: with destruction and the partisan enmity of war at one end of the spectrum, and the spirit of creativity and re-birth at the other. Ra's postulation is also situated in the context of black death: be it black political leaders throughout the diaspora being targeted for assassination by american spy agencies or four young girls at church on a sunday being targeted by racist extremists, black bodies were under siege.

Henry dumas was tragically murdered by a white new york city transit cop on the subway platform at 125th st in harlem, and it spawned rumors of targeted assassination. Regardless of his murderer's intention, dumas' died in the context of a harlem under all levels of police surveillance. From malcolm x's assassination in 1965 to the fbi's framing of the revolutionary action movement, many of whom were living in harlem, in a plot to murder naacp leaders roy wilkins and whitney young in mid 1967, black radicals in harlem lived through the disruptive and often illegal counterintelligence. The phone bill of the black panther headquarters in harlem was never paid from 1966 to 1971, but service was never cut off.⁶ beyond this, manhattan and brooklyn also witnessed massive rebellions in the streets in reaction to the deaths of community members by the police as well as following the assassination of martin luther king jr.

By the time of dumas' death, the new york panthers were infiltrated by members who would in 1969 implicate most of the chapter's leadership in the bomb plot which lead to the panther 21 trial. And dumas was a known associate of larry neal, who was part of the original harlem bpp⁷ and amiri baraka, who was, according to his fbi file being targeted for the crime of diasporic black unity⁸.

Eugene redmond writes that dumas believed that he was under surveillance in part because of his notion of *ideosound*, which was a way of waging spiritual warfare on the state. Nearly fifty years later there still are not clear answers about dumas' death. Amiri baraka wrote in his poem "black art":

We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, poems that shoot
Guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
And take their weapons leaving them dead⁹

Baraka's poem embodies the kind of warfare dumas believed in; the notion of assassin poems was both a nod to the burgeoning ethos of armed self-defense as well as a new perspective on the potential for black creative self-determination. In this way the black arts movement existed as the fulcrum between war rhetoric and resurrection. While it is often said that black arts and black power are kin, we must recognize that they are truly part and parcel of the same impulse and desire: self-determination and preservation. They are two wings on the same body. The lines between politics and culture are always porous, but the individuals involved were not either activists *or* artists, militants *or* musicians, they were both. While this may seem evident, historians often treat them separately and it is not until the last decade that the black arts movement came to be the subject of serious historical inquiry. Even the most notable historians of black arts/power still have to argue for the legitimacy of their work in the academy; what this means is that there is still an argument over the historical legacy of the era, and the thought of black power remains a point of contention.

The artist/activists of the era played many roles they also experienced shared collective grief over political assassinations, racist hate crimes, neighborhoods pushed to the brink of rebellion and/or deteriorating rapidly under a politic of benign neglect. This is a collective grief that has not dissipated. If we look at the deaths of sean bell, amadou diallo, trayvon martin, renisha mcbride, jordan davis, kimani gray and countless others we are reminded of emmett till, addie mae, cynthia, carole and denise, little bobby hutton and countless others. Oscar grants death mirrors henry dumas'. The era, often called the long 1960s¹⁰ is looked at as a kind of whirlwind. What will we make of today tomorrow? We are still living with the ghosts of the long black power movement in many ways.

Often 1968, the year of dumas' death is often seen as the apotheosis of the era, the year when leftist rebellion reached its peak in Mexico, France and elsewhere. When addressing the impact of that past upon the present we must question the periodization. For instance, does black power reach as far back as Denmark Vessey and Harriet Tubman? How far forward will it stretch? We obviously live in a vastly different political climate today than during the era that birthed the phrase black power, but its lasting impact is largely shaped by how we understand this history.

In Harlem, the historical roots of black power can be traced to the WWI era, when Hubert Harrison began street-corner speaking and Marcus Garvey led parades of hundreds of thousands of followers. To exhibit pride in one's blackness during the era when *Birth of a Nation* heralded by many, including U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, as truth, displayed black power. While it was overly simplistic to assert, as historians did for many years, that black power came about out of frustrations with the nonviolent civil rights movement, the issue of how to periodize the era has not been fully resolved. Black power is often marked as the era of 300 rebellions¹¹: 1962-1974 but while we might say these years in particular were filled with unrest, the notion of cordoning off a period of time in order to name and classify it goes against Neal's postulation of black aesthetic, and shouldn't black history be written with a black aesthetic in mind? Even Peniel Joseph's long black power movement is based upon a (white) French academic interpretation of history. This is not to say it is necessary to oppose or eschew non-black created tools of trade, or paradigms within a canon, but that in doing so, we might be doing so in a way that ignores differences in temporality, spatial understanding and historicizing memory.

In this way, Dumas' often supernatural aesthetic (that is to say not just the supernatural tropes within his work, but the nature of the work itself) can inform history writing. In Dumas' fiction work, scenes are often set out of time. His short story "Ark of Bones" is a primary example of this, where the dialogue and characters (Headeye the mystic and Fish or Fish Hound the skeptic who bears witness) are ostensibly familiar character tropes to readers. The setting itself however, is deceptive. It is seemingly set in a southern rural landscape akin to the world of Jean Toomer's *Cane* on the surface, but quickly becomes other-worldly. In this way, Dumas subtly dislodges space, while also giving the impression that time is elastic enough for the traumatic past to be enmeshed with the present. When Headeye summons the ark, the ship and the mysterious sounds surrounding it are almost too immense and strange to envision on an earthly plane. When Headeye and Fish enter the ark, Fish (the narrator) explains that he sees bones, from floor to ceiling in every compartment of the ship, reminiscent of Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones. The old man who seems to be both the high priest and captain of the ark of bones explains that the bones on the ship are "a house of generations" and that "every African who lives in America has a part of his soul in this ark"¹² time within the story becomes nearly irrelevant. The ark itself is fixed in arrested time and yet the ark's purpose is to illuminate the past's ubiquity within the present.

“ark of bones” is not simply a parable, but also a kind of object lesson in reckoning with temporality in the black american experience. When it is written that america was founded in 1776, what of the enslaved or indigenous people or women? What does that periodization do to acknowledge the experiences of those whose inalienable rights were treated as alien, even unthinkable? The legacy of chattel slavery displaced millions of africans spatially and also within linear time. The year markers of 1776 or 1787 or even 1865 do not describe the experiences of africans in america so much as they indicate an empire reflecting back upon itself and locating precise moments in time in which white men embarked upon the process of nation building. In writing towards a new black aesthetic, it will be essential to utilize a dialectic historiography; we must recognize the influence of violence and death upon black power adherents and also understand how the violence and death inflicted upon them affects the present conditions of how we write about the past.

While peniel joseph’s new periodization of black power is both pragmatic and nuanced, it essentially extends the black power era by roughly a decade, starting immediately after the second world war. While this extension of temporal analysis allows a more precise illumination of the immediate conditions which wrought the ideology of black power, it fails to address a still lingering issue within writing black history: the perception of time. Often, when i ask people who were active at the height of black power movement what radicalized them, they answer that it was the world they were born into, not a moment or instance. Perhaps these responses are embedded into the nature of memory, and not the nature of history, but as historians we are encouraged to immerse ourselves in the world in which our subjects live. This points to the necessity of analyzing the ways in which the construction of linear time in the birth and expansion of the industrialized world informs the way we have written black history. This is, of course, not specific to the united states, but applicable across the diaspora.

perhaps one legacy of black arts and black power that has yet to develop is a new black historical aesthetic that radically opposes any concept of the historian that alienates him from the community.¹³ while it would be incorrect to categorize joseph as disconnected from the black community, the profit-driven market that higher education has become often distances historians and other intellectuals from the communities who would most benefit from black power’s historical lessons. In order to be heard in the academy, it is crucial to approach this history with the nuance and veracity that joseph exhibits, but as so many african descended scholars know, this means code switching and maneuvering within academic markets. In other words, there is still much to be done in order to acknowledge the ways in which black power activists understood themselves in both time and space in relation to how black people consider both time and space at any given moment. We might also consider the ways in which we might begin to shift focus from having to explain to other scholars why black power is a valid subject of inquiry to ensuring that these histories are widely available and accessible to those in struggling communities of color.

In *space is the place*, sun ra said “i don’t believe in history, that’s his story, i believe in mystery, that’s my story.”¹⁴ while that may seem like typical out-jazz word play, sun ra illuminates a deep truth: that history is a kind of creative writing always written subjectively. Historians often write with only tacit acknowledgement that their perspective on a subject is influenced by the particular moment in which they write. While brilliant historical work has been done on the black arts and black power, historians are still beholden to certain ideological and pedagogical restrictions lest their work be mistaken for rhetoric. This is doubly true for historians who write about subjects whose legitimacy or significance is questioned by the industry of professional scholarship.

A new black historical aesthetic could, as larry neal wrote of the black aesthetic, be “predicated on an ethics which asks the question...whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?”¹⁵. It would also do as marvin x said he learned from amiri baraka, and “say motherfucker if you mean motherfucker”¹⁶. If i can’t overtly say in my own work that that i research the way cointelpro disrupted black radical movements because i know there are valuable lessons to be learned about combating today’s surveillance state, then why write history? If i can’t say there are direct parallels between provocateurs who infiltrated the black panthers and provocateurs who infiltrate arab and muslim communities today, then who am i really writing for? Henry dumas titled his collection of poems *poetry for my people*, and in that spirit, i want to call for history for our people. This is not at all dissimilar to the impetus behind the black arts movement or the education programs run by the black panther party in an attempt to recover black history and teach it to the black underclass in the united states. In order for this black historical aesthetic to be effective in

Henry dumas’ short story “ark of bones” can be seen as an ideal form of what black history could be: a “soulboat” conjured by headeye’s mojo bone, which accounts for the dead and the missing africans in america; a vessel which is ancient, ethereal, sinister, magical and truly real all at once. The “ark of bones”, like history, exists in a kind of nether realm, between that of the living and that of the dead, with concrete reality obscured by a fantastic shadow play. This is not to say we should inject black magical realism into historical studies, but that historians could learn from dumas’ idea of a house of generations that remembers and collects the bodies of the past. On the ark, the past, present and future ultimately end up in the same pile of bones. A new black historical aesthetic would be a house of generations and a house of regeneration. It would resist the destructive death urge sun-ra believes humanity has. Maybe it wld be rit in the vern/ac/u/lar of sonia sanchez’s *we a badddddddddd people* or perhaps it would be not be written but spoken over the wails of dumas’ mythical soul horn from “will the circle be unbroken?”. Perhaps it would destroy those who could not comprehend its sound. Perhaps it would resurrect those who needed to hear its heralding, discordant song.

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Notes

¹ Sun Ra and Henry Dumas. *The Ark and the Ankh*. Ikef: 1966.

² . *ibid*.

³ Stephen E. Henderson. "The Osiris Factor" *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Henry Dumas Issue (Summer, 1988),pp. 262-264

⁴ Ishmael Reed. "Henry Dumas: The Poet of Resurrection" *ibid* p. 337

⁵ James de Jongh "Henry Dumas' Harlem" *ibid* pp. 218-220

⁶ As told to the author by former NYC Panthers Cleo Silvers, Cyril Innis and David White in interviews in 2014.

⁷ The Harlem Black Panther Party was founded in June of 1966 when Max Stanford, of RAM wrote to Stokely Carmichael asking him if it would be alright to use the name Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party derived it's name from the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Lowndes County Alabama which Carmichael helped organize.

⁸ The Associated Press' obituary of Amiri Baraka that the FBI had singled him out as "the person who will probably emerge as the leader of the pan-African movement in the United States".

⁹ LeRoi Jones. "Black Art". *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. Black Classic Press. 2007. 302.

¹⁰ The idea of the long period, coming from the French Annales school is often used by historians as a tool for re-situating the periodization of histories which have long been presumed to be bookended by specific dates or themes. Cultural analyst Nikhil Singh presents a notion of the "long Civil Rights Movement" in his book *Black is a Country*, which historian Peniel Joseph re-figured to argue for a new understanding of what he calls the "Long Black Power Movement". Peniel E. Joseph. "Rethinking the Black Power Era" (presentation, The Long Civil Rights Movement: Histories, Politics, Memories, Chapel Hill, NC, April 2-4, 2009.)

¹¹ the tumult of this era is elucidated by scholar Robin D.G. Kelley in the film *Black Power Mixtape* when he notes that there were 300 riots during these years. It is a conscious choice of the author to use the word rebellion instead of riot.

¹² Henry Dumas. *Goodbye, Sweetwater*. (New York: Thunder's Mount Press, 1988) 15.

¹³ this is a play upon the opening line in Larry Neal's essay "The Black Arts Movement" written in 1968.

¹⁴ Sun Ra, *Space is the Place*, film, directed John Coney (1974; Plexifilm 2003.), DVD.

¹⁵ Larry Neal. "Black Arts Movement". *Drama Review* 12 (Summer 1968), 30.

¹⁶ Marvin X. "Black Power and Black Arts Roundtable" (Q&A session, 50 Years On: The Black Arts Movement and Its Influences, Merced, CA., March 1-2, 2014).