

HENRY DUMAS: PROPHET OF THE AFROSURREAL RENAISSANCE

by

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How would he want to be known or remembered? I feel almost at a loss to try to answer that, because I know he wanted to preserve “our precious tradition,” speaking of African American culture, but I’m not sure that that is the answer to how he would want to be remembered; that is to say, remembered as someone who brought that idea to the forefront. Although I know this was very important to him, I believe Henry Dumas was in touch with a universal kind of spirituality. He might define his work as preserving much of our tradition, but I feel that he would want to be remembered on a broader scale... expressing the human spirit.

– Loretta Dumas (née Ponton), “An Interview with Loretta Dumas”

CALL HIM SEER, HEARER, SPIRITHOUSEMOVER, WISDOMWALKER OR ROCK OF
THIS AGE WITH A TORCH, BUT HE IS POET NECESSARY IN THE LIKES OF AN
EAGLE SOUND-BREAKING WITH THE VIBRATIONS OF THE WIND’S UNDERWINGS,
THE WORD IN HIS BOSOM, FIRE TUCKED UNDER HIS TONGUE, A
WISDOMWALKER WARNING OF THE WRATH WHEN MAN SEPARATES HARMONY
FROM BALANCE.

– Shirley Bradley LeFlore, “Dumas Is Necessary”

Dumas's power lay in his skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one. The stories are fables; a mythological presence pervades. They are morality tales, magical, resonating dream emotions and images; shifting ambiguous terror, mystery, implied revelation. But they are also stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential themes is clear.

– Amiri Baraka, “Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist”

This work is dedicated in equal parts to the memories of Henry Dumas and Recy Taylor.

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Introduction: Looking Toward an Afrosurreal Renaissance

In an invitation to a book-release party for Henry Dumas in 1974, Toni Morrison stated that Henry Dumas had “written some of the most beautiful, moving, and profound poetry and fiction that I have ever in my life read... He was brilliant. He was magnetic, and he was an incredible artist. A cult has grown up around Henry Dumas—a very deserved cult” (Morrison 310). I am a proud, metaphorically card-carrying member of the Cult of Dumas. This Cult includes (or included) prominent writers like Morrison, Amiri Baraka, and James Baldwin, and lesser-known but still vital writers like John S. Wright, Hale Chatfield, and Eugene Redmond. It seems that practically everyone who encountered or encounters the vastly under-studied writing of Henry Dumas becomes entranced by the vast mythology spun by his poetry and prose. I know I certainly was. Beyond the sheer artistry of his writing, though, Dumas is vital for another reason -- a reason that has, until this thesis, been underdeveloped and underexamined. Henry Dumas serves as an essential link in the progression of Black American surrealism, or what D. Scot Miller calls, in his “Afrosurreal Manifesto,” Afrosurrealism. By locating him in this position, I hope to accomplish a twofold goal: to bring Dumas in from the periphery to make him a central figure in African American literary history, and to recognize the expansive and important scope that Afrosurrealism has. By writing this work, I seek to shout Henry Dumas’s name into a lacuna that I have uncovered in the progression of Afrosurrealism.

Now, Afrosurrealism is a genre of Black American writing wherein Black artist mobilize the aesthetic techniques about the particular experience of being Black in America, expressing the surreal conditions with which Black Americans have encountered within the United States’ special brand of systemic racism, which manifested in Jim Crow, the Ku Klux Klan, the American Neo-Nazi movement, the American Alt-Right, etc. etc. Through this, Afrosurrealist

writing grants access to “An invisible world organically connected to this one,” to quote Amiri Baraka’s introduction to Dumas’s first published work, “Poetry for my People”. Afrosurrealists portray an America that has been hybridized with myth, and they tap into surreal aesthetics to portray an America that has been unmoored from time and the linearity of hegemonic/systemic racism. My definition of Afrosurrealism is informed primarily by D. Scot Miller’s “Afrosurreal Manifesto,” which he published in 2009 and which I locate as the starting point of the Afrosurreal Renaissance – a resurgence in Afrosurrealist writing and artistic production that has accompanied our own surreal 21st century.

The work of Henry Dumas is the radical, revolutionarily surreal nexus of Afrosurrealist thought, and his is the work that bridges the Genesis Age of Afrosurrealism¹ to the contemporary writings of the Afrosurreal Renaissance, concretized by D. Scot Miller. In him, there can be found a narrative of dreams, of the Marvelous, and of a revolutionary, anti-imperialist, and anti-white-supremacist movement that is carried in the pens of the Afrosurrealists past, present, and future. Dumas is a writer whose life and work were molded to fit a variety of purposes; his work spoke the language of a culture and has since, for better or worse, been mobilized beyond his control for the myriad goals of that same culture. The writers published in Volume 22, Number 2 of *Black American Literature Forum* make up a large portion of the Cult of Dumas; each writer in this special “Henry Dumas Issue,” in their own voice, venerates Dumas’s oeuvre for its ability to artistically express Black life and experience by combining folklore, philosophy, religion, and politics. Like Baraka so astutely observes, Dumas’s ability to lay bare the “invisible world striving to manifest” was unmatched; it is because of this that Dumas’s writing became a crucible in which the Afrosurreal Renaissance was forged.

To establish the literary landscape from which my thinking comes, it is important to paint a detailed picture of a historical age that was informed, directly and not, by the literary life (and afterlife) of Henry Dumas. Even more so than in the early-to-mid 20th century when “surrealism” was at the height of its world popularity, our present moment is made more surreal every day by the unimaginably fast rate of change in society, politics, and culture, driven in no small part by the dawn of the digital age and the globalizing effect of the internet. Along with this digital age has come a resurgence of blatant and shameless right-wing fascism, xenophobia, racism, trans- and homophobia, and several other of the worst kinds of human behavior – a mirrored version, perhaps, of the fascist and imperialist forces against which the original surrealists were writing.² Now, if we are to abide by the majority of writings by and about surrealists in the 20th century, it would appear that this movement was remarkably white, and was concentrated for the most part on the European continent (Paris, in particular). This is expressly *not* the case for contemporary manifestations of the surrealist tradition. In fact, I would argue that some of the most important surrealist artistic production in the 21st century are produced by and for Americans of color, created in hopes of counteracting the new and insidious ways that our culture of white supremacy and Black marginalization is manifesting.³ One of the through lines that connect *every* iteration of surrealist aesthetics, and one that is on full display in the work of Henry Dumas, is the idea of the Marvelous. This roughly refers to powers and ideas that exist beyond our own tangible reality, bringing the surrealist’s art into a realm that transcends simple “reality,” including things like dreams, religions, mythologies, and the supernatural. Through the mobilization of the Marvelous, Afrosurrealists depart from realist modes in order to construct a world that lays bare the culture of racism that undergirds much of American society. In a similar manner to how Euro-surrealists sought to tap into the Marvelous in order to move beyond what

they saw as the oppressive regimes of realism, Afrosurrealists were and are creating art that expresses a world separate from our own wherein the destruction of white supremacy and systemic racism is possible.

The blueprint for how today's surrealism is mobilized for social change and radical artistic expression against America's systemic racism can be found in D. Scot Miller's "Afrosurreal Manifesto" which brings our present age into conversation with the aesthetic movements (Négritude, Black Arts, etc.) that motivated and inspired the artistic life of Henry Dumas. On May 20th, 2009, readers of the free newspaper The San Francisco Bay Guardian were treated to an edition of the left-wing newspaper that was dedicated to not simply surrealism in the San Francisco Bay area, but was focused specifically on Afrosurrealism. The edition was guest edited by a young and upcoming writer named D. Scot Miller, who, in his 10-point manifesto, emphasizes "that beyond this visible world, there is an invisible world striving to manifest, and it is our [Afrosurrealists'] job to uncover it" (Miller). Miller also "rejects the quiet servitude that characterizes existing roles for African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, women and queer folk," instead calling for "the mixing, melding, and cross-conversion of these supposed classifications," only through which "can there be hope for liberation" from the machinations of white supremacist and colonialist thought (Miller). The revolutionary and progressive aesthetics of Afrosurrealism are starkly evident in Miller's manifesto, which was enough to inspire not only my own study of Afrosurrealism, but the whole of the event that I call the Afrosurreal Renaissance. The Afrosurreal Renaissance is, for me, our current era of Black American artistic production, wherein "Afro-Surrealism is drifting into contemporary culture on a rowboat with no oars, entering the city to hunt down clues for the cure to this ancient, incurable disease called 'western civilization'" (Miller) – a hunt which has found more than a little bit of

success⁴. What my writing here I will hope to unpack is Henry Dumas's place in the artistic genealogy that has led us to this uniquely Marvelous artistic moment. Miller makes a call for an aesthetic movement that transcends temporality, existing not just in a realistic past or an idealized or dystopic future, but rather simultaneously in the past, present, *and* future, implicitly bringing his own conception of Afrosurrealism in line with the understanding of temporality and mythology that is expressed in Dumas's fiction. Additionally, Miller offers a theorization of "a future-past called RIGHT NOW," where he outlines a set of tenets for "Afro-surreal expressionism" (Miller). This term that was used first by Amiri Baraka in his introduction to the first-ever published collection of writing by Henry Dumas. Miller adopts this idea of Afro-surreal expressionism and distills it into what he (and I) call Afrosurreal. It was this term that led me first to Henry Dumas, and then to the only published anthology in English that is dedicated specifically, explicitly, and entirely to Black surrealist writings: *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, edited by Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley. This anthology would come to shape my own research into the genealogy of Afrosurrealism, and will serve as the temporal framework for Chapter 1 of this literary biography.

Rosemont and Kelley's anthology seeks to bring into the spotlight the "Invisible Surrealists," as their introduction calls them; "in the vast critical literature on surrealism," they point out, "all but a few black surrealists have been invisible... occasional token mentions aside, people of color – and more particularly those from Africa or the Diaspora – have been excluded from most of the so-called standard works on the subject" (Rosemont & Kelley 1). This is an error they seek to correct by tracking the progression of Black surrealist writing from its beginning. They are interested in what I will call "Black surrealism," which is a broader category

than Miller's Afrosurrealism, as it is surrealism used by Black artists *worldwide* to artistically express their lived experience in a world largely dominated by the powers of white supremacy⁵. They track the development of global Black Surrealism from its origins in the early 20th Century with the Négritude movement⁶, through to its spread into countries like Cuba, Brazil, Egypt, and Morocco, and finally landing in America in the 1930s through the 50s. From there, the anthology is dedicated almost entirely to Black surrealism in America⁷ (or, what Miller and I call Afrosurrealism); they include sections on the "Surrealist Underground" of the 50s, through the Black Arts Movement of the 60s and 70s, past the lull that Afrosurrealism experienced from the late 70s through to the new millennium, and concluding with a meditation about "Surrealism Today and Tomorrow." Notably, Rosemont and Kelley do not include Henry Dumas in their section on the Black Arts Movement (when Dumas was alive and writing) *or* in their section covering from the 70s to the turn of the century (when Dumas's work finally found widespread publication). Instead, they include his work in the section titled "Looking Ahead: Surrealism Today and Tomorrow". Dumas's inclusion under this heading was prophetic on the anthologizers' part, for Dumas represents for me and for many the gateway into a Surreal 21st century. Indeed, the inspiration for this literary biography is my realization that the 21st Century's new age of Afrosurrealism as defined by D. Scot Miller would be *impossible* without Dumas, as his work synthesized mythologies that transcended temporal periodization by tapping into ancient mythologies, his present sociopolitical milieu, and, most importantly, forward-thinking speculative ideologies that imagine a world where the powers of systemic racism can be resisted and defeated.

Much of these strivings were fueled by, as I said, the artistic, sociopolitical milieu in which Henry Dumas lived. Of perhaps particular importance were his fellow writers in The

Black Arts Movement. The Black Arts Movement was, if we are to take up Larry Neal's definition, "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of *Black America*" (Neal 29, emphasis added). "Implicit in the Black Arts Movement," Neal goes on to say, "is the idea that Black people, however dispersed, constitute a nation within the belly of white America" (Neal 39) – a nation which existed in opposition to, and despite the efforts of, systemic racism and white supremacy. The artists of the Black Arts Movement sought to create and/or access a world in which Blackness was centered, rather than the violent whiteness that America was founded on, and "In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (Neal 29). This is perhaps the most important connection between The Black Arts Movement and D. Scot Miller's Afrosurrealism; in the opening section of Miller's manifesto, he quotes Amiri Baraka's description of Henry Dumas's "skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one ... the Black aesthetic in its actual contemporary and lived life" (Baraka 174). Indeed Dumas, when anthologized, is almost always included alongside his contemporaries in the ranks of the Black Arts Movement, and this single line from Amiri Baraka (one of the foremost writers of the Black Arts Movement) demonstrates Dumas's role as a vital link between Black Arts and Afrosurrealism, a connection which I hope to elaborate as this biography moves forward. Baraka's categorization of Henry Dumas as an "Afro-surreal Expressionist" is the basis upon which my claims are made: Dumas's "entirely different world organically connected to this one" is at the heart of the Afrosurreal aesthetic, and can establish a commonality between the political strivings of Négritude, the unique artistic climate of the Black Arts Movement, and the things that the Cult of Dumas holds dear.

Before launching into the literary biography proper, I must define one more term that is *essential* for understanding Henry Dumas's importance to the literary world at large. That term is "myth." Myth, for my purposes in the context of Afrosurrealism, can act as shorthand for Baraka's "entirely different world organically connected to this one." By this, I mean that the world of myth is a world governed by laws different from our own. Because of this, artistic production within myth allows for revelation – an uncovering of previously invisible information and possibility – and allows for a pushback against hegemonic power structures. The mobilization of myth can also provide a writer with a commonality that transcends temporality and space. For example, the myths of the Abrahamic religions with which I will be dealing primarily here draw from long ago (Zoroastrianism, Babylonian religions, etc), but are also distinctly present. Most Americans who practice a religion of some kind practice one of the Abrahamic religions – and even those who do not are usually at least somewhat aware of the symbolism contained in these religious myths. While at times the purveyance of Christianity (in particular) has been motivated by systemic racism and the same hegemonic power structures that Afro- and Euro- surrealists seek to deconstruct, it at least for Henry Dumas allows for a space of play – a space where the individual is not tied down by ideas of realism, of law and order; instead, the world of mythology is a world where you can talk to trees, where boats emerge directly out of a river, where the music of a saxophone can kill unwanted interlopers, and where time is unmoored from our typical understanding of it. So, when you base a world and a story within that space of myth, it allows for a greater range of movement, and more flexibility in artistic production. This is a very similar sort of creative flexibility to what Euro-surrealists were looking for in the first half of the 20th Century. In response to the aftermath WWI and the rising fascist tendencies which would eventually lead to WWII, they were harnessing the power of the

human unconsciousness (dream states, automatic writing, etc) and they were using that to deconstruct traditional ideas of aesthetic production. Now, contemporary Afrosurrealists are utilizing this same process of aesthetic production to create art in a unique (and uniquely effective) way to artistically combat the power of white supremacy, systemic racism, etc.

So, the space where Dumas is creating his fiction is, primarily, the space of myth. That is not meant to be a blanket statement about *all* of Afrosurrealism, but at least for Dumas, that is the vehicle he chooses, and that *same* vehicle is later picked up by Sun Ra and carries Ra (and the memory of this now-absent author Henry Dumas) into the 21st century, allowing them to be carried through into the Afrosurreal Renaissance. In this way, the common thread of religious myth and mythmaking will remain the most important artistic tool for my analysis through the next several chapters. My project here is, in short, to further the goal of the Cult of Dumas by demonstrating the ways in which this under-studied master of the writing craft bridges a gap that I see in the history of Afrosurrealism; there was a lull in Afrosurreal writing after the conclusion of the Black Arts Movement (and the end of Dumas's life), which would subsequently be rekindled by Miller and *Black, Brown, and Beige*. This bridge would have been impossible without Dumas, as his aesthetics and artistic life embody everything that is Afrosurreal. In order to illustrate this, I will be making three moves, organized loosely into the past, the present, and the future of Dumas's work. Now, this will not be the past/present/future of Dumas the *man*; instead, I will follow the progression of his work, from the inspirations and life that created it, to what the work itself says, to what resonances and vibrations follow afterward. Each of these moments will reveal themselves thusly: first, I will be juxtaposing Henry Dumas's own life with the life and progression of the Afrosurreal (and global Black Surreal) movement as a whole, in order to better illustrate how integral and representative Dumas was of that movement; second, I

will be looking closely at selections of Dumas's fiction and the ways in which his work exemplifies the Afrosurreal aesthetic – especially how it accesses and expresses “the invisible” and the “unknown wonders” of Miller's Manifesto; finally, I will provide a meditation and examination of the vibrations and ripples that have come off of Dumas. This final section will be focusing primarily on his relationship with and effect on Sun Ra, who was one of the earliest and most vital members of the Cult of Dumas. By the end, I hope this critical biography will stand as biographical and analytical testament to the *necessity* of Henry Dumas to our age of Afrosurrealism.

Chapter 1: Life of an Afrosurreal Prophet

How to introduce the life of an author as such Henry Dumas? If I were writing for the 1988 “Henry Dumas Issue” of *Black American Literature Forum*, I would most likely begin by talking about the man’s death; he is probably best-known as a writer who was murdered by a New York City Transit Police officer on May 23, 1968, dying before any of the books he had written got to publication. Indeed, most biographical references made to the life of Henry Dumas boil down to a reiteration of his tragic death. Almost every biographical blurb on every posthumous publication of Dumas’s includes the details of his murder⁸. Thus in this chapter, I will re-center our biographical attention onto Dumas *life*, rather than his death.

At the time of this writing, there exists only one book-length biography of Henry Dumas. In 2014, five years after the beginning of the Afrosurreal Renaissance, Jeffrey B. Leak published *Visible Man: The Life of Henry Dumas*. This extensive dive into the story behind the author remains the only comprehensive narrative of Dumas’s life outside his own archive of papers – part of this may have to do with what his friend in life (and co-editor in death) Hale Chatfield remarks on in the original introduction to Dumas’s collection *Ark of Bones*: “any... who were his friends had to feel ultimately... that at best we knew only facets of the entire man... Nobody I know fails to feel or hesitates to affirm that Henry Dumas exceeded him in the breadth of his experience of human situations” (Chatfield vii). Leak takes it upon himself to walk his reader step-by-step through the major known points of Dumas’s life, focusing primarily on his relationship with the wider sociopolitical milieu he was writing in (especially his relationships to other writers, scholars, and other such fonts of knowledge). As such, laying *Visible Man* next to my own research into the genealogy of the Afrosurreal demonstrates how closely Dumas’s brief life followed the trajectory of Afrosurrealism between the tumultuous 30s up through the end of

the Black Arts Movement. To begin with, we will address the role the European surrealist movement had on its American counterpart. It was André Breton's "*Manifeste du surréalisme*", published in 1924, that is widely considered to be the catalyst that began the meteoric rise of the surrealist aesthetic. Breton – philosopher, author, and staunch anti-fascist – defined the Euro-surrealist aesthetic as follows:

Surrealism, such as I conceive of it, asserts our complete *nonconformism* clearly enough so that there can be no question of translating it, at the trial of the real world, as evidence for the defense. It could, on the contrary, only serve to justify the complete state of distraction which we hope to achieve here below... This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere." (Breton)

What sets Afrosurrealism apart from Euro-surrealism, though, is the fact that the lived experience of Black bodies is inextricably linked to the very real and extant dynamics of politics, society, and power; while Breton was seeking an art that was separate from existence as such in order to find what he believed to be "the actual functioning of thought" (Breton), Leopold Sédar Senghor notes that Black African surrealism (and by extension Afrosurrealism) is "mystical and metaphysical," rather than "empirical" (Bâ 65). The "basis for this distinction," according to Sylvia Washington Bâ, "is that the analogies of black African imagery presuppose and express the hierarchy of life forces, whereas European surrealism postulates no such organization of the universe" (Bâ 65). Miller, too, makes a very clear delineation between Black surrealism and Euro-surrealism, citing Jean-Paul Sartre's claim that "the art of Senghor and the African Surrealist (or Négritude) movement 'is revolutionary because it is surrealist, but itself is surrealist because it is black,'" and goes on to assert, via Frida Kahlo, that "Afro-Surrealism sees that all "others" who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist" (Miller). In other words, because Black individuals have always had to fight for their lives to be considered

“worthwhile” in the eyes of a white supremacist society, Black surrealists are not afforded the luxury of disregarding the life force inherent in the universe in the way that Euro-surrealists are. African, West Indian, and Black American artists were therefore doing work that was connected to but distinctly different from the work of Euro-surrealists. Despite this, the two aesthetic movements share a common connection in their resistance to the fascistic forces of colonialism and systemic racism – a resistance that would later become essential in both the life and art of Henry Dumas.

In 1934, the same year that Dumas was born to 19-year old Appliance Porter in Sweet Home, Arkansas, we can locate the first rumblings of surrealism’s forays into America with the publication of Nancy Cunard’s ground-breaking anthology *Negro*. Cunard, herself a white, upper-class British woman, spent much of her life actively combating the spread of fascism and the transnational perpetuation of racism. After becoming romantically involved with Black American jazz musician Henry Crowder in 1928, who “introduced Nancy to the complex and agonizing situation of blacks in the United States” (qtd. in “Nancy Cunard: A Troubled Heiress with an Ideological Mission”), she turned her attention to the American struggle for civil rights and began compiling the work included in *Negro*. Nearly 900 pages long, this remarkable anthology places side-by-side writers across the racial spectrum who make statements via nonfiction, poetry, music, and visual art that elucidates what the publisher calls, “the creative humanity of the Negro race and bitterly condemns racial discrimination in all its forms.” Cunard’s anthology includes the first English translation of “Murderous Humanitarianism,” the vehement denunciation of the evils of imperialism by the Surrealist Group of Paris. This brief piece, signed by several influential surrealists (including André Breton himself),

pronounced [the Surrealists] in favour of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial form, into a civil war. Thus we [the Surrealists] placed our energies at the disposal of the revolution, of the proletariat and its struggles, and defined our attitude towards the colonial problem, and hence toward the colour question. (“Murderous Humanism” 352)

The piece goes on to say that modern racial inequalities and cultures of oppression, both aftereffects of colonialism, are one in the same with the labor inequality fought against by Marxists and Communists. Likewise, Nancy Cunard’s introduction to the collection reveals the political strivings of the anthology’s project as a whole: “At no other time in the history of America,” she says, “have there been so many lynchings as in the past 2 years, so many ‘legal’ murders, police killings and persecutions of coloured people” (Cunard xxxi). The solution that Cunard offers to this is Communism, which “throws down the barriers of race as finally as it wipes out class distinctions” (Cunard xxxi). From these first utterances, anti-racist leftist politics and the surreal have been inextricably linked, a fact which would hold true through the entirety of the Genesis Age of Afrosurrealism. With the publication of *Negro*, the seeds of the American iteration of Black Surrealism – what would later become Miller’s Afrosurrealism - had been planted.

As the global Black Surrealist⁹ movement was thriving through the work of writers like Aimé and Suzanne Césaire¹⁰, Dumas was taking his first steps into the world with the help of his caring mother, Appliance Porter. His childhood in Arkansas would shape and inform much of the imagery in his poetry and fiction; much of his fiction is set either in Arkansas specifically, or in the rural south more generally – most importantly in and around the Mississippi floodplain. The state had been wracked in the leadup to Dumas’s birth with a flood (1927), the stock market crash (1928), and a harsh drought (1930). As Leak observes, 1934, the year of Dumas’s birth, “was a hardscrabble year for both blacks and whites. These tumultuous times left an impression

on young Henry. His people toiled hard, but Henry saw an economic system that required lots of hard work and provided little reward” (Leak 13). Like many of his characters, Dumas’s family fought and toiled for every ounce of survival they could get. Perhaps it was in witnessing the hard work of his mother, who worked as a housekeeper, or his aunts and uncles in the farm fields of Arkansas that inspired him to be as prolific as he ended up being in his few short years. Either way, Arkansas and the Mississippi River would provide some of the most important spatial content in the cartography of Henry Dumas’s life, as he “would never absent himself from his rural beginnings” (Leak 22).

The second vital place in Dumas’s life would certainly be Harlem, where Dumas and his family moved in the summer of 1944. Just before Henry moved to New York, while the Césaires were publishing their monumental Martinican journal *Tropiques* in Fort-de-France, the surrealists who had fled Europe to America were writing and publishing the magazine *VVV* out of Harlem. This migration was the next step in the progression of Afrosurrealism, and probably the closest contact that American surrealists would have to Euro-surrealism. World War II necessitated the emigration of surrealists from their salons in Europe to the wider world – namely to the United States, and specifically to New York City. The countercultural artists of the Harlem Renaissance set the stage for New York to become a hotbed for revolutionary, and thus surrealist, thinking. André Breton himself settled in New York in 1941. Breton then assisted American surrealist David Hare in founding the journal *VVV*, which ran for four issues between 1942 and 1944. Rosemont and Kelley theorize that the journal’s title – specifically its colloquial form, “triple-V” – was “clearly inspired by the African American Double-V movement (victory over fascism but also over U.S. racism)” (Rosemont and Kelley 202). This interpretation is bolstered by the first entry in the first edition of triple-V, which explains that the V represents,

"Victory over the forces of regression and of death unloosed at present on the earth, but also V beyond this first Victory, for this world can no more, and ought no more, be the same, V over that which tends to perpetuate the enslavement of man by man." (VVV no. 1, p. 1). Such calls for change and reparation left the New York of 1944 vibrant and raw, a crucible of Black aesthetic production, mirroring the revolutionary milieu of the Harlem Renaissance – and it would be here that Henry Dumas would get the majority of his formal, pre-university education. “In his new urban world,” Leak says of the Dumas in Harlem, “Henry also encountered the multiple, contradictory aspects of black life” (Leak 27). As he grew, Dumas came into contact not just with this vibrant crucible, but with “a Harlem world in which the New Negro Movement’s initiatives in the 1920s, intended to advance the black cause through black cultural achievement, had instead yielded to political frustration and social angst” (Leak 27). Instead of letting this frustration and angst stifle his growth, however, Dumas found ways in which to use these circumstances to his artistic advantage in the same way he would continue to do later in his life. Leak notes Dumas’s early involvement in the school paper, as well as the creative writing groups available to him: “Even at this young age,” Leak says, “[Dumas] displayed a serious commitment to becoming a writer who did not shy away from difficult subject matter” (Leak 29). Though he was naught but 10 years old when the journal shuttered, it would be easy to see an older version of Dumas among the editorial staff of VVV. The surrealist magazine pushed the limits of “traditional” American publishing and, like the young Dumas, did not shy away from the difficulties facing humankind.

One of the first urtexts of truly *American* Black Surrealism (what would later become Miller’s Afrosurrealism) could be said to be Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, published in New York in 1952, when Dumas was just reaching legal adulthood.¹¹ While Ellison did not label his

own work as surrealist, D. Scot Miller notably begins the main argumentative portion of his manifesto by pointing to Ellison and his character Rinehart as harbingers of what Baraka would later name “Afro-Surreal Expressionism,” which Miller would then re-interpret into “Afrosurrealism.” The same year that Ellison published *Invisible Man*, Dumas graduated from high school and entered his first foray into higher education, City College of New York. This college “operated on a radical democratic notion: that the well-heeled should not be the only class with access to the best education” (Leak 30). It is interesting to note, however, that despite this radical leaning, Dumas could only stomach a single semester within this institution. Though Dumas’s main reason for leaving CCNY was “[his] first real cycle of depression,” brought on by the fact that “the world of men is like a great sea, pounding rhythmic currents of experience upon us. And it seemed the whole sea evaporated and engulfed [him] in a great fog” (Henry Dumas Papers, via Leak 31), he could have also, at least somewhat, have been following in the footsteps of his Afrosurreal forebears and contemporaries. At this point in the history of Afrosurrealism, there was beginning to form a schism between Black surrealists and Communist ideologies. Ellison, though a long-time socialist, had split from the Communist Party during World War II, and *Invisible Man* is often seen as Ellison’s critique of what at the time was mainstream Marxism. Likewise, Aimé Césaire would distance himself from the French Communist Party four years after *Invisible Man* was published. This plots a trend that dissociated the revolutionary Black Left from what is typically thought of as Soviet Communism. CCNY at this point long been a bastion of (primarily white) Soviet Communism in the United States; the school had produced thinkers such as Daniel Bel, Nathan Glazer, Irving Howe and Irving Kristol, who had each at least begun their public intellectual careers as Socialists in the tradition of Trotsky and/or Marx. Thus, Dumas’s departure from CCNY may reflect his own dissatisfaction with the (white)

political landscape being cultivated at the college. Despite these shifting political labels, however, the same revolutionary underpinnings that were present in the writing of Black radicals who came before him would be carried on by Dumas, especially as he grew closer to the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Before he threw himself headfirst into the Black Arts movement, however, Dumas made a very important choice that would go on to shape his writing forever: after leaving CCNY, Henry Dumas joined the U.S. Air Force.

While in the military, Airman Dumas was stationed for a time in Saudi Arabia, where the seed for his interest in and passion for Arab culture – specifically the religion of Islam – was planted. Leak’s biography quotes at length from “one of the longest pieces he wrote in his early adult years, a handwritten essay on Arab culture,” which demonstrates Dumas’s “ability to see beyond the obvious, to set his own predispositions to the side and explore Arab experience in full” (Leak 32). Henry Dumas had always been a religious man, but his time in Saudi Arabia marks the moment when religion became a truly essential part of the man’s life and work. While on the Arabian Peninsula, Airman Dumas did “two things that, to some, would have appeared paradoxical”; on the one hand, he “became an observer of the Islamic faith,” and on the other, “he developed stronger, more conservative views about his own Christianity” (Leak 5). This intense focus on religion would become an *essential* part of Henry Dumas’s life and writing: perhaps one of the most important through lines of Dumas’s work is his near-constant invocation of religious and spiritual imagery. Dumas’s Afrosurreal myth-formations have one foot planted in Black Christianity, the other in Islam, and a third, spiritual foot in African cosmologies. Faith and mythology are Dumas’s strongest metaphorical weapons, and it seems he begins to seriously amass his spiritual archive during his time stationed overseas. He came back from the Arabian Peninsula a changed man, adopting an evangelical “fire for the Lord,” according to his wife

Loretta Dumas, as he “took every opportunity... to hand out scriptural leaflets to people [they] met” (Leak 39).¹² As his Christianity was of the conservative evangelical variety, it makes even more sense that after returning into the arms of higher education, he would balk at the idea of returning to the blatantly communist CCNY, opting instead for Rutgers in New Jersey. Jeffrey B. Leak gained access to some of the papers written by Dumas during his tenure at Rutgers, which demonstrate a continued dedication to his evangelism; in an essay on *The Great Gatsby*, Dumas apparently articulated a belief “that the United States stands as the moral lighthouse to the world,” and that this country’s “conception and continuation is rooted in the favor of God, not in slavery, imperialism, or the grace of geography” (Leak 44-5). Here we see probably not only the most major *ideological* departure from the trajectory of Afrosurrealism that occurred in the life of Dumas, but the most major *geographic* one as well. During the late 1950s, while Dumas was touting his evangelism and building his family on the East Coast, the headquarters of Afrosurreal Expressionism had begun its migration to the West Coast. In fact, around the same time as Dumas’s *Gatsby* paper, San Francisco was becoming (and would remain) one of the most important surrealist cities in America. This began largely with the writing of Bob Kaufman, an oft-forgotten Black poet of this time period. Kaufman is, like Breton before him and Miller after him, a devotee of the manifesto. Specifically, Kaufman in 1959 wrote the “Abomunist Manifesto,” a playful declaration of Kaufman’s own personal brand of surrealism, which he called “Abomunism,” as it was to be “the first and last word from the abominable snowmen of modern poetry” (Kaufman xi). Reading Kaufman’s Abomunist Manifesto, one feels like they’ve been transported to a Dadaist exhibit from the post-WWI era, as Kaufman’s manifesto is certainly much more playful and almost-whimsical than, for instance, Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. In contrast to the conservative, evangelical Christian philosophy that Dumas was exhibiting during

this period of his life, Kaufman retained the rule-breaking and avant-garde spirit of other Afrosurrealists. In his Manifesto, Kaufman makes use of crude humor while building his own unique vocabulary (“abomunism,” “frinking,” and various derivations thereof) and lampooning political manifestos, national anthems, and the formal rules of poetry. Kaufman’s artistic persona mirrored the content of his work; according to research done by Rosemont and Kelley, Kaufman was “known to have read his poems and proclamations in the middle of the street, on street corners, and on the roofs of parked cars. At the Co-Existence Bagel Shop he frequently declaimed while standing on a table” (Rosemont & Kelley 222). Though perhaps easily dismissed as “silly” or “ridiculous,” both Kaufman’s manifesto and his artistic persona demonstrate that the revolution need not be heavy to be important.

While Kaufman was declaring his devotion to “Abomunism” on café tables in San Francisco, Dumas was growing out of/beyond his conservative evangelism, a process which would ultimately bring him back into the fold of his contemporary Afrosurrealists. Originally, Dumas approached the Rutgers student literary magazine *Anthologist* in an attempt to “save their souls,” more or less. However, Leak recounts how he “made a quicksilver shift in his first year at Rutgers, foregoing his march to the cross, embracing instead the idea of philosophy as a source of personal and intellectual fulfillment” (Leak 47). So drastic was this change that by the end of his first few years at Rutgers, Dumas had both joined the staff of and published in the *Anthologist*, the publication which he had seen as sinful and degenerate at the beginning of his educational term. Through his work on the magazine and his studies, Dumas was developing “a more profound sense of black consciousness, as the economic and political conditions of life for so many blacks in both the North and South continued to worsen. His commitment,” Leak says, “was to observe and write about the poor and disenfranchised black masses, to capture in words

the story of his people” (Leak 58). As the 60s dawned, Dumas was beginning to publish more of his work, rather than writing just for his own and his wife’s eyes, while also journeying to the Jim Crow South with the NAACP “to interview and deliver much-needed items... to black families displaced from their homes” by predatory sharecropping practices (Leak 60). Thus, finally, did Dumas join his fellow artists in the Black Arts Movement in what Larry Neal would later call their “desire for self-determination and nationhood” (Neal 29). Here, Dumas begins to mobilize his religious fervor in service of what he would later call “our tradition,” or the tradition of Black American artistic expression. Here we see Dumas embracing the tenets of Christian theophilosophical belief in charity, kindness, and healing in order to support his fellow African Americans. In a somewhat similar way, this is also the point where Islam comes back into focus for Dumas, in the form of the Black American form of Islam practiced by Malcom X. In 1962, during the height of Malcolm X’s activity with the Nation of Islam, Dumas received a letter of acceptance from the NOI. This was after Malcolm had given a lecture at Rutgers, after which he had gone to dinner with Dumas and some of his fellow Black students. At this dinner, Leak recounts, “[Dumas] asked [Malcolm] hard questions about the likelihood of a separate state,” and determined that Malcolm was “neither a hatemonger nor separatist, but he was comfortable articulating a kind of pragmatic black nationalism and separatism, if that was necessary to secure black folks certain economic opportunities” (Leak 67). Therefore, while Dumas disapproved of some of the radical ideals that the NOI held because they ran counter to the orthodox Islam he had studied in Saudia Arabia, and despite not ultimately accepting the NOI’s offer of membership, he still penned a (tragically unpublished) defense of Black Islamic thought, written in response to a harsh criticism of Malcom X published in a Rutgers newspaper:

The question is being asked over and over in different ways: Who are the Black Muslims? One answer is plain. The Muslims are more signs of the Negro in America

becoming a VISIBLE MAN. They are signs of black men turning around not to say NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME (although that is an intriguing ambiguity) but rather THIS IS MY NAME! The tragedy of America is that she wants the Negro to echo every aspect of white culture in an attempt at final cultural assimilation. This is our heritage. There is nothing wrong with how Europeans “melted” into a new nation. But the resulting cultural values have systematically screened out the complex of African cultures that once were the “name” of the Negroes... When the Muslims announce their “name,” let us hope America will say, Glad to know you, where have you been?

Mr. H. “Ibin” Dumas

(as quoted in Leak 68)

This letter to the editor reads in many ways like the manifestoes that populate the archive of the Afrosurreal movement. In some ways, though it was never officially published, this is the closest we will come to the Henry Dumas Manifesto, shouting into the world the beginnings of his desire to create “an entirely different world organically connected to this one” (Baraka 164). It is no wonder that this same time period of Dumas’s life is where most of his writing was done.

With such intense philosophical beliefs held in his head, it is equally little wonder that his path through this world sent him on a collision course with another giant of Afrosurrealism, Sun Ra. His connection with the experimental jazz musician and band leader was a tangential result of his affair with Lois Wright in the late 60s. After leaving Rutgers, Dumas all but moved into Wright’s apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which put him smack in the middle of the vibrant Black Arts scene. Dumas, still seeking desperately for artistic inspiration and input, dove headfirst into “an organic black culture, springing forth from black tragedy and triumph, whose roots stretched across the Atlantic, that took them to places like Slug’s in the East Village” (Leak 114). While living in Lois Wright’s apartment, he met one Tam Fiofori, who collected tips for Sun Ra and his Arkestra while they played at a local jazz club called Slug’s Saloon. Introduced by Fiofori, Ra and Dumas quickly realized that they had a true artistic kinship, as “Sun Ra’s conception of music as a means of cosmic revelation... was the corollary to what Henry sought to achieve as a writer. Fiction and poetry could entertain, certainly, but

Henry felt writing and art had a more lasting purpose” (Leak 115). Sun Ra had a conception of existence and artistic creation far different from that of his contemporaries. Ra saw music as a language through which a world could be created that was separate from the white supremacist society of tangible planet earth. In Vol. 5, No. 1 of the journal *Black Camera*, in a special section devoted to Afrosurrealism, scholar Anthony Reed investigates a piece of Sun Ra media (his 1974 film *Space is the Place*) that, while created after Dumas’s death, is in a similar vein to Dumas’s writing in that it seeks to re-define the vision of the wider cultural paradigm, thus embodying the Afrosurreal spirit. Ra’s work, while often located squarely within *Afrofuturism*, is and was and shall be closer to *Afrosurrealism*, which synthesizes past, present, *and* future into an ideology that de-constructs the dominating white vision of the world, re-defining what Black existence is. By creating in his film a mythical planet only meant for Black life, Ra creates “a caesura of thought aimed at attempting to imagine an unimpeded future, which still retains the risks of authoritarianism and reactionary formations, but also the promise of something greater than itself that cannot yet be named” (Reed 122). Likewise, perhaps expressing here a bit of Afropessimist thinking¹³, Dumas wrests the world of his fiction from the grasp of white supremacy; “In a white world that often refuses to acknowledge what blacks feel, see, and think,” says Jeffrey B. Leak, “characters in Dumas’s creative world assume their view of the world to be valid and valuable” (Leak 1). It is through his connection with Sun Ra that Dumas truly finds the language to express his Afrosurreal strivings. “Sun Ra had demonstrated,” Leak points out, “that a higher plane of artistic consciousness was possible” (Leak 118). Dumas, through his contact with Ra and with the Black Arts movement as a whole (especially the likes of Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka), developed in these final years of his life an understanding of Black consciousness that “mov[ed] beyond DuBois’s idea of double consciousness,” (Leak 118) as this double consciousness was,

ultimately, rooted in the gaze of white society and reflected through the tenets of enslavement. It would be through his connection Sun Ra, as well as through the support granted him by Baraka, Neal, and the descendants of the Black Arts movement who would later make up the Cult of Dumas, that Dumas's artistic work would survive the oblivion threatened by his early death.

The last years of Dumas's life were both chaotic and tragic. He descended deeper into the same depression that had driven him out of CCNY – a depression that was only exacerbated by his increasing use of drugs, as well as his alcoholism. He distanced himself from his family and his friends, and though he was able to maintain gainful employment at both the *Hiram Review* and Southern Illinois University, what was once a bright and promising life was beginning to spiral out of his control. Even this time was not without bright points for Dumas, however. It was during his short time at Southern Illinois University that he met Eugene B. Redmond, without whom it is very likely that Dumas's work would never have seen the light of day. While working at the Experiment in Higher Education at SIU, Dumas earned himself “a reputation as a deep thinker and committed mentor. Although Henry was not at his best emotionally or psychologically, he impressed students with his level of engagement” (Leak 133). Despite the deterioration of Dumas's mental health, physical health, and social connections (Leak takes great pains to make clear the details of Dumas's deteriorating marriage during *Visible Man*'s chapters on this period), his artistic and educational abilities remained strong until the end of his life. I would like to believe that had the events of May 23rd, 1968 not occurred, Henry would have found help, and would have rebuilt his personal life so that he could continue producing his remarkable work. Alas, however, that was not to be. After returning to Harlem for the wedding of a friend, Dumas was (according to reports published during that time) involved in some kind of altercation on a subway platform, and was shot dead by a police officer, like so many black

men before and after him. His loss, though tragic and resonant in hindsight, produced little in the way of notice or attention at the time of his death. A short news story, an incorrect obituary, and a near-anonymous burial in a cemetery. That was all. Ironically, however, I would say that more has been made out of the circumstances of Henry Dumas's death than has been made out of his life and work. Very few pieces on Dumas don't begin with a re-iteration of the man's death. While it is *extremely* important to remember the structures of white supremacy and systemic violence that took this visionary away from the world too early, I will not dwell for long here on the details of his death. I will instead return to his death after an examination and celebration of his writing. In so doing, I hope that his work, rather than his death, will come to define the cultural image of Henry Dumas.

Before moving to Dumas's work, however, I would like to mention here a final non-Dumas piece of the Afrosurreal canon: Ted Joans's "Black Flower Statement," originally published in the year of Henry Dumas's untimely death. Both the anonymity of this manifesto and Dumas's death roughly demarcate, for me, the end of the Genesis Age of Afrosurrealism. Joans's "Statement" is, sadly, probably the most difficult to find piece of the Afrosurreal canon; the obscurity that Joans's statement fell into echoes the obscurity that would befall Dumas's writing. Despite being largely unknown or ignored by mainstream African American Literature scholars, Joans, alongside Bob Kaufman and D. Scot Miller, is, I would argue, one of the most important Afrosurreal manifesto-writers in the history of the genre. Joans also holds the honor of being "the only African American surrealist [André Breton] ever met" (Kelley 190). His work was published by both American and European publishers, and thus is a concrete and indelible link between the fading European surrealist movement of the latter half of the 20th Century, and the still-nascent seeds of the coming Afrosurreal Renaissance. In *Black, Brown, & Beige*

Rosemont and Kelley include Joans right alongside Bob Kaufman, as the two poets share not just a time period, but an overarching aesthetic. Both are largely dedicated to a free and open expressionistic style (though as far as I know Joans never declaimed his poetry while standing atop restaurant tables). The “Black Flower” is of particular importance because it directly connects the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial statements of the Black Arts movement (and before them, artists like Aimé Césaire) with the surreal aesthetic, as Joans “envisaged a movement of black people in the United States bringing down American imperialism from within using the weapon of poetic imagery, ‘black flowers’ sprouting all over the land” (Kelley 190). The efforts of Afrosurrealists would not get a more straightforward definition until Baraka’s “Afrosurreal Expressionist” essay and D. Scot Miller’s “Afrosurreal Manifesto”. Robin D.G. Kelley in his book *Freedom Dreams*, highlights both the marvelous strains of Joans’s work and his political influences:

“Fantasy, imagination, dreaming – these are the characteristics that distinguish surrealism from the kinds of social critiques at the core of leftist politics. In fact, it is quite possible that black dissatisfaction with socialist realism had to do precisely with the suppression of key elements of black culture that surrealism embraces: the unconscious, the spirit, desire, humor, magic, and love. At the same time, ironically, the fact that relatively few black radicals actually took part in the international surrealist movement may well be because of its very familiarity; its revolutionary core was recognized as having always existed in African and black diasporic life” (Kelley 191)

Though Kelley was speaking specifically of Joans there, the same statements can easily be made about Henry Dumas. In fact, it is this statement which will be guiding the following chapters of this work. I hope to deal in equal measures with both the political underpinnings and the imaginative aspects of Dumas’s work. Through this, I hope to demonstrate the vital role Dumas plays as prophet and progenitor of the mythical, political Afrosurreal Renaissance.

But first, how can we navigate the gap between Dumas’s death in 1968 and year one of the Afrosurreal Renaissance, 2009? The anthologizers Rosemont and Kelley’s chapter on this

period is relatively light, one of the shortest of the entire work. In some respects, their subdued tone is justified; though there were certainly still writers whose work aligned with Afrosurrealism between the end of the 70s and the turn of the millennium, there was little that unified these artists. No governing body, no movement, no name. In the decades from the 70s to the new millennium, Afrosurrealism definitely saw a lull in popularity and production, despite the writers of the Black Arts Movement continuing producing the same quality of work they had before. There existed two exceptions to this quietness. First, there were the Chicago Surrealists, headed by Franklin and Penelope Rosemont. Unfortunately, this group, despite being able to claim direct connection to André Breton via the Rosemonts, were arguably a mere shadow of the Afrosurreal glory that came before. The second exception, though, was Vol. 22, No. 2 of *Black American Literature Forum*: “The Henry Dumas Issue”. Published in the summer of 1988, twenty years after the death of the Afrosurreal prophet, the nearly 300 pages of special issue contain the majority of Dumas scholarship published in the last 50 years.¹⁴ It includes writing from significant Black Arts writers like Jayne Cortez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Amiri Baraka. This special issue creates in Henry Dumas a nexus of Afrosurrealism as it is now understood in American literature. The scholars contained in this volume appear throughout this work, but by way of introduction, I would like to focus here on the editor, Eugene B. Redmond, and his introduction to the larger volume of scholarship.

Though he only mentions surrealism once in his introduction (and even then, tangentially), many of the aspects Redmond attributes to Dumas land him squarely within the Afrosurreal tradition. He describes how Dumas “permits us to enter, with him, a world of surrealism, supernaturalism, Gothicism, madness, nightmarism, child-men and girl-women, astrology, death, magic, witchcraft, and science fiction,” (Redmond 149) and though this is an

immensely broad list, they all seem to gesture towards Dumas's other world organically connected to this one. It is a world like but not quite like our own, where "mythology and reality, fantasy and normality merge" (Redmond 150). As he knew Dumas near the end of the writer's life, Redmond was struck by Dumas's "electric personality, intellectual energy, and creativity," which "drove him at an almost dizzying speed" (Redmond 144); as I noted above, despite the corrosion of his personal life during his final years, his artistic abilities remained in full power. Redmond, and practically anyone who came into contact with the young author's work, was amazed by the amount of truly remarkable writing that Dumas had accumulated in his 33 years. It would prove more than enough work for Redmond to personally edit and publish over 100 pages of poetry, over 150 pages of an unfinished novel, and a hefty 380-page anthology of stories. Each page furthers Dumas's goal to "create appropriate vehicles for utilizing traditional folk forms in the service of serious literary expression" (Redmond 146). Each poem, story, or novel page drips with Dumas's deep understanding of the folklore, mythology, and religion that are relevant to Black life. Through each of these things, Dumas crafts an Afrosurreal world, one that posits a radically different understanding of life on planet earth – echoing, of course, the veins of thinking put forth by his friend and mentor Sun Ra. Redmond seems to be speaking directly to Ra's influence when he states the ways in which "[Dumas's] earth-language and rhythmized way of seeing reach across the spectrum of his poems, parables, and stories" (Redmond 149); Ra offers a similar dialect of cosmos-language, and Dumas riffs off of many of Sun Ra's song-parables and philoso-compositions in the crafting of his dense and alluring soundscape. Another commonality between the two artists that Redmond gestures towards is their exploration of the idea that "the fantastic, after the thinking of the African, is actual, a part of where we are, who we are, and what we are" (Redmond 150). This "fantastic" includes "the

African traditional worldview of understanding human experience in cyclical, rather than linear, terms,” a worldview which Jeffrey Leak attributes directly to Sun Ra, whose connection to Dumas will be examined and expounded in the third chapter of this critical biography (Leak 118).

Finally, we return once more to the document whose publication started the Afrosurreal Renaissance – in fact the document that inspired my own passion for Afrosurrealism: D. Scot Miller’s “Afrosurreal Manifesto.” Tellingly, the first paragraph of Miller’s manifesto ends with an invocation of Dumas:

In an introduction to prophet Henry Dumas' 1974 book *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*, Amiri Baraka puts forth a term for what he describes as Dumas' "skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one ... the Black aesthetic in its actual contemporary and lived life." The term he puts forth is Afro-Surreal Expressionism. Dumas had seen it. Baraka had named it. This is Afro-Surreal! (Miller)

It is this “entirely different world organically connected to this one” that is the key and core of the Afrosurreal aesthetic. Few mastered it like Dumas, and it is because of him that the Afrosurreal aesthetic survived until Miller. So, by extrapolation, Black artists of the 21st century who create in the Afrosurreal tradition can be connected not simply to D. Scot Miller and his manifesto, but to Dumas as well.

Here, for thoroughness’s sake, I will go point-by-point through Miller’s manifesto, concretizing the connection between what Miller defines as Afro-surreal in his manifesto and the writing of Duma, utilizing Miller’s own words and structure:

“Behold the invisible! You shall see unknown wonders!”

1. Afrosurrealists have seen unknown Worlds... old gods with new faces, and new gods with old faces.

2. Beyond this visible world, there is an invisible world striving to manifest; it is Afrosurrealists' job to uncover it.
3. Afrosurrealists restore the Cult of the Past – they revisit old ways with new eyes.
4. Afrosurrealists use excess as the only legitimate means of subversion, and hybridization as a form of disobedience. They distort reality for emotional impact.
5. Afrosurrealists strive for Rococo: the beautiful, the sensuous, and the whimsical.
6. Afrosurrealist life is fluid, filled with aliases and census-defying classifications, highly-paid short-term commodities, ambiguous, rejects quiet servitude, intersexed, Afro-Asiatic, Afro-Cuban, mystic, silly, and profound.
7. The Afrosurrealist wears a mask while reading Leopold Sédhac.
8. The Afrosurrealist seeks definition in the absurdity of a “post-racial” world.
9. Through performance, the Afrosurrealist excavates the remnants of this post-apocalypse with dandified flair, a smooth tongue and a heartless heart.
10. Afrosurrealists create sensuous gods to hunt down beautiful collapsed icons.

“Dumas had seen it... This is Afro-surreal!”

1. Dumas is deeply, irrevocably connected and devoted to the religions and mythologies of the earth, be they Christian, Muslim, tribal, futuristic, or anything else that haunts the corners of humankind's mind.
2. It is in this point that I locate the strongest tie between the Manifesto and Dumas. Baraka named it. The world of the Ark, the River, the Tree, Fon, Kef, etc... The world of Dumas is truly “an entirely different world organically connected to this one”.

3. Toni Morrison coined the phrase “The Cult of Dumas,” and I would say that The Cult of Dumas *is* The Cult of the Past. Authorship is always memory for Dumas, as he was (with few exceptions) never being read in the “present.” The man was a man. The memory is an Afrosurreal god (with all the complications that godhood brings).
4. Distortion of reality throughout his visuals. Strong ties to the real *and* the surreal, creating a bridge between the concrete and the painfully abstract. There can be balance in excess, and Dumas finds it.
5. While Dumas is not outwardly “Rococo” (this is a wish/demand of the young Miller, I would argue, not of Afro-surreal as a whole, as it is de-emphasized in Miller’s later writings), the complex, intricate capsules of his stories perhaps can be viewed in a Rococo lens.
6. Dumas’s skill is fluid, certainly. Realistic fiction, surreal fiction, poetry, prose, novel, myth, slave stories and urban-set stories and magic stories and untethered abstract stories – all masterfully crafted by the Afrosurreal Prophet
7. Dumas wore a mask, to be sure. Who knew the real Dumas? Who knows the real Dumas? None but his immortal soul, I would say.
8. Dumas’s work is never in question of its racial dealings. It does not shy away from... anything, really. It makes no concessions in constructing its distinct brand of absurdity.
9. He never created performance pieces, but if he had, they would be post-apocalyptic and dandified (or at the very least reverentially irreverent) in the best possible way.
10. Dumas deals in deities of the senses. That which is collapsed, died, crushed, destroyed, and erased becomes that which is seen, felt, and known in the soul through the visual and the aural and the oral and the surreal.

There is a reason, beyond Amiri Baraka's essay on him, that Henry Dumas is brought up in nearly every discussion of Afrosurrealism; as one can plainly see, he neatly fits practically every facet of Afrosurrealism at its most basic level. His work transcends temporality, existing on a level such that he feels simultaneously ancient and absolutely present. Above all else, he retains a prophet-like access to the mythologies from which he draws. The invisible world he expresses in his writing is deeply steeped in his own mythology. The years that Dumas spent studying the Bible and attempting to convert those around him are evident in his deep, detailed biblical references throughout his entire body of work. And, of course, Christian mythologies are not the only ones that he mobilizes; he melds the mythologies of Islam, Judaism, and several others in order to gain access to the surreal world Afrosurrealists are seeking to make manifest. Dumas speaks to the old gods and the new gods in equal measure, and blends them both in the crucible of the surreal world of 20th Century America to form a new mythology that is uniquely Afrosurreal.

Chapter 2: Gods of an Afrosurreal Prophet

God of a Watery Ark-hive15: “Ark of Bones”

1. *We have seen these unknown worlds emerging in the works of Wifredo Lam, whose Afro-Cuban origins inspire works that speak of old gods with new faces, and in the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who gives us new gods with old faces.*
– D. Scot Miller, “Afrosurreal Manifesto”

God (whether the Christian God or some other, all-powerful entity) was inarguably a vital part of every phase in Henry Dumas’s life, from his time listening to gospel choirs in Sweet Home, to his service on the Arabian Peninsula, to his evangelizing before enrolling at Rutgers, to his time speaking and communing with Sun Ra. As would be expected, this becomes abundantly clear through any but the most cursory readings of his work. The “old gods with new faces” (or “new gods with old faces”) are primarily, due to his background, the Gods of Abrahamic religious traditions. The literary world of Dumas echoes constantly with spiritual songs and preaching voices, each proclaiming the surreal stories contained within the pages of the Bible, the Torah, and the Qur’an: the Great Flood, the parting of the Red Sea, the Resurrection, Pentecost, the Revelation of John, the visions of Muhammad etc. etc. etc. Each “miracle” performed in these holy texts could, with a shift in perspective, easily have a place in the fantastic(al) and marvelous writing of the Afrosurrealists. Just as perhaps these miracles were not meant to be read literally (though some devout religious folk read them as such) but instead intended to be read allegorically, so too can we read the strange and marvelous worlds crafted by Henry Dumas as representing Miller’s “‘future-past’ called RIGHT NOW” (Miller). It is through the powers wielded by the “old gods” of organized religions that Dumas is able to express the lived Black experience as he saw it; perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in his short story “Ark of Bones,” the titular piece from the first collection of Dumas’s stories.

“Ark of Bones” is probably Dumas’s best-known work, having been anthologized and written on more than almost any other piece of Dumas’s writing. In it, the Mississippi river is painted as a place to contact the divine – or at the very least, the fantastic. As I will show, the Mississippi of “Ark of Bones” is a space of rapture and remembrance, a place where an unknown world emerges via processes of baptism and extraction via the power of a divine and/or fantastic power. “Ark” tells the brief story of an extraordinary event, seen through the eyes of two young Black boys, the pseudo-priest-child Headeye and the story’s narrator Fish-hound. Headeye is apparently well-known among his fellow children for his affinity for the mystical or the unknown, as they started and spread a rumor about Headeye “puttin’ a curse on his old man” – but “he ain’t got no devil in him,” Fish-hound assures us (Ark 10). It’s notable that, despite his later characterization as an almost supernatural figure himself, the first descriptor used to describe Headeye is simply that “he knowed the river good” (Ark 9); *this* proves to be how Fish-hound knew Headeye had no devil in him. Knowing the river, for Dumas, was nothing short of knowing God. Headeye is a true river person, as “Only river people know how to talk to the river when it’s mad” (Ark 14). For Dumas here, “knowing the river” is equivalent to knowing Baraka’s “entirely different world organically connected to this one.” The story’s action begins with Fish-hound heading down to the river to fish (a fisher of men, perhaps?), with Headeye trailing close behind. Immediately before the two boys come into contact with one another, Fish-hound is bombarded by natural forces in the form of animals:

I come up on a *snake* twistin toward the water. I was gettin ready to bust that snake’s head when a *fox* run across my path. Before I could turn my head back, a flock of *birds* hit the air pretty near scarin me half to death. When I got on down to the bank, I see somebody’s *cow* lopin on the levee way down the river. Then to really upshell me, here come *Headeye* droopin long like he had ten tons of cotton on his back (Ark 10, emphasis added)

All these beasts of nature make their presence known to Fish-hound, himself named for beasts of the earth and the sea.

Each animal named in this passage play vital roles in at least one Biblical story. The first is perhaps the most familiar, hearkening back to the Garden of Eden – though I believe Dumas would ask his readers to take similar pause as Fish-hound does before dismissing or killing this particular snake. While in Genesis the serpent symbolizes temptation and sin, in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus calls on his disciples to “be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves” as they go out among the masses to preach his teachings (Matthew 10:16). The snake, here, is not an evil being, but rather a being of discerning wisdom. Additionally, this positive categorization of the snake comes at a moment where Jesus’s disciples are being sent to sermonize – a moment which becomes relevant later in Dumas’s story, as the two boys begin to proclaim the story of what they saw at the river. Foxes come up less often than snakes in biblical texts, but they are notably mentioned twice in the Gospels. During the same story, told in both the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus responds to a scribe who wishes to join him by saying, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Luke 9:58, Matthew 8:20). In the Book of Matthew, this verse comes just before the story of Jesus calming the storm – from whence the common phrase “Ye of little faith” is taken – during which Jesus’s supernatural/divine power is demonstrated. Though the body of water that Jesus calms is a lake and not a river, his act of calming is reminiscent of Headeye’s ability to “talk to the river when it’s mad” (“Ark” 11). While foxes are scarce in the Bible, birds are as present as snakes throughout Biblical texts, perhaps the most famous being the dove that brought the olive branch to Noah on the Ark (a simple connection to make to Dumas’s Ark-bound story). Birds are present alongside foxes in the two gospel passages I mentioned above, as well, showing their

linkage to both the power of preaching and the power of the divine. Symbols of freedom, peace, and innocence, birds can therefore be said to serve as heralds and messengers between this world and Dumas's world organically connected to this one.

The final animal that comes to Fish-hound before his encounter with Headeye is the cow. While cows are also plentiful in the Bible, most of them appear in the Old Testament, thus separating this reference from the previous ones who seem to be gesturing towards stories of Jesus. Though it might be tempting to dismiss Dumas's cow as irrelevant, there is a passage in 1 Samuel that is worthy of note when considering Dumas's orientation as regards both biblical mythos and the Afrosurreal tradition. 1 Samuel, Chapter 6 deals with the *other* biblical Ark, the Ark of the Covenant. 1 Samuel, Chapters 4 and 5 tells a story about the Philistines capturing the Ark of the Covenant, which brings down upon the Philistines the wrath of God (in a similar manner to the plagues of Egypt), with plagues of sores and rats nearly bringing the Philistines to their knees. In the sixth chapter of 1 Samuel, they seek to return the Ark to the Israelites from which they took it, in order to placate God. To do so, they place the cart and a "guilt offering" in a cart, and hitch it to "two milch [or milk] cows on which there has never been a yoke" (1 Samuel 6:7). After releasing the cows to make their own way, "the cows took the straight way in the direction of Beth-shemesh; they went along the highway, lowing as they went, and did not turn aside to the right or to the left," (1 Samuel 6:12) until they arrived back in Israelite territory. A small miracle, but a miracle nonetheless – the likelihood that a pair of cows would of their own volition travel 150 miles between the two ancient cities is slim to none. This story, like many stories contained in the Old Testament, has a lot to unpack. There is the simple fact that this seems to be a supernatural or fantastic event, due to the Ark's background and power, the plagues that are seemingly sent down from God on to the Philistines, and the ability of the cows

to make the 150-mile journey free from guidance. Additionally, the story also outlines divine power as something that can bring about vengeance for the persecuted or broken, a pattern that is picked up in almost every story Dumas wrote. This is perhaps simple speculation and a desire to see patterns where there might not be. But, making the connection between “Ark of Bones” and the return of the Ark to Israel does offer an insight into Dumas’s understanding of God. Though he was raised in a Protestant Christian community and preached a form of Evangelism that put a lot of stock in the New Testament, it seems he still had much respect and appreciation for the writings contained within the Tanakh – writings which demonstrate in no uncertain terms the power of a vengeful God. Is this an old god with a new face, or a new god with an old face? It appears to be both and more. This becomes even clearer with Headeye’s direct invocation of another story from the Tanakh, the story of Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones in the scene directly following this barrage of animals.

When Fish-hound finally confronts Headeye, asking him why he’s following him, Headeye gives no clear answer, instead producing his “mojo bone,” a mystical item with some unknown power, saying that he’s looking to go “fishin’” like Fish-hound is, “but not for the same thing” (“Ark” 11). Headeye calls his mojo bone, seemingly the item he’s going to go fishing with, “a keybone to the culud man,” saying it “belongs to the people of God” – yet another reference to the Israelites, and perhaps hinting that Headeye is to be a disciple-like figure, becoming a “fisher of men”. He goes on, however, seemingly as a non sequitur, to repeat almost word-for-word the beginning of Ezekiel, Chapter 37:

“...And the hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit to the valley of dry bones. And he said unto me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ and I said unto him, ‘Lord, thou knowest.’ And he said unto me, ‘Go and bind them together. Prophecy that I shall come and put flesh upon them from generations and from generations.’ And the Lord said

unto me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of thy brothers, scattered to the islands. Behold, I shall bind up the bones and you shall prophesy the name.’ (“Ark” 11)

It is important here to note the adjective “dry.” The dry bones of Ezekiel, upon hearing the prophet’s preaching, were no longer dry; instead, they were covered in flesh (made up mostly, as is commonly known, of water) and given life and agency through the power of the Christian God. By the addition of this water-in-flesh, those who were dead were given new life by God -- in fact forming “an exceedingly great army” (Ezekiel 37:10). In this passage, God declares to the Israelites, “I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel.” (Ezekiel 37:12). This is both a promise of resurrection and an oath of retribution against those who have wronged the Israelites, one that seems to reiterate the covenant made with both Noah and Abraham.

After abruptly ending his pseudo-preaching, Headeye leads Fish-hound to the story’s own Valley of Dry Bones: Deadman’s Landing. Deadman’s Landing is apparently thus named because of a body that was found there at one point, whose “body was so rotted and ate up by fish and craw dads that they couldn’t tell whether he was white or black. Just a dead man” (“Ark” 12). This water, this river, seems to act as an equalizer. As he would later prove in the opening scenes of *Jonah and the Green Stone*, Dumas’s formulation of water is a space outside of space, time, and race, where the power of white supremacy is overwhelmed by the force of the parallel world organically connected to this one. As the two boys stand on Deadman’s Landing, they observe the physical manifestation of this parallel world: the titular Ark of Bones, which appears to emerge out of the river itself, “movin slow, down river, naw it was up river. Naw, it was just movin and standin still at the same time” (Ark 15). The Ark is displaced from ordinary time and space, stuck in a stasis of simultaneous movement and stillness. A marvelous sight to behold, for sure, not least because it seems to exemplify “the African traditional worldview of

understanding human experience in cyclical, rather than linear, terms” (Leak 117). The Ark might as well be helmed by Sun Ra himself, who “resisted the concept of viewing himself in strictly linear terms, of defining himself by chronology” (Leak 117). The impetus towards linearity (and by extension the rejection of circularity), according to cultural critic James Snead, is an inherently Western and European conceptualization of existence. Instead, “Black culture highlights the observance of such repetition, often in homage to an original generative instance or act. Cosmogony, the origins and stability of things, hence prevails because it recurs, not because the world continues to develop from the archetypal moment” (Snead 149).¹⁶ Thus, in a non-Western imagination of existence, the body persists because it recurs, because it is held in a kind of stasis, rather than because it proceeds on any sort of upward- or downward-facing course. So too does this Ark prevail, not because it is making a linear journey or because exists in any linear sense of time or space, but precisely because it exists in a recursive anti-linear space.

Headeye wades out into the rising Mississippi waters to get a better look at the approaching Ark, and calls back to Fish-hound, hailing him to wade behind: “Come on, Fish! Hurry! I wait for you” (“Ark” 15). Instantly, as if by magic, Fish-hound is out in the river, and a rowboat from the Ark is there to receive them. Fish-hound assumes they have died, and this Ark is a “Glory Boat” that they will ride “over the river and make it on into heaven” (“Ark” 15). He is not, of course, entirely wrong. This boat stands as a memorial to the glory and spiritual memory of those whose lives have been lost in the war against white violence and antiblack racism. This aspect of the boat becomes obvious the moment the boys step foot onboard – passing, ironically, from a realm of mythology and religion across a threshold of history and memory. As the Ark beckons the boys aboard, they ascend steps seemingly inscribed with years. Though there are said to be many different years, the ones that Fish-hound notes in particular are

1608, 1944, and 1977. While 1977 was a future year for Dumas (which explains why Fish-hound pays it “no mind”), the other two years on the steps I believe are signposts that indicate that this Ark of Bones is not just an object of marvelous wonder, but a concrete historical archive as well, which exemplifies Afrosurrealism’s intent to “restore the cult of the past” (Miller). This reinforces the idea that the Afrosurrealist aesthetic *cannot exist unconnected to the actual lived lives of Black Americans*. This is further supported by the actual historical events that seem to be invoked by each year’s place on the ark.

1608 is the first year the Jamestown colony became a sustainable colony and the year that John Smith came to power there. While the first African slaves would not arrive in the colony until 1619, it could be said that 1608 was the year that the American colony of white supremacy was concretized. In a way, the fate of nonwhites in America was sealed in the year 1608, with the explosion of violence against Chief Powhatan’s tribe. While under threat of starvation, Smith and his white military threatened the tribe with force to get them to give up their own food. White America was founded and survives on violence, a fact which Dumas solidifies by invoking 1608 alongside 1944, the year of both *Smith v. Allwright* and the brutalization of Recy Taylor. *Smith v. Allwright* was the landmark court case that declared whites-only primaries unconstitutional. Though it was a near-unanimous decision, the dissenting opinion, authored by Justice Owen Roberts, demonstrates the wider opinion of the antiblack American society Henry Dumas was living and writing in. Rather than extoling the courts for their ability to see and acknowledge past mistakes, mistakes which disenfranchised millions of Black voters, Justice Roberts notes in his dissent that he finds it

“regrettable that in an era marked by doubt and confusion, an era whose greatest need is steadfastness of thought and purpose, this court, which has been looked to as exhibiting consistency in adjudication, and a steadiness which would hold the balance even in the

face of temporary ebbs and flows of opinion, should now itself become the breeder of fresh doubt and confusion in the public mind as to the stability of our institutions”

The unacknowledged subtext in Justice Roberts’ dissent is that these institutions were built out of antiblack violence and racial prejudice, and those whose thinking aligned with Roberts’ wanted these racist institutions to remain intact. White primaries were a tool used to disenfranchise nonwhite voters, thus protecting the white supremacist establishment that had been threatened by the abolition of slavery and the granting of civil rights. By voicing his dissent using this coded language of “stability” vs “doubt and confusion,” Justice Roberts illustrated an argument that is still being used today by white supremacists in power in order to justify their oppressive actions¹⁷. The power and viciousness of white supremacy was further reiterated in the second event that this date seems to point to in Dumas’s text.

On September 3rd, 1944, 24-year-old Recy Taylor was kidnapped and sexually assaulted by six white men. The details of her rape are horrific, and I decline to reproduce the scene here¹⁸. Recy Taylor’s kidnapping and assault were reported immediately to the police, but despite the confession of the car’s owner, as well as the testimony of several eyewitnesses, the men were effectively allowed to go free, with Hugo Wilson, the owner of the vehicle that picked Taylor up, being fined only \$250 (McGuire 8). The case of Recy Taylor put on full display the failure of the criminal justice system when it comes to Black people, especially when it comes to Black women. No justice was served for Ms. Taylor; the only miniscule modicum of justice she received, after two dismissals of the case, was a declaration by the state of Alabama in 2011, 67 years after the rape occurred, that the state’s “failure to act was, and is, morally abhorrent and repugnant” and that the state legislature sought to “express [their] deepest sympathies and solemn regrets to Recy Taylor and her family and friends” (Act no. 2011-175, pp. 2). It is, of course, difficult not to connect this late-coming expression of sympathy and regret offered to Ms.

Taylor and the “thoughts and prayers” offered to the victims of atrocities in contemporary American society. The fact that her attackers were not prosecuted, and that she did not receive any official recognition of the mishandling of justice that occurred in her case until several decades later, serves to re-emphasize the statement made by Dr. Crystal Feimster in the 2017 documentary *The Rape of Recy Taylor*: like the men who brutalized and raped her, the state justice apparatus “didn’t see her, in the sense that they really did not see her; that she was an idea of what black women are... that they had a right to her body” (*The Rape of Recy Taylor* 01:26:00-01:28:00). In the eyes of these men, and in the eyes of a white supremacist state apparatus, Recy Taylor was abstracted to the point of obliteration. Here is where one might lodge a complaint against Dumas’s methods. The archival research that I have unpacked and examined here was driven by two numbers, carved into steps on a fictional Ark. They are given no context, but are still recognizable as years, which then sends the reader’s mind spiraling out into the archive of Black history, trying to fit together the story of this Ark.

But, one must wonder, without contextualizing or concretizing the events referred to by these years, are readers left to follow in Fish-hound’s footsteps, when he declares that he “ain’t pay the number any more mind” (“Ark” 16)? Is this re-performing the same strategies of erasure that relegated Recy Taylor to a life of perpetual injustice? While there is validity to this argument, when observed within the larger context of “Ark of Bones” and the tenets of Afrosurrealism as a whole, one can hope that Dumas is constructing a different kind of archival memory here, one that goes beyond just a statement of history. Just as surrealists (both Afro- and Euro-) ask their audiences to *work* in order to connect with the world of the Marvelous, so too does Dumas ask his readers to read beyond the superficiality of the page. These two numbers, 1608 and 1944, are more than just years; they are reference numbers in the archive of Black

America. They speak into existence a history that white supremacist society has tried to erase since the beginning of the Transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, rather than marginalizing these histories, Dumas is attempting to perform the linguistic work that Bâ locates within Leopold Sédhar Senghor's distinctly African view of surrealism: "In black surrealism, it is always a question of an *existing reality*, a life force, with which the poet can communicate by means of the analogical image" (Bâ 151, emphasis added). Furthermore,

the poet possesses the gift of calling forth or naming a force, an element, or a person and thereby ordering its realization and assigning it to a meaningful position in relation to man by virtue of creative revelation... to answer to one's name is to recognize both one's own existence and the right of another to call forth this reality" (Bâ 64)

In other words, by naming the years 1608 and 1944 within the context of this Soulboat (which will later in the text be revealed to house the remains of thousands upon thousands of dead Black bodies), a vessel which is unstuck from hegemonic, linear – and thus white supremacist – time, Dumas is affirming the importance of these years. He is speaking into existence their archival importance, which is affirmed by the reader's own action of researching them. I would assert that his simple naming of the years is not an action of erasure, for it follows the "syntax of juxtaposition" outlined by Senghor. According to Bâ, "Senghor cites as one of the major contributions of surrealism the revelation of the juxtaposition of totally unrelated concrete realities as a powerful means of forging images," whose equivalent he finds in the "syntax of juxtaposition" (Bâ 149) – an equality of syntax, and by extension meaning, that thwarted hegemonic ideas of language that Senghor saw in European languages and surrealisms. In his book *The Tongue-Tied Imagination: Decolonizing Literary Modernity in Senegal*, scholar Tobias Warner elaborates on this syntax of juxtaposition in a way that further justifies Dumas's stylistic choices in his construction of this Ark-hive. Senghor, according to Warner, believed that "since African languages had a syntax of juxtaposition rather than subordination, they could do without

the logical bonds of syntax. Thought could move intuitively by leaps and bounds” (Warner 133). Dumas is therefore operating within an African linguistic tradition by asking his readers to make the intuitive leap from the year into the historical archive outlined above. Not only does this tactic put Dumas in an African linguistic tradition, either; as Warner outlines, for S nghor “African languages were inherently surrealistic... in a very specific sense; it was not that they had no grammar, it was rather that the way they meant anything relied not on syntax but on intuition” (Warner 133). This seems to echo the invisible, psychic forces of the Marvelous that drove the Euro-surrealists pens in their automatic writing exercises. Just as these African languages and the Euro-surrealist writing relied on instinct for construction and interpretation, a truly Afrosurreal entrance into the archive would rarely be explicit. It would be the responsibility of the reader, the witness, to step aboard.

The two boys step aboard the boat and are greeted by a man Fish-hound believes to be this Ark’s Noah. During a brief conversation with Headeye to which Fish-hound is not privy, Fish-hound recognizes among the cacophony of the boat (wind, moans, voices, etc) the sound of “engines. I could hear that chug-chug like a paddle wheel whippin up the stern” (“Ark” 17) – a sound which further emphasizes the Ark’s existence outside of linear time, as it is of course incongruous for an ancient-seeming ark to be powered by a steamboat paddlwheel. Shortly after this, after another timeskip in Fish-hound’s narration, he and Headeye are descending another set of steps, down into the belly of the Ark. There, Fish-hound is struck dumb by something he’ll “never forget for as long as [he] live[s]”: within the hold of the ark lies “Bones... they were stacked all the way to the top of the ship” (Ark 18). These bones are being handled by the all-Black crew “very carefully, like they were holdin onto babies or somethin precious” (Ark 18). Little does Fish-hound realize that these bones *were* something precious, being held safe in the

bosom of this river-vessel. These bones represented the bodies, lives, and memories of his own community, catalogued and archived by this Noah, who moves across the piles of bones to meet the boys, “walkin frontwards, backwards, sideways and every which way,” mimicking the way the Ark itself moves through space. And though he is stepping across a floor densely populated with bones, “he was bein careful not to step on the bones,” (“Ark” 19), as he too considers them to be somethin’ precious. It’s at this point that one of the hauling crew begins “holler,” speaking in tongues like the biblical apostles on Pentecost. He, in an action that is implied to be commonplace on this boat, begins to shout verses that seem at first to be gibberish, but upon closer inspection appear to be comprised, at least in part, of an accented Arabic. The man repeats the phrase “aba, aba, al ham dilaba,” (“Ark” 19), an approximation of the Arabic phrase “Alḥamdulillāh,” or “praise belongs to God.” This phrase is found in the second verse of Al Fatihah, the first surah of the Qur’an: الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ (Qur’an 1.2, emphasis added). This surah of the Qur’an is referred to as “The Opener,” or “The Key,” not only because it literally opens the Qur’an, but also because, to some, it holds the ability to open a person up to faith in God (Lumbard 3). At the very least it is possible that this surah has the ability to *strengthen* a person’s faith in God – Dumas’s fervent evangelism after returning from the Arabian Peninsula stands as evidence to that. It also seems to be the key to the Ark’s next layer of archival existence, as the man’s hollering of this verse prompts the Noah to pause, read his scroll, and shout “Nineteen hundred and twenty-three!” Like 1608 and 1944, 1923 was an important year to the history of Black life in America¹⁹. It was, among other things, the approximate year when membership of the Ku Klux Klan was at its highest²⁰, as well as the year of the racially-motivated Rosewood massacre.

Author and journalist Mike D’Orso describes in his book *Like Judgment Day: The Ruin and Redemption of a Town Called Rosewood* how, just a week after “the bells of Rosewood rang in the new year... those bells lay smoldering among the twisted steel and blackened ruins...the smoking soot of a place that would never exist again” (D’Orso 13). What began, as so many racially-motivated mob actions do and did, with a series of unsubstantiated rumors about a Black man’s interaction with a white woman, ended with a lynch mob laying siege to a Black family’s home. In fact, it could be said that this was a case of mistaken identity – the same phrase that would later be used to describe Henry Dumas’s murder – as the bloodhounds who were brought in to track the alleged Black perpetrator led the lynch mob not to the home of a rapist, but to the home of Aaron Carrier, the nephew of the white woman’s housekeeper Sarah Carrier. The mob mentality and racist rumor mill drove the lynch mob from the white woman’s house to the Carrier house, where Aaron Carrier was almost lynched, then to the blacksmith Sam Carter’s house, where Sam Carter *was* lynched, to an armed standoff on the property of Sarah Carrier. It was from there that the fires started. By the end of a week, the town of Rosewood was burnt to the ground, and the populace was scattered. According to D’Orso, who conducted a large series of interviews with the massacre’s survivors,

A month later, a grand jury composed of local farmers and merchants, all white, was convened in the county seat of Bronson. Twenty-five witnesses were called, including eight blacks. After three days of investigation, the jury declared the evidence ‘insufficient’ for indictments. None were made, and the case was closed... And so it was finished. The town was gone, and its memory soon vanished as well. (D’orso 58)

Despite this massive act of violence and destruction, the Rosewood Massacre was – and is – a vastly under-known and under-studied moment in the history of the United States. The fires erased Rosewood from the map, and the failure of justice through the triumph of white

supremacy sought to similarly erase Rosewood from the archive – until, one could say, Dumas’s Noah shouted out the year of its destruction.

I must pause here momentarily to justify what might seem to be my unorthodox methodology. Why have I gone through such pains to connect these years to their historical referents? The mention of these years is so brief as to almost be insignificant in the story’s larger context. There don’t seem to be any direct references in Dumas’s writing to Smith’s takeover of Jamestown, or *Smith v. Allwright*, or Recy Taylor, or Rosewood – so why do I include them here? Because this uncovering, this archival excavation, is precisely the same work being done by the crew of the Ark. We must handle these stories with the same care and preciousness with which the Black men handle the Ark’s bones, because these bones can be read as physical testimony to the history of Black bodies, with their years and histories inscribed upon the Ark itself, and their remains handled with the care required for the handling of precious treasures. In an almost foreshadowing manner, Dumas calls his readers to remember those who have been forgotten, whose bodies have been destroyed but whose spirits have passed into world organically connected to this one. In our archival research to unlock the Ark’s mysteries, we follow these two boys into an Ark-hive that exists outside of hegemonic linear time; these bones, raised from the river and given new life and memory aboard the Ark, transcend time to thwart the death imposed upon them by the violences of antiblack racism. As John A. Williams puts it in his essay “Henry Dumas: Black Word-Worker” (published in the 1988 “Henry Dumas Issue”), “these bones, residuals of the horrors of African Americans ranging from the Middle Passage to Jim Crow lynchings, can live again only through connections of the past with the present” (Williams 313). Likewise, lives lost in Rosewood, or the lives threatened in Jamestown, or the

life Recy Taylor built before her rape, can live again only through our own extra-textual research, and our prophesying of their names.

Like our own work as scholars, however, the work of this Ark-hive does not end with simple excavation. Fish-hound recounts how the Ark's Noah had to stop four other times to holler out a year in response to the men extracting the bones from the river; the act of hollering is, itself, an essential practice to Dumas's archival work. It is not enough just to acknowledge the old gods; we must give the old gods new faces, as declared by D. Scot Miller. How can this be done? Those who stand as witness to the historical record must bring that which is historical into the present moment through preaching and sermonizing. Those who stand witness and perform the archival uncovering we have done here become the poets who "[possess] the gift of calling forth or naming... thereby ordering its realization and assigning it to a meaningful position" (Bâ 64). Just as we may hope to become ones who assign the memories of Rosewood, Recy Taylor, and the Powhatan tribe their rightful meaningful position in our scholarly consciousnesses, Headeye and Fish-hound are sent out into the world by the Ark's Noah with the task of calling forth and naming the mysteries they saw that day. After bearing witness to this ceremonial process of excavation and calling, Headeye is ordained into the Ark's extra-ordinary religious archival body. "Son, you are in the house of generations," says Dumas's Noah, "Every African who lives in America has a part of his soul on this ark. God has called you, and I shall anoint you" ("Ark" 20). Noah and Headeye then proceed through the ceremonial ordination, which includes the following chant: "Aba, I consecrate my bones/Take my soul up and plant it again/Your will shall be my hand/When I strike you strike/My eyes shall see only thee/I shall set my brother free/Aba, this bone is thy seal" ("Ark" 20). Again, we have here the re-appearance of the word Aba, which could be an accented form of the name of the God of Islam, Allah.²¹ Headeye dedicates his – and

by extension the Ark's – bones, as well as his soul, to the Black community's cause. It seems that Headeye will be performing in the “real” world the same task the Black crew are performing onboard the Ark; Headeye will “set [his] brother free” by taking what he has seen and heard aboard this vessel and preaching it. Headeye is destined, it seems, to follow in the footsteps of the prophet he had quoted earlier in the text – Ezekiel. In the story of Ezekiel and the Valley of the Dry Bones, God commands Ezekiel to “prophesy” to the valley of bones,

and as [he] prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And [he] looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them... and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. (Ezek. 37:7-70)

From the invocation Headeye recites, it can be extrapolated that he is to lead one such “great army,” with the will of “Aba” guiding him, striking when commanded. Headeye's hand will be guided by an old god with a new face: the face of these two Black youths. Indeed, Fish-hound is not exempt from the ceremony, and thus by proxy becomes a part of this esoteric organization. He is Headeye's “witness,” an apparently essential part of Headeye's ordination, as Noah declares to Headeye “with the eyes of your brother Fish-hound, so be it” (“Ark” 21). After a final moment that involves Headeye ritualistically burning his makeshift ceremonial vestments, the two Black boys depart the boat, returning to the so-called “real” world. Upon his return, Fish-hound learns from his family and neighbors that, while he and Headeye were gone, “the white folks had lynched a n---r and threw him in the river” (“Ark” 21). Another soul and set of bones to add to the soulboat, it seems.

In the final scene of “Ark of Bones,” Headeye comes to visit Fish-hound to tell him he's leaving town – ostensibly to preach the word of the Ark. Upon hearing this plan of Headeye's, Fish-hound remarks that “We all be leavin if the Sippi keep risin,” to which Headeye replies, “Nah” (Ark 22). Headeye and Fish-hound, though they bore witness to the same surreal events

aboard the Ark, still have different interpretations of the holy power of the Mississippi water-space. Fish-hound, who began the story already apprehensive about the river, saying “all [he] ever did [in the river] was fish and swim” (“Ark” 12), still has not reached full understanding (if such a thing is possible) of the river. “I like to keep my feet on the ground,” Fish-hound reveals, “you can’t never tell what you get yourself into by messin’ with mojo bones” (“Ark” 21). Fish-hound remains a god-fearing person, and thus interprets the rising waters of the ‘Sippi as something that is coming to destroy them, like the floodwaters of Old Testament Noah’s story. Headeye knows better; with that one word, “Nah,” he reveals that he understands the implications of the rising waters *beyond* the Mississippi’s annual cycle of flooding and destruction. He understands that the river, as the space that produced and preserves the Ark, is a river of salvation. The new incarnation of Noah that they met on board the ark, the one re-cast by Henry Dumas as the representative simultaneously of an old god with a new face and a new god with an old face, seeks to protect and preserve the Black community, and to carry them not into destruction, but to deliver them from the evil of white supremacy. In a way, both boys are correct. The ‘Sippi will, metaphorically, keep rising; the forces and agents of white supremacy persist even until today. But the ‘Sippi continues to rise in other ways: from the marches on Washington, to the protests that continued well past the Civil Rights movement, all the way to today’s age of Black Lives Matter. This rising water will not efface Black history or murder black bodies the way the waters of enslavement did; this time, the water is a holy water, re-hydrating and re-invigorating the Black community – like the water-in-flesh of Ezekiel’s story.

For Fish-hound and Headeye, enlightenment and understanding of the things they witnessed comes through Ezekiel, a story of dryness becoming moisture, of death becoming life. In the water of the Mississippi, Headeye and Fish-hound are baptized and reborn as brothers, believers,

and prophets. They, and by extension their communities, are the “called” or “chosen” people – “the people of God,” to whom the mojo bone belongs, according to Headeye. Just as enslaved congregations had found a modicum of free feeling when preaching or being preached to, these two Black boys – who racist public opinion might categorize as “thugs” or “hoods” later in life – have come to understand the power of this kind of holy memory in preserving, preaching, and understanding a higher power. Even Fish-hound, who insists that he “wasn’t fit to whip up no flock of people with holiness,” (Ark 18) ends up preaching the word of the Ark after he has encountered the other world organically connected to this one. Fish-hound closes the story with a subtle gesture towards his understanding of this holy water-reality; when asked about Headeye’s whereabouts, he simply “tell[s] em a little somethin I learned in church. And I tell em bout Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones” (Ark 22). Through Fish-hound and Headeye, the history and power of the Ark is freed from the Western ideation of a finite, linear progression from life to death. In this way, Fish-hound and Headeye become the embodiments of the river, the ark, and Ezekiel. The river is that “which has no beginning and no end,” and proves to be, as Eugenia Collier points out, “the agent of death and of rebirth” (Collier 197). So, it could be extrapolated that the path of these bones aboard the Ark counteracts the linear hegemony of white supremacy that seeks to eradicate both Black pasts and Black futures. They are extracted from a linear narrative path that James Snead would label as one of either “progression” or “regression” (Snead 146). The river is, here, a representation of the Black Culture that Snead examines. It hybridizes Collier’s claim that a river is that “which has no beginning and no end,” and Heraclitus’s well-known adage that “a man cannot step in the same river twice” – in other words, the river is a repeating and recurring force that defies the imposition of any sort of hierarchical or concretizing ideas, and thus proving itself to be a space operating outside of the oppressive tenets

of Western realism and linearity. In addition, the Ark, whose physicality seems to have been manifested *out* of the river, acts as an agent of the *cyclical* nature of life and death as it repetitively brings the bones up from the depths of the river, archiving their memories outside of time and space in the stasis of the Ark. The slain Black men and women whose bones are interred there and whose death-years are proclaimed for all on board to hear are then given new life and importance in *this* world through the preaching of Headeye and Fish-hound. They both seem to come to realize that the Ark put them “onto somethin. [They] had fished out somethin” (Ark 20) – and that “somethin” was precisely the same call to prophesy that led Ezekiel to preach in the unknown world of the valley of dry bones.

God of Singing Vengeance: Jonoah and the Green Stone

2. *Afro-Surreal presupposes that beyond this visible world, there is an invisible world striving to manifest, and it is our job to uncover it. Like the African Surrealists, Afro-Surrealists recognize that nature (including human nature) generates more surreal experiences than any other process could hope to produce.*
– D. Scot Miller, “Afrosurreal Manifesto”

In “Ark of Bones,” Dumas shows the power of the river incarnated as a vessel of protection, preservation, and re-birth. What re(oc)curs, then, when water becomes a more active weapon against hegemonic antiblackness? Dumas shows this other side of the river’s divine power in his tragically unfinished novel, *Jonoah and the Green Stone*. Its prologue is a scene of water and mourning; the titular Jonoah attends the funeral of Mamada, his adoptive mother, as rain begins to fall. Though “the rain comes, muscling across the river, across the bowing corn, beating against the shield-like and leathery magnolia leaves beside the porch—blasting them the way machine-gun bullets blast through a thicket,” Jonoah is “not fearful of water like this” (*Jonoah* 3). From this first page, Jonoah is shown to have developed an innate understanding of the natural world around him; Jonoah “knew the truth: the rain was galloping in out of the past and

its thunder-smashes... were messages” (*Jonoah* 3). This natural world, according to Miller, is that which “generates more surreal experiences than any other process could hope to produce” (Miller). Like Headeye in “Ark of Bones,” Jonoah had learned how to talk to the water, as well as how to listen when the water talked back. In this past, Jonoah “learned to distinguish between mortal danger and moral danger, between the waters of men and the waters of God” (*Jonoah* 4). It is in this distinction that Dumas’s Afrosurreal Expressionism manifests. As an author, he too understood the difference between these dangers, and between these waters. And, if it is true what Baraka says in his essay on Dumas, that “the liberation of African American people and the ultimate destruction of Imperialism are *inherent* in nature itself” (Baraka 165, emphasis original), the waters of God do not seek to do Jonoah harm, ultimately. Once Jonoah learned the language of the waters of nature, he was able to read the before-invisible signs of another world. Now, Jonoah says,

when I see the long rain coming, when I see a fullness at the banks of the river that was not there yesterday, when I see the live oak leaves drooping from the long rain, the magnolias and the dogwoods thick and dark, then I know the universe is sending a warning in drops that scream and splash like written words, and it is the time when men will think they are solely in mortal danger. (*Jonoah* 5-6)

Yet again, Dumas reiterates that the primary way to know God, and to know his “entirely different world organically connected to this one,” was to know the *river*.

Even moreso than in “Ark of Bones,” the water of *Jonoah* is an unstoppable and terrifying force, the embodiment of the same Old Testament God of vengeance that cursed the Philistines; the flooding Mississippi “came like a wild beast,” Jonoah says, for “it was a vengeful river... There was nobody who could tell it what to do. Even the white men did not mess with the river” (*Jonoah* 15). It is notable that Jonoah takes pains to differentiate the power of this water from the power of the water used against him and his compatriots during his time in the Civil

Rights movement. He describes how “even the water hoses they turned on us in Greenwood last year did not bring back the first fear [he] had of the river” (*Jonoah* 4). For Dumas, the element of water does not belong to the forces of antiblackness. Instead, his image of liquid and Blackness walks closer to the sixth tenet of D. Scot Miller’s “Afrosurreal Manifesto”: “Afrosurreal life is fluid, filled with aliases and census-defying classifications” (Miller). Water is not simply an agent of a government which seeks the obliteration of Black life; in fact, it resists the imposition of such attempts to control or define the natural. The narrator temporally locates the aforementioned description of the flooding river’s fury “before they built all the fine concrete levees and bluffs to stop it” (*Jonoah* 15). Though not given a precise time, it would not be far-fetched to draw a connection between this off-hand comment from Jonoah and the observations made by Anissa Janine Wardi in her book *Water and African American Memory*. In her chapter on Henry Dumas and the Mississippi (one of the few contemporary published pieces about the Afrosurreal prophet), Wardi notes the racialized aspects of the United States Army Corps of Engineers’ attempts to “[straighten] the rivercourse, with locks, dams, levees, cutoffs, floodways, jetties, and gates... evocative of an enchained body: the mighty Mississippi is ‘held captive’ and tis flooding an ‘escape’ in defiance of ‘its captors’” (Wardi 74). In this way, she posits, the machinations of the U.S. military industrial complex “[read] as a colonial gesture determined to force the river’s surrender, and thus one inevitably roots for the river, whose foe is the strong arm of the United States” (Wardi 75) – a strong arm that seeks to re-subjugate Black individuals. “Of course, the powerful river does not bend to the will of a forced hand,” Wardi continues, “and thus [the river] defies its captors in its hunger for freedom and unfettered mobility” (Wardi 75). So too does the space of the River serve as a site of resistance and enables a (albeit momentary) defeat of the forces of white supremacy. Because “when that river broke over the mud line and

climbed up over the levee and headed toward the farms and town, there wasn't much even the Federal Government could do but obey the river" (*Jonoah* 8).

Flashing back to Jonoah's early childhood, the first section of the novel proper is fittingly called "Children of the Flood," as it opens with Jonoah being reborn through the water of the flood. The flood comes to John (as he is called at this point in the narrative) in a fever. On the night he was driven out of his biological family's house and into the arms of the river, "I was fevered up," John says, "I was sick. I was alone. I was hungry...and I couldn't remember if I was me or not" (*Jonoah* 10). John, here, has lost his old identity through the dual effects of the pounding rain and burning fever. His narration is disjointed and vague. He stumbles around his house, disconnected from both time and place. A page later, he is baptized by the possibly unreal Old Man Hearth, whose primary purpose in the narrative seems to be to "[come] through the water wading knee-deep almost, pulling that old cotton boat he and Papa used to take [Jonoah] fishing in" (*Jonoah* 11). Hearth takes the feverish Jonoah and the body of his apparently-dead mother onto his boat, keeping up the refrain that he was going to take Jonoah to his father. As his father never appears, apparently swept away by the flood, it is possible that the "father" that Hearth is taking the young boy to is the Father of Christianity's triune God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). This interpretation seems to be supported when Jonoah sees a vision of "Jesus, or somebody that I figured must be Jesus, and he was reaching a hand out for me, and I was wading in the water." This vision of Jesus persists, until Jonoah begins to "wade in the water again, and the flood got higher and drowned everything..." (*Jonoah* 14) – everything, that is, except Jonoah, safe on his Ark, his own soulboat. This boat would end up being that which saves Jonoah's found family, as well, as through divine providence the floodwaters carry his boat into the arms of Jubal, Ruby, Aunt Lili, Papa Lem, and Mamada. Thus is it reiterated that the

Mississippi River is a multifaceted force, both destroying the family that birthed him and delivering him to a new family that would protect him and guide him through his formative years: “just as much as the river gave *them* to me,” Jonoah says, “it gave *me* to them” (*Jonoah* 16). Jonoah forms a kinship with the river and these “river-people”, due in large part to his re-birth as adoptive son and Child of the Flood. As Jonoah and his found family ride down the river on the boat given to them by Old Man Hearth, they are able to become a part of the unfettered mobility that Wardi describes.

After Old Man Hearth disappears in the floodwaters, Jonoah begins to lose hope that he will ever make it through this trial, feeling “a sense of loss and loneliness” (*Jonoah* 18). But before he succumbs to this loss, he hears a series of voices, calling out to him over the river. At first Jonoah is reminded of his mother, which foreshadows the familial connection he will soon forge with the owners of these hailing voices. Then, he lays eyes for the first time on Jubal Lee, his soon-to-be adoptive brother. In *Jonoah and the Green Stone*, like in most of Dumas’s fiction, the characters’ names hold a special modicum of meaning, uncovered upon closer analysis. Even with that being said, it is worth pointing out that Jonoah and Jubal Lee are two of the most uncommon names (nicknames aside) in Dumas’s entire oeuvre. Both, however, have metaphoric resonances that give further complexity to the mytho-religious world Dumas has created. To begin with, Jubal Lee has a double meaning in his name: “Jubal,” a descendent of Cain who is mentioned briefly in the Book of Genesis as “the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe” (Gen. 4:21), and “Jubilee,” the time described in Leviticus as a time when “You shall... proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family” (Lev. 25:10). The first becomes important when considering the importance of music in *Jonoah*’s narrative, which I will

address later in this section. The second is, of course, drawing a direct connection to the Days of Jubilee, the days when enslaved persons were granted their freedom in the Antebellum age, as well as the idea of returning to one's family – another reinforcement of Jubal's role in Jonoah's found family. Unfortunately, beyond this first section, readers of the novel as published are not provided much insight into the character of Jubal; it is indicated in the notes that Eugene Redmond found along with the novel's unfinished manuscript that Dumas had planned on greatly expanding the character of Jubal in a section for which he had not completed any writing before his death. Still, just from this first appearance of Jubal, the fact that he emerges like the Ark of Bones *out of the river itself* in order to save Jonoah affirms the freedom implied by Jubal Lee's name. In naming Jubal this esoteric name, Dumas is, like S nghor before him, "assigning [him] to a meaningful position in relation to man," (in this case Jonoah) "by virtue of creative revelation," which in turn "enables the spirit to transcend appearances and circumstances, to will into existence a higher, beneficent force" (B  64). This transcendence can perhaps be said to be one of the greatest forms of freedom; the Afrosurrealists would certainly agree. The higher, beneficent force that the naming grants access to the invisible world beyond our own that is striving to manifest – perhaps it can even be said that this beneficent force resides on the other planet that Sun Ra would later theorize.

What of Jonoah's name, then? As previously observed, Jonoah was born simply "John," named either for one of Jesus's twelve apostles, or for John the Baptist, or perhaps for the author of the Book of Revelation. The implications of his name being a reference to John the Baptist are relatively straightforward; the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke each contain a story specifically detailing John baptizing Jesus, and in the Gospel of John, though it is not described directly, John the Baptist references the act (John 1:32-34). In the book of Matthew, it is written

that after Jesus was baptized, “the heavens were opened, and [John] saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased’” (Matt. 3:16-17). John the Baptist is illustrated here as a kind of conduit, connecting the physical manifestation of Jesus with the extra-physical presence of the Holy Spirit, via the medium of water. So, like Jonoah and Jubal both, it seems John the Baptist firmly straddles both this world and an invisible, super-natural world. Also, this reinforces the symbolic maneuvers Dumas is making regarding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, perhaps with the river itself being representative of the Holy Spirit and Jonoah acting as the conduit between its divine power and this family. Of equal interest, though, is the possibility that Johnoah is named for the John who is called (at least in a certain gospel tune) “John the Revelator.” Details about the mysterious, contentious author of the final book of the New Testament is all but unknown to contemporary Biblical scholars. The ambiguity in authorship does not detract from the religious and philosophical import of this book of the Bible, however. In a text filled with fantastical and marvelous stories, the book of Revelation is by far the strangest and most surreal. This apocalyptic narrative was supposedly granted in a series of visions to the enigmatic John the Revelator on the island of Patmos in the first century AD. The subject of much philosophical and theological debate, the Book of Revelation contains some of the most visceral apocalyptic imagery anywhere in the Christian Bible. It is, of course, from this book that the familiar image of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse comes, and thus it is out of the pages of this book that Dog Whitlock would later ride. These horsemen are supposedly one of the first heralds of the Second Coming of Christ, a notable moment in the course of the Bible where the world is to be destroyed in order to be re-invented for the better. Again, we have a

biblical John acting as a bridge between the Divine and the mortal earth, in order to bring about justice and betterment for all of humankind.

Another, more obvious apocalyptic biblical moment invoked by Dumas in his novel is, of course, the Great Flood. After being pulled out of the water, John is re-christened by Papa Lem “John Noah,” for “old man Noah must have been your father!” as Papa Lem believes that God, through John, “had sent the ark after them” (*Jonoah* 26). Juxtaposing these two apocalyptic stories, the Second Coming and the Great Flood, beside each other in one boy’s name, Dumas drives home this image of a world born anew. In the story of Noah, contained in the first book of the Tanakh, “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually,” (Gen. 6:5) which caused God to send the flood and wipe out all but a chosen few. After the floodwaters receded, it was said that God made a covenant that “all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen. 9:11), and told Noah and his family to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Gen. 9:1). The floodwaters of Revelation, too, recede after the second coming of Christ, as John writes “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea,” (Rev. 21:1), after which God declares

Behold, I am making all things new... It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. (Rev. 21:5-7)

Both times, the people of the earth are given a message of deliverance, of a world made new, free from the suffering that haunted it before the apocalyptic moment. John and Noah each act as a conduit through which God’s grace is able to “save” humankind from sin, just as John – now Jonoah – saved his newfound family from the floodwaters. Like the Ark of Bones, Jonoah’s ark

is a vessel of preservation, as well as a vessel of rebirth. It is here that their family unit is forged, though they don't realize it in the moment, for "how were any of [them] to know then that the next few months would mold [them] into a family that would someday accuse America with its blood?" (*Jonoah* 27) The river, like the Ark, is disconnected temporally from the narrative as it follows the members of Jonoah's flood-made family through the rest of the novel, most notably granting them strength as they become voices in the Civil Rights Movement, channelling the God-driven power of the Mississippi River into their fight for their rights. But first, they needed to survive their encounter with their horseman of the Apocalypse, Whitlock.

Unlike "Ark of Bones," whose narrative spectre of white violence does not materialize physically within the text of the story ("Ark of Bones" has no living white characters whatsoever), *Jonoah* features a front-and-center representation of white hegemony in the form of this rich white man. Whitlock, called "Dog Whitlock" at some points and "Whitlow" in others (most likely due to the novel's being incomplete and largely unedited), enters the scene upon "a muddy white horse" (*Jonoah* 28), a sight which mirrors the first Horseman of the Apocalypse, as told thusly in the book of Revelations: "I looked, and there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest" (Rev. 6:2). A fitting role to be held by an agent of racism and hate, to be sure, but, as Jonoah had observed earlier in the novel, the river and its people are not to be conquered. The fate of the horse (and later of Whitlock) proves the unconquerable power of the river: though Whitlock insists at first on taking his steed on to the small river vessel, Mamada and Papa Lem know the river well enough to realize that this would surely sink the boat, and they convince Whitlock to leave the steed to be swallowed up by the flood (*Jonoah* 31). Immediately, Whitlock begins blaspheming, cursing God for his personal misfortune. Indeed, he takes the flooding Mississippi

as a personal slight against him, hollering at the water, saying “So you after me now! You bone-making snake” (*Jonoah* 32). Here is a “a little man with a big voice” (*Jonoah* 32), a man who does not know the river and seeks to resist its power with brute force; like his biblical counterpart, Whitlock’s view is one of conquering, of being master over this body of water, just as white colonial thought presumes white mastery over those deemed inferior.

While Whitlock rants and raves that the flood has made him lose his faith in God, Papa Lem remains steadfast in his faith and attempts to act as a peacekeeper. “God knows we all just want to get out of this water safe and dry,” he says, “We been holdin up for three days now, same as you” (*Jonoah* 44). Just these three words, with just the hint of equality, the mere suggestion that they all could be “the same,” sends Whitlock into a frenzy, shouting epithets and insults at everyone on the boat. This comes as little surprise to the family, as his violence has been feared from the moment they picked this white man up. Whitlock goes as far as knocking Mamada into the water when she refuses to cower before him. “White man, you ought not to have done that” (*Jonoah* 47), Papa Lem says; thus begins a direct confrontation between the family’s faith and Whitlock’s blasphemy:

“I ain’t gonna blaspheme, but, white man, if you push me too far... I don’t want to die, but I believe...”

“You threatenin me, n----r?”

“I pick you up, Mr. Whitlock, and we all tryin to scape the high water... I pick you up cause you was stranded, not cause you white.” (*Jonoah* 49)

Whitlock is convinced the family is hiding something from him, but Papa Lem declares they “got nothin to hide from God, and [they] ain’t afraid of the truth” (*Jonoah* 49). He, Mamada, and even Aunt Lili trust in the river, and by extension they trust in God (or perhaps they trust in God, and thus they trust in the river). Lili, in her Cassandra-like state of near-madness, goes as far as to call for Whitlock to be killed by the family, something that would have been unthinkable on dry

land. Instead, she is able to call down God's wrath upon him, which gives the family final strength to force this blaspheming colonizer out of their river-bound sanctuary. Once he is well and truly cast off the Ark, none of the characters pay him any mind, for they know that as long as they stay in the space of the river, his threats cannot reach them.

After the white Whitlock is expelled from the Ark, Aunt Lili begins to sing "Oh Mary Don't You Weep," a spiritual that tells the story of both the defeat of Pharaoh's army by the Red Sea, and Lazarus "wad[ing] in the water" (*Jonoah* 52). This brings me now to music's essential place on and in the river. Music, specifically Black spirituals, echo up and down Dumas's Mississippi floodplain, as an artistic manifestation of religious faith in the face of antiblackness, and thus as a symbolic placemaker for Dumas's Afrosurreal aesthetics. Carter Mathes observes that "[Dumas's] short fiction is both attuned to the literary transcription of sound into narrative and is invested in a more diffuse conceptualization of sound as central to a larger ideological and philosophical framework of black consciousness" (Mathes 64); in this way, the nexus of Dumas's religious, political, and literary ideals becomes easily located in certain Black spirituals whose reverence for river water mirrors that of Dumas's characters. Though Mathes makes a specific and poignant tie between Dumas's Afrosurreal aesthetics and the music written and produced by Sun Ra, little has been noted as regards Dumas's deep knowledge of spirituals and gospel song. When reading both this novel and "Ark of Bones, however, one is reminded of one of the best-known spirituals in the entire songbook: "Wade in the water/Wade in the water, children/Wade in the water/God's gonna trouble the water." Both Papa Lem and Mamada are said to have waded in the water to return to the boat after ridding themselves of Whitlock, and an older Jonoah wades in the same waters of the Mississippi to escape a possible lynching on his way home (a la the prodigal son). Both times, wading in the water brings characters back to their

families. Headeye, too, was said to be “wadin’ out deeper in the ‘Sippi” when he first catches sight of the approaching Ark (Ark 13). This physical contact with and immersion in this seemingly-holy water mimics Christian baptismal practices, as well as upends the image of enslaved persons being thrown slave vessels – an image focused on by contemporary Black Surrealist poet M. NourbeSe Philip in her work *Zong!*. Like the water of John 5:4 – the verse from which the line “God’s gonna trouble the water” comes – the water of Dumas’s prose is, ultimately, a healing water. Charles Warrts, Jr., in his contribution to the 1988 Henry Dumas Issue, examines this healing water directly, saying that “it is into this reservoir of spiritual power, this river of wholeness that Dumas commands us to dip our ebony cups, to imbibe the living water that refreshes and heals the weary spirit like a laying on of hands” (Warrts 393). Dumas reclaims the destructive floodwaters from the hands of white supremacy, writing a new myth wherein the world is born anew after the apocalyptic destruction is over. Just as one of the earliest-published spirituals, “No More Auction Block for Me,” lent its melody to one of the anthems of the Civil Rights movement, “We Shall Overcome,” so too do these water-focused religious mythologies and spirituals become, for Henry Dumas, something that sings back against a hegemonic antiblack world, preaching in the language of the river. On and in and through the gods of this river, Dumas seeks to speak into existence his “entirely different world organically connected to this one,” singing it into existence through the Abrahamic mythologies that dominated his life. Just as Dumas’s and his characters’ voices echo across his fiction’s floodwaters, so too does his writing resonate beyond him and his life, ushering in a new age of Afrosurrealist thinking and doing, while remaining connected to the myths of the past.

My use of the word “resonance” here was not incidental, as the third and final chapter of this work will focus on an individual from Henry Dumas’s past, present, and future whose

philosophy hinges on the idea of resonance and vibration, and whose work carried the spirit of Dumas into the Afrosurreal Renaissance. This individual is/was/will be the Arkestral²² band leader Sun Ra.

Chapter 3: Vibrations of an Afrosurreal Prophet

“This music is all a part of another tomorrow. Another kind of language. Speaking things of nature, naturalness. Speaking things of Blackness. About the void. The endless void. The bottomless pit surrounding you.” - Sun Ra, *Space is the Place* (1974)

So, through the mobilization of historicization and myth-making, the Afrosurrealism that Henry Dumas exemplifies seeks to change the world in such a way that Black artists can fight back directly and effectively against the powers of white supremacy. What other such tools can be used to accomplish these ends? What spaces have not been tainted by the touch of white supremacy? The works of Henry Dumas and his close friend, the musician Sun Ra, seem to answer in concert: “music.” Paul Youngquist begins his work *A Pure Solar World: Sun Ra and the Birth of Afrofuturism* with the declaration that “Music, apparently, can change the world. This inscrutable possibility provided the driving force behind Sun Ra’s creativity” (Youngquist 1). Sun Ra, in the years just before as well as the years following Henry Dumas’s death, created his own mythology that focused on the power of music, and would prove to be one of Dumas’s most vital proponents in the years between his death and the beginning of the Afrosurreal Renaissance.

I am not the first scholar to draw this connection between Ra and Dumas, of course. Carter Mathes, whose work I invoked in the previous section, is particularly in line with my way of thinking about Dumas. In fact, he even makes a similar move to one that I made earlier in this critical biography by bringing Larry Neal and the wider aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement into the conversation around Dumas, saying that,

both Neal and Dumas understand the [Black Arts Movement] as a space to rupture and extend categories of artistic expression. In Dumas’s case this inclination was frequently articulated through his philosophical and representational uses of sound. Dumas’s short stories blend supernatural and realistic elements within musical and environmental contexts that are marked by the presence of sound as an active force, which helps direct the narrative movement of the stories. Through his exploration of sound within particular

narrative contexts, Dumas forges connections between the historical immediacy of black cultural national and more ethereal approaches to aesthetic innovation.” (Mathes 63)

From this position, Mathes goes on to describe how, in a similar way to Dumas, “Sun Ra’s conceptualization of mythic, supernatural, and extraterrestrial black identity is less a reflection of eccentricity than it is a critical construction for questioning the foundations of historical knowledge that underline hegemonic formations of social and political hierarchies” (Mathes 68). It would be an easy move for Mathes to have made, then, to have connected Dumas’s and Ra’s shared mythological conceptualization of Black identity with the calls for a questioning and resistance aesthetic practice called for in D. Scot Miller’s manifesto. Indeed, examining the similarities between the works of Sun Ra and Henry Dumas, as well as their close link in life, reveals the ways in which each of these two Afrosurrealists mobilized music in an effort of creative placemaking – creating a place where censuses and aliases can be defied, and “quiet servitude” can be rejected in favor of a loud declaration of existence, in fulfillment of the sixth tenet of Miller’s manifesto: “The Afro-Surrealist life is fluid, filled with aliases and census-defying classifications” (Miller). For the most part, Mathes and I concur as to the import of Ra and Dumas’s relationship in the formation of an Afrosurreal aesthetic (though Mathes does not use Miller’s terminology); however, his interpretation reverses the direction of influence. Mathes claims that “Dumas’s aural approach to resistance and transformation is heavily indebted to Sun Ra’s idea that ‘space is the place’” (Mathes 68) – but, how could this be so when the phrase “Space is the Place” did not enter Sun Ra’s creative vocabulary until five years after Dumas’s death? Neither the album that bore that name, released in 1973, nor the film that shared it, released in 1974, existed while Dumas was still alive. So, I would instead like to propose a theory that rather than Dumas being heavily indebted to Ra, Ra may have been indebted to the nascent Afrosurrealist tendencies (tendencies which would later be outlined by Miller) extant in

Henry Dumas. I propose that as much as Sun Ra was a friend and compatriot for Dumas, Dumas's thinking and doing seem to have had a lasting resonance within the work of Ra – which would in turn lead Ra to become a founding (if underplayed) member of the Cult of Dumas.

Sun Ra, at least according to Paul Youngquist, was “the great forefather of Afrofuturism, a movement devoted to imagining new black futures” (Youngquist 3); although D. Scot Miller's manifesto was initially quite hostile towards the Afrofuturist movement,²³ Miller has since cooled his opinions on the movement, implied by his conversations with Ytasha Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* – a book which has an entire chapter dedicated to Afrosurrealism. “The emphasis on today rather than the future,” Womack writes in this chapter, “the minimal tech, heavy folklore, and mystical prism...makes an aesthetic all its own” (Womack 167). But she insists that “the [Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism] are flipsides of the same coin, with shared influences and champions. Today, the two aesthetics are so intertwined that it's nearly impossible to talk about one without talking about the other” (Womack 171). I concur with Womack here; despite Miller's Afrosurreal Manifesto including Afrofuturism under the forceful heading “THIS IS NOT AFROSURREALISM,” there is more that is similar between the two than there is difference. Womack cites Sun Ra's work as exemplary of this two-ness between the two aesthetics, Miller's Afrosurreal and her Afrofuture; on one side, Sun Ra has “his love of all things futuristic, space-bound, and electric,” and on the other, he has “his African mythmaking, metaphysics, and real-world efforts to heal through music and the other” (Womack 168). This second side is what connects Ra inextricably to the same aesthetics that Dumas utilized. Even after Dumas's death, Sun Ra was creating and manifesting the marvelous, with similar styles and themes to his friend. In fact, like Dumas, Sun Ra seems to be living long after the death of his physical body; Sun Ra's Arkestra is still

performing and touring all over the world, carrying the same mythmaking and musical healing that Ra proclaimed in his life. Looking at Ra's theories of ontology and mythical craftsmanship, it is easy to see the vibrations that shaped the Cult of Dumas – vibrations that are, in fact, continuing to shape the Afrosurreal Renaissance. Sun Ra's role in both Afrosurreal circles and the Cult of Dumas outlines the contexts in which Dumas's writing was carried into the 21st century, and thus further illustrates the resonances that led to Dumas's work becoming the foundation on which the Afrosurreal Renaissance was built.

The first explicit tie between Sun Ra and the Afrosurreal Renaissance came in the form of an essay published in Issue 5, no. 1 of *Black Camera*. This issue, published in 2013, contains a special section called "Close Up: Afrosurrealism," focusing on Afrosurrealist film, media, and theory. Following in the footsteps of the 1988 "Henry Dumas Issue" of *Black American Literature Forum* as another "Special Issue" in the Afrosurreal canon, this collection showcases the multimedia and interdisciplinary nature of contemporary Afrosurrealism, while highlighting the importance of visual art; this one however, rather than being dedicated to Dumas *specifically*, is still tacitly connected to the same aesthetic tradition mobilized by Dumas. It republished D. Scot Miller's 2013 manifesto alongside critical works examining the work of Kara Walker, William Greaves, Kevin Jerome Everson, and most importantly for my purposes here, Sun Ra. Anthony Reed's piece on Ra, entitled "After the End of the World: Sun Ra and the Grammar of Utopia," dives deep into Ra's 1974 sci-fi/avant-garde film *Space is the Place*. Though its creation began four years after Henry Dumas's murder, the grammar of utopia that Ra uses in his film seems as though it could have been lifted straight from the pages of Dumas's work – particularly in what Reed locates as "a challenge... to avoid reproducing within the projected [utopian] space the hierarchies and contradictions of the dominant society against

which it would offer an alternative” (Reed 118-9). Sun Ra finds this utopian space in outer space, declaring that “Space is the Place,” which, according to Youngquist, “announces the aim of Sun Ra’s cosmo-drama and the space music that sustains it: to envision an abstract space conducive to everyday life” (Youngquist 210). Likewise, the phrase “Space is the Place” offers a way through which readers can access and understand the larger message of another of Dumas’s better-known short stories, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”, a story in which, through the magic of “The afro-horn,” a *space* (in this case an underground jazz club) is crafted into a *place* which holds the power to deconstruct and destroy the hierarchical structure of dominant (i.e. white supremacist) society. In fact, it is quite likely that this story of Dumas’s, published in his first posthumous collection, was one of the first to be taught in an academic context – taught, in fact, by none other than *Professor Sun Ra*.

In 1971, students at UC Berkeley were offered the chance to take a course under the title “African-American Studies 198: The Black Man in the Universe” taught by visiting scholar Sun Ra. Thanks to a 2010 post on the blog *New Day*, we have access to the full reading list for this course (the one and perhaps only time Sun Ra was ever able to preach his philosophy in front of a group of students rather than a group of concert-goers). The syllabus includes such texts as The Egyptian Book of the Dead, the anthology *Black Fire* edited by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal²⁴, the King James Bible (which he refers to as “The Source Book of Man’s Life and Death”), and, most notably, both *Ark of Bones and Other Stories* and *Poetry for My People* – the first two collections of Henry Dumas’s writing ever published, both published the year before in 1970, marking what was likely the first time Dumas appeared on any syllabus. This class proceeded in a way parallel to Sun Ra’s ideology and aesthetic, with Ra jumping from idea to idea, seemingly with only the most tenuous connections, and breaking down language in such a way as to

uncover some hidden meaning behind practically every facet of human existence – indeed, performing similar work to what I’ve done in the first two sections of this critical biography.

Biographer John Szwed describes an average lecture by Ra thusly:

Sun Ra wrote biblical quotes on the board and then ‘permutated’ them—rewrote and transformed their letters and syntax into new equations of meaning... His lecture subjects included Neoplatonic doctrines; the application of ancient history and religious texts to racial problems; pollution and war; and a radical reinterpretation of the Bible in light of Egyptology. (Szwed)

Despite Ra’s staunch opposition to having his lectures recorded, there thankfully exists one audio recording of at least a portion of a class. In this succinct 47-minute recording, Ra covers Shakespeare, the Bible, contemporary race relations, Egyptian mythology, acoustics, linguistics, James Baldwin, mathematics, and the nature of good and evil. Most interesting – and most appropriate for our examinations of how Dumas remains relevant to modern Afrosurrealist thought – are Ra’s words regarding vibrations and music, and the ways in which they can warp and change one’s identity through language. It is easy to see this lesson being paired with Dumas’s story of creative placemaking, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”, which is perhaps one of the most Ra-like stories in Dumas’s entire body of work. So, before examining Professor Ra’s lesson, it will be useful for us to have a grasp of the story that very well could have been assigned the night before as homework. This will hopefully also elucidate the close relationship between Sun Ra’s philosophy and Dumas’s conception of the world.

“Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” is a relatively brief story, and, like many of Dumas’s works, it leaves much up to interpretation. However, when juxtaposed with the thinking and doing of Sun Ra, the meaning behind the story finds resonance that expands beyond its meagre few pages. In it, Dumas crafts a legend surrounding “The afro-horn,” a mystical saxophone about which “there were more rumors... than there were ears and souls that had heard the horn speak”

(“Will the Circle” 105). It is said that “there are only three afro-horns in the world,” which were “forged from a rare metal found only in Africa and South America” (“Will the Circle” 109). It is notable, of course, that Africa and South America were where, arguably, the Transatlantic Slave Trade both began and ended. The afro-horns, then, begin and end with the spectre of enslaved blackness, a ghost which persists and haunts much of modern culture, and which is diametrically opposed to the forces of white supremacy. Over the course of the story, it is revealed that this instrument, crafted from the ores and commodities extracted from and by Black bodies, holds the power to kill any white person who hears its tones – thus crafting a space free (by force) from white supremacy. Using music, the afro-horn inscribes the story’s titular circle within this jazz club, forming even from the first paragraph “a spiraling circle” of Black bodies that “move[s] in a soundless rhythm as if it were the tiny twitchings of an embryo” (“Will the Circle” 109). When Jan, Ron, and Tasha, the story’s three white interlopers, attempt to break through the circle, the sonorous vibrations of the afro-horn overtake them, and they succumb to its mystical power. The story ends with the discovery of the bodies of these three whites deceased, after the birth of “a child” who “climbed upon the chords of sound, growing out of the circle of the womb” (“Will the Circle” 110). This is more than just sound, however. The music produced by the afro-horn is specifically referred to as “vibrations”. In fact, some form of the word “vibrate” appears at least six times in this six-page story, and it is these vibrations that could be said to engineer Black rebirth at the reasonable cost of white death. While it is possible that Dumas picked up the philosophy of music-as-vibration-as-existential-power from Sun Ra, it is just as likely that Ra gained insight into the nature of vibrations from his discussions with Dumas during both of their time spending time in Slugs’ Saloon²⁵. What is definite, however, is that the message of Dumas’s

“Circle” lived on beyond Dumas’s own life through the teaching, speaking, and creating of Sun Ra.

Just as the vibrations created by the Afro-horn in Dumas’s jazz club were incompatible with white existence, Ra, in his lecture, asserts that “the white race, they’ve got certain ways they have to go, certain things they have to do. They’re on a different vibration” (06:25). This theorization of vibration seems to be in-step with the scene in “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” where Probe is said to have his “head tilted toward the vibrations of the music as if the ring of sound from the six wailing pieces was tightening” (“Will the Circle...” 105). In response to these vibrations the circle tightens, forming a womb-like place of safety, which is then attacked and ruptured by the white intruders. These three white interlopers attempt to talk the talk, so to speak, in order to breach the club’s perimeter, but despite their “lingo,” they are not in tune with the vibrations of the circle they are attempting to break. Ra offers an explanation why this is the case, because despite the fact that “language molds you into a particular thing, vibration-wise,” (27:22) “a Black man throws out different vibration from a white man. That’s why no Black person can ever really be white, and no white person can ever be black” (28:28). For Ra, language isn’t enough, and for Dumas, being able to “speak like” or “understand” jazz culture isn’t enough to save these white intruders. Color is the determining factor here, as “Color itself is like music. You can hear it.” (29:05). Writing several decades later, Reed picks up on this same ideology in Ra’s other work, noting in his discussion of the opening song/chant of Ra’s 1974 film *Space is the Place*:

The reverberations, the transition and overlap between sections of the song and the lines themselves suggest the conjunction of disparate times: a “post” reverberates in the present in which one realizes his or her fate too late (“don’t you know that yet?”), and an impossible time that cannot move forward (“it’s after the end of the world”) but nonetheless does. (Reed 125)

By this logic it seems these vibrations transcend time, existing like Dumas's Arks in a stasis outside of time, existing simultaneously in a past, a present, and a future existence.

In the course of his Berkeley lecture, Ra passes around a book of Egyptian Grammar. It would seem, from what Sun Ra says in the available recording, that this Egyptian grammar is the same grammar of utopia that Reed would later locate in Ra's film. For Ra, "utopia" exists in the ancient Egyptians, or, more broadly, the "natural self," to which he believes the modern Black person has no access in their current form: "Now see Black people have got to change completely. You've got to turn loose everything you've got and get to be your natural self. Now the instant you become your natural self... well you're gonna be alright. Because there isn't anything better than your natural self" (17:00). The closer one is to nature and the natural, apparently, the "stronger" one becomes, at least in Sun Ra's eyes. "If you got in tune with nature, you could get what you want," he says (46:30); separate from nature, in a space constructed by whites, "black" is inextricably linked with "evil." But Sun Ra to that says, "I'm 'evil', the incarnation of 'evil,' because I'm Black... I come and say 'Yes, so what?'" (40:02). In his Black utopia, which is the same as the center of Dumas's circle, a place Dumas calls "the womb [of] the Afro-horn" ("Will the Circle..." 109), Ra posits that there is only Blackness, and through Blackness, beauty. "Because Black *is* beautiful," Ra says, "though many people associate it with death. So what? What's greater than death?... Everything bows down to death." (18:02). To him, Blackness has a power unmatched by anything this world (a world he sees as corrupted and tainted by whites) can offer, and therefore a separate, Black utopia must be established where Black Power is free to be released. To access this Black utopia,

"All you have to do is be evil and wicked like me... You're gonna have to be over in another realm and dimension of thinking, because these people are not playing with you. Any time you bring up a righteous man, they're gonna oppose it. Do you think they're

gonna let you be righteous and go to heaven and leave them behind? Ain't nothing white good. Everything white is evil. I ain't never met a good white person, and I never will, because they weren't *made* 'good'. They were *made* evil and wicked, an imitation of the evil and wicked Black man." (42:25)

In other words, in Ra's philosophy the Black man, in order to counteract the antiblack society in which he lives, must construct for himself a "*myth*. And nothing that has ever been is a part of what I'm talking about. Because I'm saying that Black folks need a myth-ocracy instead of a dem-ocracy, because they're not gonna make it in anything else" (38:22). And this is *precisely* what Afrosurrealism seeks to do. If we return to the second point in Miller's "Afrosurreal Manifesto," now with Sun Ra's wisdom in hand, we are better equipped to access the "invisible world striving to manifest" which Afrosurrealists seek to uncover (Miller). Equally, the importance of being like "nature" in Ra's philosophy is given new color when we acknowledge that "nature (including human nature) generates more surreal experiences than any other process could hope to produce" (Miller). Dumas was *writing* these myths, and calling this invisible world into existence, when Sun Ra knew him; perhaps that is why, "Of the friends and family who mourned the loss of Henry, Sun Ra... 'became angrier than anyone had ever seen him before, and had raged on and on for days, cursing the city and its inhabitants'" (Leak 153). This passionate understanding of Dumas explains why Dumas was included not just once, but twice²⁶ on Sun Ra's syllabus in 1971. It is clear that the space-travelling Afrofuturist prophet saw in Dumas what D. Scot Miller would see in him in 2013, and what I see in him now. Dumas epitomized the ability of mythmaking to create a world that actively opposed whiteness. Sun Ra was very clear and vocal through his writing, teaching, and music-making that "Space is the Place" for Black existence; Sun Ra, then, carried within him Dumas's own knowledge of "an entirely different world organically connected to this one," and found this world – where else? – in the place of space.

A year after his tenure at Berkeley, Sun Ra began work on his filmic opus, *Space is the Place*, which continues and expands upon his previous ideation of vibrations as that which separates Black people and whites. In fact, the film begins with him making the following observation about a new planet he has discovered:

The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth. Planet Earth sound of guns, anger, frustration. There's no one to talk to up on planet Earth to talk to who would understand. We'll set up a colony for Black people here. See what they can do on a planet all their own, with no white people there. They could drink in the beauty of this planet. It would affect their vibrations – for the better, of course. (*Space is the Place* 01:51)

Sun Ra picks up the vibrations that echoed in Dumas's jazz club and imagines an entire planet that is created just for Black existence. Ra's film is strange, at times hilarious, at times impenetrable, but constantly expressing the Afrosurreal aesthetic. This is what made Anthony Reed's essay "After the End of the World: Sun Ra and the Grammar of Utopia" a perfect addition to the genre-shaping 2013 issue of *Black Camera*. In the film, Ra portrays a demigod/alien lifeform seeking to transport all non-white people to the planet cited above, and in doing so bring about the end of the world. This framed by an ongoing battle between Sun Ra and another being known only as The Overseer. The two play some sort of esoteric card game using Tarot cards while sitting in an extradimensional desert – as Youngquist puts it, "Astro-black mythology faces off against worldly pleasure in a game to claim the souls of black folk" (Youngquist 210). The action shifts back and forth between this Seventh Seal-esque extraplane and the primary action on Earth, where Ra attempts to convince radical Black men and women to join him and leave earth before the apocalypse comes, all while being hunted by NASA agents and the Overseer himself. Reed proceeds to meticulously pick apart and close-read the film through a largely Marxist lens. The Overseer and the NASA agents attempting to kidnap and kill Ra fulfill the role of "The Man," representation of the racist hegemony that the Black young

people in the film are fighting against, and from whom Sun Ra eventually rescues them. Reed, through Sun Ra's work, situates "space" as a distinctly revolutionary realm, pointing out the ways in which "Ra was attempting to create a space outside of systems of domination, that his project more often seems concerned with showing the space within those systems, the hinges, the joints, the places where it seems vulnerable to attack" (Reed 135). In this way, Sun Ra exists not strictly in the realm of Afrofuturism, but instead exists squarely alongside Dumas in the Afrosurreal present. "Space," in Ra's hybrid ancient/futuristic conception of his own existence and art, goes beyond the traditional space-age aesthetics usually associated with science fiction. Instead, his film is closer to Dumas's "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?", engaging current modes of political discourse by crafting a mythology outside of the dominant hegemonic modes of thinking. Ra is rebelling against the ideologies that have become commonplace in his reality in the 70s. Reed postulates that this film, much like Afrosurrealism itself, is a battle between past and future, waged in the tumultuous mythos of the present. In fact, Ra is exceptionally aware of the current political climate in which he is operating. Appearing in his film before a group of radical Black youth, he posits that

I'm not real—just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, you'd have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as a reality, I come to you as the myth. Because that's what black people are: myths...I'm actually a presence sent to you from your ancestors" (*Space is the Place* 24:28).

Here, as in his entire philosophy, Ra asserts himself as separate from time and place, with a foot in the past, and a foot in the future, putting his body squarely in the present. These words spoken by Ra's film persona echoes lyrics of his 1970 song "Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)," off of his album "After the End of the World" "If you are not a reality, whose myth are you? If you are not a myth, whose reality are you?" Like Dumas did, Ra offers an alternative

reality outside of both temporality and materiality. Reed recognizes that “when Ra claims, ‘I’m talking about impossibilities. So I have to play things that are impossible,’ he is neither discussing mere flights of fantasy or escapism, nor is he strictly speaking metaphorically. He is describing an effort to bring about a more fundamental change in “reality” itself, that is, in ideology” (Reed 123). The new ideology that Ra proposes relies upon “What appears to be separatism,” but upon closer examination, “opens to myth, as Sun Ra sheds history as a condition for racial identity” (Youngquist 212). This myth is the astro-black mythology of Afrosurrealism, which makes up what D. Scot Miller calls “a ‘future-past’ called RIGHT NOW” (Miller), and which “can transport people to a brave new black world.” (Youngquist 213). It is a myth that exists outside of time, and a myth that is actively and ferociously opposed to the machinations of white supremacy. Thus, the thinking of Henry Dumas, Sun Ra, and D. Scot Miller appear to be all interconnected; their united in its devotion to the separate world organically connected to this one, the invisible world striving to manifest, the place that is space, and the space that is place.

Epilogue: The Canonization of an Afrosurreal Prophet

As one of (if not the) first people to bring Dumas's writing into the classroom, Sun Ra was instrumental in solidifying Dumas's place in the Afrosurreal tradition; one of the reasons I take pains in this project to elucidate the connection between this esoteric musician and my main subject is that Ra is one of the few members of the Cult of Dumas – a cult whose ranks include well-respected authors like Amiri Baraka and Toni Morrison – who was *not* archived in the Spring 1988 issue of *Black American Literature Forum*. This special issue contains almost the entirety of Dumas scholarship published before D. Scot Miller's Afrosurreal Manifesto, and has been omnipresent throughout my examination of Dumas's life. Over 50 different writers and scholars are contained within its pages, each expressing in their own ways how unique and important Henry Dumas was and is and will continue to be. Henry Dumas, like the characters of his stories, exists outside of time. The publication of his work was posthumous, disconnected from the "present" of its creation, and yet it still remains relevant to the sociopolitical milieu of the 21st century, inspiring scholars like Miller and myself. And this is not because Dumas was blessed with some sort of supernatural foresight; in fact, as has been proven in the previous chapters, Dumas was relying on exceptionally old stories and mythologies. Instead, it is because Dumas speaks to a necessity that has proved to be timeless: the necessity of community, resistance, and wonder.

However, I still do not feel he has garnered the recognition he deserves. Though the writers whose work makes up the "Henry Dumas Issue" laud the Afrosurreal Prophet for his brilliant technique and emotional resonances, few of them write more than two pages worth of analysis on him. Each piece begins largely the same way, as well, spending half a page or more recounting again and again the way in which he was killed, reproducing again and again the

scene of violence that robbed the world of this literary genius. Though it is important to remember the broken state apparatus that led to his death, to reduce the writer to these circumstances is to do not only him a disservice, but to do his predecessors, his work, and his legacy a disservice. As Shirley Bradley LeFlore eloquently puts it, “DUMAS IS NECESSARY”. His work demands work from its reader, work that can be uncomfortable or unfamiliar at times, but work is *necessary* nonetheless. Without Dumas, Miller’s Afrosurrealism would not exist. Dumas is the crucible and catalyst in which the Afrosurreal Renaissance is forged, as he picks up on the fruits of Black Surrealism, Négritude, and Euro-surrealism, mixes them with the Black fire and community-building passion of the Black Arts Movement, and produces an aesthetic language that has been carried on (whether consciously or not) in the literature of Colson Whitehead and Victor LaValle, in the music of Childish Gambino and Dr. Octagon, and in the films of Jordan Peele and Boots Riley, among many others. It is our duty to learn this language, interpret these mythical symbols, and imagine a world that deconstructs and defies the efforts of white supremacy. Henry Dumas mobilizes a mythology carved from the myths of the past, and through them he “creates sensuous gods to hunt down beautiful, collapsed icons” (Miller). He then invites us to use these gods and icons to construct a new world, organically connected to this one.

Now is the age of Dumas. The circumstances of his death proved to be prophetic for his importance to the 21st century. When we remember Dumas, we also remember Trayvon Martin, and Philando Castile, and Stephon Clark. But beyond the killing of unarmed Black men by police, Dumas also draws our attention to the ways in which we can dismantle the white supremacist apparatuses that persist and dominate contemporary society. The Afrosurreal aesthetic transcends periodization and temporality; no matter how white supremacy grows and

evolves, Afrosurrealism will be there to resist it, and to lead the revolution against it. The final story in the most recently-published anthology of Dumas's stories is called "Riot or Revolt?". It is somewhat unique among Dumas's other works, being largely bereft of supernatural elements. Instead, it paints a relatively straightforward, familiar image of a protest that was sparked by the murder of a young black boy in Brooklyn. To close out my analysis of Dumas's life and legacy, I will quote here the final line of "Riot or Revolt?", which is also the final line of the entire anthology: "They gathered around him, and when he shouted 'Freedom!,' they did too" ("Riot" 381). Ultimately what Dumas calls us to do is to shout "Freedom!" along with him. As much as Afrosurrealism is different from Euro-surrealism, it retains one especially important similarity, as expressed by Franklin Rosemont (anthologizer of the Black surrealism) in his introduction to *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings by André Breton*:

"The surrealist project is necessarily in a state of continuous renewal, perpetual 'crisis'. Contrary to imperialism's morbid cultural postscripts... which express the death wish of an entire civilization, every true manifestation of surrealism is a *preface* to the new world of poetry, love and freedom that can only arise from the ashes of the old order."
(Rosemont, "Bréton" 130, italics preserved)

On this, Bréton, Dumas, Sun Ra, and Miller agree; surrealism is a preface to a new world, organically connected to this one, which is free from the threats of imperialism and white supremacy. The Afrosurrealists call us to examine our surroundings through the lens of the surrealist marvelous, and to find ways to riot and revolt against the insufficiencies we find. The 21st century creates more surreal experiences than could ever have been imagined in any other age, and thus Henry Dumas deserves a place at the center of the literary canon now more than ever. For, by examining his life, his work, and his legacy, we find that Dumas provides us with "a universal kind of spirituality," which in turn expresses the triumph of the Afrosurrealist spirit in our hostile, racist world.

Notes

¹ This is a term of my own creation, which I use to refer to the period beginning in the early 20th Century, and ending with Henry Dumas's death in 1968. This period saw publications and manifestos in the surrealist mode by some of the greatest Black writers that the United States have ever seen group. This "Old Guard" of Afrosurrealism included such well-known writers as Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Zora Neal Hurston, and some underground or especially radical writers like Ted Joans and Bob Kaufmann.

² When most people think of "The Surrealist Movement," they are mostly thinking of what I call "Euro-surrealism," which was a radical, avant-garde multi-genre artistic movement geographically concentrated in western European countries during the first half of the 20th century, led by artists like René Magritte, André Breton, and Luis Buñuel. It involved a radical acceptance of raw human consciousness as the fodder for artistic production. For a clear definition for the surrealist aesthetic of this time, see Breton's 1924 "Manifeste du Surréalisme."

³ These include works by filmmaker Jordan Peele (*Get Out*), visual artist Kara Walker (*Darkytown Rebellion*, *Sugar Sphinx*), and Pulitzer-prize winning author Colson Whitehead (*The Intuitionist*, *Zone One*, *Underground Railroad*), among scores of others representing almost every mode of artistic production, from music to poetry to sculpture, and on and on.

⁴ In 2019, we have seen a Black man with superpowers break box office records (*Black Panther*), we have seen a music video that depicts a group of Black children dancing through a scene of chaos and confusion take the internet by storm (Childish Gambino's "This is America"), and we have seen a Black woman win the most prestigious prize in the science fiction world three years in a row (N.K. Jemisin's winning of the Hugo Award in 2016, 2017, and 2018).

⁵ Hence their subtitle, *Surrealist Writing of Africa and the Diaspora*, which I for brevity's sake condense to the phrase "Black surrealism".

⁶ Négritude was a multifaceted movement focused on the opposition of global white hegemonic racism by way of art, politics, and philosophy in order to create a unified Black community that could stand up to the powers of imperialism and colonialism. The word Négritude was originally

coined by and Léopold Sédhar Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the literary journal *L'étudiant Noir*, and came to represent an embrace and celebration of Blackness – specifically in Francophone colonies such as Senegal and Martinique, where both poets would later become prominent statesmen.

⁷ Indeed, it is perhaps a limitation of the anthology that they spend so much of their time considering American Black Surrealism (leaving out non-American surrealist writers of color like Braulio Arenas, Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude, Mohammed Berrada, and others) as well as under-emphasizing the importance of women surrealists. For the time being, I will retain their chronological framework, but I wish to emphasize that *Black, Brown, and Beige* is far from a perfect anthology. My future work will hopefully fill some of the gaps left by this work.

⁸ During a 2012 a reading event at Emory University, Eugene Redmond (who became Dumas's literary executor after a short friendship just before his death) described how “[he and Loretta Dumas] decided not to play up that part [of Henry Dumas's story] after a while, because a lot of people just grabbed on to that... so many people get killed, we didn't want that to obliterate anything or confuse what we were trying to do... so we stopped putting that in his biography” (Redmond Interview 01:24:20).

⁹ In 1935, Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor published the first issue of the short-lived journal *L'Étudiant Noir*. Probably the most notable aspect of *L'Étudiant Noir* was its site as the origin of “Négritude,” coined by Césaire in the third of the journal's issues, as well as being one of the earliest moments when Césaire's name appeared in print.

¹⁰ In his 2016 article titled “Afrosurreal: The Marvelous and the Invisible 2016”, which serves as a follow-up for his *Afrosurreal Manifesto*, D. Scot Miller declares that “Though much has been written and said about artist/activist/statesmen Aimé Césaire, much more needs to be written about his partner Suzanne, a brilliant surrealist thinker, and mother of the *Afrosurreal* aesthetic” (Miller 2016), citing her establishment of *The Marvelous* within the context of Black Surrealism as essential to his conception of *Afrosurrealism*.

¹¹ Despite Miller's reliance on *Invisible Man* as the origin point for *Afrosurrealism*, it must be noted that Black American writers were mobilizing surrealist aesthetics well before Ellison's

novel – as early, in fact, as the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, Zora Neal Hurston was producing work inspired by the mythological Marvelous well before Ellison was writing; Hurston relied heavily on folk tales, song, and religious mythologies in books like *Tell My Horse* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.

¹² This is a unique moment in Henry Dumas’s philosophical development, as he exhibits a kind of conservatism that seems to be counter to the radical aesthetics of most surrealist writers (both Afro- and Euro-). Though it is mere speculation due to the lack of hard written evidence at this time, it could be inferred that Dumas was feeling lost at this point, grasping for an outlet for his deep connection to surreal religions and mythologies. It would only be when he became close to writers and thinkers like Sun Ra that he was able to find a fitting artistic outlet for his religious philosophy.

¹³ I refer here to the theoretical mode outlined by scholars Frank B. Wilderson III (*Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*), Saidiya V. Hartman (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*), and Jared Sexton (*Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*), among others.

¹⁴ Even when casting a net outside of the “typical” academic databases, there is very little scholarship to be found on Henry Dumas between 1988 and 2009; one of the only scholarly articles published during that period to include Henry Dumas in its title was Dana A. Williams’ 1999 article “Making the Bones Live Again: A Look at The “Bones People” in August Wilson’s ‘Joe Turner’s Come and Gone’ and Henry Dumas’s ‘Ark of Bones’”

¹⁵ This term contains a triune meaning: Archive, a physical record of the past. Ark, a vessel for travel in the present. Hive, a site of production for future use.

¹⁶ Beth A. McCoy eloquently summarizes Snead’s claims thusly: “In his monumental “On Repetition in Black Culture,” James Snead examines how European- and African-derived cultures respond to repetition, which he sees as the symptom of ‘nature’s ineluctable circularity’ (146). For Snead, Enlightenment driven European cultures shape repetition into ‘accumulation and growth,’ a futile (if capitalism-friendly) disavowal of both the circularity and its attendant ‘accident and rupture,’ which African-derived cultures acknowledge and make room for (149,

150). Recognizing the dangers of sweeping cultural generalizations, Snead nevertheless argues that cultural attitudes toward repetition reveal the ‘willed grafting onto culture of an essentially philosophical insight about the shape of time and history’ (146)” (McCoy 160)

¹⁷ “If there is going to be peace and legislation, there cannot be war and investigation. It just doesn’t work that way. We must be united at home in order to defeat our adversaries abroad.” – Donald J. Trump, Second State of the Union Address, 2019

¹⁸ This is keeping with the tradition set by Saidiya Hartman in her work *Scenes of Subjection*.

¹⁹ This was a major year for the forces of white supremacy outside of the United States, as well. On November 8th and 9th, Adolf Hitler, who had recently become the leader of the Nazi party in Germany, staged his famous “Beer Hall Putsch,” where he tried to overthrow the government of the Weimar Republic. This was perhaps the first time that the name “Hitler” became a near-household name around the world.

²⁰ Due to the secrecy with which the KKK was operating at that point in history, it is difficult to locate an exact year when their number was the highest, or what that exact number was. However, according to an article by the African American Registry, “At its peak in the mid-1920s, [the KKK’s] membership was estimated at 4 million to 5 million” (“The Ku Klux Klan: A Brief Biography)

²¹ There are, in fact, several implications for the usage of the word “Aba” here, as it is also very close to the word “Ab” or “Abba,” an intimate word for “father” in most Semitic languages. For further information on its usage in religious contexts, see Fr. Paul Tarazi’s “The Name of God: Abba” and Mary Rose D’angelo’s “Abba and ‘Father’: Imperial Theology and the Jesus Traditions.”

²² Sun Ra cleverly referred to the group of rotating musicians that accompanied him as his “Arkestra.”

²³ By the time Miller was writing in 2009, Afrofuturism had become, in brief, the term applied to a trend in African American literature towards speculative and science fiction. This term was first coined by Mark Dery in 1994. He defined it as “speculative fiction that treats African-

American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture — and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery 136)

²⁴ *Black Fire* was, in fact, the first “mainstream” anthology to include Henry Dumas’s writing, and may have been the only time his work appeared in a book (rather than a literary journal) while he was alive, as *Black Fire* was published in the same year as Dumas’s death.

²⁵ There exists a single audio recording of Henry Dumas’s voice: an interview underscored by music, released as an album titled “The Ankh and the Ark: Sun Ra and Henry Dumas in Conversation.” According to the album’s liner notes, “Although no clear date or location is specified [for this recording], it is likely that the dialogues were recorded at the legendary lower east side club Slug’s in 1966 when both Dumas and Sun Ra resided in the New York area.”

²⁶ Three, if you count the inclusion of “Fon” in *Black Fire*. *Black Fire*, edited by Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, was perhaps the most significant instance of publication that Henry Dumas had during his lifetime, and stands as monument to the renown that Dumas could have achieved if his life had not been cut short.

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