



Sean Bonney, 'Time Negatives of Variable Universe: On Sun Ra and Amiri Baraka'. (2022) 14(1): *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.9257>



Time Negatives of Variable Universe: On Sun Ra and Amiri Baraka

Sean Bonney

This essay was originally posted on Sean Bonney's blog *'Round Midnight: Notes on Baraka*, subtitled 'notes and essays on militant poetry and poetics', on 26 July 2019. It was delivered as a talk for *Cesura/ Acceso: Journal for Music and Experimental Politics* in 2014, a recording of which can be found at the following link: <https://soundcloud.com/cesura-acceso/sean-bonney-time-negatives-of-variable-universe-on-sun-ra-and-amiri-baraka>.



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Henry Dumas imagined a musician named Probe, whose 'Afro-Horn' was a repository of occult and revolutionary wisdom that also had the power to kill. His short fiction 'Will The Circle Be Unbroken' is an account of three white people – a musician, a jazz critic and some kind of generic Beatnik – who try to get, and are at first refused entry to a Harlem jazz club called The Sound Barrier. They are at first refused entry for safety reasons, but following the intervention of a local cop they get in. Unfortunately for them the 'safety reasons' are a bit heavier than they might have expected: the Afro-Horn is rumoured to have secret powers, and that evening those rumours turn out to be true. The music opens up a vortex that kills all three of them.

The central musicological statement of Dumas' fable, of the weight carried by music, its simultaneous use as a spiritual balm and actual weapon, was a commonplace in the writing produced by partisans of the Black Arts Movement in the late 60s. Lindsay Barrett, for example, wrote that if a Coltrane solo could be grasped 'as a club', 'wield(ed) with the force that created it', then 'the battle would be near ended'. The suggestion, the metaphor (not only a metaphor) was that the intensity of a Coltrane solo was a carrier of the accumulated rage and misery of the past 400 years of black experience in the US, and that the compression of that rage that each note represented was such that it had actual use as a revolutionary weapon. That African-American music carried such an intensity of knowledge was not something unique to the Black Arts Movement: Ralph Ellison's narrator in *Invisible Man* has visions while smoking weed and listening to Louis Armstrong records, Julio Cortázar wrote about the 'obscure and forgotten central flame' at the centre of the music. W. E. B. DuBois, in the first years of the twentieth century, had spelled out what the content of that flame, that forgetting, actually was, while writing about the sorrow songs (spirituals), which are the root of all African-American music:

I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world . . . They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways. The songs are indeed the sifting of the centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words; and in it we can trace here and there signs of development. My grandfather's grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and the Housatonic, black, little and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees . . . The child sang it to his children and they to their children's

children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children and they to their children's children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music . . . In these songs, I said, the slave spoke to the world. Such a message is veiled and half articulate.

A veiled, half forgotten content, traces of 'barely remembered' African cultures that had been criminalised from the earliest days of chattel slavery. The transformation of that meaning into a weapon – the musical counterpoint to the rejection of the pacifism of the Civil Rights movement as it morphed into the Black Liberation Movement following the murder of Malcolm X – was due to the act of remembering, or, if not remembering, the speaking of what had previously been unvoiced. Duke Ellington had once quipped that 'you could say what you want with a trumpet, but you have to be careful with words', and had also pointed to his own hidden militancy by saying that in music you 'say something by not saying it' (how different, that, to the reprehensible 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it of John Cage). This 'it' is social death, the unspeakable because unknowable, in the process of being, impossibly, spoken and known. Robin Kelley has called 'it' the 'multiplicities of Madness, the nightmares, the terrifying hallucinations embedded in the collective black unconscious'. Cedric Robinson has pointed out that a chief task of the Black Radical Tradition has been to grasp those hallucinations, to turn them inside out, to transform them into revolutionary meaning. Analogous with Walter Benjamin's 'secret' (and so revolutionary) 'cargó' (the metaphor is highly fortuitous) at the heart of esoteric poetry, Robinson notes that the slave-ships had, despite themselves, smuggled 'critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmologies and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs and morality'. This was, for Robinson, 'the embryo of the demon' at the centre of American (and so Western) culture. The artists of the Black Arts Movement were trying to raise that demon, to make clear the social fact at the centre of the metaphor. In an early poem, Amiri Baraka described the task as 'to provoke some meaning/when before there was only hell'. And to provoke meaning means to attack it, to force into being a revolutionary moment where the social metaphor becomes actual, ceases to be at best an image to hide inside, at worst a decorative alibi, becoming instead a working hypothesis.

For Dumas, then, each note Probe played was that metaphor in the process of being turned inside out. He described it as 'an atom stripped of time'. Dumas was a close student of Sun Ra, Ra in turn being the intellectual heart of the early phase of the Black Arts Movement, described by Amiri Baraka as a spiritual advisor to the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem. For Ra, music was metaphor for everything that exists, which itself is only the active sub-set, the detonator, of all that does not exist. Bassoon

player James Jacson gives this example of the kind of instructions Ra would give to his players during rehearsal:

He once said to me, 'Jacson, play all the things you don't know! You'll be surprised by what you don't know. There's an infinity of what you don't know.' Another time he said, 'You know how many notes there are between C and D? If you deal with those tones you can play nature, and nature doesn't know notes. That's why religions have bells, which sound all the transient tones. You're not musicians, you're tone scientists'.

Sun Ra's music has been accused of being weird. When he hit New York from Chicago in the very early 60s, the absolute otherness of what the Sun Ra Arkestra were doing seemed to mirror the escalation in absolute criticism of and confrontation with the everyday world that was happening everywhere. Years later, Baraka recalled that 'the Weirdness, Outness, Way Outness, Otherness was immediate. Some space metaphysical surrealistic bop funk . . . they put on weird clothes, space helmets, flowing capes. They did rituals played in rituals, evoked lost civilisations, used strangeness to teach us open feeling as intelligence. In those cellars and lofts, Sun Ra spun a cosmic metaphor. He was a philosopher musician. He used music as language, and image'. The music, in the stage directions for *Black Mass*, the play he and Ra collaborated on, was described by Baraka as being of 'shattering proportions'. Much of it still sounds startling. Talking drums, electronic noise, Fletcher Henderson, fully out free jazz, easy listening schmaltz, poetry, space mythology proto-dub, technology, ballroom music, all of it as delicate and as swinging as Duke Ellington, as devastating as the collective moons of Jupiter and Saturn all crashing into the sea, or a colonised people storming the enemy citadel. All of this taking place in vaguely dangerous holes on the Lower East Side and elsewhere.

Ra described music as a 'neglected plane of wisdom', a vocabulary of, echoing DuBois, 'unsaid words'. 'The music is not only just music', he wrote, 'It touches and projects other dimensions'. That is, it 'touches and projects' what, according to the official world, is 'not' – a recurring motif in his poetry, liner notes to his albums, and other writings. Play what you don't know, he advised his musicians, and, of course, what you don't know in its wider sense includes what you 'can't know'. And, from the perspective of a world constantly enforcing social death – when, in Orlando Patterson's words, your threat to the dominant order can only be felt in a supernatural sense – what you 'can't know' is all, finally, that you do know. Ra described himself as a 'living myth', and wrote in a poem that 'when the person Myth meets the person Reality/The

spirit of the impossible-strange appears'. Baraka, writing about Dumas had this to say, which equally could apply to Ra:

(His) 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.

And when the 'entirely different world' meets this one, the mysticism ('you can call me Mr Mystery', he once quipped) of Ra's counter-system becomes absolutely clear. The moment of the 'impossible-strange' is the moment when it becomes possible to speak the 'unsaid words', and where the racist enemy is forced to listen to what they can't know. Archie Shepp, writing in the jazz magazine *Downbeat* in 1965, in an essay reprinted in the anarchist magazine *King Mob*, voices the exoteric core of Ra's esoteric system:

I am an antifascist artist. I play about the death of me by you. I exult in the life of me in spite of you. I give some of that life to me whenever you listen to me, which right now is never. My music is for the people. If you are a bourgeois, then you must listen to it on my terms. I will not let you misconstrue me. That era is over.

Speaking the truth to power might as well be speaking in tongues. There is a chasm between Shepp's plain speech, and the bourgeoisie that he is speaking to. His 'terms' are non-negotiable, that is, impossible and incomprehensible. He speaks from behind his death, and the only way that speech is to be audible, the only way the bourgeoisie can accept that he is living, is from beyond the bounds of their own death. They can only communicate as two living forces – across the border-lines of separate eras, of the borderline between the world we cannot accept and the world that does not exist, if they understand that it is the dead talking to the dead. Because the actual content of Shepp's simple antifascism is not so far away from the reality described by Henry Dumas in his liner notes for Ra's album *Cosmic Tones for Mental Therapy*:

THE QUASAR (QUASI-STELLAR OR STAR-LIKE) EMITTED
RADIO WAVES REACHED OUR GALAXY AFTER 13 BILLION
LIGHT YEARS AND SUN RA, WHOSE MIND-WAVES ARE SYN-
CHRONISED TO NATURE WITH COORDINATED INTUITION,

PRISMED THE VOICE OF THE QUASAR ON A COSMIC TONE
 PIANO AND THIS THUNDER IS LIKE SHOCK WAVES SHAKING
 AWAY THE STAGNATION OF LIFE IN THE MIND, WHEN YOU
 CAN MOVE IN A DIMENSION FASTER THAN LIGHT YOU
 SOLVE THE RIDDLE OF TIME AND YOUR MIND'S COSMOSIS
 COMPLETES THE EQUATION: LIFE EQUALS DEATH, FOR IN
 THE EXPANDING UNIVERSE THE INFINITE DESTROYS THE
 ILLUSION OF LIMITATIONS WHICH TRAP MAN TO THE
 PLANET EARTH. THE INFINITY OF CONTINUOUS AND
 ACCELERATING MOTION CHASES THE FLEEING GALAXY
 ANDROMEDA . . . THE MUSIC OF THIS FLIGHT ENERGIZES
 THE QUASAR AND SUN RA RECEIVES TONES FROM THAT
 QUASAR WHICH HAS BECOME PREGNANT WITH
 RADIATION AND THIS COMPLETES THE EQUATION: DEATH
 EQUALS LIFE IN A DYING UNIVERSE WHERE GALAXIES
 COLLIDE AND WHERE DEATH WEARS A MYSTERIOUS
 CROWN OF CONSTELLATIONS CALLED CREATION. TO
 HEAR THIS MUSIC IS TO HEAR THE SOLAR BAND OF REVE-
 LATION. THE TONES REVERBERATING HERE PASS
 THROUGH THE TIME SPECTRUM OF THE ARKESTRA'S MIND
 AND YOU SEE WITH EAR AND WITH EYE AND YOU BECOME
 THE METAGENESIS OF COSMIC ATOMS.

'Radio waves' – it is here, at the point of the most outlandish elements of Ra's music, that it meets the everyday, where a cosmic enormity hits the everyday, where the content of pop radio – and we must remember that there was an important element of pop radio that inside Ra's sound: the version of the Batman theme he recorded in the 60s, and especially those weird doowop records, those sessions he recorded for commercial bands at the beginning of his 'career', and which he always insisted were as much of a part of his music as any other. That is, pop, too, the everyday commercial blah, becomes transformed and made weird by being an element of a secret cargo of social antagonism and cosmic apocalypticism – all those sounds of dying stars and interplanetary interference breaking into the centre of mawkish sounds about lost love, transforming even those mawkish songs into the howls of the sorrow songs. An early poem of Baraka's, 'The Politics of Rich Painters', a carefully directed attack on the Bohemian artists of the Lower East Side whose pretensions he was quickly tiring of as he became increasingly active politically, written around the same time that Ra

would have been recording Cosmic Tones, also deals with the secret cargos of radio transmission, ending with these lines:

. . . . reminding us of lands
our antennae do not reach.

And there are people in these savage geographies
use your name in other contexts
think, perhaps, the title of your latest painting
another name for liar.

These 'savage geographies' are on the first level places far outside the immediate social framework of the New York Bohemia that he, Dumas and Ra all inhabited. They are revolutionary Cuba, Algeria, Congo. But they might also be found in New York itself: as another poem of Baraka's from this period has it, 'In back of the terminal /// where the circus will not go. At the backs of crowds, stooped and vulgar, breathing hate syllables'. They are the weird social space opened up at the centre of a riot, they are also the centre of 'a dying universe where galaxies collide and where death wears a mysterious crown of constellations called creation', they are the notes played by Probe and Sun Ra, they are every syllable of Shepp's glossalaliac plain speech from the pits of social death. And from within these absolutely separate and intimately linked realities they transform the landscape of social reality, which is already a landscape of social antagonism, into one in which liberation struggles and advanced astro-physics make of that landscape a network of dialectically warring signals wherein those savage geographies turn out to be the instant of truth at the centre of the dominant culture's systems of lies. 'The truth concerning this planet is indeed dreadful to behold', Ra wrote, 'how strange it is that the truth should reach the state of the dreadful'.

Chicago musician Joseph Jarman titled a poem that he wrote during this same period 'Non-cognitive Aspects of the City'. It is from these 'aspects' that the radio signals picked up by Baraka and Ra are broadcast: these, ultimately, are Baraka's 'savage geographies', are Probe's 'atom stripped of time'. The Lower East Side, Algeria, Harlem, Outer Space, all converging within a city and a people who have been denied all memory, understanding, visibility or history, who don't actually live in the cities they inhabit, but rather in zones, geographical and psychological, zones patrolled by domestic-imperial policy, zones defined by racism, class oppression and debt, zones that extend backward and forward into history. The counter-Ra. Fanon described it thus: 'a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born'.

Fanon's work, central to the political thinking of the poets associated with the Black Arts Movement is also – to take an analogical leap, or, maybe, to grasp a metaphor as a factual interpretation of reality – central to ways in which we can think about militant poetics in general, and Ra and Baraka's Afro-Surrealism in general. One of Fanon's greatest, and strangest, essays from his involvement in the Algerian War of Independence, 'This Is the Voice of Algeria', charts the relationship of the actual lived life of colonised people with the official statements that came to them from the colonisers. Fanon charts the status of radio within occupied Algeria throughout the 1950s, and strangely or not, his descriptions of that radio are almost descriptions of what we might imagine [to be] the experience of decoding the radio transmissions Dumas describes in his liner notes for *Cosmic Tones*, where those transmissions become sites of conflict, of the battle ensuing when those relegated to absolute social death begin to take back their actual lives from the strongholds of the colonial enemy citadel. For years the colonised, according to Fanon, had been indifferent to the broadcasts from Radio-Algeria, which as far as they were concerned were nothing but 'Frenchmen speaking to Frenchmen': the entirety of the broadcast was a system of lies, of an irreality that was all too real – i.e. the truth transformed into something dreadful – but in the early stages of the liberation struggle, those lies become the site of the first battleground. Faced with the necessity of communication, of the need for a news source, the meaning of the coloniser's broadcasts change, even if their content does not:

The Algerian found himself having to oppose the enemy news with his own news. The 'truth' of the oppressor, formerly rejected as an absolute lie, was now countered by another, an acted truth. The occupier's lie thereby acquired greater reality, for it was now a menaced lie, put on the defensive.

That is to say, the lies of the colonised become activated, becoming therefore an element of a 'truth' that is reaching a boiling point, shimmering, becoming unclear in some places: monstrous and hallucinatory as well as reaching a heretofore impossible clarity (the social relation laid bare in all its vicious modernity). The coloniser contributes to this boiling and intensifying of 'truth' (which, of course, also is a source of a wild, un-nerving 'poetry', where the most commercial and schmaltzy parts of Sun Ra's sound become the wildest, the most out, the most deafening and threatening), by pitching an attack using 'lies' as its battleground. The colonisers jam the radio signals of the colonised. That is, the 'lies' of the colonisers become less language itself than pure noise, sonic warfare. In turn, the voices of the colonised become shattered until no solid meaning can be reached. The expression of meaning, and truth, becomes a

hideous, inaudible hiss. It is here that we see a revolutionary poetic in one of its many forms, its many aspects (non-cognitive) as preparatory study:

The programmes were then systematically jammed, and the Voice of Fighting Algeria soon became inaudible. A new form of struggle had come into being. Tracts were distributed telling the Algerians to keep tuned in for a period of two or three hours. In the course of a single broadcast a second station, broadcasting over a different wave-length, would relay the first jammed station. The listener, enrolled in the battle of the waves, had to figure out the tactics of the enemy, and in an almost physical way circumvent the strategy of the adversary. Very often only the operator, his ear glued to the receiver, had the unhoped-for opportunity of hearing the Voice. The other Algerians in the room would receive the echo of this voice through the privileged interpreter who, at the end of the broadcast, was literally besieged. Specific questions would be asked of this incarnated voice. Those present wanted to know about a particular battle mentioned by the French press in the last twenty-four hours, and the interpreter, embarrassed, feeling guilty, would sometimes have to admit that the Voice had not mentioned it.

But by common consent, after an exchange of views, it would be decided that the Voice had in fact spoken of these events, but that the interpreter had not caught the transmitted information. A real task of reconstruction would then begin. Everyone would participate, and the battles of yesterday and the day before would be re-fought in accordance with the deep aspirations and the unshakable faith of the group. The listener would compensate for the fragmentary nature of the news by an autonomous creation of information.

Everything becomes strange. What is at first revolutionary strategy regarding the distribution of information, the assurance that accurate information ('truths?') can still be passed on, experiences a kind of implosion, whereby the accurate information becomes an obscure signal from elsewhere, where the 'operator' of the radio set becomes instead the 'interpreter', and as the radio itself becomes the Voice, that 'interpreter' becomes the incarnation of that voice. Strategy and rationality turns inside out, becomes seance, irrationality, even madness ('skull-crazies').¹

But this is not the disaster it could be, is not an absolute collapse into a superstitious false consciousness thus making an expropriation of the colonisers' monopoly on the word 'truth' impossible. The opposite is in fact the case. The struggle to hear the 'choppy, broken voice' of the radio leads to an intensification of revolutionary collectivity, and makes the reality, the truth of revolution tangible: 'The nature of this voice recalled in

more than one way that of the Revolution: present 'in the air' in isolated pieces, but not objectively':

Every evening, from nine o'clock to midnight, the Algerian would listen. At the end of the evening, not hearing the Voice, the listener would sometimes leave the needle on a jammed wave-length or one that simply produced static, and would announce that the voice of the combatants was here. For an hour the room would be filled with the piercing, excruciating din of the jamming. Behind each modulation, each active crackling, the Algerian would imagine not only words, but concrete battles.

The 'piercing, excruciating din' is the whirring, necessary psychopathology of revolution consciousness coming into being made material by the modernity of the radio set. The static is not only the sound of the enemy jamming our signals, but the sound of our own thinking as it moves outside of what official language permits, into an 'atom stripped of time', into a 'thunder like shock waves shaking away the stagnation of the life of the mind', where action becomes music that is 'not only music', that touches other dimensions, other planes of there. In *Six Persons*, Baraka describes the 'excruciating din' of the crisis which is necessary for revolutionary consciousness as an active reality, as a process, to emerge:

What they thought of as their life, was actually several lives. All jammed together, happening simultaneously, and separate. And at some pts, what was raised, by undersea contradictions, forced into the light wild contrasts, extremes.

The problem is how to make those 'wild contrasts' absolutely intelligible to us, but unintelligible to the enemy i.e. how to make the excruciating din work as a strategy, as a means of infecting the 'lies' that we live under, and make them visible, to translate these dialectical nebulae made up of static and screams into clear speech.

Note

- ¹ [Editors' note: Bonney here refers to a phrase from Amiri Baraka's novel *Six Persons* (1974), discussed in his essay 'Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City'. See *The Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka*, ed. by Henry C. Lacey (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2000), p.388, and Bonney, 'Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City', *Notes on Baraka*, 2019. Online <<https://notesonbaraka.blogspot.com/>>]
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