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"Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?": Malcolm X, Visual Culture and the Challenge of the Black Aesthetic

My paper today will look at what I think of as an understudied part of Malcolm X's legacy and that is his contributions to the growth of radical African American visual culture in the late sixties and seventies. I want to look particularly at the contributions his thought made to "seeding" the Black Arts movement, the radical arts movement that saw itself in the words of Larry Neal as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister to the Black Power concept."<sup>1</sup> It was defined by the work of people like Neal, Amiri Baraka, Jane Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Henry Dumas, Hoyt Fuller and Haki Madhabhuti. While primarily a literary movement, I am especially interested in the ways in which the writers, artists and musicians of the movement attempted to redefine perception especially around visibility and so I am especially interested in their attempts to define a Black Aesthetic. Malcolm X provided a blueprint for change that was contingent on a personal transformation that was as deeply perceptual as it was political. In a 1960 debate with Bayard Rustin, an architect of the March on Washington and a key civil rights organizer, Malcolm X explained: "Instead of changing the mind of the white man we change the mind of the black man and make him accept himself and as soon as he accepts himself he'll solve his own problem."

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<sup>1</sup> Neal, Larry. *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Writings* New York: Thunders Mouth Press, 1989.

When we remember the era we tend to remember its tremendous sonic output whether in the music of people like John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra, Eric Dolphy and Albert Ayler or in the spoken word experiments of its poetry. Scholarship tends to think through the period with sound metaphors as well even when they are writing about political or literary work. For example, Kimberly Benston's *Performing Blackness* and Aldon Nielson's *Black Chant* both explore the Black Arts movement's literary production in relationship to the music of the era produced by musicians such as Sun Ra and John Coltrane while a text like Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie* thinks through Robert Williams considerable contribution to the Black Power movement through his work on the radio program that he created while in exile in Cuba. More recently, Carter Mathes book *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature After Civil Rights* considers the use of sound in the production of an aesthetic of literary resistance.

I want to center the visual rather than the sonic in my presentation today because the change that Malcolm X is calling for is grounded in a lived experience of racism that is profoundly dependent on visual cues to enact its racist ordering of the world. In 1962, Malcolm X responded to claims that that the Nation of Islam was teaching hate with the powerful response: "They say that we teach hate but who taught you to hate yourself?" This becomes a rhetorical exercise in a perceptual reordering of the world.

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Malcolm X spoke these powerful words at a press conference held before the funeral of Ronald Stokes. (image of the murder of Stokes) Stokes was a Nation of

Islam member that Malcolm X personally recruited into the Los Angeles Mosque, a mosque that Malcolm X founded.<sup>2</sup> At the funeral, Malcolm X would note that: “Brother Ron...was a good man, a clean man, an intelligent man and an innocent man when he was murdered.” Malcolm X was reportedly so moved upon hearing about Stokes murder that he wept.<sup>3</sup> According to Manning Marable, the circumstances surrounding the murder of Stokes “shattered” Malcolm X and would lead to his eventual split with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. The night he was murdered, Stokes, a Korean War veteran and secretary of the mosque, was helping fellow mosque members unload used clothes from the trunk of one of the member’s car when they were confronted by the police, who accused them of stealing the clothes. The Los Angeles Police Department had been monitoring the mosque for a year for potentially subversive activity. (image of the murder of stokes)

At some point during the confrontation between the members of the mosque, the police, and the crowd that gathered, the police called for back-up and a decision was made to raid the mosque. In the ensuing raid, the mosque members who were unarmed were brutally beaten and seven were shot. One member was paralyzed while Stokes was killed. Stokes was reportedly shot while his hands were raised in surrender. Many scholars note the significance of this speech as a moment when Malcolm X’s focus was turning away from the Nation as a religious force and towards direct political action. Malcolm X, who fought with Elijah Muhammad about

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<sup>2</sup> Wainstock, Dennis D. *Malcolm X: African American Revolutionary*. New York: McFarland Press, 2009: 61.

<sup>3</sup> Marable, Manning. *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*. New York: Penguin Press, 2011: 207.

the appropriate response to police violence, used the moment—against the wishes of Muhammad—to organize with civil rights groups in a rally against police brutality.

Malcolm X words at the funeral and press conference are timely as he makes the powerful and still relevant pronouncement that “the Black community is a police state.” (image of the murder of stokes) In a speech marked by political, rather than religious rhetoric, he also utters the series of rhetorical questions we have heard. These questions are very much concerned with the reality of racism that is physical, embodied and *visual*.

This call to make a new racial order was incredibly destructive and constructive in the moment of Malcolm X’s death. (Image of Malcolm X at funeral in white) It was a moment that called for radical reconstruction. Larry Neal, who was in the Audubon Ballroom when Malcolm X was murdered, characterizes his death as a moment that “emotionally fractured young black radicals.”<sup>4</sup> This fracturing was catastrophic for some but for others, like Neal, it would cause them to attempt to radically reformulate the world that had killed Malcolm X. Neal would use the moment to propel the idea that African Americans should use their considerable intellectual and artistic output to define a new world view based around the idea of a Black Aesthetic. The Black Arts movement would serve as a response to Malcolm X’s assertion “the American Negro is a Frankenstein, a monster who has been stripped of his culture and doesn’t even know his name”<sup>5</sup> His prophetic call to reexamine oppression as manifested in every aspect of Black life led to the radical

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<sup>4</sup> Neal, 128.

<sup>5</sup> *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1988): 33

desire to discover new ways of *seeing* the world. Among poets and intellectuals, this desire included the aspiration to define and assert a uniquely Black aesthetic.

I want to turn now to some examples of this Black Aesthetic idea put into practice in non-visual Black Arts movement work that placed visual metaphors at the center of their reconstructive enterprise. I want to start with Henry Dumas experimental short story “The Ark of Bones,” which was published posthumously in 1974. At the center of “The Ark of Bones” is the powerful visual metaphor for which the story is named. The Ark of Bones is a mysterious ship—“a soulboat” as one of the characters labels it—that trawls the Mississippi River collecting the bones of people of African descent that have been deposited there as a result of acts of anti-Black violence. The ship is discovered by two boys, one of who joins the ship to act as a member of its crew at the end of the story. (Ark of Bones image)

Death saturates the life and the work of Henry Dumas who was himself murdered by a New York City Transit officer while waiting for a subway just a few months after the assassination of Martin Luther King. (Dumas was only 33 at the time he was killed.) Much has been written about Dumas investment in sound and rightfully so. He was actually killed coming home from a rehearsal of experimental jazz musician Sun Ra’s Arkestra. (Ark and the Ankh Image) But what lies at the center of “Ark of Bones” are powerful *visual* metaphors the two most striking being the Ark itself and the main characters whose name HEADEYE replicates the visionary role that he plays in the story. (Image of first page)

Headeye, who is also called Eagle-Eye, is according to the narrator, “bout the smartest nigger in that raggedy school” and is called that because “on Headeye,

everything is stunted 'cept his eyes and head."<sup>6</sup> One of importance aspects of Dumas' story is in its attempt to use for poetic purposes the everyday, ordinary language of Black people as rooted in the author's childhood in Sweethome, Arkansas. But there is nothing ordinary about the story that the language tells. In fact, the story has been labeled Afro-surrealism by Scott Saul. Throughout the story, we like the narrator are repeatedly made witness to things that we never quite understand. The narrator is told repeatedly by the main character "You my witness." However, Headeye's visionary and perceptive capabilities outstrip those of the both narrator and the reader so much that even when we are shown the Ark in its entirety we are not sure what to make of it. But we are sure that we are supposed to be looking at it. When Headeye attempts to explain the presence of the Ark by referencing the Biblical prophet Ezekiel, things get more complicated rather than clearer. The character of Headeye seems to suggest that we people of African descent in the Americas have not fully explored or made use of our perceptual powers, our vision and our sight and that we will not find resolution until we do.

(Image of Malcolm X at funeral in white)

The murder of Malcolm X led to a flowering of Black Art dedicated to memorializing his vision. Everyone from Gwendolyn Brooks, Larry Neal, Haki Madhubuti, Margaret Walker, Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez, Robert Hayden and Etheridge Knight wrote poems dedicated to Malcolm X in the wake of his assassination. The Malcolm X poems of the Black Arts movement exist as a kind of elegy not only to the man but the lost potential of the moment. Much of the elegiac

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<sup>6</sup> Dumas, Henry. *Echo Tree: The Collected Short Stories of Henry Dumas*. Coffee House Press, 2003: 9.

quality of this work is carried through the visual. (Image of Malcolm X at funeral in white) Margaret Walker's "For Malcolm X" notes the "Snow-white moslem head-dress around a dead black face!" while Gwendolyn Brooks poem "Malcolm X" reads "He had the hawk man's eyes./ We gasped. We saw the maleness." These works all embody a desire to witness and to catalogue trauma in an attempt to restore sight—the power of seeing—in the process of continuing Malcolm's vision. In another set of provocative rhetorical questions Malcolm X asked: "One hundred million Africans were uprooted from the African continent. Where are they today? One hundred million Africans were uprooted, one hundred million...Excuse me for raising my voice—were uprooted from the continent of Africa. At the end of slavery you didn't have 25 million Africans in the western hemisphere. What happened to those 75 million Africans? Their bodies are at the bottom of the sea, or their blood and bones have fertilized the soil of this country."<sup>7</sup> The focus on the visual in the work of BAM allows us the expanded perception to see the dead that history tried to erase or bury. It allows us to use that witnessing to envision a liberated future.

(Image from Oakland celebration)

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<sup>7</sup> "The Black Revolution" speech given April 8, 1964. <http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-black-revolution-april-8-1964.html>