

Sun Ra at UC Berkeley: The Power of Words and the Black Man in the Cosmos

In his course at UC Berkeley in 1971, famous musician Sun Ra used his platform as the artist-in-residence to speak on his own personal philosophies. During his lecture, Sun Ra mirrors his free-jazz style as he uses language, biblical references, and egyptology, supplemented by his own beliefs, to articulate his thoughts on the place of the Black man in the cosmos in the past, present, and the future.

A large portion of the lecture focuses on the importance of language, wisdom, and knowledge to history. Ra focuses on the etymology of words in particular, and how many can be traced back to ancient civilizations, especially focusing on those of Egyptian descent. One word that Ra returns to many times throughout the lecture is Human, or Man, or Mankind, as he reminds listeners that they all mean different things. The word Human in particular, according to Ra, was derived from Man and the word Hu, a powerful Egyptian god. “People worship things and they don’t even know what they are worshiping,” says Ra. Even though these languages are ‘dead’, or the language is not known by the people who are using the words that are derived from it, that language can still affect the meaning of words.

Ra also speaks on the manipulation of words, which has been used to control people throughout history. “The white race is very good at changing words around,” says Ra. Throughout history, white people, as the dominant race in America, not only have the dominant narrative but also the ability to control the narrative that is recorded and passed down to future generations. For example, white people are lauded as the “good people” in history. America’s history was built “by good people, for good people.” Essentially, it was built by white people to perpetuate the systems that enforce white supremacy. In this way, wisdom is controlled by white people. Everyone has a part of the wisdom, but, as Ra says, “we are taught by the people who

messed the books up.” Thus, society is set up from the beginning as anti-black. Society was created without the Black narrative included in it, since “America’s blueprint didn’t have Black people in it.”

However, Ra was on a search for the truth, about the history of the Black Race and the universe at large. Ra urges to his audience the importance of equations in this search. To Ra, people are made by equations, and can also be assessed in that way. In fact, they must be assessed in that way to find the truth. People, especially white people, are not truthful. If the truth does not benefit you, he says, then it isn’t needed. You must investigate and research from many places to find even a glimpse of the truth. Ra sees himself as a purveyor of truth, someone who is attempting to spread wisdom to those who are in desperate need of it. However, his truths are neglected, because they are not congruent with the dominant narrative. The truth, he says, does no good. He states that the Black race should invest in a mythocracy rather than a democracy, since they “won’t make it” in anything else. “History has no Black folks at all,” he says. Ultimately, Ra disregards the truth, but he still stands by his method of collecting wisdom and knowledge.

Ra’s knowledge, however, comes from beyond Earth. He states that his knowledge comes from the creator of the universe itself, a force different from god or nature. Ra shares his knowledge about this creator, who he says will help those who ask for it but otherwise removes itself from human affairs. Black people, and humanity at large, Ra says, are of no use to the creator of the universe because they are of no use to themselves. He says that the creator will not come to the planet when the people there don’t care for themselves. God has taken pity on humanity and left them to their devices, but when and if the creator is called upon, it will fix the universe and restore things to be as they are supposed to be, altering the universe itself.

In his philosophy, Ra theorizes in terms of sound, music, and vibrations. Sound is essential to the universe, in the sense that nature and the universe were created to be in tune with each other. In fact, the universe is always in tune according to Ra. However, nature on this planet is not in tune. The issues facing the contemporary world – specifically anti-blackness, oppression, and the inability of people to live in harmony with one another – have caused these issues. Ra refers to the universe as the Arkestry of the cosmos, and the planets all as instruments within that arkestry, with the creator being the master musician who plays and tunes these instruments. “If the planet is not in tune,” Ra warns, “it may be kicked out of the arkestry.” In a more localized sense, Ra speaks of vibrations. These are the sounds that individual people give off, and they define who and what these people are. Ra also states that languages hold different vibrations, including his language, the language of music. Just as sound is important for the harmony of the universe, vibrations are important for the harmony of people on earth with one another. Vibrations make people who they are, and who people are creates vibrations in turn.

Despite his rather otherworldly personal philosophies, Ra references the bible extensively in his lecture. He stated that he “didn’t regard it as sacred” but “wanted to find out what it meant.” He talks about abandoning righteousness, taking from the pages of Job, and reconnecting with nature and the natural self. He also talks about the purpose of the bible, which he states is to shroud the truth in mystery and ultimately teach people how to die meekly. However, the most prevalent teaching that he takes from the bible is the meaning of the word ‘Man’.

According to the bible, Ra says, man is filthy and abominable. The Black man, especially, has been the victim of this characterization throughout history. However, Ra embraces the title that white people have thrown upon him. “I am wicked,” Ra says. “I am evil.” In fact, he

states that every Black man is wicked and evil. The white race will not accept Black people or Blackness as good or positive in society. Therefore, rather than fight a losing battle against these ideas, Ra rejects truth and embraces his 'wickedness', saying that evil is a part of humanity. "The truth is no good because I can't use that," says Ra, "It is not recognized by the white race." Though he embraces evil, Ra's words also imply that the truth is that Blackness is not evil, and in fact whiteness is the evil that is pervading the Earth and the universe at large.

Ra goes on to tell that every white man is evil or wicked. Whiteness and its oppressive nature in general are evil. However, their evil is successful and is destroying the Black man, whereas the Black man's evil is not. This is because white people have abandoned righteousness and truth. The white man is willing to do anything, use any "natural defenses" available to them, to achieve their goals of subjugation and power over their enemy, which they have identified as the Black race. "You don't have to be good for the creator to give you things," Ra says.

In the end, Ra proposes his own solution to the issues facing Black people at large. Ra blames a large portion of the suffering of Black people on the oppressive forces of whiteness, but he also states that Black people as a race are no longer connected with one another. Black people are strong because they are creations of nature, but they have been disconnected from it. Their vibrations have been affected, either by their own doing or by the repression of their language by the erosion of time and the perversion of other peoples and cultures. They no longer hold brotherhood with one another, in the way that white people are aligned with one another and protect each other. Ra urges that Black people must return to nature and their natural states, loving people and wanting to help each other, to progress and get what they want from the universe. "We must start thinking about not independence" Ra says at the end of the lecture recording, "but interdependence."

Bibliography

Ra, Sun. "The Power of Words." Lecture, 1971.