

**“Separating the Substance from the Noise”: A Survey of the Black Arts Movement.**

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Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, October 2002



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## **Abstract**

This thesis will survey the Black Arts Movement in America from the early 1960s to the 1970s. The Movement was characterised by a proliferation of poetry, exhibitions and plays. Rather than close textual analyses, the thesis will take a panoramic view of the Movement considering the movement's two main aims: the development of a canon of work and the establishment of black institutions.

The main critical arguments occasioned by these literary developments contributed to the debate on the establishment of a Black Aesthetic through an essentialist approach to the creation and assessment of black art works. This survey considers the motivations behind the artists' essentialism, recognising their aim to challenge white criticism of black forms of cultural expression.

Underpinning the Movement's critical discourse was the theme of blackness, a philosophy of racial consciousness that blended a rather crude biological determinism with the ideology of a unique black experience. Physical blackness, the racial identity shared by black-skinned people of all hues and shades, determined their social, economic and educational opportunities. It was from these shared factors that a philosophy of blackness was pursued and the thesis assesses the attempt by black writers and thinkers to develop a theory of black cultural expression for their creative and critical works.

The impact of blackness and the Movement's success in achieving its aims are evaluated through an analysis of the debate on black aesthetics, the New Black Poetry

Movement, dissent in the work of Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed and womanist essentialism in the poetry and fiction of black women writers.

The thesis concludes by acknowledging the influence of the Black Arts Movement on future black writers particularly in the discourse of the “New Black Aesthetic”.



## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Richard King, for his insightful comments and astute critical guidance. Thanks too, to Graham Taylor who also read, re-read, criticised and challenged my work. In addition, Graham provided humour, friendship, a listening ear to my rambling anecdotes and then, reminded me to get back to work. Thanks also to Ethelbert Miller and Kalamu Ya Salaam who kindly agreed to be interviewed. Kalamu also sent me a draft copy of his book *The Magic of Juju: The Black Arts Movement* which assisted me enormously in my research.

At the risk of sounding like a self-indulgent soul singer, I really must say thanks to God, not only because my faith has informed my life and work but also because that faith has been the bedrock of my relationship with my personal trinity; my father Victor, my mother Una and my sister Viv.

Thanks also to my many friends and family members who asked how things were going and sensitively knew when not to ask.

Finally, this thesis has been written because and in spite of the sudden death of the man I loved dearly.

Yvette Hutchinson  
30<sup>th</sup> September 2002.

## **Dedication**

To my sister Viv whom I love beyond words.

## Introduction

The Black Arts Movement was a vibrant cultural movement. It blended music, drama and poetry in a loosely organised arts, political and black nationalist commitment to black arts by black men and women. There were a variety of events and activities taking place in America during the 1960s that contributed to the development of the Black Arts Movement. The Civil Rights Movement's activism and community development programmes inspired young black men and women to make demands for freedom in all aspects of their lives. In music, after Bebop and Hard Bop, the new jazz, led by such musicians as John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman seemed to represent a new age of black music. In 1964, the musician Bill Dixon led what was dubbed the "October Revolution in Jazz", a series of concerts by avant-garde players in New York. In the literary arts, the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) won an Obie Award for his play *Dutchman*, and Sidney Poitier, an Academy Award for his performance in *Lilies of the Field*. All of these events represented the buzz of activity taking place across the black arts scene in America. However, the Black Arts Movement loosely began in 1965, the year in which Malcolm X was assassinated and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School was established. It was driven by ideological, political and cultural concerns that inspired people to write and perform and the black artists saw themselves as part of a larger movement for black liberation. Larry Neal highlighted this view in his seminal essay "Black Art":

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister to the Black Power concept...The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire

for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between art and politics determined the style, content, form and critical objectives of black artistic and cultural production from the 1960s until the mid-1970s, as was manifested in the flurry of meetings and symposia taking place at the time.

A series of writers conferences fed the excitement. The gatherings occurred so frequently that *Negro Digest* carried a special column dubbed, "On The Conference Beat."...Organized by different groups, the meetings came rapidly...occurring in Berkeley, California, during 1964; in New York City, 1965; in Dakar, Senegal, 1966 (First World Festival of Negro Arts); in Detroit and Newark, 1966; in Detroit, 1967; in New York City, 1968; at Fisk University, 1966, 1967, and 1968; at Howard University, during 1974, 1976, 1977, and 1978; and in Lagos, Nigeria, 1977 (called the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture).<sup>2</sup>

The Black Arts Movement could be described as an extemporised jazz session, without sheet music or the guidance of a conductor, where various musicians met and began playing a fanfare that drew the attention of the black community looking on. Throughout the Movement musicians, dancers, writers met together, shared venues and experimented with different artistic forms. Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Neal, "Black Art", *The Drama Review* Vol. 12 No.4 (Summer 1968):38.

<sup>2</sup> Abby Arthur Johnson and Ronald Maberry Johnson, *Propaganda and Aesthetics: The Literary Politics of Afro-American Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979) 170.

Ironically, notwithstanding the role of conferences in promoting an international black arts agenda, Harold Cruse, who had advocated the inclusion of black culture in any black revolutionary movement, was very dismissive of such conferences. "Negro conferences settle nothing, solve nothing, pose nothing, analyze nothing, plan nothing, create nothing - not even a decent new literary review - which is the least any bunch of serious, self-respecting writers with a gripe ought to do." Harold Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc. 1967) 498.

Cruse was particularly scathing about the New York conference in 1965, describing it as "painfully frenetic" and citing *The New York Times* report of how the delegates 'hissed and hollered and debated'. These conferences in New York and Fisk were led by John O. Killens and attended by both black and white writers. The conferences, particularly in the early to mid-1960s, attracted both young and more established black writers and critics and Killens, unlike the organisers of some other writers conferences, tried to maintain a policy of equality and inclusion. However, as black writers became more radical in their demands, the inter-age, intercultural mix of these conferences diminished. After 1968, with a distinct move among writers towards blackness and a black aesthetic, there was a break until 1974 when a new series of conferences were held at Howard University, led by Stephen Henderson, Howard's Director of Arts and Humanities.



Harlem, the Harlem School of Arts, the Studio Museum in Harlem and groups like Rhythmaton, a percussive ballet troupe, were just some of the successful initiatives of the period. There was an increase in poetry and performance workshops at which new audiences were exposed to black consciousness, a black aesthetic ideology and revolutionary black writing.

It was not the first time that black artists had developed a political agenda through the arts; the Movement followed in the traditions of the New Negro Movement, during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. That movement had brought together artists, critics and intellectuals in a fusion of political and cultural thinking. Some of the concerns of the Black Arts Movement, such as the development of a Black Aesthetic, were prefigured in discussions during the Harlem Renaissance. However, the Black Arts Movement differed from the Harlem Renaissance as it did not have white patrons, the political imperative was more striking and there was less unity between the Black Arts Movement writers and their literary predecessors.

The Black Arts Movement can be divided into two strands; community engagement and intellectual discourse.<sup>3</sup> The two strands were linked by the intellectuals who led the activities for community engagement and generated intellectual discourse. The community motive was to involve local people in the celebration of black culture. Black artists wished to create black audiences and then encourage them to participate in black arts activities and develop an understanding of the nuances of black culture. Through their writing they attempted to teach black people about black consciousness. Although much of the Black Arts Movement

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term intellectual here to represent creative writing and the critical dialogues occasioned by the increased literary production. There is a fuller discussion on the black intellectual in the Black Arts Movement in Chapter One.

activities were conducted for community audiences, there were also several attempts to engage the black community in arts programmes and to develop the artistic talents of local men and women. Through workshops, the black artists also encouraged black people to write about their lives and later, through the development of black publishing companies and theatre organizations, provided opportunities for the distribution of these new works among black people.

In this study, however, I will explore the development of the Black Arts Movement through the intellectual discourse and literary works which emerged. This involved a wide group of people, referred to as artists and writers, who saw it as their “primary duty to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people”.<sup>4</sup> The artists included both men and women, although the language of the Movement, from both men and women, was very male-centred.<sup>5</sup> They wanted an opportunity to hone their own creative and critical writing skills, needing a black community of their peers to judge and assess their work as well as to provide the muse for their creative writing. They also needed the intellectual challenge that came from dialogue with fellow writers in journals and magazines.

The 'race' men and women of the future,<sup>6</sup> many of the intellectuals were artists representing a stratum of society that had received a college education and had, to some extent, enjoyed the benefits of middle-class Negro life. East-coast, northern colleges graduates, these young artists were of the budding new generation from

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<sup>4</sup>Larry Neal, “Black Art”, 29. From musicians such as Sun Ra and Abbey Lincoln to dancers such as Arthur Mitchell, there was a cooperation and sharing of ideas between the artistic disciplines. Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Dudley Randall, Don L. Lee, Clarence Major and Nikki Giovanni were some of the writers who were involved in creative and critical writing.

<sup>5</sup> I make comments on the masculine nature of the critics’ discourse throughout the text but discuss women’s writing and the Movement in Chapter Seven.

<sup>6</sup> The term “race man, race woman” is an old-fashioned phrase used to describe black men and women committed to political activism for the black community.

which organisations like the NAACP expected to take its next leaders.<sup>7</sup> As the earliest beneficiaries of Civil Rights and ‘upholders of the race,’ they rejected the traditional security of becoming teachers and ministers to become leaders of the new movement for black consciousness. In his 1968 essay "Black Poetry: Which Direction?", the poet and critic Don L. Lee argued that the black artist is "an integral part of the black community; a guiding force; a walking example...Black poets (blk/artists per se) are culture stabilizers; [who] bring back old values, and introduce new ones". Lee cited LeRoi Jones, perhaps the most important single figure of the Black Arts Movement, as an example of the "missionaries of blackness" that Black Arts writers needed to be.<sup>8</sup>

LeRoi Jones was a poet, essayist and dramatist who was regarded by many of his contemporaries as a significant cultural minister and leader. He was born in 1934 in Newark, New Jersey. In 1965, at the inception of the Movement, Jones renounced his Jewish wife, his engagement with the ‘white arts’ and began to actively participate in a movement for black artists.

Central to his break with white liberal ideology was his new assumption that blackness (race) was the most significant factor in a black person’s life. Although interestingly, his insistence that art was the best instrument for creating black culture out of the elements of black life grew out of the avant-garde aesthetics he had absorbed from that white ideology, his new goal was to incite the community to national purpose through a positive sense of black consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Several of these urban artists were in fact born in the south and moved north with their parents in the last major migration. Artists like Sonia Sanchez (born 1934, Birmingham, Alabama, raised in Harlem), Larry Neal (born 1937, Atlanta, Georgia, raised in Philadelphia), Nikki Giovanni (born 1943, Knoxville Tennessee, raised in Cincinnati, Ohio), Don L. Lee, later Haki Mudhabuti (born 1942, Little Rock, Arkansas, raised in Detroit, Michigan) and Ishmael Reed (born Chattanooga, raised in Buffalo) wished to marry their artistic development with serious political involvement.

<sup>8</sup> Don L. Lee, "Black Poetry: Which Direction?" *Negro Digest* 17 (Sept-Oct. 1968): 27-32.

<sup>9</sup> William J. Harris, *The Poetry And Poetics of Amiri Baraka* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985) 9.



Jones moved to Harlem and set up the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Spring 1965 and later 'Spirit House' in Newark, New Jersey.<sup>10</sup> Although he and others did not choose the predictable paths of teachers and ministers, it is significant that when Jones changed his name to Imamu Amiri Baraka, the meaning reflected those very roles: The title 'Imam' is an Islamic term for 'priest/leader', Amiri means 'warrior' and Baraka means 'blessing.' Amiri Baraka was the man most clearly associated with the Movement and by choosing the title "Imamu", he was naming himself, with the assent of his peers, as its leader.

In the parlance of the black church, Baraka had a 'calling' to speak to all black people and galvanise an artistic movement in black America. He made his own statement regarding this calling in his 1969 poem "SOS":

Calling black people  
Calling all black people, man woman child  
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in  
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling  
you, calling all black people  
calling all black people, come in, black people, come  
on in.<sup>11</sup>

Baraka's strength was his ability to 'call', and indeed to warn black people about the dangers of living in America without a black-led community focus.

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<sup>10</sup> "From its inception, Spirit House has been regarded as 'The spiritual center of the Black Arts Movement in America' and has presented many of the experimental, explicitly 'black art' plays by its founder and other young black writers. It sponsors dramatic workshops (for blacks only) and sends an acting troupe, the Spirit House Movers, all over the country to perform works from its repertory. They prefer to admit only black people to Spirit House productions; on their tours elsewhere they charge fat fees to perform for 'alien' audiences." Daphne S.Reed, "LeRoi Jones: High Priest of the Black Arts Movement," Educational Theatre Journal (1966) 22, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, "SOS", The Black Poets Dudley Randall, ed.(New York, 1971)181. Two decades after the publication of this poem, the critic Phillip Brian Harper challenged the poem not for its message, but for its lack of message. "What is striking about Baraka's poem, however, is not that it 'calls' black people in this nationalistic way but that this is *all* it does; the objective for which it assembles the black populace is not specified in the piece itself, a fact I take to indicate fundamental difficulties in the nationalist agenda of the Black Arts poets." Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s", Critical Inquiry Vol. 19 No.2 (Winter 1993):236.

Another reason why Baraka is so highly regarded can be seen by the duration of his involvement in black arts. Professor William J. Harris, in collaboration with Baraka, edited *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*<sup>12</sup> and divided Baraka's work into four stages (the beat period, the transitional period, the black nationalist period and the Third World Marxist period) which identify his ideological shifts and their influence on his writing. These clear cut ideological demarcations provide accessible periods into which one can organise Baraka's work. However, when applied to almost twenty years of black arts and culture, these groupings provide a crude but useful overview of significant trends in black literature leading up to and including the development of the Black Arts Movement.

'The Beat Period' (1957-1962) was a time of prolific Civil Rights Movement activity. During this period Civil Rights singers such as Bernice Reagon<sup>13</sup> and Cordell Johnson were blending standard church songs with political chants and making music part of a cultural and political statement of black activism. During this period, Lorraine Hansberry completed her play *Raisin in the Sun* and Hoyt Fuller revived the journal *Negro Digest*.<sup>14</sup>

During the 'Transitional Period' (1963-1965), the march on Washington took place, Cassius Clay won the world heavyweight boxing title and joined the Nation of Islam, and Ralph Ellison's book of essays *Shadow and Act* was published. Baraka published *Dutchman* (1964), a play about a young black man whose dilemma lay in his complicity in his own manipulation by middle-class white America.

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<sup>12</sup> William J. Harris, ed. *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> Bernice Reagon Johnson is the founding member of the a capella group *Sweet Honey in the Rock* and now works for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C.

<sup>14</sup> During this period Baraka was living in Greenwich village and was involved in the Beat movement - an avant-garde, anti-middle-class, racially unspecific literary movement - and in 1961 published the poetry collection, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note*.

The Black Nationalist Period (1965-1974) reflects the period of the Black Arts Movement, when there was a proliferation of poetry, music, drama and dance. During this period the Movement's most significant literary debate around the idea of a Black Aesthetic, took place. And, in 1965 and 1968, Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were killed; both deaths sparking off riots and disturbances in urban centres across the country.

Finally in 1974, during what Harris described as the 'Third World Marxist Period', Baraka renounced black nationalism as racist and wrote from a socialist perspective. Many black writers became more involved in global responses to political and social disadvantage and widened the focus of their creative and critical writing. Thus, notwithstanding the extemporised nature of the Black Arts Movement, like a good jam session there was an evolution of ideas and a point of climax before the sounds of the Movement died away.

The intellectuals had quite clear views of black people and their cultural needs and were confident of their ability as artists and writers to meet those needs. To be consistent with the terminology used by the intellectuals, I will refer to the black community both as one homogeneous group and as small community groups in different parts of America. I will also discuss "black consciousness" or "black awareness", which referred to black people who were proud of their identity and conscious of the social and political disadvantage affecting black people's lives.

With varying degrees of commitment to the Movement's ideologies, the intellectuals were striving for two general aims: The first was to establish black cultural institutions and the second was to develop a canon of creative and critical works. The first aim reflected their ambitions for themselves as black writers. The second, their intentions as writers and as leaders to inspire the black community to be



both creators and audiences for this new body of black writing. Their desire was to produce work that reflected black people's experiences and contributed to Black America's cultural and intellectual heritage. The most helpful framework for understanding the Movement's aims was provided by the contemporary activist and critic, Harold Cruse, in his 1967 polemical work, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual*.

Dissatisfied with the paucity of contemporary black intellectual discourse, in *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual* Cruse suggested the blending of political aims with cultural praxis. He argued that the black movement for political and social change in America was in crisis because it lacked a cultural ideology as part of its focus; he believed that political, economic and cultural forces would have to work together to develop a "social movement of combined forces".<sup>15</sup> In order to establish cultural institutions, Cruse argued, black writers would need to abandon attempts to

. . . join the prevailing cultural superstructure of America while protesting its standards and values under the misapprehension that the injection of *their* values (whatever they are alleged to be) can change that superstructure.<sup>16</sup>

Cruse explicitly called for the formulation of a black cultural philosophy/ideology. He advocated the development of black institutions of cultural production that would challenge the white American "cultural superstructure".<sup>17</sup> And, as a kind of alternative to the prevailing cultural superstructure, the Black Arts Movement's two aims of cultural institution and canon building were bolstered by such themes as nationalism, intellectual discourse and self-determination .

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<sup>15</sup> Cruse, *The Crisis Of The Negro Intellectual* 86.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 505.

<sup>17</sup> "No one can hope to change America's cultural standards and values unless the proprietorship, the administration and the uses to which the cultural apparatus are put are changed to allow for more democratic social control." Ibid.

Black nationalism took on many forms and William Van DeBurg in *New Day In Babylon* (1992) discussed religious, cultural, political, economic and African nationalism. However, it was cultural nationalism that was the main nationalist theme during the Movement.<sup>18</sup> Van DeBurg described an uneasy and short-lived alliance between people ranging from the ‘racial chauvinists’, those who wanted a completely separate black nationalist approach to politics and art, and the ‘intercommunalists’ who were willing to make astute political alliances. Commenting on Van DeBurg’s analysis, Jennifer Jordan expanded on the differences between the two groups:

The conflicts . . . arose between those who felt that economics and politics were central to liberation and the cultural nationalist who felt that the cultural battle had to be won before one made political moves.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the conflicts, ultimately the cultural nationalists and the political nationalists recognised that both aspects of the black experience needed to work together for the benefit of black people, as Van DeBurg concluded:

In their mind’s eye, the highly literate aesthetes of the Black Arts movement could conceive of bonding with the black underclass...Despite obvious temptations to do otherwise, a surprising number of black activists – including both cultural nationalists and their ‘political opponents’ -

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<sup>18</sup>Professor James Turner, Director of the Afro-American studies programme at Cornell defined the Black nationalist movement objectives:

“Thus Black Nationalism can be objectively defined as:

- The desire for Black people to determine their own destiny through formation, preservation, and control of their own political, social, economic, and cultural institutions.
- The determination of Black people to unite as a group, as a people in common community, opposing white supremacy by striving for independence from white control.
- The resistance of Black people to subordinate status and the demand for political freedom, social justice, and economic equality.
- The development of ethnic self-interest, racial pride, group consciousness, and opposition to and rejection of the dominant ideas of white-defined society perceived to be incompatible with this objective.
- The re-evaluation of self and of the Black man’s relationship with the social system in general.”

James Turner, “The Sociology of Black Nationalism”, *Black World* (January 1971):25.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Jordan, “Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s: Politics and Poetry”, Adolph. Reed, Jr.ed. *RACE, POLITICS AND CULTURE Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s* (New York: Greenwood, 1986) 39.

expressed a desire to link politics and culture in support of national liberation...

Recognizing that culture sometimes took the role of politics among the disfranchised, they hoped to reconcile ethics and aesthetics...they articulated and popularized awareness and intensified popular commitment to social activism.<sup>20</sup>

One very practical way in which black nationalism was demonstrated was through the development of black publishing and the increase in black publications. In this thesis, although there will be no specific focus on particular periodicals, I will cite articles and essays from these sources which represented black intellectual independence. Abraham Chapman, in his introduction to the anthology *New Black Voices* (1972), stated:

These independent Black publishing ventures are cultural manifestations of the larger movement of Black nationalism which is a strong force today and one of the important contexts of the new black writing.<sup>21</sup>

The desire for self-definition independent of white society was pursued in two specific ways. The first was that Movement artists and critics appropriated the discourse on black creativity by demanding the right to speak for themselves and challenging the right of white critics to comment on Black Arts issues. Many of the black artists were demanding what was later described by Laurence Thomas in his 1992 essay as 'moral deference':

The idea behind moral deference . . . is that there should be a presumption in favor of the person's account of her experiences. This presumption is warranted because the individual is speaking from a vantage point to which

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<sup>20</sup>William, L. Van DeBurg, *New Day In Babylon* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 188, 190.

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Chapman, *New Black Voices* (New York: Mentor, 1972) 36.



someone not belonging to her diminished social category group does not have access.<sup>22</sup>

While the artists would possibly have agreed with the main sentiments of Thomas's theory, many of them would have argued strongly against the idea of black people as a 'diminished social category,' or perhaps, would have wanted to make explicit the fact that the diminishing of the black subject as a racial group was a product of racism and oppression and the result of black marginalisation in a superordinate white world.<sup>23</sup> However, the issue of 'moral deference' is still pertinent in that black artists, concerned about the black community's 'emotional category configuration', demanded that white writers leave black artists to define and discuss their own artistic expressions.<sup>24</sup>

The second way in which the Movement attempted self-definition was by the participants insisting on difference and the unique position afforded them through blackness, a philosophy that has since been the subject of Victor Anderson's critical work *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995):

Ontological blackness is a philosophy of racial consciousness. . . Ontological blackness renders black life and experience a totality. It is a totality that takes narrative formations that emphasize the heroic capacities of African Americans to transcend individuality and personality in the name of black communal survival.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference", *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. XXIV No. 1-3 (Fall-Spring 1992-3):244.

<sup>23</sup> Alain Locke, in his title essay "The New Negro", argued against such presentation of a diminished category: "[The Negro] resents being spoken of as a social ward or minor, even by his own, and to being regarded a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy. For the same reason, he himself is through with those social nostrums and panaceas, the so-called "solutions" of his "problem," with which he and the country have been so liberally dosed in the past." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (c) 1925. (New York: Touchstone 1997) 11.

<sup>24</sup> A clear example of this demand for moral deference was displayed in the response of black critics to William Styron's controversial 'meditation on history', *The Confessions Of Nat Turner*, which will be the subject of Chapter Two.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995) 14-15. In Anderson's equation, ontological blackness works in two ways: It makes racial identity the primary focus of political and cultural identity and it lauds a black heroic spirit.



Blackness created essentialist criteria for black artists and gave them a philosophy of black identity which offered self-definition and opportunities for them to present their writing as an expression of the blackness that they shared with the black community.

This commitment to blackness as a philosophy of racial consciousness was the basis of what was called the Black Aesthetic debate; the critical dialogue between black writers attempting to develop a black literary theory as part of a philosophy of blackness.

Diane Fuss, a feminist critic, made a defence of essentialism in her book *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. Recognising the controversial nature of her approach, Fuss suggested the following:

The question we should be asking is not “is this text essentialist (and therefore ‘bad’)?” but rather, “if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment*”.<sup>26</sup>

Fuss went on to answer her own question by defining the basis on which the essentialists form their ideas:

For the essentialist, the natural provides the raw material and determinative starting point for the practices and laws of the social.

. . . Thus while the essentialist holds that the natural is *repressed* by the social, the constructionist maintains that the natural is *produced* by the social.<sup>27</sup>

In the Black Arts Movement, the “raw material and determinative starting point” was the shared experience of physical blackness. The social effect of this blackness had been to make black people the subject of what the academic and critic Houston Baker called “white cultural theorizing”.<sup>28</sup> Being subject to this theorizing, motivated the

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<sup>26</sup> Diane Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989) xi.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 2, 3.

<sup>28</sup> This phrase was used repeatedly by Houston Baker in the introduction to *Long Black Song* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1972)

black writers to blend a rather crude biological determinism with the ideology of a unique black experience in their development of a critical discourse exclusive to black people.

The aim of this thesis is to recognise the process of celebrating blackness, with all of its essentialist ramifications and to choose, like Arnold Krupat, to criticise it "in a spirit of solidarity", with black artists who attempted to distinguish themselves and their work by their unique black cultural experiences.<sup>29</sup>

In order to discuss this Movement committed to blackness, largely through evaluation of the contemporary anthologies, I will survey the critical debates that attempted to theorise this blackness at the heart of the Movement's literature. The discussion will not be structured chronologically but will clarify the main aims and ideologies before analysing how those ideas were applied to different areas of literary expression.

Chapter One offers definitions of the Black Aesthetic and the aim to develop an essentialist criteria for assessing black art works. In Chapter Two I discuss the debate occasioned by the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions Of Nat Turner* and consider the impact of that "white" text on "black" critical discourse. The focus of Chapter Three is literary criticism. Beginning with an overview of black criticism, I consider Black Aesthetic criticism and developments of black literary theory. In Chapter Four, including a discussion on Stephen Henderson's theory for black poetry, I assess the New Black Poetry Movement, the Black Arts Movement's most prolific area of creative writing. In Chapter Five I discuss the development of black theatre as an achievement of the aim to establish black institutions. In Chapter

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<sup>29</sup>Arnold Krupat, "Narrative American Writing and Multiculturalism", a talk at the University of Nottingham, 20th March 1995.

Six, I focus on dissent and make comparisons between the rebellious writing of Amiri Baraka and Ishmael Reed, who challenged the rigidity of the Black Aesthetic framework. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses revolutionary and womanist black women's writing.

In an interview published in 1979, the writer Ishmael Reed reflected on the period:

The sixties was a strident decade. I call it "The Decade that Screamed." It's going to take hard working critics to sift through all of this and separate the substance from the noise.<sup>30</sup>

This thesis, in an attempt to separate the substance from the noise, or, to continue the jazz metaphor, to identify the harmonies produced by the blending of sounds, will explore the Black Arts Movement by concentrating on the literary arts. Rather than providing close textual analyses, I will offer a panoramic overview of the literature of the Black Arts Movement, through the identification of particular aims and critical themes.

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<sup>30</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide In Old New Orleans* (New York: Avon Books, 1979) 167. Ishmael Reed in a self-interview responding to the following question: What is your opinion of recent black poetry?



## **Chapter One**

### **The Development of the Black Aesthetic.**

But the Black Aesthetic is not bound by a name. More than a simple, rhetorical strategy motivated by idealism, the phrase has served as a poetic construct, and as an artistic slogan raising substantive issues in aesthetics... The Black Aesthetic, in its various usages and effects, has given to a newly realized black collectivity and its artists a sense of holism, a sense of an essential reciprocity between black art and black culture... Black aesthetics - analytical inquiries into the nature, mode of existence, and evaluation of black art - is a reality.<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction I described the Black Arts Movement as a jam session without order. It was soon clear that the ideas would need to be organised within some kind of structure. The development of a black aesthetic would help to provide the framework for such an organisation of Black Arts ideas.

The Black Aesthetic provided the critical language and analytical tool of the Black Arts Movement. It was both an ideology for black literature and culture and a debate about how it should be defined; it was a model of what black people wanted for black art and a discursive framework for how that could be realised. Larry Neal, a founding member of the Black Arts Repertory Theater, suggested that the Black Aesthetic provided a "vocabulary – the ingredients that constitute a way of proceeding creatively".<sup>2</sup> The notion of a Black Aesthetic endorsed a new approach to black art forms and promoted a network of black artists. Through this network the work of

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<sup>1</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism (London: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 142.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa DiRocco, "Aesthetics and Culture: A View by Larry Neal", The Drum IX (1978): 10.

black artists could be published, recorded, presented, critically appraised and, most importantly, understood by their peers.<sup>3</sup>

Because the term “Black Aesthetic” was the product of a number of art forms and black ideologies, one of the most potent aspects of the Movement was the debate amongst black artists about what the Black Aesthetic should be. This chapter will introduce the Black Aesthetic debate and explore some of the attempts to define it. It will also consider the Movement’s aims and how they were fulfilled through the publication of anthologies and in the debates about black arts in journals and symposia. The effects on the Black Arts Movement of black intellectual exchange will be briefly considered; and finally, in examining the Black Aesthetic as a critical approach to black arts, I will also assess its limitations as a framework for black arts discourse

Between 1968-1972, the debate on the Black Aesthetic took place chiefly in the *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*).<sup>4</sup> It was launched by David Lloren’s “Survey on Black Writers (*sic*) Views on Literary Lions and Values” in January 1968. A selected group of thirty-eight writers and critics were asked to respond to twenty-five questions covering issues of black history and literature.<sup>5</sup> Their responses were written up as an article in the *Negro Digest*.

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<sup>3</sup> The impact of the Black Aesthetic was such that all literature by black writers for the decade from the mid-1960s was expected to reflect Black Aesthetic concerns. The Black Aesthetic became the ideology of black literature and contemporary black fiction was assumed to be ‘for it’ or curiously and antagonistically ‘against it’. The issue of ‘dissenters’ and those who did not choose to write within the Black Aesthetic will be the subject of Chapter Six.

<sup>4</sup> “It was Hoyt Fuller, [the editor of *Black World*], who started the relatively recent controversy concerning the possibility of developing a Black Aesthetic. This controversy originally stemmed from a survey of the artistic and ideological views of thirty-eight black writers. The flurry of critical and/or ideological debate this engendered has persisted into the seventies.” Larry Neal, “The Black Contribution to American Letters: Part II The Writer as Activist - 1960 and After” ed. Mabel M. Smythe, *The Black American Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1976) 777-778.

<sup>5</sup> David Lloren, “A Survey on Black Writers (*sic*) Views on Literary Lions and Values”, *Negro Digest* (Jan. 1968):10-48. The questions are listed in Endnote One.

The survey had an obvious literary bias which, in terms of the development of a black aesthetic for all black arts and culture, limited its application to such areas as the fine and performing arts. There were also limitations in the presentation of the results. One only got a partial sense of each writer's views rather than a discussion about each respondent and their individual replies. More positively, however, some of the questions invited black writers to comment on each other's writings and to use the opportunity, like their white counterparts, to cite each other's works.<sup>6</sup> Such discussion was in itself a contribution to the canon formation that was one of the Movement's aims. The questions also brought to the fore issues that would become important themes for the Black Aesthetic, such as the 'black experience', 'blackness' and the 'black community'.

Questions eighteen and twenty-one asked about the work of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. These two writers, along with James Baldwin, were colloquially called the "triumvirate". By referring directly to Ellison and Wright, Lloren's survey acknowledged the importance of these writers in the black literary canon. Sadly there was no question about black women writers, thus Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker, for instance, two significant black women writers, were not included in this survey on "Literary Lions".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The critic Barbara Herrnstein Smith observed: "... the repeated inclusion of a particular work in literary anthologies not only promotes the value of that work but goes some distance toward creating its value, as does also its repeated appearance on reading lists or its frequent citation or quotation by professors, scholars and academic critics". This was a crucial part of the Black Arts Movement. It was a significant weapon in their battle against the established literary canon and a useful tool for the promotion of black writers and their work. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value", *Critical Inquiry* Vol.10 No.1 (Sept. 1983):25.

<sup>7</sup> In 1950, Gwendolyn Brooks was the first African American writer to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize and to be considering 'Literary Lions' without a recognition of this was a great failing on the part of the compilers. However, the survey cited several black women's responses to the question on the future for a Black Aesthetic. Mari Evans thought that the Black Aesthetic represented "a mystique in which excellence (craftsmanship) and blackness have interfused". The former SNCC worker Jean Wheeler Smith said, "I'm not sure I know what the term means." Alice Childress, on the other hand, saw the Black Aesthetic as defensive: "I do regret that so much of it is simply 'other side of the coin' reaction to white action." Julia Fields stated: "In the future, the only relevant literature will be that which has gone directly to the heart of Blackness", and Sarah Webster Fabio spoke about the future of black writing: "A Black Aesthetic will be necessary to create a power force which will interpret, support, and validate the reality of the black experience."



The last set of questions (19-25) addressed the development of a Black Aesthetic sensibility and generally received a positive response. Replying to question nineteen, “Do you see any future at all for the school of black writers which seek to establish ‘a black aesthetic’?”, Gwendolyn Brooks wholeheartedly endorsed the idea of a black aesthetic as an “exciting concept”. The writer John O. Killens too, made a logical, if more measured, argument in its favour:

Since the materials of most black writers come out of the black experience, it would seem that a black aesthetic would be a most viable and fruitful one for the black artist.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of the survey was significant as it gave black writers an opportunity to have their ideas compared and contrasted with those of their peers. While the survey illustrated the diversity of opinions on black art and culture, it also showed that there was a general commitment among black artists to the ideas of a black aesthetic, black cultural independence and a black literary canon.

### **Definitions of a Black Aesthetic**

Rather like the term “Black Arts Movement”, the Black Aesthetic was synonymous with revolutionary black literature, black nationalism and an essentialist notion of the unique experiences of black people in America. As such, the Black Aesthetic became the lingua-franca of writers and critics and was defined and redefined as black men and women, cultural nationalists and black separatists, all attempted to locate their experiences and their artistic perspectives within a Black Aesthetic context. Some contributors, such as Addison Gayle, felt that the Black Aesthetic provided a “critical methodology [that] aids men in becoming better than

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<sup>8</sup> John O. Killens, “A Survey on Black Writers (sic) Views on Literary Lions and Values”, 31.



they are”.<sup>9</sup> Seeking the “de-Americanization of black people”, Gayle’s ideal model was informed by what he saw as the intrinsic relationship between revolutionary black art, politics and social action.<sup>10</sup> For those writing in support of a new aesthetic for black literature, the expectation was that the Black Aesthetic would provide a new way of thinking that would influence all areas of black cultural and intellectual life. As Larry Neal ambitiously argued: “We need new values, new ways of living. We need a new system of moral and philosophical thought.”<sup>11</sup>

Two years later, in an appendix to his essay “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic” (1970),<sup>12</sup> Neal tried to outline this “new system” in relation to black arts and culture. Significantly, in a movement that was often dismissive of the work of its recent cultural past, Neal followed in the tradition of Langston Hughes and anticipated the later work of Houston Baker and Albert Murray in proposing to use the blues idiom to interrogate black artistic production.<sup>13</sup> He categorised five stages of the Black Aesthetic, which I have paraphrased below:

1. *Race Memory*: rhythm as a black aesthetic creative principle
2. *Middle Passage*: diaspora and the terror within race memory
3. *Transmutation and Synthesis*: dance as memory through collective folk consciousness
4. *Blues God/ Tone as Meaning and Memory*: sound as racial memory, word as energy/force, the relationship between blues and spiritual music

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<sup>9</sup> Addison Gayle, “Introduction”, The Black Aesthetic (New York: Anchor Books Edition, 1972) xxii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xxi. From Gayle’s essay, it was unclear whether this aesthetic was to apply to the arts alone or was also applicable to the political and social aspects of black life.

<sup>11</sup> Larry Neal, “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation”, Black Poets and Prophets (New York: Mentor, 1969) 149-150.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Neal, “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic”, The Black Aesthetic 12-16.

<sup>13</sup> See in particular Larry Neal, “Politics as Ritual: Ellison’s Zoot Suit”, Black World (December 1970):31-52, Houston Baker, Blues, Ideology And Afro-American Literature (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984. Paperback Edition 1987) and Albert Murray, The Hero and the Blues (New York: Vintage, 1973).

5. *Black Arts Movement/Black Art Aesthetic*: this was linked to music to create a unity of culture, politics and art. The Black Aesthetic was for Third World people. Its aim was to make black people love themselves, black culture and, as far as the Black Aesthetic writers were concerned, the unique responses of black people to their own culture.

What Neal called his “rough outline” suggested categories to bring black people in to a closer relationship with black art. He encouraged the use of vernacular expression in art and turned to African history and the Blues as paradigms for black cultural analysis and self-critique.

The young critic Sandra Govan’s “The Poetry of Black Experience as Counterpoint to the Poetry of the Black Aesthetic” (1974) was another attempt to define the Black Aesthetic.<sup>14</sup> Her essay was written six years after Lloren’s survey, by which time Amiri Baraka had changed his ideology to Third World Marxism.<sup>15</sup> Although she began asserting that the “credo of the Black Aesthetic is still in the process of formulation: therefore, one should not make any hard and fast judgments about what it is or what it isn’t”,<sup>16</sup> Govan rather unwisely ignored her own advice and set out a prescriptive profile of the Black Aesthetic:

[T]he poetry of the Black Aesthetic is more "structured" or "directed" to the *responsibilities* of the artist, both artistically and politically; he *must* reflect a Black experience and he/she must do it in such a fashion that the art "teaches and instructs" the Black community. . . it believes in art/poetry as weapons; it is didactic and stresses the responsibility of the work of art to teach or in some other fashion to relate to the Black community; again, it

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<sup>14</sup>Sandra Govan, "The Poetry of Black Experience As Counterpoint to The Poetry of The Black Aesthetic", Negro American Literature Forum Vol.8 No.4 (Winter 1974):288-292.

<sup>15</sup> In the introduction I outlined Baraka’s ideological shifts (beat, transitional, black revolutionary and third world Marxist), suggested by William Harris in The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka.

<sup>16</sup> Govan, "The Poetry of Black Experience As Counterpoint to The Poetry of The Black Aesthetic", 288.

stresses the responsibility of the artist to draw from and return something to the Black community.<sup>17</sup> (Govan's italics).

For Govan, the Black Aesthetic was a tool of black expression that suggested a particular kind of racial reasoning and cultural consciousness. Her argument, like Black Aesthetic discourse, thrived on the exclusivity of blackness and black experience. Govan's essay is a rather crude example of the almost circular argument of a Black Aesthetic that was for black people, by and about black people's experiences and which could only be judged by responsible black people committed to the black community. Govan referred to political and social events that constitute a black experience and charged the artist with the responsibility for reflecting that experience. She wanted black artists to instruct the black community through their work, yet simply assumed that the black community wanted to be instructed in this way and also assumed that black artists were willing and capable of providing such didactic instruction. Although the Black Aesthetic attempted uniform approaches in literature, Govan's essay assumed that there were no different or conflicting views between the artists.

It is interesting that, three years after the publication of *The Black Aesthetic*, this young black writer was still engaging with the debate and contributing to keeping alive the idea of a black aesthetic.<sup>18</sup> Govan was also willing to acknowledge the "tentative" nature of her hypothesis and the contradictions in her work in progress. Overall, her article reflects both the best and worst of the Black Arts Movement: a zeal to enter into debate about ways of approaching black arts but a confusion about the role of the artist. Govan continued to display a pioneering spirit in her eagerness

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 289.

<sup>18</sup> Equally interesting is the fact that, three years on ( six years after the debate began) there was still no agreed definition of the Black Aesthetic.



to ask questions and suggest fresh definitions. However, the disparate nature of Govan's work –which she herself described as a “plunge” - reflected an incoherent idea of the artist's function. The Black Aesthetic writers had felt empowered, or perhaps even obliged, to speak, to teach and to direct but without a location for their ideas in any clear historical or intellectual tradition. In fact, for these writers, it was this supposed lack of tradition that inspired them to pursue the Black Aesthetic as a framework for a new black cultural tradition.

Within the circular argument of the Black Aesthetic, in order for its criticism to represent an exclusively black artistic sensibility, the artists and critics had to claim the black experience as unique to black people and separate from white culture. Blackness, as a signifier of collective cultural attitudes, was an attempt to affirm the feeling of being black in America by identifying experiences “indigenous to the psychology that mutual suffering and common environment and ancestry have created”.<sup>19</sup> Gayle had described the Black Aesthetic as a “ unique art derived from unique cultural experiences [which] mandates unique critical tools for evaluation”.<sup>20</sup> One could easily substitute the word ‘black’ for the word ‘unique’ to show how the theme of blackness permeated the Black Aesthetic.

References to blackness ranged from blackness as physical (dermatological, racial) to blackness as metaphysical (ideological, political, intellectual, ontological). The two ideas can be described crudely as the blackness of identity and the blackness of experience. Physical blackness, or the blackness of identity, refers to the everyday lives of black people in America, whose racial identity determined their social class, economic and educational opportunities and their cultural heritage. Metaphysical

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Thorne, "Integration or Black Nationalism?" Negro Digest Vol.XII No.10 (August 1963): 43.

<sup>20</sup> Addison Gayle, "Introduction", The Black Aesthetic xxiii.

blackness is how a philosophy of knowledge and existence is expressed, based on the fact of black identity and the historical experience of being black in white America.

In an article, "Blackness: A Definition", Mari Evans identified how a metaphysics of blackness could be defined:

Blackness is a political/cultural concept. It recognizes Man's need for a knowledge of where he has been in order to determine where he must go. It affirms an identity that is African in root, understanding that an infusion of European/Asiatic strains has possibly expanded and certainly not destroyed that basic African identity.

Blackness is a political/cultural concept powered by the demands of Man's moral and spiritual nature. It emphasises the indivisibility of Man with the One Force, securing therefore forever the dignity of the individual and his right to freedom by whatever means necessary.

Blackness is a political/cultural concept called "revolutionary" by/to the oppressor because it identifies the oppressor, defines the nature of his oppressionistic acts and frees the mind of the oppressed.

Blackness is the political/cultural concept that actuates the man who has determined to direct his own destiny, formulate his own definition and construct his own guidelines and forge his values. It understands that American democracy has been, from the beginning, a fascist system based on racism and that the issue from the beginning and now, is control. It advocates Black control in the degree necessary to serve the best interest of Blacks and with the realization that old government systems do not serve the best interests of Blacks. It understands that freedom by any means necessary is the only acceptable alternative to bondage by whatever name.

Blackness is a political/cultural concept that is innovative. It endorses a creative Family-Nation which dismisses an alien tradition and re-thinks forms, systems and methodologies - placing Black minds, Black energies and Black resources to a common goal: the creation of New

Man, and a re-directed, re-shaped Society supportive of him.<sup>21</sup>

A metaphysics of blackness inspired black writers and critics to theorise a crude, biologically determined black cultural sensibility. Metaphysical blackness created an epistemology of black people's art and culture. This system of knowing acknowledged black skin and assumed shared spiritual, social, political and cultural experiences resulting from that blackness. Black writers, therefore, in developing the Black Aesthetic, located their ideas firmly within this notion of a metaphysics of blackness, which would permeate the Movement and its aim to develop institutions and, particularly, to develop a canon of black works.

### **Canon formation**

Having posited broad definitions of the Black Aesthetic firmly rooted within a concept of blackness, I will explore in more detail the aims of the Movement. The emphasis on developing a black canon also involved the Movement's other aim: to place Black people in the institutions where they could wield power over their own works, contribute to current literary discourse and promote community instigated cultural and creative programmes. Through anthologies such as *Black Fire* and *The Black Aesthetic*,<sup>22</sup> Black Arts activists were promoting their ideology and black engendered critical theories. The publication of these anthologies between 1968-1971 reflected the numbers of poems, plays, short stories and criticism that were being produced. Bringing together contemporary black writing in anthologies helped to

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<sup>21</sup> Mari Evans, "Blackness: A Definition", *Negro Digest* XIX No.1 (November 1969):19-20. In this essay Evans used the notation style adopted by some of the black poets. Her use of male-specific language is similar to that of Carolyn Gerald's in her essay "The Black Writer and His Role", discussed on pages 22-23.

<sup>22</sup> Leroi Jones and Larry Neal, eds. *Black Fire* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1968) Addison Gayle, ed. *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972). Clarence Major, ed. *The New Black Poetry* (New York: International Publishing Co. Ltd., 1969). *The New Black Poetry* is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four. Other works such as *The New Black Poets* and *William Styron: Ten Black Writers Respond* will be discussed in more detail in following chapters.



create a sense of a movement taking place. In all of the anthologies there was a bibliographic appendix telling the reader about the academics, established writers, fledgling poets and novelist contributors. The range of contributions showed that the collections were not the ad hoc ideas of a few individuals, but that common themes and approaches to black literature were shared by black people from different disciplines and geographical areas. *Black Fire* and *The Black Aesthetic* tried to encapsulate the mood of a movement that, like the Harlem Renaissance, represented a “... new psychology... more of a consensus of feeling than of opinion, of attitude rather than of program”.<sup>23</sup> In *Black Fire*, cultural and political revolution was constantly explored, whereas the application of a black aesthetic in black writing and music was the theme of *The Black Aesthetic*.

Aware of the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and, to a limited extent the recent Civil Rights Movement, many of the black artists wanted to ensure that their movement lasted and effected tangible changes. Addison Gayle alluded to this in his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic*, where he encouraged black writers to produce their own anthologies as a way of establishing new traditions of black writing:

Instead of being content to write introduction [*sic*] for white editors, perhaps our serious black artists will edit anthologies themselves. If this is done, the present renaissance in black letters will escape the fate of its predecessor in the nineteen twenties, and endure.<sup>24</sup>

The predecessor to which Gayle referred was the Harlem Renaissance, a movement sparked by Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, the title essay of which defined the new way of thinking:

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<sup>23</sup> Alain Locke, *The New Negro* 1925 (New York: Touchstone 1997 edition) 10.

<sup>24</sup> Gayle, Introduction, *The Black Aesthetic* xxiv.



...the mind of the Negro seems suddenly to have slipped from under the tyranny of social intimidation and to be shaking off the psychology of imitation and implied inferiority. By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation.<sup>25</sup>

Despite Gayle's concern about the longevity of such movements, *The New Negro*, as the seminal work of that period, was highly regarded and strongly influenced black writing and black anthologizing for decades to follow.<sup>26</sup>

LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) jointly edited *Black Fire* with his friend and colleague Larry Neal. It was published in 1968, the same year as David Llorens' "Survey". As its title suggests, *Black Fire* blazed on the black literature scene with revolutionary black feeling expressed in poetry, fiction, drama and critical discussion. Themes ranged from explicit political commentary to signifying on 'white art', the 'white aesthetic' and the formidable historical traditions that maintained this system of white supremacy in politics, art and culture. With a foreword by "Ameer Baraka" and an afterword by Larry Neal, *Black Fire* was divided into sections of essays, poetry, fiction and drama. What made *Black Fire* different from earlier, and indeed some subsequent, anthologies was its content. It was a collection of almost exclusively new work from contemporary black writers. It was a vehicle for "Black and unknown Bards" whose work reflected the revolutionary zeal of its black editors.<sup>27</sup> Jones and

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<sup>25</sup> Locke, "The New Negro" (1925), *The New Negro* 4.

<sup>26</sup> *The New Negro* began in March 1925 as a special issue on "Race and Black New York" in the national magazine *Survey Graphic*. The subtitle for the special edition was "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro" and the magazine included a variety of articles, poems and stories. The issue was guest edited by Alain Locke, who, eight months later, brought out *The New Negro*, with revised essays and several other articles from the original magazine issue. The most significant anthology that followed Locke's was Sterling Brown's *The Negro Caravan*, which was published in 1941. The collection was divided into eight sections including short stories, poetry, folk literature and drama. Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee, *The Negro Caravan* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1941).

<sup>27</sup> "O Black and Unknown Bards", (1908), a poem by James Weldon Johnson, was an homage to "black slaves singers, gone, forget unfamed". ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. Mackay, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 769-770.

Neal claimed that their negative experience with the book's white publishers demonstrated the need for a black publishing network for black writers.<sup>28</sup> *Black Fire* had a major impact on contemporaries and also on the generation that followed. Writing almost 20 years later, Henry Louis Gates regarded *Black Fire* as the most daring attempt at black canon formation up to that point, one that began a new tradition:

This canon, the blackest canon of all, was defined by both formal innovation and by themes: Formally, individual selections tended to aspire to the vernacular or to black music, or to performance; theoretically, each selection reinforces the urge toward black liberation, toward 'freedom now' with an up-against-the wall subtext. The hero, the valorized presence, in this volume is the black vernacular...Absent completely was a desire to 'prove' our common humanity to white people by demonstrating our power of intellect. No, in *Black Fire* art and act are one.<sup>29</sup>

In the same article, citing James Weldon Johnson's *Book Of American Negro Poetry* (1922) and V.F. Calverton's *An Anthology Of American Negro Literature* (1929), Gates argued that these early attempts at canon formation defined as their goal "the demonstration of the existence of the black tradition as a political defense of the racial self against racism". Gates argued that in Sterling Brown's *Negro Caravan* (1941) too,

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<sup>28</sup> Their fear that white funded publications would not bring ideological independence but a subliminal propagandising of "white" aims was an observation repeated by other editors of black magazines and journals flourishing around that time. The difficult choice of accepting white funding had been an issue for many years. Carter G. Woodson expressed a similar concern when it was recorded that by 1933 he "would not endorse or participate in any projects financed by whites, that he could not control, because he considered them detrimental to his case of undertaking to advance black history or the professional nature of black scholarship". Jacqueline Goggins, *Carter G. Woodson: A Life In Black History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993) 111. Similarly, in 1971, Joe Goncalves, the editor of the *Journal of Black Poetry* argued: "We are going to have to control our means of communication from the source of finance right down to the printer." Joe Goncalves, "Some Notes: An Editorial", *Journal of Black Poetry* 1 (Summer 1971): 2-3.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Authority, (White) Power and the (Black) Critic: It's All Greek to Me", *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 99.

the editors regarded the canon as "unified thematically by self -defense against racist literary conventions".

*Black Fire* was published at a time when black activists, particularly students, were criticising and challenging the academic world about its attitude toward Black Studies and the African American perspective in intellectual discourse. This unsettling publication served to fuel the anger of the militant students and to point accusingly to critics and academics who refused to acknowledge a separate black expression. *Black Fire* was included in Jack Richardson's review of Harold Cruse's *Rebellion or Revolution*, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul On Ice* and James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, in the *New York Review of Books* in 1968.<sup>30</sup> The main theme of Richardson's review essay, "The Black Arts", concerned the traditions of black literature and the changes that this new movement had created: "Dragged out into America's social chaos, the new literature, instead of analyzing the lunacy behind the slogans of the struggle, has begun to embody it." Citing James Baldwin as a good writer who had succumbed to the dubious charms of blackness, Richardson recognised that *Black Fire* was an important work, but beginning a dangerous tradition:

One can well imagine that this sort of anthology is an omen of what will be coming from a great many black writers in the next few years. There will be more and more proclamations of Blackness, more claims to "soul" in place of demonstrations of it, and more undigested anger within wide margins which call themselves poems. It seems that over the whole concept of Black Nationalist Art, there must hang a metaphysic of primitiveness which its votaries somehow identify with purity and with an imagination untainted by white notions of excellence.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Jack Richardson, "The Black Arts", *New York Review of Books* Vol.XI No. 11 (Dec. 19, 1968):10-13.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 11. Richardson's dispute with the idea of a philosophy of blackness prompts him to use the term "primitive", which is a poorly judged application of the term and does not illuminate the criticism he is levelling.



*Black Fire* demonstrated that there was a new mood amongst black writers and it was this mood or, to quote Alain Locke on the Harlem Renaissance, this “new psychology” that was the most important consideration of the editors since it clearly dominated their selections. The essays covered issues regarding black revolution and nationalism, Afrocentrism and liberation. On black art, James T. Stewart’s “The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist” argued for specific black aesthetic models because the “existing white paradigms [did] not correspond to the realities of the black existence”. Stewart advocated new models “consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic styles, and our moral and spiritual styles”. While this was an appropriate first essay in the anthology, as it clearly set the context of the collection, Stewart did not elaborate on what those different styles were, or how they were part of the Black Arts Movement - another example of the lack of clarity about the role and function of the artist.<sup>32</sup>

Different perspectives on economic and political change were expressed in Lindsay Barrett’s “The Tide Inside It Rages” and Nathan Hare’s “Brainwashing of Black Men’s Minds”. Stokely Carmichael’s “Towards Black Liberation” argued for a political movement in which “the racial and cultural personality of the black community must be preserved”.<sup>33</sup> The inclusion of an essay by Carmichael was a reminder to readers that the Black Arts Movement was the ‘sister concept’ of Black Power and that the Black Aesthetic was informed by this cultural and political alliance.<sup>34</sup> There was a less celebratory essay, “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afro-American”, by Harold Cruse, whose *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* had been

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<sup>32</sup> James T. Stewart, “The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist,” *Black Fire* 3.

<sup>33</sup> Stokely Carmichael, “Towards Black Liberation”, *Black Fire* 128.

<sup>34</sup>In the introduction, I cited Larry Neal, who referred to Black Art as the “aesthetic and spiritual sister to the Black Power concept”. Larry Neal, “Black Art”, *Drama Review* Vol. 12 No.4 (Summer 1968):38.



published the previous year and had included some derisive comments about LeRoi Jones' expectations of social change through the arts. Cruse's essay assessed the failure of communities to make the connections between black protest in America and global anti-colonial feeling. James Boggs' essay, "Black Power: A Scientific Concept Whose Time has Come", debated black people's relationship with capitalism. Boggs argued that black people needed to go beyond Civil Rights and demands for equality and replace white people in the positions of economic power.

Poetry made up the largest section of the anthology. The poems generally celebrated blackness, encouraged revolution and praised Africa and black musical traditions. Examples of some of the titles were 'Uhuru', 'It is Time for Action', 'Oh Shit, a Riot', 'Mississippi Concerto', 'The Nigga Section' and LeRoi Jones' now famous poem, 'Black Art'. A few of the poems were in the form of dedications to prominent black figures; "Malcolm X" by Larry Neal, "Dirge for J.A. Rogers" by Hart LeRoi Bibbs (the "Harlem Griot") and "Two Dreams (for M.L.K's one)" by Clarence Franklin. The anthology also included two poems by the now rather conservative critic, Stanley Crouch, along with poems like "Brother Harlem Bedford Watts Tells Mr. Charlie Where Its At" by Bobb Hamilton, the editor of the fiery journal *Soul Book*. The fiction included work by Henry Dumas, whose work was highly respected by LeRoi Jones, and two short stories by women writers, Julia Fields and Jean Wheeler Smith – two of only seven contributions by women out of the 70 writers featured.

"And Shine Swam On", Larry Neal's afterword, tried to bring together the passionate feelings for black cultural independence that ran through the anthology. Neal attempted to provide guidance for young black writers by encouraging them to search for a 'workable ideology' from the theory of Black Power. Such an ideology

would ease the tension arising from being separate in a racist society which, Neal argued, should be the immediate concern of writers and critics.

For Neal, the resolution of this tension had not been tackled appropriately by older black writers. To illustrate his point, Neal referred to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison's work as representing ideas that were inconsistent with the current revolutionary black movement. Citing Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" (1937), Neal discussed Wright's insistence on the reconciliation of "nationalism" and "revolutionary aspirations". He applauded Wright's "utilization of black tradition and culture – a culture that had developed out of the black church, and the folklore of the people".<sup>35</sup> However, where Wright failed, Neal argued, was in his rejection of black nationalism and embrace of communism. This, Neal suggested, left Wright with an enduring "double consciousness" that forced him to spend the last years of his life "explaining the psychology of the oppressed throughout the Third World".<sup>36</sup> Although Neal was disappointed that Wright had felt the need to be exiled from America - and, therefore, exiled from participating in its black liberation struggles - he believed that the international thrust of Wright's later work, such as *Black Power*, *White Man Listen!* and *The Color Curtain*, linked Wright with Garvey and DuBois and foreshadowed the work of Fanon and Malcolm X.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, Neal dismissed Ralph Ellison as unable to accept the "coarse" nature of the nationalism that he himself wrote about through his character Ras in *Invisible Man*. Neal continued:

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<sup>35</sup> Neal, "And Shine Swam On", *Black Fire* 650.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 652. Neal's use of the term "double consciousness", comes from W.E.B. DuBois' 1903 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois argued that "double consciousness" was the sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of white people. DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk* 1903. New York: American Library, 1982.

<sup>37</sup> Ironically, in later years, Wright and indeed Fanon, rejected Third World ideologies of racial-cultural exceptionalism and exclusivity.

The things that concerned Ellison are interesting to read, but contemporary black youth feels another force in the world today. We know who we are, and we are not invisible, *at least not to each other*.<sup>38</sup>

*Black Fire* was published four years after the publication of Ellison's own collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, and it is not clear if Neal had read this before he wrote "And Shine Swam On".<sup>39</sup> What is clear, however, is that the message that *Black Fire* wanted to leave with its readers was that black literature must take a different turn, firstly by destroying "double consciousness" and then by black people developing their own nationalist consciousness. The aesthetic model Neal espoused to achieve this was black music; "the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel".<sup>40</sup>

The anthology concluded with a list of contributors: academics, poets, critics and 'revolutionary brothers', some of whom were in exile and with whom, by the time of publication, the editors had lost touch. *Black Fire* was a model for what the Movement wanted to achieve. It was a blend of literature and analytical discourse on the black arts and laid the foundation for *The Black Aesthetic* which, three years later, attempted to connect those ideas in a black specific ideological framework.

*The Black Aesthetic* was edited by the writer, academic and cultural activist Addison Gayle in 1971 and was the major critical anthology of that era. *The Black Aesthetic* was a conscious attempt to "faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro".<sup>41</sup> Gayle believed that there was an "aesthetic inherent in the soul of black people" and his ambition was to appraise that aesthetic in black writing,

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<sup>38</sup> Neal, "And Shine Swam On", *Black Fire* 652.

<sup>39</sup> In later years Neal changed his ideas about Ellison and in 1970 wrote an essay which is almost a homage to Ellison's craft. "Politics as Ritual: Ellison's Zoot Suit", *Black World* (December 1970): 31-52.

<sup>40</sup> Neal, "And Shine Swam On", 654. Music as a model for black literature is discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>41</sup> Gayle, Introduction, *The Black Aesthetic* xvi.



music and drama.<sup>42</sup> Some of the critical writing about fiction and poetry was taken from the debates held in *The Negro Digest*. The contributions were chosen to bring together what were, at core, essentialist criteria for blacks to evaluate their own works through their own critical framework.

Divided into five sections - theory, music, poetry, drama and fiction - *The Black Aesthetic* mixed critical analysis from established names such as Larry Neal, Hoyt W. Fuller and John O. Killens with work from younger writers like James Emmanuel, Julian Mayfield and Adam David Miller. Each section began with a new introductory essay or by reprinting a well known essay by an established black writer. Theory was the first section, and opened with Hoyt W. Fuller's "Towards A Black Aesthetic". This introductory essay set the tone for the anthology and also recognised Fuller's significance as the editor of *The Negro Digest*, where the debate had really started. The music section began with an "Introduction to Black Aesthetics in Music" by Jimmy Stewart and was followed by DuBois' "Of the Sorrow Songs" from *The Souls of Black Folk*. This section also included J. A. Rogers' "Jazz at Home", from *The New Negro*, and a shortened version of LeRoi Jones' "The Changing Same". The poetry section opened with Langston Hughes' 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", whose prophetic conclusion, "We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves", was a great source of inspiration to Movement artists.<sup>43</sup> Alain Locke's 1927 essay "The Negro and the American Theatre" was the first in the drama section, while the fiction section opened with Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing".

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

<sup>43</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", *The Black Aesthetic* 172.

*The Black Aesthetic* was published while the journal debates on the Black Aesthetic were still continuing. Gayle wanted to demonstrate that the Black Aesthetic was already in existence and constantly developing. Concentrating on the theme of black aesthetics, there was no suggestion that a black aesthetic for literature needed to be significantly different from a black aesthetic for music and fine arts. Gayle insisted that there was a black aesthetic evident in all areas of black art.

Julian Mayfield's definition of the Black Aesthetic in "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours" argued that the aesthetic was within black people and therefore could be applied to different art forms and genres:

It is in our racial memory, and the unshakeable knowledge of who we are, where we have been and, springing from this, where we are going.<sup>44</sup>

Mayfield then went on to make the crucial point, to which Gayle had alluded in the book's introduction, that the Black Aesthetic was, in part, "a corrective":

The Black Aesthetic if it is anything is the search for a new program, because all the old programmes spawned out of the Judeo-Christian spirit have failed us.<sup>45</sup>

This search for a new programme lent excitement and creativity to artists and critics in the Movement. These Black Arts activists, whom I shall call Black Aesthetic writers and critics, were developing critical ideas and models for creative and critical writing, while at the same time ignoring or rejecting the models they had been given by white critics.

*The Black Aesthetic* attempted to clarify the role of criticism, although the essays tended to focus on the function of the black critic rather than on the tools and

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<sup>44</sup> Julian Mayfield, "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours", *The Black Aesthetic* 26.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 27.

purpose of black criticism. Two significant essays on this subject were Darwin T. Turner's "Afro-American Literary Critics: An Introduction" and James A. Emmanuel's "Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics". Turner's essay gave an overview of the history of black literary criticism and divided the work into six phases.<sup>46</sup> The enthusiastic young critic James Emmanuel offered a personal view of how the Black Aesthetic should develop as a critical paradigm. Emmanuel recognised the changing nature of black literature; from writing that was simply about black people to writing that was "social, programmatic, and more therapeutic".<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel then outlined why the Black Aesthetic was needed and paraphrased below are his four reasons:

- The Black Aesthetic was necessary because black people see/feel things differently from their white counterparts
- The Black Aesthetic was a way of fighting against racism from within the literary domain
- The Black Aesthetic provided an opportunity to do the crucial work of recording black expressive arts and creative production
- The Black Aesthetic would encourage independent publishing and did not leave the business of publishing black writing to the academic presses.<sup>48</sup>

There was an element of philosophical idealism in Emmanuel's outlook, but he was also quite astute. He saw the black artist as the "culture hero of his race", whose purpose was to "memorialize in beauty the truth and essence of heritage".<sup>49</sup> Of course, if artists were to memorialize in beauty, as Emmanuel suggested, they might not always be conveying the 'reality' of the black experience that so many of them

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<sup>46</sup> This essay is also discussed in Chapter Three.

<sup>47</sup> These concerns would later be dubbed by Henry Louis Gates as 'extra-literary concerns'.

<sup>48</sup> James Emmanuel, "Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics", The Black Aesthetic 182-211.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 192.



demanding from black cultural expression. Also, by “memorializing”, there was a danger of petrifying a culture which was inherently dynamic and responsive to various environmental factors of social and political change.

An enthusiastic message came from Carolyn Gerald’s “The Black Writer and his Role”, notably one of only two essays by black women in this anthology.<sup>50</sup>

Gerald’s main argument was the importance of image for self-identity:

We are black people living in a white world. When we consider that the black man sees white cultural and racial images projected upon the whole extent of his universe, we cannot help but realize that a very great deal of the time the black man sees a zero image of himself.<sup>51</sup>

Gerald’s blueprint clearly directed black artists to become guardians of the image:

We cannot block out the black-white struggle for control of image and create a utopianized world of all-black reflections. Our work at this stage is clearly to destroy the zero and the negative image-myths of ourselves by turning them inside out. To do this, we reverse the symbolism and we use that reverse symbolism as the tool for projecting our own image upon the universe.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Gerald’s essay demonstrated how male identity and masculine language dominated black literary discourse. In her essay she talked about the writer as a man and discussed *his* role as though the writer is always male. Here, Gerald, perhaps unwittingly, revealed her own alienation from the accepted image of the black writer. “We’ve said that man projects his image upon the universe. But man does not exist in isolation. It is far more accurate to say that man projects his cultural and racial images upon the universe and he derives a sense of personal worth from the reflection he sees gazing back at him. For he defines himself and the world in terms of others like him. He discovers his identity within a group.” Carolyn F. Gerald, “The Black Writer And His Role”, The Black Aesthetic 349.

One wonders with whom Gerald identifies in this model. Her statement raises an issue far more important than semantics and gender-specific language, it raises the issue of the black woman’s engagement with the politics of cultural identity through the arts and the real issue of black female self-subjugation in the creation of the black literary subject. This was not a concern that Gerald expressed but the omission of her own identity or the subsuming of her identity within this black male image suggested that there was no opportunity for black women to examine their identities and express themselves fully in their own racial and gender contexts, a subject I consider in more detail in Chapter Seven.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 350.

Advocating a battle against the “zero image”, Gerald also encouraged a movement in which black people looked inwardly and celebrated their own image, to be reflected positively to other black people and defiantly at a negative white world.<sup>53</sup>

Another important essay was the last in the collection, Gayle’s “The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time”. Like Neal’s afterword in *Black Fire*, Gayle challenged earlier black writers’ attempts to “transform the pragmatics of their everyday lives into abstract formulas and theorems”.<sup>54</sup> Drawing a contrast between the styles of earlier and contemporary black writers, Gayle argued that black literature would need to be rooted in the black experience and in the lives of black people if it were to have any cultural value.<sup>55</sup>

*The Black Aesthetic* and *Black Fire* both demonstrated the diversity of critical and creative work being produced by African Americans. Only five writers appeared in both anthologies, indicating the breadth of available writing talent involved in black artistic production in the late 1960s and early 1970s and, perhaps also, how dynamic and changing the black literary scene had become. These works represented a huge cross-fertilization of ideas, especially as most of the writers included in the anthologies were also writing regularly for black journals. Although both anthologies ended with afterwords that cited Langston Hughes, in *Black Fire* many of the writers were still “playing off and defining themselves against the white world”.<sup>56</sup> It was

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<sup>53</sup>Gerald concluded her essay with a poem beginning “Dress the muse in black”, and the point of Gerald’s poem is that black people should fight to make “the universe ...black again”. Mari Evans wrote a similar poem “Vive Noir” (1970), which begins with her decision to leave the inner city and its social degradations to spread out over America and intrude her “proud blackness all over the place”. The proud blackness Evans wanted to “intrude” on America was in her style, her personal tastes and conveyed through images of blackness, beginning with putting “black angels in all the books and a black Christ child in Mary’s arms...” until she changed society so that it would be “a crime to be anything but BLACK”. Mari Evans, “Vive Noir”, *New Black Voices* ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Mentor, 1972) 245-247.

<sup>54</sup> Addison Gayle, “The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time”, *The Black Aesthetic* 384.

<sup>55</sup> Gayle’s essay implied that Ellison, Wright and Baldwin were not sufficiently rooted in the black experience.

<sup>56</sup> This comment was made by Jack Richardson in his 1968 black literature review article. Jack Richardson, “The Black Arts”, *New York Review of Books* Vol.XI No. 11 (Dec. 19, 1968):12.



really *The Black Aesthetic*, concerned with the development of black aesthetic theory and a black intellectual tradition, that better demonstrated Hughes' disinterested comment; "If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter."<sup>57</sup>

### **Development of a black intellectual tradition.**

Alongside the desire for a Black Arts Movement that encouraged black writers, there was a similar ambition for the development of institutions of black learning across the different academic disciplines. Thus, while the writer and academic Stephen Henderson was establishing himself as Howard University's Director of Arts and Humanities, the aim to wield power within institutions was also being fulfilled by the historian Vincent Harding, who established the Black Studies programme at Spelman and was the first Director of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Center in Atlanta. He contributed to the development of the think tank, the Institute for the Black World, which was established through the influence of Walter Rodney and the sociologist Andrew Billingsley.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain", *The Black Aesthetic* 172.

<sup>58</sup> Vincent Harding was strongly influenced by the Black Arts Movement and his model of historical development - Negro history, Black history and Black Studies- was linked to the Movement's aims. The first stage, 'Negro History', in which category one might place the early twentieth century historian, Carter G. Woodson, "sought only to guarantee that the black presence was properly acknowledged, assuming that blackness could be contained within the confines of the American saga."

The second phase, Black history, was the one in which Harding placed himself and his own intellectual pursuits and described as follows: "Black History comes closer to the significance of the black folk creations than much of Negro History. It encompasses more of the literature and the music than Negro History. Its tendency is to deal with the Black Experience, to shake off the more narrowly defined discipline-oriented understanding of history (thus it approaches Black studies) . . . Black History, then, is the facing of the chasm, the hard and unromantic reading of the experiences of black people in America . . . We demand hegemony over our institutions. We seek for control of the telling of our story." Vincent Harding, John Williams and Charles F. Harris eds. "Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land" *Amistad* 1 (New York: Vintage, 1970) 273,279,284,289. Harding recognised that the telling of that story was more than relating a historical monograph but, as the Black Arts Movement proposed, a commitment to understanding and examining all aspects of black people's lives from the unique perspectives of their blackness in white America.



In this final section, I will briefly explore the role of the intellectual in the Black Arts Movement and the contribution of that role to the development of a black intellectual tradition.

In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Harold Cruse scathingly noted that the black intellectuals were "... in a crisis, but a crisis occasioned not merely by an inherited backlog of unresolved history, but by the fact that they are not truly *intellectuals*, by any historical and cultural definition".<sup>59</sup> Cruse's argument was that there needed to be a mediating presence between the black community and the outside world. This role, he suggested, should be held by the "creative intellectual" who would "evolve creative and artistic policies that will govern cultural programs, organizations and self-sustained and administered research institutions".<sup>60</sup> Cruse's creative intellectual was an important blend of artist and intellectual, whose role was to fill the gap that, Cruse felt, had been created by the lack of cultural analysis in contemporary black political and social dialogue:

The history of the Negro intelligentsia indicates that the role of the Negro creative intellectual is an interim role at best, insofar as leadership is concerned. This role is necessary, in the absence of other willing, or able, spokesmen, in order to bring the cultural front (as differentiated from the political and economic fronts) into its proper focus.<sup>61</sup>

Cruse's suggested solution required the involvement of activists and artists who were critics and intellectual interpreters of their age. This wide-ranging brief appealed to black artists who, as the cultural nationalist poet and commentator Askia Muhammad Touré pointed out, wanted an opportunity to comment on all aspects of black life:

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<sup>59</sup> Harold Cruse *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1967) 519.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 518.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 543.

[We need an] authentic intelligentsia . . .to organize Black people politically, culturally, spiritually, and economically. In other words, a true intelligentsia of a people would seek to create the forms, the organizations, through which that particular people can, first survive, then prosper, and finally, rise to eminence or world power. The "negro" intellectuals (or "civil writers") , due to the ignorance of their roles, again, as Bro. Harold Cruse points out, have failed to do this and thus the Black Nation/Race at the present time is defenseless.<sup>62</sup>

Touré's view of the intelligentsia was of a group of black men (and, one would hope, women) with an active involvement both in the life of the mind and in the organization of the political and social aspects of black life. Larry Neal, in a tribute to the vision of LeRoi Jones, suggested that Jones' work proposed a way to bring together the establishment of a black intellectual discourse that communicated with the masses:

For America infects Black intellectuals often with a peculiar kind of estrangement - an estrangement that makes reconciliation between the community and her 'intellectuals' a difficult affair. Jones has been unaffected by this estrangement... acting upon Jones have been forces from both within and without. As a creative person, he has been driven by a desire to evolve a unifying philosophy of art; one suited to his needs and to his people. The other forces, related to the one just stated are historical. They involve the destruction of an epoch .<sup>63</sup>

The Black Arts Movement, then, strove to produce intellectuals who attempted to combine academic rigor and community consciousness. Through the Black Aesthetic as the critical discourse of a revolutionary movement, there was an opportunity for

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<sup>62</sup> Askia Muhammad Touré, "The Crises in Black Culture", Journal of Black Poetry 1 (Spring 1968):6. Amiri Baraka made a similar point about music, but here he recognised that only the middle classes were actually equipped to take on this role: "Until relatively recently those Negroes who *could* become critics, who would largely have to come from the black middle class, have simply not been interested in the music." LeRoi Jones, Black Music (London:MacGibbon and Kee, 1969) 11.

<sup>63</sup>Larry Neal, "Development of LeRoi Jones ", Liberator No.2 (6 Feb.1966):19.

black writers to blend established black intellectual traditions with their nationalist grass-roots activism.

As an essentialist ideal, the Black Arts Movement aimed to promote black participation in the creative arts and critical process. To use economic terminology, the Black Arts Movement was extremely 'protectionist'. Artists saw blackness as a way to protect their culture, literature and art, and as a way to develop ways of understanding the different forms of black expression. The Black Aesthetic was the over-arching ideology behind this protectionist exclusivity. However, despite the prescriptions and models like those suggested by Neal and Govan, the development of critical theories within the Black Arts Movement was limited. David Smith, who wrote a measured essay on "The Black Arts Movement and its Critics" (1991), argued thus:

The difficulties these writers experience in defining the Black Aesthetic exemplify a dilemma that writers of that movement never resolved, one which, I argue, could not be resolved. The concept of "blackness" was - and is - inherently overburdened with essentialist, ahistorical entailments. An adequate account of African-American aesthetic practices would call the concept of "blackness" into question, and the failure to question this concept would inevitably lead to muddled theories.<sup>64</sup>

I would describe the main aims of the Black Aesthetic as worthy, but diverse and idealistic. The Black Aesthetic critics wanted to overcome the "twoness" described by DuBois by celebrating a singular black experience.<sup>65</sup> They applauded new approaches to identity and the black experience, yet without any real assessment of the stifling

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<sup>64</sup>David Lionel Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and its Critics", American Literary History Vol 3 No.1 (Spring 1991):95.

<sup>65</sup>DuBois described "Twoness" as the warring of ideals in the dark body of the individual who was both American and Negro. DuBois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk 1903. New York: American Library, 1982.



effect that a singular black aesthetic might create. However, the Movement's priorities of developing a canon of creative and critical writing and institutions wherein black critics could be developed, did provide newer and more eager audiences for black writers and, through the Black Aesthetic, a framework for the development of their work. The Black Aesthetic critics did not wish to be part of America's racist literary canon and wanted to contribute to the development of a radical black canon and literary tradition that was divorced from white literature.

Overall then, the Black Aesthetic writers and critics were challenging the need to work within the framework of the American canon and were looking to develop their own systems of black literary expression and critical analysis. This issue of ownership of black intellectual discourse which was expressed in the Black Aesthetic had been prefigured four years earlier in the debate occasioned by the publication of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which will be the basis of the discussion in the following chapter.

### Endnote One

**David Lloren, “Survey on Black Writers (*sic*) Views on Literary Lions and Values”, Negro Digest (Jan.1968):10-48.**

1. Which books made the most lasting impact upon you in elementary and high school? Name three.
2. Which books which were ‘required’ reading in high school or college, failed to impress you most? Or, which books which were ‘required’ reading did you feel were overrated?
3. As a student in elementary school and college, did you read any books at all written by Negroes or written about Negroes? If so, name three – or as many as you remember reading.
4. If *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* were ‘required’ reading in school, do you recall having negative reactions to the novels?
5. Did you attend schools where Negro History was taught?
6. If you attended predominantly–white schools, did you experience embarrassment when the slavery and Civil war periods were being studied and discussed.
7. At what point in your educational career were you introduced to Negro History?

8. Which books dealing with the Negro's role in history would you recommend now for study by Negro children? Name one or more.
9. In growing up, were you exposed to Negro newspapers and magazines? List the periodicals which were most frequently found in your home?
10. What did you feel about the quality of the Negro periodicals you read while growing up?
11. Did any of the columnists or writers in the Negro newspapers and magazines have any influence on your decision to become a writer?
12. Which writers, if any, were influential in your decision to try to write? Name them in order of their importance to you?
13. Who do you feel are the three greatest writers of all time?
14. Who do you feel are the most important American writers, black or white?
15. Who do you feel are the most important white American writers?
16. Who do you feel are the three most important black American writers, past or present?
17. In terms of 'promise' which of the newer (younger) black writers would you single out for possible major contributions to literature?



18. Do you agree with the contention – prevalent among even some black writers - that the later works of the late Richard Wright suffered because, in his European exile, Wright had lost touch with the living American reality?
19. Do you see any future at all for the school of black writers which seek to establish ‘a black aesthetic?’
20. Do you believe that the black writer’s journey toward “Art” should lead consciously and deliberately through exploitation of “the black experience”?
21. What do you feel is the most important novel written by a black writer since publication of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison?
22. Who are the most important living black poets? Name three, in order of their importance.
23. Who are the three most important black poets of this century?
24. Who are the most important black playwrights of this century?
25. Should black writers direct their work toward black audiences?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Representation of a Black Hero : William Styron's Nat Turner and a Black critical response.**

#### **I**

Clearly, we are in the presence of no mere “fiction” but a cultural and social document which is both “illuminating” and potentially definitive of contemporary attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

In what the critic Albert Stone later described as a “discourse of fury”,<sup>2</sup> the debate surrounding the publication of William Styron's novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), raised issues of black ownership of institutions and intellectual discourse. This debate took place partly in John Henrik Clarke's collection *The Confessions of Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), which was an important text as one of a growing number of publications of black critical analysis. In exploring how this debate arose and was conducted, the views and responses of younger black critics and their impact on black literary and cultural criticism will be discussed.

*The Confessions of Nat Turner* was a historical, fictional, first person narrative written by the white novelist William Styron. It loosely told the tale of a slave rebellion that took place in Virginia in August 1831. The main protagonist, Nat Turner, led a rebellion of slaves during which he killed several people, including a white woman called Margaret Whitehead for whose death he was later tried and executed. Styron referred to two written sources in his research for the novel. Prior to his execution, Nat Turner had spoken to a lawyer, Mr. Thomas Gray, who transcribed

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Thelwell, “Back With the Wind: Mr Styron and the Reverend Turner”, John Henrik Clarke, ed. William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond (Boston:Beacon Press,1968) 79.

<sup>2</sup>Albert Stone, The Return of Nat Turner: History Literature and Cultural Politics in Sixties America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992) 173.

the conversation and later, in 1831, published the dialogue as *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.* Gray's pamphlet was regarded as a valuable account of the events in Virginia and provided an insight into the motives for Turner's rebellion. As the only written account, it became an important text linked to the slave narrative genre. Styron's other source was a written account of "The Southampton Insurrection", published as a Ph.D. thesis by W.S. Drewry in 1900.<sup>3</sup>

In *Confessions*, Styron identified psychological, religious and ideological concerns which might have motivated Nat Turner to rebel. Turner's story was that of a young "house nigger" who "as a child...as a young man...was happy by anybody's standards". In Styron's tale, Turner's happy relationship with his benign master turned "sour and awful" when his master's economic circumstances changed and he sold Turner to an "illiterate woodcutter". For Styron, Turner's rebellion did not come out of oppression but from Turner's having been given "a smell of something grand", which was taken away before he could enjoy its benefits.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it was the sense of a missed opportunity for the better life that his previous master had promised him that motivated Turner to rebel. Styron, therefore, portrayed a complex man who questioned his faith and his own motivations. His reworking of Turner's rebellion turned a figure who had become a heroic mythological symbol for the black community into a man defeated both by his own flawed personality and by the oppressive system of slavery.

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, John Henrik Clarke referred to the research conducted by "Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the Colonel of the famous Black Regiment...thirty years after the event [Higginson] established the fact that Nat Turner had a wife – a slave wife on a plantation separate from that of his master". Clarke felt that Styron should have referred to Higginson's research which confirmed, amongst other things, that Turner had been a married man. John Henrik Clarke, ed. William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond ix.

<sup>4</sup> Styron, "An Interview with William Styron", Robert Canzoneri and Page Stegner, Per/Se (Summer 1966):41.



The black critics argued, however, that in creating a protagonist at odds with himself, Styron did not illuminate but burdened the hero with traits derived from his (Styron's) own prejudiced modernist ideas.<sup>5</sup> Thus, to the black critics, *Confessions* showed that, left in the hands of white writers, black male heroes could be misinterpreted, and, even after death, remain victims of white misinterpretation and historical and literary exploitation. In blending fiction and fact, Styron had fused together two levels of discourse that were related but not wholly compatible. This interdisciplinary work of 'faction', black critics feared, could initiate a movement that would leave all black heroes and historical figures, open to an unwelcome modernist re-evaluation through the guise of meditating on history.

In writing *Confessions*, Styron allowed himself "the utmost freedom of imagination in reconstructing events". The novel was, he said, based on sufficient historical research to discover "only so much as [his] instinct as a novelist told[him]to care".<sup>6</sup> Writing in the first person, Styron, a twentieth century white Southerner, became a nineteenth century Negro slave. Using "rank intuition", Styron assumed an understanding of the Negro slave psyche that suggested an identification with black people and black history that many of his black critics did not believe he had earned. Years later, the white critic, Melvin Friedman listed Styron's participation in liberal activities as evidence of his ability to write from a Negro point of view. Friedman described Styron as the "first authentic literary martyr to the cause of black power - which too willingly forgets the liberal credentials of its white victims".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Holder argues that Nat's obsession with the ugliness of his people proceeds "from something in Styron himself rather than from his protagonist", "Styron's Slave :The Confession of Nat Turner", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. LXVIII No.2 (Spring 1969):174.

<sup>6</sup> William Styron, *This Quiet Dust* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983) 7.

<sup>7</sup> Melvin Friedman, *William Styron* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1978) 38. Although Friedman's essay was published ten years after *Confessions*, I believe that the black critics would have countered his argument by saying that it was the fact that, despite such liberal credentials, Styron was still unable to free himself from the shackles of a racist vision that made *Confessions* such a damning indictment of his own so-

Generally, in mainstream reviews, *Confessions* was regarded as a triumph. The critical acclaim the novel received from white reviewers confirmed for many black writers the racialised power imbalances within literary criticism. However, the criticism did not fall neatly along racial lines. White critics like Richard Gilman and Stanley Kauffman argued that *Confessions* was insensitive to the black community and inadequately explored the religious aspect of Nat Turner's experience. Black academics John Hope Franklin, Saunders Redding and Benjamin Quarles, on the other hand, wrote reviews endorsing Styron's novel. In *The Return of Nat Turner* (1992), Albert Stone tried to analyse the different groups of black opinion and said that during the first months after the novel's publication, black opinion was "comparatively insubstantial".<sup>8</sup> While he did not elaborate on that, or on specific critical responses, Stone suggested that the different responses to the novel were in "generational and/or social class terms, with older, black, thoroughly middle-class intellectuals more willing to sympathize with Styron's attempt".<sup>9</sup>

The different ways in which *Confessions* was received sparked an important debate. Several of the black writers' responses to *Confessions* were collected by John Henrik Clarke in *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, which was published in 1968, a few months after David Lloren's "Survey on Literary Lions" in *The Negro Digest* and Jones and Neal's *Black Fire*. The collection included essays from historians, psychologists, sociologists and literary critics, with contributions from

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called liberal views. The historian Lerone Bennett Jr. in his essay "Nat's Last White Man", observed: "The difference in tone between the *Confessions* of Gray, the racist, and Styron, the white liberal, gives one pause. Gray, who loathed Nat but who looked into his eyes, gives him a history unrepentant, courageous, sure of his act and his eventual vindication. Styron who says he sympathizes with Nat, destroys him as a man and as a leader. And the terrifying implication of this fact is that the fascination-horror of a bigot may be more compelling than the fascination-anxiety of a white liberal." Lerone Bennett Jr., "Nat's Last White Man", *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* 16.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Stone, *The Return of Nat Turner* 126.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.



Lerone Bennett, Vincent Harding, Michael Thelwell, John Henrik Clarke and Alvin F. Poussaint.<sup>10</sup> Some of the essays posited reasons for Styron's portrayal of Turner, while others discussed the symbolic, cultural and historical damage to Turner's image through Styron's book. The essays were mostly personal and quite subjective responses to Styron's depiction of a celebrated black hero. However, their essays were not part of a Black Aesthetic defence of blackness, but a defence of their cultural legacy and their rights as black writers to challenge white people's negative portrayals of black people.

Clarke's introduction outlined the attitude of the black critics to *Confessions*, and included the following rhetorical statement about Styron and his white supporters:

Have they failed to see Nat Turner as a hero and  
revolutionist out of fear that they might have to see H. Rap  
Brown and Stokely Carmichael in the same way?<sup>11</sup>

Clarke deliberately made this suggestion in the introduction in order to link the essays with contemporary struggles for black liberation in America. He also implied that Styron was challenging contemporary black liberation activities by questioning the honour of past heroes. By linking Nat Turner to contemporary revolutionaries, many of the critics were also paying tribute to such activists as Brown and Carmichael as black heroes in a similar mould. For most of the black critics, Nat Turner was a black hero because he was featured in books and in the stories and myths that black people

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<sup>10</sup> Of the several debates that the publication engendered, there were two separate discussions between Styron and the historian Herbert Aptheker and another between Eugene Genovese and Vincent Harding. The latter took place at the Southern Historical Association's Annual Meeting, held in New Orleans in 1968 and was sponsored by the *Southern Literary Journal*. It was entitled "The Uses of History in Fiction". There was an invited panel of writers, led by C. Vann Woodward, which included Ralph Ellison, William Styron and Robert Penn Warren. The discussion ranged over a variety of texts but was influenced by the publication of Styron's *Confessions*. In 1970, the white critics Irving Malin and Melvin J. Friedman published William Styron's The Confessions Of Nat Turner: A Critical Handbook Melvin J. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1970) which was a collection of the essays and symposia surrounding *Confessions*.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond ix.



shared in recitations, songs and store-front conversations. For black people, Nat Turner was important to his community because of his rebellion, and also, because they, as a community needed to have black heroes of whom they could be proud.<sup>12</sup> Thus, black writers discussed Nat Turner as their own hero who had been taken away as a result of Styron's novel. Through Styron's novel, the issue of ownership of Nat Turner was raised. However the discussion was not about slavery and freedom but about the way black writers related to a black hero who did not just belong to black people but also belonged to the communities of historical and literary discourse.

Such a desire for ownership was criticised by the historians Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender in "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner":

One of the essays in *Ten Black Writers* is entitled "You've Taken My Nat and Gone", the "My" in this title - as throughout the volume - is meant to refer to the "real," the "true," the "historical," Nat Turner; the meaning of whose life Styron has deliberately attempted "to steal". For these black critics, there is neither ambiguity nor haziness nor complexity in the figure of Nat Turner. *They* know him - know him not merely as a racial symbol but as an historical fact, and the historical fact which Styron has "distorted," "manipulated," "rejected," "emasculated" is the "true story" of an authentic militant hero and revolutionist, a 19th century version of H.Rap Brown or Stokely Carmichael.<sup>13</sup>

Gross and Bender thought that accusations regarding the distortion of Nat Turner could equally be made against the black critics and their attempt to convert Nat Turner into both a racial symbol and a historical fact.

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<sup>12</sup> The debate on Styron's *Confessions* illustrated how black people's appreciation of Nat Turner sprung from their need of a black historical hero. In a written memorial to Paul Robeson, Ossie Davis exemplified this kind of need and its effect on how black people choose to recall their heroes: "Is it not possible that we defined Paul not so much out of knowledge but out of need? Did our appreciation spring from what he truly was to himself and to his people, or from what we desperately needed him to be to meet our demands?" Ossie Davis, "Paul Robeson - Part I" *Freedomways* 11 (Spring 1971):101.

<sup>13</sup> Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender, "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner", *American Quarterly* (October 1971):488-489.

Prior to the publication of *Confessions*, in a 1966 interview with Robert Canzoneri and Page Stegner, Styron said “the beauty for me of Nat as a subject is the fact that I can use whatever responsible imagination I have trying to create my own myth”.<sup>14</sup> For the ten black writers, Styron’s own myth was an *irresponsible* use of his imagination. The black writers questioned William Styron’s right to take on a black hero and his ability to place that subject matter fairly within its proper black, historical context. They felt that, unlike Styron, they knew Turner and understood his mind; consequently they saw themselves as guardians of his legendary life. For the black critics, Styron was not simply writing about a historical figure, but had chosen to reproduce the spirit of the *contemporary* age through the re-telling of the tale of one of black history’s most significant heroes. At a time when Black Americans were beginning to feel that they could make rightful demands rather than ‘Civil-Rights’ pleas, *Confessions* confirmed for them the fragility of black political and cultural resistance and the vulnerability of the black past in the annals of American history. The essays and debates, in response to this fragility and vulnerability, were strong, assertive critical challenges to *Confessions*, Styron himself and those critics, black and white, who defended his work.

My discussion will focus on the views of these younger black critics in *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, who argued that *Confessions* revealed more about white society and its attitudes to black people and their heroes, than it did about one of the most significant slave revolts in American history. To examine the impact of this work of ‘faction’<sup>15</sup> on contemporary black

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<sup>14</sup> Canzoneri and Stegner, “An Interview with William Styron”, 39.

<sup>15</sup> I first heard this term used by Alex Haley in the early 1990s in response to criticism of his book *Roots*. Fiction described a genre of work that uses historical events as a basis for a fusion of historical and literary exploration.

aesthetic discourse, this chapter will chart how a “white” text precipitated a “black” response and how that text dealt with the dichotomy of hero/anti-hero. The arguments covered issues of historical accuracy, the dangers of blending fiction and fact and general concerns about the coherence of the novel. That the narrative was in the first person, that is, that Styron wrote in the voice of the black slave, was another critical objection. Finally, there were repercussions from these debates that raised institutional issues about the American canon and added impetus to the Black Arts Movement’s demands for black-specific literary criticism. Beginning with a consideration of authentication and the novel, I will provide an outline of Styron’s literary approach. I will then discuss the issues of historical accuracy - particularly through discussion of family and religion - coherence of the text, the emotional effects of Turner’s relationship to his blackness and finally the repercussions and impact on the Black Arts Movement.

## II

Like the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *Confessions* was written in the first person, and dominated by the themes of personal redemption, valuing one’s own humanity and group freedom. There was, however, one significant feature of the slave narrative that was not replicated in *Confessions*. Most slave narratives began with an introductory passage written by a prestigious white abolitionist in support of the author. Robert Stepto, in his essay “Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative* of 1845”, described this endorsement as part of an authenticating machinery that “is at least partially responsible for the narrative[s] being accepted as historical evidence”.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>16</sup> Robert B. Stepto, “Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative* of 1845”, Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, eds. *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1979) 178.



credibility of the writer and the truth of his/her experiences were ratified by this authenticating preface which introduced the writer, via a suitable white patron of good repute, to a liberal-minded and curious readership. This testimonial verified the author's ability to write the narrative and his/her right to be taken seriously by white readers. William Styron was writing a fictional account of a historical event in the first person, but was a successful twentieth century white author and had no need for such authentication. Although Styron did not need any white person to endorse his veracity, for him to have credibility with black writers, he would perhaps have benefited from a black writer offering an authenticating context to explain his portrayal of this significant black hero.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the relationship with his close friend James Baldwin provided Styron with such an endorsement by an authenticating person. Baldwin was a respected man of letters whose championship of the black cause was well known. His support of William Styron's work was an influential factor in its reception. This did not, however, prevent comment from sceptical black writers:

William Styron may have let James Baldwin spend some time on his farm, but obviously knowing and listening to Baldwin, as perceptive as Baldwin is, doesn't give Styron the sensitivity necessary for recording the adventures of one of our greatest Black heroes.<sup>18</sup>

Authentication by association was not sufficient for black writers. The above comment by poet Don L. Lee reflected the attitude of many black critics who agreed that in writing his novel, Styron had shown no sensitivity or "moral deference"

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<sup>17</sup> Stepto's essay on the authenticating preface was not published until 1979 so neither Styron nor the black critics could have considered such a view.

<sup>18</sup> Don L. Lee, ed. "Black Critic", Dynamite Voices: Black Voices of the 1960s (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) 18.

towards black people's feelings about Nat Turner.<sup>19</sup> This lack of "moral deference" coupled with the historical inaccuracies and incoherence of the text formed the basis of the black critics' arguments.

Much of the known data to which the black critics referred came from the original *Confessions Of Nat Turner*, as told to white lawyer Thomas Gray in 1831. "Dialogue-by-intermediary",<sup>20</sup> as June Jordan (née Meyer) described Gray's *Confessions*, had as many flaws as did Styron's own "meditation on history". Writing in 1992 Albert Stone reminds us that "Neither William Styron's *Confessions* or Gray's should be regarded as a fixed pole of reference, setting terms for critical discourse and settling questions of historical fact or interpretation."<sup>21</sup> Other white critics, Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender for instance, argued that Gray was a "very shrewd man who knew precisely what he was doing and why [and was anything but] a blank-faced scrivener"; his pamphlet, they argued, was a "political document in the most basic sense of the word".<sup>22</sup> Ironically, many of the black critics were treating as definitive historical record the confessions of a revolutionary slave to a white lawyer and, as Vincent Harding's essay demonstrates, did not fully question their own reliance on such a source:

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<sup>19</sup> In the introduction I cited Laurence Thomas's 1992 essay "Moral deference": "The idea behind moral deference . . . is that there should be a presumption in favor of the person's account of her experiences. This presumption is warranted because the individual is speaking from a vantage point to which someone not belonging to her diminished social category group does not have access." In this case, black writers were requesting moral deference regarding a historical figure of whom they had no personal experience. I imagine, however, that the black critics might have argued that as black men living with the legacy of slavery, they understood Turner's motivations in a way that would have been impossible for white critics. Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference", *The Philosophical Forum* Vol. XXIV No. 1-3 (Fall-Spring 1992-3):244.

<sup>20</sup> June Meyer, "Spokesmen for the Blacks", *The Nation* (December 4, 1967):599. The essay was reprinted with its original title "On Listening A Good Way to Hear". Jordan, *Moving Towards Home* (London:Virago,1989).

<sup>21</sup> Stone, *The Return Of Nat Turner* 21.

<sup>22</sup> Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender, "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner", 492.

The man reported by Gray far overshadows the character created by Styron. Indeed, it appears that the twentieth-century white Virginian was no less overwhelmed by black Nat Turner than was his nineteenth-century counterpart, but he was evidently not so honest.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the black critics depended on Gray's *Confessions* mainly because in Gray's pamphlet, Turner was depicted as the kind of hero that black people could revere.

Acknowledging Styron's position, the critic Wilfred Sheed commented that "Styron used history quite properly to put his own experience into fancy dress and see how it looks".<sup>24</sup> In an article charting the historical creations of Nat Turner, the critics Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender argued that it was not just Styron who 'used' Turner in this way:

Styron has "used" Nat Turner as Gray, Higginson, Wells Brown and, indeed, the accusing critics themselves have used him - reading into him, and out of him, those usable truths which seemed to him to coalesce about the image he was contemplating. Styron's hostile critics may not like what his imaginative search has turned up; they may even in the free country that is literary study denigrate his motives and try to deny him the right to his subject. But they can scarcely attack his "meditation on history" from some supposedly unassailable rampart of historicity.<sup>25</sup>

A rather different point of view was expressed in 1969 when the *Southern Literary Journal* published a conference discussion on "The Uses of History in Fiction".<sup>26</sup> In his contribution Ralph Ellison pointed out "...you don't have the freedom to snatch any and everybody and completely recreate them. This is why you must lie and

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<sup>23</sup> Vincent Harding, "You've Taken My Nat and Gone", William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond 25.

<sup>24</sup> Wilfred Sheed, "The Slave Who Became A Man", New York Times Book Review (October 8, 1967):Section 7:1

<sup>25</sup> Gross and Bender, "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner", 506.

<sup>26</sup> The discussion was led by C. Van Woodward with Ralph Ellison, William Styron and Robert Penn Warren.



disguise a historical figure. You can not move into the area or impose yourself into the authority of the historian..., because he is dealing with chronology... Just leave history alone."<sup>27</sup> Ellison said he hadn't read *Confessions* and therefore related his comments to the title of the conference. However, Ellison's words were very passionate, and he made it clear that there were certain principles of artistic integrity and the authority of historical "truth" that he felt should not be manipulated.<sup>28</sup> In his ostensibly general comments, I believe that Ellison was attempting to protect and preserve the image of the black cultural hero from those white critics who were "snatching" and "recreating" the black historical figure.

In an article a few months later, in a somewhat similar act in defence of an academic discipline, William Akin, commented on the dangers of impressionistic history:

. . .if history is presented as art then historians must subject it to the same rigorous criticism that they do conventional history. . .[Equally] impressionistic history must be held accountable to the known facts if it is to have validity for the particular.<sup>29</sup>

The difficulty was that, as "impressionistic history", *Confessions* could not be scrutinised in the way that Akin suggested and this ambiguity added to the frustration of the novel's critics and detractors. In his own rather poor defence, Styron cited Georg Lukacs who, in *The Historical Novel*, wrote about the image the public maintains of a historical figure and how this is a "hindrance to the writer who wishes to reproduce the spirit of an age faithfully and authentically".<sup>30</sup> Styron's use of a

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<sup>27</sup> Ralph Ellison, "The Uses of History in Fiction", *The Southern Literary Journal* Vol.1 No.2 (Spring 1969): 74.

<sup>28</sup> If it was the case that Ellison had not read the novel and still accepted the place on the panel, then any comments he made would have to be accepted as general rather than specific and he could not be accused of directly criticising Styron's work.

<sup>29</sup>W.E. Akin, "Toward an Impressionistic History: Pitfalls and Possibilities in William Styron's Meditation on History", *American Quarterly* 21 (Fall 1969):808, 806.

<sup>30</sup>William Styron and Herbert Aptheker, "Truth and Nat Turner : An Exchange", *The Nation* (April 22, 1968):545.

historical figure may have reproduced the “spirit of an age”, but not the age in which the novel was set. To the black critics, Styron’s *Confessions* reflected the 1960s preoccupations of white writers’ interpretations of slavery and black family life and represented those ideological views within a text set in the nineteenth century. The black critics argued that in *Confessions*, Styron had reflected prevailing socio-political attitudes, such as those posited by Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s famous report on black America’s matrifocal families, which unduly influenced contemporary writing about slavery.<sup>31</sup> Lerone Bennett argued vehemently against this new trend:

Styron is playing the ‘new history’ game of reviving Big Black Sambo. In other words, he is trying to prove that U.B. Phillips, the classic apologist for slavery, and Stanley Elkins, the sophisticated modern apologist, were right when they projected Sambo - as a dominant plantation type. ... (Styron) gives his main character the mind and vocabulary of U.B. Phillips . . . Nat is filled with rage by the ‘harmless, dull, malleable docility of Hark’ and he discourses in the best ‘new history’ mode on the unspeakable bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, snivelling servility.<sup>32</sup>

Vincent Harding, in his essay “An Exchange on Nat Turner”, supported Bennett’s view when he referred to the role of white writers and critics : "In essence they seek (perhaps unconsciously, but nonetheless effectively) to become the official keepers of

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<sup>31</sup> Richard H. King, in his essay “ Domination and Fabrication: Rethinking Stanley Elkins’ *Slavery*”, argues that Elkins’ book *Slavery: A Problem In American Institutional And Intellectual Life* (1959), discussed the slave personality created by a closed system with “few, if any, sources of countervailing power to that of the masters”. King also argues that Elkins’ *Slavery* should be regarded as a work recognising how slavery developed types of behaviour – notably that of the Sambo. While acknowledging Elkins’ use of controversial terms like “Sambo” and the “infantile” behaviour of the Negro slave, King argued that Elkins’ main discussion was the effects of slavery on the personality of the enslaved. King’s view notwithstanding, it was the possible use of this “Sambo” theory - and its availability to white critics wishing to pathologise post-emancipation black people - that worried black critics. And for these black critics, Styron’s *Confessions* was an example of how the Sambo theory was inappropriately applied. Richard H. King, “ Domination and Fabrication: Rethinking Stanley Elkins’ *Slavery*”, *Slavery and Abolition* Vol.22, No.2 (August 2001): 1-28.

<sup>32</sup> Lerone Bennett, Jr. “Nat’s Last White Man” *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers* 7.



our memories and the shapers of our dreams."<sup>33</sup> Harding believed that, through texts like *Confessions*, the idea of Nat Turner's rebellion would become part of a consensus on slavery that rendered it less horrific, with benevolent slave masters who taught their slaves to read and vicious slaves who overlooked this beneficence and killed the hands that fed and educated them. The society that accepts such assumptions, Harding argued, offered "a slavery at once more subtle and more damaging than any we have known before".<sup>34</sup> The black critics wanted to maintain the image and reputation of the heroic Nat Turner they felt they knew. Thus for them, Turner had to be portrayed as a man with strong moral attitudes, with the certainty and conviction to incite a rebellion. However, for the purposes of his novel, Styron needed to portray a man in inner turmoil. His portrayal of Nat Turner was consistent with his attempt to present a man, not of strong, moral and religious convictions, but one manifesting complex responses to the institution of slavery and to his relationships with his fellow slaves and master. Although moral certainty and complex responses to slavery were not mutually exclusive, as a heroic figure, the Nat Turner that black people revered had to be portrayed as focused and unwavering.

For the black critics, the treatment of Turner's religious beliefs in *Confessions* represented another example of Styron's manipulation of historical data. In Gray's and Higginson's accounts, Turner was portrayed as devoutly religious and strongly committed to his faith. Yet Styron depicted a black man who questioned the faith upon which his own morality and search for justice were founded. Vincent Harding challenged Styron for failing to recreate the "fierce religious conviction"<sup>35</sup> of the hero and the white critic Stanley Kauffman argued that ". . . the central defect of the book

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<sup>33</sup> Vincent Harding, "An Exchange on Nat Turner", New York Review Of Books (Nov. 7, 1968): 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Harding, "You've Taken My Nat and Gone", William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond 26.



is that Styron has written a novel about a religious agonist without fulfilling - in any way he might have chosen - the religious agony".<sup>36</sup>

One of the difficulties raised by the theme of religion was the actual issue of belief. Styron regarded Turner as a "religious fanatic" attracted to a white woman who was also a "religious nut".<sup>37</sup> In response to an interview question as to why Turner instigated the revolt, Styron answered that the "religious fanaticism must have disguised a profounder reason".<sup>38</sup> Styron did not believe in Turner's religious convictions and, I suspect, did not really understand them or how they could be so influential in Turner's life, as Vincent Harding discussed: <sup>39</sup>

For though William Styron-Turner talks about religion a great deal and though he quotes biblical passages in excellent style, the "divine fury" of Old Testament experience is almost totally absent. Though Nat Turner is a preacher, only one major attempt at a sermon is made in *The Confessions*, and it fails to catch any of the peculiar rhythmic and thematic strengths of this black folk art form. Equally striking is the fact that the religious music of Afro-Americans never enters as a major structural element of the novel as one would expect if such work had been done by an Ellison, a Baldwin, or a Wright.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Stanley Kaufmann, "Styron's Unwritten Novel", *Hudson Review* 20 (Winter 1967-1968):677. Also, Alan Holder argues that "Styron's novel appears to be poised between taking Nat's religious sensibility seriously - working out its theme in religious terms - and reducing Nat's behaviour to psychosexual terms which function to explain away his religious notions. The book wants to be inside Nat's religious frame of reference, and to view it with a cold, secular gaze. The two impulses pull the novel apart." Alan Holder, "Styron's Slave: The Confession of Nat Turner", 178.

<sup>37</sup> Styron, "An Interview with William Styron", Canzoneri and Stegner, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 41,42

<sup>39</sup>In "You've Taken My Nat and Gone", Harding argued that perhaps Styron was unable to understand Turner's religious convictions: "Perhaps we must now say with charity that it is likely too much to expect a white, twentieth-century American novelist to be able to conceive of the world of a black, Old Testament-type messiah. (William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren might have made more interesting attempts, I suspect.) The power of belief, the power of righteous anger, the dynamism emanating from a sense of divinely ordained vocation, the power of blackness - none of these is a hallmark, of the major section of current American fiction." 29-30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 29.

Fully aware of the power of religious conviction and political struggle - particularly in 1968, the year of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination –Harding was especially sensitive to the way in which Styron seemed to take away Turner's "religious center". This he regarded as ahistorical and irreverent.<sup>41</sup> Harding also criticised Styron's inability to effectively portray the cultural context of black religious practice. Michael Thelwell argued in a similar vein in his essay "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner", saying that the real language of the slaves was in the spirituals, a resource that Styron did not use to enrich his work. Thelwell also referred to the importance of the preacher's rhetoric and the "range and flexibility of the language", which, again, Styron did not successfully reproduce. Thelwell therefore dismissed Turner's "white language", declaring that Styron did not have the ability to use "the idiom in which Nat might communicate with his peers".<sup>42</sup>

Styron, on the other hand, was quite pleased with his style and claimed he had avoided using anachronisms to write within the rules of nineteenth century dialogue. At a reading of selections from the draft text, Styron responded to a question from a member of the audience who asked whether Negroes would have used the kind of language and thought in the terms that Styron had used. Styron regarded the question as condescending to Negroes as it "implied that Negroes didn't think like the rest of us folks".<sup>43</sup> While that may have been an appropriate response to that question, Styron did not address the issue of nineteenth century dialogue that was not adapted to the nuances of black vernacular speech patterns. Relying on the fact that Turner was an educated Negro, Styron thought it appropriate to describe things in a "regular literary

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner", William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond 81.

<sup>43</sup> Styron, "An Interview with William Styron", Canzoneri and Stegner, 40.

fashion". That "fashion" Michael Thelwell called "white language". Styron, he argued, superimposed this regular literary diction on a Nat Turner with a "white consciousness" who, through Styron's manipulations, was distanced from his own community both in his language and in his attitudes towards his people.<sup>44</sup>

As well as challenging the historical credibility of the text and Styron's poor appreciation of the importance of religious belief and observance, writers like Bennett and Harding thought that *Confessions* deliberately put Nat Turner at odds with his own family and race. The black psychologist Alvin Poussaint argued that Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner* revealed a man who "fondly remembered his parents who taught him to read and write" and he cited Turner's own description of his grandmother as "very religious and to whom I was much attached".<sup>45</sup> Yet Styron's Turner came from a dislocated family background and this portrayal, at a time when sociologists and politicians were making judgements about matrifocal black families, supported contemporary views on dysfunctional black family life.<sup>46</sup> Lerone Bennett, in his essay "Nat's Last White Man," considered Styron's novel as a deliberate ploy to destroy the black family. The Nat Turner he 'knew' was a married man, a father, with semi-literate parents and a strong supportive grandmother. The black critics were angry that Styron chose to ignore what evidence existed about Turner's wife and to portray him as sexually unfulfilled and fantasising about men and white women. Vincent Harding was equally concerned about this Turner, who was able to offer "clear and often tender descriptions only of white women, not of blacks" and wanted

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<sup>44</sup> Thelwell, "Back With the Wind: Mr. Styron and the Reverend Turner", William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond 81.

<sup>45</sup> Nat Turner, in the 1831 Text of the Confessions Of Nat Turner as told to Thomas Gray, ed. John Henrik Clarke, William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond 100.

<sup>46</sup> As I stated earlier, in his introduction to William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond, Clarke referred to the research conducted by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "thirty years after the event [Higginson] established the fact that Nat Turner had a wife – a slave wife on a plantation separate from that of his master". Ibid., vii-viii.



to be white.<sup>47</sup> Thus, when he was describing Margaret Whitehead, the naïve young woman who had unknowingly aroused him with her friendship, Styron's Turner talked about her “glossy tumbling mass of chestnut - brown hair. . . the freckled young shoulders and the slim waist”. Turner's appreciation was such that even his fantasy about a black woman turned into a desire for “milky-white legs and arms”.<sup>48</sup> Such fascination seemed an obvious way of developing a character who Styron wanted to be gripped by uncertainty and conflicting emotions:

I see him as being thrown into very close contact with this girl, in the rather easy –going sort of racial relationships of the time. He was enormously unusual. He was an educated slave, and a man even of some refinement in a curious way. A man of that sort I think in a deep part of his heart would scorn the average, illiterate, pathetic colored woman – slave woman- and gravitate especially toward an eighteen-year-old nubile, religious nut very similar to himself.<sup>49</sup>

Styron's own understanding of “easy-going” racial relationships at the time are worryingly disingenuous and his narrative ignored the factors of fear and hatred that underpinned black/white, slave/master or mistress relations. However, perhaps the most important issue raised by Turner's gravitation towards this eighteen-year old white woman was how, as Lerone Bennett argued, Styron used Turner's musings as a cheap way for Styron to laud 'whiteness' over Turner's black identity. Bennett referred to an incident in the novel in which Turner, in a moment of abandonment and bewilderment, imagined himself to be white and considered how the difference would

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<sup>47</sup>Vincent Harding, "You've Taken My Nat and Gone", 28.

<sup>48</sup> Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* 337, 347.

<sup>49</sup> Canzoneri and Stegner “An Interview with William Styron”, 42. Styron's comments raise an interesting topic of contemporary debate. The argument he presents is that an educated black man “of his sort” would always scorn the average black woman (whom Styron also sees as “pathetic”). This particular dimension of the novel was not pursued by any of the black male or female critics at the time.

completely change his life for the better. In his reverie he exclaimed: "How white I was! What wicked joy." <sup>50</sup> Turner was not just musing on being white but was regretting his blackness, an issue of particular concern to the psychologist Poussaint:

Styron's reconstruction of events is an example of the stereotyped belief that black people rebel primarily because of an unfulfilled psychological need to be white and not because of a sense of their own inner dignity.<sup>51</sup>

If Turner's lauding of whiteness over blackness was disturbing, so was his seeming contempt for his own people and their 'Sambo' behaviour.

He speaks of 'childishly loud' Negro laughter, of 'loutish Negro cheer,' of 'galloping eyeballs.' [Their language is described as] 'stunted, unbearably halting and cumbersome with a wet gulping sound of Africa in it'. . . He is appalled by the odor of Negro cabins - which exists he says in spite of the master's attempt to teach cleanliness - This makes him feel disgusted at being a Nigger.<sup>52</sup>

Styron clearly distinguished between the attitudes of Turner and his own black people. Turner was arrogant and seemed to treat the futile struggles of his fellow slaves with disdain:

My black shit-eating people were surely like flies, God's mindless outcasts lacking even that will to destroy by their own hand their unending anguish ...<sup>53</sup>

Styron's Nat Turner was estranged from these "mindless outcasts" and was a protagonist in limbo; unable to identify fully with his masters or his fellow slaves.

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<sup>50</sup>Lerone Bennett Jr., "Nat's Last White Man", William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond 16.

<sup>51</sup>Alvin Poussaint, "The Confession of Nat Turner and the Dilemma of William Styron", *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>52</sup> Alan Holder, "Styron's Slave: The Confession of Nat Turner", 171-172.

<sup>53</sup> Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner 27.

In the anthology *William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Critical Handbook*, co-editor Irving Malin also suggested that "Nat is an exile . . . separated from his many white owners and also separated from his fellow Negroes because he can endure visions of ultimate freedom." His fellow editor Melvin Friedman concluded that "Nat as depicted by Styron is cut off from blacks and the violence of his protest is his insurrection."<sup>54</sup> However, for most of the black critics, Turner was both a unique, far-seeing visionary and an enslaved black man, who, like his fellow slaves, was part of a community of people whose spiritual and emotional wills were equally overshadowed by privation. They argued that if this estrangement from fellow slaves were real, then Turner would have had no reason to organise others into a bid for freedom.<sup>55</sup> Thus Styron's insistence on Turner's separation from fellow slaves was evidence of the incoherence in the novel as well as one of the historical inaccuracies highlighted by the critics. The black critics needed to preserve the image of a man of the people, proud of his people, whose ambition was to fight for their freedom. They were keen to show that even though Styron's Turner articulated his hopes for freedom in the well-modulated (and sometimes hardly credible) tones of his master's language, that did not make the potency or urgency of his hopes greater than that felt by all black slaves. Neither, they argued, did it separate Turner from his fellow slaves. By perpetuating the image of the black man as an ineffectual leader who was not comfortable in his black identity and lusted after white women, Styron's Turner, as Mike Thelwell argued, was the "creature of whiteness, stereotyped

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<sup>54</sup> Irving Malin, "Nat's Confessions" and Melvin J. Friedman "A Meditation on History", Irving Malin and Melvin J. Friedman, eds. *William Styron's The Confessions of Nat Turner: A Critical Handbook* 85, 80.

<sup>55</sup> "It might be argued that Styron's having Nat fall from his position as a relatively pampered house servant and perceive that he is ultimately only a slave, as vulnerable as any other Negro to the cruel possibilities of the system, prepares us to accept him as making common cause with the other slaves. But [within the text] the recognition of a bond with them, if such there is supposed to be, does not jibe with the intense disgust for them he shows throughout and right up to the very end." Holder, "Styron's Slave: The Confession of Nat Turner", 172.



perceptions and racial clichés".<sup>56</sup> This creation was not the black hero that black people could recognise or with whom they would choose to identify. William Styron's Nat Turner perpetuated the image of a white man's view of a black man.

### III

The critical responses to *Confessions* continued for several months in magazines, newspapers and journals, and many of the issues surrounding the publication of this book were of 'extra-literary' significance. The discussions raised wider questions of literary and cultural value, the significance of control over the American literary canon, objectivity and the social responsibility of the writer. Black and white critics argued about the moral right to write on any subject and black critics questioned the degree to which artistic license could be allowed when it was exercised on the heroes of another cultural group. The debate became the subject of a now famous exchange between the more vehement black critics of *Confessions* - Michael Thelwell and Vincent Harding - and the historian Eugene Genovese.<sup>57</sup>

In defending Styron, Genovese challenged black writers – and Vincent Harding specifically - to seek redress by writing their own version of events. Genovese was, at the time of the exchange, researching his book *Roll Jordan Roll: The World The Slaves Made* and, while defending Styron, needed to establish the legitimacy of the white writer amongst his/her black peers writing about black history and culture.

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<sup>56</sup> Mike Thelwell, "An Exchange on Nat Turner" *The New York Review Of Books* (Nov. 7, 1968): 34. Thelwell refers here to the historian Eugene Genovese whom he also deemed as one who 'took liberties' with black history.

<sup>57</sup> These exchanges echoed earlier debates between Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison and, indeed, later exchanges between Howe and Ishmael Reed on the relationship between the white critic and the black writer.

Nothing prevents (or ever prevented) black intellectuals, who claim to have the living traditions of black America at their disposal from creating their own version... If you say that black folk life can be unearthed and made relevant then do it; if white historians for whatever reasons - have been blind to whole areas of black sensibility, culture and tradition, then show us. We can learn much from your work, but nothing from your fury.<sup>58</sup>

Genovese's confrontational answer exhibited what the critic Albert Stone later called "cultural blindness" and a wanton "indifference to the social fact of black rage".<sup>59</sup> The best response to Genovese's skilful appropriation of the right to tell the victim how best to fight back, came from the critic Anna Mary Wells. She reminded Genovese of the body of work by African-American writers that was already available:

So while it is true that Harding must work, it is also imperative that Genovese explore the work already done by Harding's forefathers. Significant portions of the folk-life are available only to the folk, of course, but much is out in the open.<sup>60</sup>

The young writer June Jordan, like Vincent Harding, had argued in a 1967 essay, "Spokesmen for the Blacks", that white critics rarely took much notice of the contributions of black writers and their perceptions of their own communities. In a 1988 reprint of the essay, Jordan resurrected its original title: "On Listening: A Good Way to Hear."<sup>61</sup> This title responds to the contention by critics like Genovese that black intellectuals were criticising white writers but themselves not producing work about their own heroes and heroines. Jordan aimed to illustrate the difficulties black writers had in finding publishers, the problem black critics faced when they wanted to challenge the work of white writers, and the fact that critics chose not to listen to what

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<sup>58</sup> Eugene Genovese, "The Nat Turner Case", The New York Review of Books (Sept. 12 1968):35.

<sup>59</sup> Albert Stone, The Return of Nat Turner 160.

<sup>60</sup> Anna Mary Wells, "An Exchange on Nat Turner", The New York Review of Books (Nov. 7, 1968):32.

<sup>61</sup> The original article was written under the name June Meyer in 1967.

black people said or wrote, particularly if it had no direct reference to white people. Jordan cited an interview with Jonathan Kozol (whose book, *Death At An Early Age: The Destruction Of The Hearts And Minds Of Negro Children In The Boston Public School* was published in the same year as *Confessions*), in which he said "[t]here's nothing in my book that Negroes couldn't tell you themselves".<sup>62</sup> Jordan reworded it by saying that there is nothing that Negroes have not been *trying* to tell.<sup>63</sup> She argued that even if one speaks from the top of one's voice, the message is only as loud as the hearer's willingness to hear. Having a voice was one thing, but having a listening audience willing to accept the black man's and woman's viewpoint was what would really make a difference. She stated:

I should not have to care about the multiplying white interpretations of me, of black people. We should have an equal chance to express ourselves directly.<sup>64</sup>

For Jordan, it was not just that white writers were misinterpreting black people, but also that black writers were not given many opportunities to respond to such portrayals in mainstream publications. She commented on a review of *Confessions* by Philip Rahv, the veteran of the literary Left in America. Rahv had applauded Styron's achievements in *Confessions* and spoke of his unique capacity to produce such a work:

I think only a white Southern writer could have brought it off. A northerner would have been too much 'outside' to

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<sup>62</sup> June Jordan, "On Listening A Good Way to Hear", *Moving Towards Home* (London:Virago,1989) 17.

<sup>63</sup> Don L. Lee made a similar point in response to white writers who felt the need to write on behalf of black people. He clearly stated: "There have always been Black critics. . . The problem, however, was not that there weren't any competent Black critics, the problem was getting into print." Don L. Lee, "Black Critic", *Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960s* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) 19.

<sup>64</sup> Jordan,"On Listening : A Good Way to Hear", 17. Jordan's arguments address the claims of Genovese, but it would appear that the opinions of this woman poet and critic were not sought when John Henrik Clarke was editing *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.



manage it effectively; and a Negro writer, because of a very complex anxiety not only personal but social and political, would have probably stacked the cards, producing saints and sinners. Styron, however, by an act that at once seizes upon his background and transcends it, maintains throughout this narrative a consistent and highly imaginative realism not only on the objective plane (the economics of Virginia in the 1820s, the social relationships, the ideological defense-mechanisms), but also by recreating the intimate psychology of his characters, the black slaves and the white owners.<sup>65</sup>

If, as I do, one generally accepts the black writers' criticism of Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner, then Rahv is entirely correct in saying that only a white man could have written *Confessions*. Turner's "creature of whiteness", as Thelwell described him, would not have been created by a contemporary black writer. Rahv's article suggested that because of filiopietism and unnecessary rage, black novelists were not yet ready to write critically about one of their own heroes; but he did not demonstrate how Styron was able to "transcend" his heritage in a way that a Negro would not have found possible. Rahv claimed that Styron had an intimate knowledge of the South and black and white relations; however given the paucity of musical and linguistic representations of black cultural life, Styron's knowledge was hardly evident in the text. Also, Styron's knowledge of the history of the event is difficult to gauge since he deliberately chose to blend selected facts and fiction in his "meditation on history". Rahv's comments clearly reflect the contributions to the American canon of an established white male critic who saw Styron's book as a welcome addition to that literary tradition.

Incensed by Rahv's review, Jordan argued against his suggestion that Styron possessed a unique capacity to recreate the "intimate psychology of his characters":

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<sup>65</sup> Philip Rahv, "Through the Midst of Jerusalem", *New York Review Of Books* (October 26, 1967):6.

Styron's stunt merely gives point to a season of fantastic, Black-to-white 'dialog' miscarried by white-controlled media through the 'medium' of the now professional white intermediary.<sup>66</sup>

The white intermediary to which Jordan referred was the system controlling the American canon, a very powerful gatekeeper that endorsed white writers and their portrayals of black people. Styron's *Confessions*, promoted as it was by reviews, special interviews and endorsements from the literary establishment, clearly benefitted from this system. Jordan argued that black writers had limited access to the medium of the "professional white intermediary" and therefore the black community of intellectuals needed to write and publish their own histories, develop their own canon and further an intellectual dialogue between black writers about their own works. It was a white critic, Richard Gilman, who, in his 1970 essay "Nat Turner Revisited" substantiated Jordan's arguments:

We need to go on reminding ourselves of how culture is becoming more and more a question of power, not of values, or rather of how power, regarded as the supreme value, has made culture increasingly a pragmatic affair. The relevance of this to *Nat Turner* is that the book was immediately swept up into areas of power and influence wholly outside its existence as literature, and even more crucially before such existence could even be brought into question.<sup>67</sup>

*Confessions*, for many black writers, demonstrated why they needed to develop a separate black literature, a separate system of criticism and resistance against the influence of white critics. Styron's novel illustrated how the voice of the black

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<sup>66</sup> Jordan, "On Listening: A Good Way to Hear", 16.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Gilman, "Nat Turner Revisited", William Styron's The Confessions Of Nat Turner: A Critical Handbook 104.

experience could be distorted through the literature of white writers and reinforced by literary institutions to which black American writers were not privy. Thus, Mike Thelwell, in his essay “The Turner Thesis”, vehemently insisted on the need for black people to define their heritage:

It would be too optimistic to expect the white literary and scholarly establishment to abandon the comfortable myths, traditions and habits of many life times to undertake the reassessment of black historical and cultural contributions and realities. But we must insist - a burden no other minority appears to have - on our prerogative to define this heritage in *terms* of our own choice. This is necessary not only to black needs of the moment, but to fill a vacuum in the total history, consciousness and sensibility of the nation.<sup>68</sup>

Black critics and writers, arguing against the power white institutions had over the literary canon, began to see quite clearly that *they* needed to safeguard their own heroes through their own journals, newspapers and products of mass media. In order for this community of black intellectuals to be established fully, a new approach to literature, drama, art and their appreciation would be required. Such a development would demand not just a black intelligentsia but organisations and institutions where this knowledge could be transmitted.

These and similar arguments had been made in the same year by Harold Cruse in *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. His central thesis was that there should be black control of black cultural institutions.<sup>69</sup> The close publication dates mean that it was likely that the critics had not had an opportunity to read Cruse’s book – which would

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<sup>68</sup> Michael Thelwell, "The Turner Thesis", *Partisan Review* Vol. XXXV No.3 (Summer 1968): 411.

<sup>69</sup>“No one can hope to change America's cultural standards and values unless the proprietorship, the administration and the uses to which the cultural apparatus are put are changed to allow for more democratic social control”. Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* 505.



have added strength to their arguments about black control of black intellectual discourse. It was left to the white historian Eugene Genovese, in his reflections on black literature, who actively discussed the development of black institutions.

Two years after his debate with Harding and Thelwell, Genovese accepted Jordan's angry argument that black people had been trying to speak but no-one was listening: "Since the white intelligentsia has controlled the main accesses to publication, the blacks have had to wage a bitter struggle with meagre resources to develop and present their own points of view."<sup>70</sup> Genovese recognised that black scholars needed their own journals and forums of debate. However, he saw such discourse as part of the fabric of American intellectual life and was unwilling to regard a separate black intellectual discourse as important and essential in its own right. "Even if we take full account of the desire of many black scholars to go their own way and to minimize white influence, we can hardly expect major success in an attempt at intellectual self-isolation."<sup>71</sup> He continued:

The shrill and insistent demands that whites get out of black history could not be met, even if whites were inclined to meet them: The history of America can no longer be written without a full account of its black element; and that element cannot be isolated for discrete analysis since it penetrates and has been penetrated by everything else.<sup>72</sup>

This was a distinct change in tone and opinion from the Genovese who had criticised the black critics two years earlier. However, in a somewhat contradictory fashion,

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<sup>70</sup> Eugene Genovese, "The Influence of the Black Power Movement on Historical Scholarship: Reflections of a White Historian", *Daedalus* Vol.99 No.2 (Spring 1970):483.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 485.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 487.

Genovese conceded that the ability and capacity for black intellectual autonomy was possible and even understandable.

The emergence of a black intelligentsia, conscious of the historical evolution of a community of interest, has within itself the power to forge a separate culture out of a tradition that has been both of America and a thing apart. In view of the white- racist resistance to integration, the victory of this tendency seems probable.<sup>73</sup>

I believe that in the work of Vincent Harding at Spelman and the Martin Luther King Jr. Center and in the Black Aesthetic debate, this black intelligentsia began to forge a separate tradition.

#### IV

The impact of the Styron debate was twofold. Firstly the debate provided an impetus to black writers moving towards arts initiatives that were exclusively black generated for black audiences. Secondly, the views of the black critics caused anxiety among some white writers interested in writing about black history, literature, art and culture. To conclude, I would agree that Styron's portrayal of Nat Turner was significantly coloured by his own assumptions about black male behaviour. I would also agree with the critics who felt that this blending of history and literature was problematic. However, the black critics' arguments regarding historical truth were not convincingly made. Despite this, the Black Arts Movement - in its own right and after the ferment of debate over William Styron's *Confessions* - garnered support and created a will for an independent black intellectual tradition. In order for this to be realised, black critics would need to develop their own critical theories and establish their own black cultural institutions. The hope for a new way of thinking and an exclusive reading of

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 490.

black literary and historical traditions formed a bedrock upon which a whole area of contemporary black literary criticism was grounded.



## **Chapter Three**

### **Black Aesthetic Critics and Criticism.**

In my introduction, I cited Ishmael Reed who described the 1960s as a strident decade “that screamed” and concluded that the role of the critic would be to “separate the substance from the noise”.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is the cacophony of this strident decade louder than in the area of criticism. As part of the discussions on the Black Aesthetic, the development of black literary theory and criticism was becoming increasingly important. In this chapter I will try to draw together the main ideas of Black Aesthetic critics in order to evaluate their success in developing a Black Aesthetic literary criticism. The Black Arts Movement needed critics who could approach black literature with an understanding of its cultural context and the current debates on black political and social change. Such critics needed rigorous black literary theories with which to pursue their analyses and interpretations of black literature’s form, structure and language styles. Unfortunately, what did not emerge was a structured series of ideological positions and literary theories, nor were there distinct schools of thought within Black Aesthetic criticism. However, what the Movement did produce was a wide-ranging debate about what black criticism should achieve, the role of the writers and the critic and the significance of the critic’s commitment to blackness and the black community.

I have deliberately chosen to discuss the nascent ideas of the Black Aesthetic critics rather than discuss their opposition to earlier writers like Ralph Ellison and

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<sup>1</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Shrovetide In Old New Orleans* (New York: Avon Books, 1979):167. Ishmael Reed in a self-interview responding to the following question: What is your opinion of recent black poetry?

James Baldwin whose views have been well documented. Instead, I will concentrate on the challenging and often contradictory arguments of the young Black Aesthetic critics, in their attempt to base a Black Aesthetic criticism on their notion of blackness. Following a historical overview of black criticism, I will discuss the Black Aesthetic critics and their ideas. I will then assess a retrospective review of the Black Aesthetic by the critic and writer Houston Baker. I have chosen to consider Baker's work because he was the first critic, sympathetic to the Black Aesthetic, to produce a single-authored book of black literary criticism. His own involvement in the Black Aesthetic debate and his development as a literary theorist has spanned the 'fashions' of black literary theory over the past three decades. And, in the revised edition of his work, *Long Black Song*, he assessed some of the Aesthetic's strengths and limitations.

## **Black Critics**

In this brief overview of black criticism, I will refer to "Afro-American Literary Critics" (1970) by the writer and critic Darwin T. Turner. In that essay, Turner surveyed literary historians and critics and placed them loosely into six categories.<sup>2</sup> The categories are not very revealing but do provide an historical overview of black criticism. (Direct citation in italics)

- i. *Afro-American critics who have earned recognition primarily by writing about literature by whites.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Darwin T. Turner, "Afro-American Literary Critics", *Black World* Vol.XIX No.9 (July 1970):54-67. In his analysis, Turner briefly mentions Carolyn Rodgers but does not spend any time on the contributions of women critics either as a group or as members within the given categories. While this approach was in keeping with the attitude to women at the time, it must be noted that women as a group of writers or as individual critics were not acknowledged in Turner's work.

<sup>3</sup> Turner names William Stanley Braithwaite, Benjamin Brawley and Nathan A. Scott as examples of critics in this category.

- ii. *The historian/critic whose work was to familiarise people with the work of black writers.* <sup>4</sup>
- iii. *Essayists who became known as critics.* <sup>5</sup>
- iv. *Black writers who have served as historian, critic, polemicist or anthologiser.* <sup>6</sup>
- v. *Academic critics.* <sup>7</sup>
- vi. *Black Aesthetic critics.* This sixth category represented a new criticism by young black critics that was rooted in contemporary black culture and proposed that political, social and aesthetic factors should be part of any critical literary analysis.

Turner's essay recognized the fluidity of the different kinds of criticism and it is helpful rather than confusing to see that certain critics, Benjamin Brawley for instance, featured in a number of different categories. The overlapping of categories highlights the fact that there was a community of intellectuals, many of whom had had an involvement in the black literary arts across the decades. They were influential on each other in the development of a black critical dialogue and developed a variety of ideas and approaches. Turner noted that this was not the case with the sixth category - the Black Aesthetic critics. He argued:

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<sup>4</sup> Turner stated that after the 1920s there was a significant increase in the volume of work produced by black intellectuals and noted W.E.B. DuBois as the most popular and prominent critic commenting on literature. Turner also cited William Wells Brown and Benjamin Brawley as significant examples of this category. For Turner, perhaps the best known and most successful person to familiarise black and white people with the work of black writers was Alain Locke, the editor of *The New Negro*, in 1925.

<sup>5</sup> Turner suggested that Harold Cruse, Eldridge Cleaver and to some extent James Baldwin were examples of this category.

<sup>6</sup> Turner cited James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Baldwin and the writer/critic Arna Bontemps.

<sup>7</sup> Turner argued that this fifth group should be the most significant group and included in it Benjamin Brawley, Sterling Brown and Saunders Redding.



At present the major weaknesses of the Black-aesthetic critics are their tendencies to denounce older Black writers while lauding the newest.<sup>8</sup>

Along with his concern about their denunciation of older black critics, Turner identified other characteristics that set the new critics apart as a group:

A new group of Black critics has developed. These reject the standards previously applied to works by Afro-Americans and are demanding that that literature be judged according to an aesthetic grounded in Afro-American culture. Many of these new critics insist that, to have value, Black literature must contribute to the revolutionary cause of Black liberation, not merely in polemics against white oppression but also in re-interpretation of the Black experience. All of the new critics agree that the literature should not be judged good or bad according to its imitation of the styles and tastes of Europeans but according to its presentation of the styles and traditions stemming from African and Afro-American culture. For example, they point out the foolishness of expecting iambic meter in work of a poet who moves instead to the rhythms of jazz or be-bop, and they argue that it is supercilious, or even racist, to complain that literature does not conform to the patterns and tastes of the white literary world if it does suit and meet the needs of Black people.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Turner, "Afro-American Literary Critics", 67. In an essay "The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop and Origins of The Black Arts Movement", the critic Lorenzo Thomas discussed the role of literary and political groups that contributed to the Black Arts Movement. Thomas's views were at variance with Turner's condemnation of young black critics. One of the common views that Thomas wanted to correct was that of the relationship between the older and younger generation of artists: "One might think that the admittedly 'literary' orientation of the Umbra circle and its location on New York's lower east side would have precluded much contact with the older underground Black Arts tradition, but that is not the case. All of the Umbra poets had questioned and conferred with these sages as part of an ordinary downhome or ghetto upbringing." Lorenzo Thomas, "The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop and Origins of The Black Arts Movement", *Callaloo* Vol.1 No.4 (October 1978):65.

Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory Of Poetry* explored the different stages of the relationship between writers and their precursors. Rather than regarding denunciation as a major weakness, Bloom saw it as an essential requirement for the continuation of a strong literary tradition. *The Anxiety of Influence :A Theory Of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>9</sup>Turner, "Afro-American Literary Critics", 65-66.

It is this sixth category of young black critics that I would like to focus on in this chapter. Throughout this discussion I will refer to this group as the Black Aesthetic critics. It is important to point out, however, that there was never a discrete group of people that set themselves apart as Black Aestheticians. But for the purposes of this discussion, I will group together writers such as Larry Neal, Carolyn Fowler, Amiri Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle and James Emmanuel because of the similarities in their outlooks, the debates and ideas they shared, and their contribution to the re-constitution of a canon of black literary criticism.

Turner identified three main characteristics of this group. The first was their attempt to create a new critical approach that challenged what I call the 'Negro sensibility' identified by Turner in his first two categories. That Negro sensibility, evident in such works as Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, introduced black and white readers to black writing and mediated between black writing and its black and white reading public. The Black Aesthetic critics dismissed that mediating role. Instead they espoused a criticism that was committed to black people, community-oriented and linked to identifiable African American traditions.<sup>10</sup> The work could come from a variety of arenas and could be part of the oral and musical traditions of black cultural life. Some of the Black Aesthetic critics were open to changing the modes of critical expression and believed that a written critical analysis was not always necessary if the critic wanted to respond in a manner that replicated the oral traditions of black culture. Thus, street corner poets and critics would be given opportunities to share their ideas without the aid of the established academic presses. Ironically, those critics,

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<sup>10</sup>One such tradition was 'Call and Response', which originated in the black church, with the call coming from the Minister and the response from the congregation. This popular way of communicating was used in a variety of essentially oral and musical art forms and writers and critics wanted to achieve that antiphonal exchange between the black audience and writer. 'Call and Response' was a culturally-specific communication tool for an interactive critical assessment of black expression and just one example of how Black Aesthetic critics sought to develop critical frameworks from their own home-grown traditions.

Neal, Baraka, Don L. Lee, Carolyn Fowler, for instance, who were urging a move towards a different type and medium of critical dialogue, almost always expressed these ideas through the familiar and traditional media of literary journals and magazines such as *The Liberator*, *The Journal of Black Poetry* and *SoulBook*.

According to Turner, the second characteristic of Black Aesthetic critics was their support of a “revolutionary cause” in black writing that would promote social action and effect political change.<sup>11</sup> As I discuss later in the chapter, supporting such writing was part of a cosy relationship where writers of revolutionary poetry such as Carolyn Rodgers and Don L. Lee for instance, were also critics of revolutionary poetry and supported each other in their appraisal of their works.

The final characteristic Turner identified was a distinctive black writing style. Black writers were trying establish a black literary style that moved away from European traditions. The role of the critics then was to encourage black writers in the development of their own styles, in order to interpret the revolutionary cause and judge black writing on its own stylistic terms. This new group of black critics needed to be suitably immersed in African American cultural traditions, firstly so as to understand the styles in which black writers would present their work and secondly to establish their own critical tools from African American cultural traditions.

## **Generational Shifts**

In 1981 Houston Baker wrote "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature", an essay that, like Darwin Turner's "Afro-American

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<sup>11</sup> Turner, "Afro-American Literary Critics", 65.



Literary Critics” eleven years earlier, categorised the work of black critics.

“Generational Shifts” offers perhaps the best example of a (one-time) Black Aesthetic critic evaluating Black Aesthetic critical themes by identifying their relationship to blackness.

Houston Baker was born in Louisville, Kentucky and completed his PhD in English at UCLA in 1968. He then went to Yale to study Victorian literature. Coinciding with the rise of the Black Arts Movement, Baker’s Victorian studies were overtaken by his growing interest in black culture. Baker immersed himself in black literature and aimed to establish a critical analysis that reflected his cultural and literary history as a black man in America. His interest in black literature led him to pursue studies in the subject at the University of Pennsylvania in 1974, and to a subsequent professorship in the Humanities.<sup>12</sup> Baker began writing about black literature toward the end of the 1960s and informally contributed to the establishment of the school of black literary criticism from which came such writers as Henry Louis Gates and Kwame Anthony Appiah. As such, he represents the transition from the Movement’s desire to develop a canon of black works and black institutions to the establishment of a black criticism that prided itself on textual analyses committed to metaphors rather than a metaphysics of blackness.<sup>13</sup>

Writing about black literature after the Harlem Renaissance, Baker charted the generational shifts by analysing the anthologies produced at the time. Baker defined a generational shift as

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12 Biographical details from The Oxford Companion To African American Literature William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds. (Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1997) 43.

13 In Chapter One I discussed the differences between physical and metaphysical blackness. Physical blackness, or the blackness of identity, refers to the everyday lives of black people in America, whose racial identity determined their social class, economic and educational opportunities and their cultural heritage. Metaphysical blackness is how a philosophy of knowledge and existence is expressed, based on the fact of black identity and the historical experience of being black in white America.

...an ideologically motivated movement overseen by young or newly-emergent intellectuals who are dedicated to refuting the work of their intellectual predecessors and to establishing a new framework of intellectual inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

The integrationist precursors to the first of Baker's generational shifts wrote between the 1940s and 1960s and were the literary offspring of writers like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frances E.W. Harper and James Weldon Johnson.<sup>15</sup> Baker cited the anthology *Negro Caravan*, co-edited by Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis and Ulysses Lee in 1941, as the seminal work representative of that era. Owen Dodson, Margaret Walker, Frank Horne and Langston Hughes were some of the writers from that collection who spanned the two decades. However, also included in *The Negro Caravan* were such writers as Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay, who were generally regarded as Harlem Renaissance poets and produced some of their best work during the 1930s. It was largely this group of writers to whom Baker referred when he discussed 'integrationist poetics' as an integrated approach to literature, with a single standard of criticism determined by racial categories. Its aim was to weave the agonizing reality of the black experience into the history of American letters. Perhaps the best example of this endeavour comes from an essay entitled "Since Richard Wright" by the poet and critic Saunders Redding.

And American Negroes do have a literary culture to preserve. It is both American and Negro. It makes it

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<sup>14</sup>Houston A. Baker Jr., "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro- American Literature", *Black American Literature Forum* Vol.15 No.1 (Spring 1981):3.

<sup>15</sup>It is useful here to consider what directly preceded the 'integrationist' movement and consider the Harlem Renaissance, an era about which Baker makes no statements, nor any comparison, although he did later write a book on *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in his groundbreaking 1979 essay "Black Structures of Feeling:Dis and Dat Dialect and Descent", talks about a Renaissance of overtly political strong poetry: "Black poetry during the Renaissance and the period surrounding it was marked by what Stephen Henderson calls "urgency," a seemingly overwhelming sense of political purpose. . . This sense of "urgency" had many ramifications for the poetry of the Renaissance." Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Black Structures of Feeling:Dis and Dat Dialect and Descent" Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto eds. *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York: M.L.A., 1979) 107.



clear that all the factors which create the fluid complex called the American environment have generated in Negroes the same consciousness and conscience, the same social and moral values-the same "nationalism," if you will- that mark white Americans. But also it is a literary culture which records a body of experience that only Negroes living in America can know. It distinctly represents a double consciousness, and it projects a double image, American and Negro; and in both the cognitive and emotional sense, the second is as important as the first. To delineate this double image, and to tell, in John O. Killens's words, "as much of the truth as they know the painful truth to be," is the responsibility of the Negro writer, the measure of his integrity. Unless this truth is told, American culture is impoverished. Unless it is told, American literature fails not only as an instrument of historical and social diagnosis, but, indeed, as an expression of American culture as a whole. The most gifted and serious Negro writers in America are committed to no less than this.<sup>16</sup>

What Redding asserted here was the importance of the Du Boisian duality of being American and Negro. The nationalism of which he spoke was not that of the cultural nationalists like Toure, Karenga, et al. Redding's nationalism was American and his commitment to the Negro artist was to include his/her work in the literary canon. For the poets, integrationist poetics was necessary for America if its literature was going to be truly reflective of the nation.

The first generational shift in the mid-1960s represented a move away from the inclusion of the black experience in the American canon. The newer critics wanted to develop their own canon of black literature through works that differentiated an essence of blackness that was committed to black people.

[T]he faith that postulated 'Blackness' as a distinctive category of existence [wa]s seen as the generative source

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<sup>16</sup> Saunders Redding, "Since Richard Wright", *African Forum* 1 (Spring 1966):21-31.



of a new art, politics, and criticism nullifying the  
interpretative authority of a white, critical orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup>

Blackness was regarded as statement, theme and, for some of the new black writers of the late 1960s, even form.<sup>18</sup> The most significant anthology of this era, according to Baker, was Jones and Neal's *Black Fire*.

The Black Aesthetic critics did not want an integrationist approach to the arts, neither did they want to be a part of the deferred dream of which Langston Hughes so poignantly spoke.<sup>19</sup> This new generation attempted to invert the "integrationist field of vision".<sup>20</sup> In a strangely loose definition of Marxist, Baker described this first shift as "Romantic Marxist"; Romantic in that it was "idealistically centred in the imagination of the black critical observer and Marxist in that these writers were very much concerned with the social function of art".<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Houston Baker, "Generational Shifts and the recent Criticism of Afro- American Literature", 9.

<sup>18</sup> "The essence (today, we would say essentialism ) of the project resided in the assumed referential actuality of some thing (some essence) called BLACKNESS. Held to be a discoverable, analytical, and empirical reality, BLACKNESS came to signify a historical, experiential, and artistic reality that provided a unique cachet for black people's art and culture". Baker, *Long Black Song* xiv.

<sup>19</sup> **Harlem**

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore---  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over ---  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

Hughes's poem, part of his "Montage of a Dream Deferred" (1951), had a significant impact on black writers and was used as the title of Lorraine Hansberry's most successful play "A Raisin In The Sun".

Langston Hughes: Selected Poems (London: Pluto Press, 1986 edition. First published 1959.) 268.

<sup>20</sup> Baker, "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro- American Literature", 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 8,9. This 'Romantic Marxism' was not a deliberate identified ideological choice, even though there were artists whose interest in Marxism and Socialism developed through the Movement.

The second generational shift came in the late 1970s and, Baker argued, was a product of the developing professionalism among African-American literary critics and of the white academy opening its doors to minority groups. Baker noted that within academe an emerging black middle class of what he described as “reconstructionist critics” saw their status and privileges contingent upon their adherence to the accepted (i.e. white) standards of their profession. Rather like new integrationists, these new black academics wanted to justify themselves as literary critics. To demonstrate their credibility as black critics they attempted to write about black fiction using the language of American academe. They scrutinised the themes and metalanguage of the Black Aesthetic to create their own reconfiguration of blackness for literary analysis. The major text signalling this shift was *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction*, edited by Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto.<sup>22</sup> Previously, Baker had used anthologies of poetry, criticism, drama and stories to illustrate the integrationist and Black Aesthetic writing. However, he chose a book of criticism to signal the second generational shift. While he was not comparing like with like, by focussing on criticism he effectively highlighted the shift from an approach that linked the creative with the critical to an approach in which black literary criticism was independent of creative and imaginative writing. However, in discussing the reconstructionist critics, Baker did not focus on any literary anthology but concentrated on the significance of the ideological change, particularly demonstrated in Henry Louis Gates’ now famous essay “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext”, included in *Afro-American Literature* in 1979.

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<sup>22</sup>Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepto, eds. *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (New York: The Modern Language Association of American, 1979). Ironically, the work of the reconstructionists was not dissimilar to Baker’s own achievements in *Long Black Song*.

Gates challenged the Black Aestheticians for their use of the metaphor black as an entity in itself.

Blackness is not a material object or an event but a metaphor ; it does not have an 'essence' as such but is defined by a network of relations that form a particular aesthetic unity.<sup>23</sup>

My view is that the network of relations forming the 'aesthetic unity' were themselves unique to black life and provided the components of a Black Aesthetic experience that the 'reconstructionists' chose to dismiss.

In "Generational Shifts," Baker challenged the 'reconstructionists' analysis of the metaphors of blackness, outside of its social and cultural location, and was equally critical about the notion of an empirical reality of blackness suggested by the Black Aesthetic critics. However, in criticising the theories underpinning these literary movements, Baker did not suggest a more viable model.<sup>24</sup>

### **Black Aesthetic Criticism**

Both of the overviews provided by Turner and Baker recognised the importance of blackness in Black Aesthetic criticism. However, neither of the critics cited were able to identify a Black Aesthetic literary theory or any clear model for critical analysis. The Black Aesthetic critics discussed black criticism and described

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<sup>23</sup> Gates, "Preface to Blackness:Text and Pretext", Ibid., 67.

<sup>24</sup> Baker's dismissal of the reconstructionists did not recognise Gates's arguments that identified cultural traditions as viable aspects of a black literary theory. However, while the arguments between these two critics would bear greater scrutiny, it is not the purview of this discussion on Black Aesthetic criticism to pursue the debate here.



their work as the critical aspect of the Black Arts Movement and yet what emerged were a series of suggestions about what black writers and critics should do and about the role of the critics. Rejecting the “patterns and tastes of the white literary world”,<sup>25</sup> the Black Aesthetic critics relied heavily on the idea of blackness as the substantive experiential component of their aesthetic. They believed that Western literary theory had a different ontological basis from their own; and thus they argued that for black people the reality was race and, consequently, a unique black experience warranted different modes of expression. They conceded that issues of method and epistemology might coincide with Western approaches but the singular ontological reality of their blackness made all aspects of their expressive and written arts separate from those of white America.<sup>26</sup>

The socially –oriented aim of their criticism widened the focus of the analysis they espoused to include the social and political contexts of black life. The context they inevitably focused on was the contemporary urban experience. However, having made those claims, they did not then develop a convincing theory based on blackness, the unique experience and socio-political ideas they defended. Instead, the Black Aesthetic critics wrote about the role and function of criticism, the writer and the critic and spent insufficient time on analysing contemporary literature and applying their ideas in close textual analysis.

Rather like Turner’s third category of “essayists who became known as critics”, the conflation of Black Aesthetic writer and critic roles blurred the distinction

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<sup>25</sup> Turner, “Afro-American Literary Critics”, 66.

<sup>26</sup> In their political views of the arts and social action, the critics rejected Western ideologies, although later, LeRoi Jones and Don L. Lee began to look more appreciatively toward such ideologies as Communism and Third World Marxism for models of critical analysis. LeRoi Jones went to Cuba in the early 1960s and again in 1977 and was hugely influenced by this. The effect was to propel him into what William J. Harris described as his ‘Third World Marxist phase’. The Black Panthers too, were influenced by Che Guevara and a commitment to ownership of the means of production and social control within the black community.

between creativity and criticism. As part of the vibrant cultural entente between artists and critics, there was sometimes a cacophony of voices as writers became critics who responded to other writer/critics. *Negro Digest* editor Hoyt Fuller regarded these multiple voices as a positive opportunity for writers and critics to exchange ideas:

Black writers across the country now are encouraging the development of black critics(who) share with the writers whose work they evaluate, a general world of experience and an angle of vision. They have no need to undergo a transformation of perspective in order to follow the author's visions nor do they need to mount a defense against implicit accusations of complicity in crimes against the human spirit. They are free to accept the new black literature on its own terms and to judge it on those terms.<sup>27</sup>

However, in the melange of wistfulness, nationalist vision and sometimes anti-Western aggression, the imagination, originality and the intricate linguistic demands of the creative writer were sometimes confused with the analytical skills and evaluative abilities required of the critic.

Definitions of the role of the critic abounded. It was easier to discuss what the role of the critic should be in terms of political, cultural and social approaches, than wrestle with the criteria that those critics should use to inform their judgements. Emphasis on such issues as immersion in blackness, commitment to community and challenge to white oppression, detracted from the analysis of the craft and quality of writing that black literary criticism needed to address. Addison Gayle's essay "The Function of Black Criticism at the Present Time" was just one of several outlines of the role of the black critic:

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<sup>27</sup> Hoyt Fuller, "Perspectives: Black Images and White Critics", *Negro Digest* XIX No.1 (Nov.69):49.

...the function of the critic is to demand that the writer adhere to the proposition that a sane universe is possible, that a new morality and a new ethical system are possible only when the new man has come into being and that the writer must devote his talents to these ends. <sup>28</sup>

Gayle encouraged a relationship between writer and critic that lay a heavy duty on the black critic:

At every state of human history there have been those, romantic in nature, who envisioned a world of principle and justice against the overriding pragmatic considerations of the moment. This must be the position of the black writer. The function of the black critic at the present time is to see that he accepts this position. The critic will fulfill *his* function by devoting himself, not to spurious theories of art for arts (*sic*) sake, but to art for the sake of black peoples everywhere. <sup>29</sup>

Like his Black Aesthetic contemporaries, rather than focusing on analytical discourse, Gayle suggested that art for social good was the only really valuable goal of black literature. <sup>30</sup> He promoted the idea of the black critic beyond that of observer and commentator and as a champion for social action through the arts.

Don L. Lee, in his essay "Black Critics" (1970), was equally demanding of critics:

The Black critic/writer must understand that writing is, after all is said and done, a *vocation* like that of a teacher, doctor, historian *etc.*, and becomes a way of life only if a way of life is established within a concept and core of an

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<sup>28</sup> Gayle's essay was published after a talk he delivered at a symposium on that subject in 1975. Addison Gayle "The Function of Black Criticism at the Present Time". One year later, Houston Baker edited the discussion papers as a collection of essays. Reading Black: Essays in the Criticism of Africa Caribbean and Black American Literature ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Cornell University Africana Studies and Research Centre, Monograph Series No.4,1976):40.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> This concern was pursued at the symposium "The Function of Black Criticism at the Present Time".



identity that is compatible with the inner working of the self.<sup>31</sup>

Lee's expectation was that the black writer/critic should commit herself to the black community and the revolutionary cause and linked the writer's role with her way of life. Like other Movement artists, Lee did not distinguish between the creative writer and the critic, partly because most writers were functioning as both.

In a more specific commentary on the role of the critic, however, Lee did suggest that critics should offer guidance to writers that was more than a simple appreciation of their writing:

It will be his responsibility to not only define and clarify, but also to give meaningful direction and guidance to the young and oncoming writers. To perform that function the critic must, if possible, remain detached from his material so that he can fairly filter the music from the noise. So, we reiterate that good criticism calls for detachment and fairness and not pseudo-objectivity.<sup>32</sup>

Lee did not explain the difference between detachment, fairness and pseudo-objectivity, although the latter was a charge that many of the black writers made against white critics. In a later essay, "Black Writers and Critics: Developing A Critical Process Without Readers" (1978), Lee, now writing as Haki R. Madhubuti, explained the purpose of good criticism:

Part of the function of the black critic is to locate the wisdom and the inconsistencies in the writer's work. The black critic is also a resource that if understood and used properly would not only promote the literature but aid the writer in finding his people's ear. The critic should also

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<sup>31</sup> Don L. Lee, "Black Critics", Black World Vol. XIX No.11 (Sept 1970): 28.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 25.

bring to the reading public as well as to the writer an understanding of world literature-especially how it relates to black people.<sup>33</sup>

By 1978, then, Madhubuti's priorities had changed. In order to look with the "detachment and fairness" that he favoured in 1970, he now encouraged the critic to look outside of herself and her immediate community to draw from the best of world literature. This shift in Madhubuti's thinking was important. Initially, he demanded that black writers demonstrate an exemplary black consciousness in their work. By 1978, he recognised the importance of looking outside of oneself and one's community in order to compare experiences and place black literature in an appropriate global context.

The most focused call for a more analytical approach to black literature came several years earlier, from the young critic James Emmanuel in "Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetics". In that essay, discussed in Chapter One, Emmanuel gave four reasons why a Black Aesthetic was the way forward for black literature.<sup>34</sup> He questioned over-emphasising the 'visibly black', which he felt would not further the cause for the improvement of the black literary tradition. Emmanuel concluded his essay by asking critics to give black writing the serious examination it required. This, he pointed out, could only happen if those critics were trained and professional. Emmanuel made a poignant request that summed up the very innocent aspirations that people had for the Black Aesthetic:

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<sup>33</sup> Haki R. Madhubuti, "Black Writers and Critics: Developing A Critical Process Without Readers", The Black Scholar (Nov.-Dec, 1978):39.

<sup>34</sup> James Emmanuel, "Blackness Can: A Quest for Aesthetic", The Black Aesthetic 182-211. The four reasons:

- The Black Aesthetic was necessary because black people see/feel things differently from their white counterparts
- The Black Aesthetic was a way of fighting against institutionalised racism from within the literary domain
- The Black Aesthetic provided an opportunity to do the crucial work of recording black expressive arts and creative production
- The Black Aesthetic would encourage independent publishing and did not leave the business of publishing black writing to the academic presses.

A cultural community of widely separated black authors studying one another's best work systematically would represent a dynamic interchange of the spirit – corrective and instructive and increasingly beautiful in its recorded expression.<sup>35</sup>

Notwithstanding the focus on unity and uniformity, there were many critics who were associated with the Black Aesthetic and many others who, with hardly any involvement, were watching its development with curiosity. I have chosen to loosely categorise these critics to illustrate their different levels of involvement in the Movement and their commitment to the notion of a Black Aesthetic. I have divided them into three groups; participant critics, participant/observer critics and observers. The participant critics were primarily writers, people like Don L.Lee/Haki Madhubuti, Larry Neal, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Carolyn Rodgers. They also wrote essays about criticism and were all regular contributors to the Black Aesthetic debate. On the edge of this group were critics like Addison Gayle and Hoyt Fuller, who were slightly older than the participant critics and not as involved in developing community initiatives. The next group, participant observers, included critics such as James Turner, who was particularly interested in issues of black nationalism; Stanley Crouch, a journalist and music reviewer; and the academic Houston Baker.<sup>36</sup> Finally, the observers were not strictly participants but witnesses to the debate and commentators on literature. Older critics like J. Saunders Redding and A.X. Nicholas fell into this category of observers; they did not choose, nor were they invited, to participate in the discourse of the Black Aesthetic debate.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.,199.

<sup>36</sup> I got the idea of Baker as a participant observer after interviewing Kalamu Ya Salaam in New York. Salaam highlighted these writers and critics immersed in the movement and identified Baker as a kind of semi-detached participant.

<sup>37</sup> Most white critics fell into the observer category.



Fuller and Gayle, who stood slightly apart from the participant critics, and Houston Baker, the participant observer, were perhaps the most influential in the development of black criticism. Fuller, as the editor of *Negro Digest/Black World*, played host to the four year debate on the Black Aesthetic and was able to steer the discussions and draw in new young writers. Writing the introductory essay in Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*, he set out the responsibilities of the black critic:

Black critics have the responsibility of approaching the works of black writers. . .with the knowledge that white readers – and white critics –cannot be expected to recognize and to empathize with the subtleties and significance of black style and technique. They have the responsibility of rebutting the white critics and of putting things in the proper perspective.<sup>38</sup>

Gayle, as the editor of *The Black Aesthetic*, had a pivotal role in highlighting the important themes of the debate through his selection of essays for the anthology. Gayle was also instrumental in widening the context of the Black Aesthetic debate to include discussion on theatre and music. Perhaps the best example of Gayle's views on criticism can be found in *The Way of the New World* (1975):

The message is clear: to evaluate the life and culture of black people it is necessary that one live the black experience in a world where substance is more important than form, where the social takes precedence over the aesthetic, where each act, gesture, and movement is political and where continual rebellion separates the insane from the sane, the robot from the revolutionary.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hoyt W. Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic", 11.

<sup>39</sup> Addison Gayle Jr. *The Way of The New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1975) xi-xii.

Thus Gayle, in a vision that might have been attractive to many black writers committed to the social importance of art, encouraged Black Aesthetic criticism that “depends for its viability upon black perceptions based upon black definitions of reality”.<sup>40</sup> Gayle’s contributions to the Black Aesthetic debate hardly changed from his introduction to *The Black Aesthetic* in 1971 to his 1977 “Blueprint for Black Criticism”, which offered a ten -point blueprint, against which Gayle expected the critic to judge black art:

1. Black artists must refuse to accept the American definition of reality and propose a Black definition instead.
2. Black Art must offer alternatives to the stereotypes of Black created by white Americans and validated in the works and critical offerings of Black fellow travellers.
3. Black Art must emphasize those paradigms of the Black past that enabled Black people to survive the American nightmare.
4. Black Art must create images, symbols and metaphors of positive import from the Black experience.
5. Black Art must be written for, by and about Blacks and the Black American condition.
6. Black Art must redefine the definitions handed down from the Western world.
7. The objectives of Black Art must be to inculcate the values of communality between one Black person and another.
8. Black Art must be critical of any and all actions detrimental to the health and well-being of the Black Community.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 261.

9. Black Art must divorce itself from the sociological attempt to explain the Black community in terms of pathology

10. Black Art must be in continual revolt against the American attempt to dehumanize man.<sup>41</sup>

This checklist did not propose that the critic have any particular abilities with regard to understanding literature. The blueprint was, quite superficially, responding to the mood, style and rhetoric of the day rather than suggesting a dispassionate pursuit of theoretical routes to understanding the ways in which race-inflected literary discourse could be analysed. Thus Gayle's "Blueprint", coming from a kind of elder statesman of the Black Aesthetic, told the artist what to write and the critic what to look for, but gave no guidance regarding how such writing and criticism could develop. There was nothing in his blueprint that encouraged the individual black writer to develop his or her craft. Indeed, both Gayle and Fuller, whose views matured within a Black Aesthetic context, discussed the importance of black criticism, but concentrated on the role of the critics to "rebut white critics" and "to live the black experience in a world where the social takes precedence over the aesthetic".<sup>42</sup> Such guidelines for black criticism outlined the social and political expectations of the critic but did not contribute effectively to discourse on the quality of black literary criticism or to the development of black literary theory.

In an attempt to challenge what he called "race theorizing by whites"<sup>43</sup>, the observer critic Houston Baker published *Long Black Song* (1972), the first single-authored book of literary criticism associated with the Black Aesthetic.

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<sup>41</sup> Addison Gayle, "Blueprint for Black Criticism" First World :International Journal Of Black Thought Vol.1 No.1 (Jan/Feb, 1977):41-45.

<sup>42</sup> Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic", 11. Gayle, The Way of the New World xi.

<sup>43</sup> Baker, Long Black Song 15.



Particularly in *Long Black Song*, Baker constructed a definition of black culture and discussed what Harold Cruse called the cultural superstructure governing intellectual and imaginative work.<sup>44</sup> *Long Black Song*, written one year after *The Black Aesthetic*, purported to be a product of Black Aesthetic thinking but used the language of contemporary academic prose. Baker managed to locate himself as a sympathetic follower and critical observer of a Black Aesthetic criticism that he described as “capable of extricating from the Black text composed in English those meanings that grow out of a particular cultural situation”. He continued:

. . . Its realization of the origins of the Black author’s language and its willingness to view his created text as historical evidence are grounded on a recognition of the Black man as a fully rational agent. Since white American ideational frames have precluded such considerations, it is not surprising that a perspective - endorsed primarily by Blacks and capable of generating an accurate conception of Black American literature has come to the fore.<sup>45</sup>

As a “fully rational agent”, Baker insisted on the development of black American “ideational frames” coming from the traditions of black culture. He asserted that race and culture theorizing by white America had succeeded in distorting the black psyche and had had a profound effect on black people’s own appreciation of their own culture. *Long Black Song* was a discussion based on three claims, paraphrased below, that I will evaluate as critical arguments.

1. Black American culture had been developed orally or musically for many years.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Cruse discussed the prevailing cultural superstructure as the proprietorship and administration of America’s cultural standards. Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* 505.

<sup>45</sup> Baker, *Long Black Song* 56.

<sup>46</sup> Baker’s claims about the significance of oral and “collectivistic” aspects of black culture looked to traditions of black cultural expression distinct from white American culture. Ironically, where Darwin Turner had challenged the Black Aesthetic for dismissing black literary traditions, Baker was drawing on the traditions of the culture to

2. Black American culture was never characterized by the individualistic ethos of white America culture but by a collective community approach.
3. Black American culture is partially differentiated from white American culture because one of its most salient characteristics is an “index of repudiation”.<sup>47</sup>

Baker’s second claim about the collectivist ethos described how the black community, as a numerical minority in America, developed its own group identity. Baker noted that a collectivist ethos was already in place and that writers were continuing its promotion in their work. However, Baker’s notion of black people as a homogeneous cultural collective was a simplistic reduction of black experiences across gender and class groups. In my view, Baker’s collectivist ethos traded on an assumption that group identity and community activism had always existed in African American communities. Baker chose not to examine dissenting groups and individuals. His collectivist ethos seized upon the ambitions of the Movement and suggested an anodyne, romantic rendering of a collective black ideal.<sup>48</sup>

Baker’s final principle, an “index of repudiation”, provides the most useful tool for literary analysis. He stressed that race theories had been used to “allow white men to state that black men are part of an inferior race”,<sup>49</sup> arguing that the effect of those theories had been to underwrite assumptions about black inferiority and endorse the systems of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crow and inequality. The index of

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define authentic black cultural expression. His first claim was that music and story-telling were mainstays of black cultural life.

<sup>47</sup> Baker, *Long Black Song* 16.

<sup>48</sup> The critic Adolph L Reed Jr. later regarded Baker’s idealism as a deliberate avoidance of ideological conflict. Particularly in relation to the differences between W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington, Reed argued that Baker’s refusal to recognise political, economic and social differences among black people was a significant weakness in his work. In *Long Black Song* this “presumption of [a] fundamental unity of experience”, of which Reed accuses Baker, is only really evident in Baker’s reflection of the roots from which black folklore springs: “Black jazz, folklore, and literature proceed out of an experience that is unknown to most white Americans; they are products of a culture that white America has chosen to ignore, misrepresent, or deny.” Baker, *Long Black Song* 15.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

repudiation, representing “oral, collectivistic and repudiative”<sup>50</sup> aspects of black American culture, challenged the notion that there was no African American “body of intellectual and imaginative work”. The repudiation, Baker argued, was characteristic of black American folklore:

From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Don L. Lee, black literary artists have employed the black folk base in their work, and this helps to explain the manner in which the black American literary tradition has grown. The theme of repudiation runs through Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” and is as much present in Lee’s “A Poem to Complement Other Poems.” The rhythms of the music so dominant in Langston Hughes’s first volume, *The Weary Blues*, are as vital to Ted Joans’s first volume, *Black Pow-wow*. The dialect and intonation of black sermons and religious tales that are very much in evidence in Zora Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* also characterize the speeches and the autobiography of Malcolm X.<sup>51</sup>

Baker also argued that through literature and drama, black writers repudiated the conventions of American literature. They did so in order to establish their own style and cultural references. The index of repudiation could be applied to both the critical and the creative and the index was a critical tool for challenging white literary assumptions and for praising black literary and cultural traditions.

There were, however, problems with Baker’s index of repudiation: the issue of who repudiates - the writer, the critic or both - was not considered. It was not clear if repudiation could be both conscious and unconscious. At the time of writing, for instance, some writers may have been consciously repudiating white cultural theorizing while others might not. Or, indeed, there may have been black writers who were repudiating aspects of black cultural life. Equally, there may have been writers

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 14.



who chose not to repudiate but to integrate their work and ideas into universalist literary theories that attempted to consider the human condition without bias toward any particular racial group.

Despite its limitations, *Long Black Song* was an important text of literary criticism. Although it did not purport to present a theory of black literature, it did offer an approach to the criticism of black people's writing that attempted to reflect their historical and cultural experiences. In his 1990 revised introduction to *Long Black Song*, Baker reevaluated the book's aims and recognized some of its inconsistencies:

I am struck by its contradictory denials and assertions . For example, the work denies the necessity of asserting the existence of a sui generis black culture in the United States. Yet, each chapter expends a lot of energy asserting just such an existence. And while *Long Black Song* works to revise traditional, exclusive, cultural categories, it remains paradoxically unaware of black women's studies.....Proclaiming black critical and artistic independence on the basis of BLACKNESS was the task of the black aesthetic. *Long Black Song* situated itself gladly, vigorously, and, perhaps too unquestioningly in the black arts and black aesthetic camps.<sup>52</sup>

Thus Baker questioned the willingness with which he had situated himself within the contemporary ideologies that made up Black Aesthetic thought. He argued that, despite his stated reservations, he had become caught up in the possibilities of what he later described as the "historically determinate metacategory called *BLACKNESS*".<sup>53</sup> However, at the time, Baker clearly believed in what he called – but never fully explained - authentic blackness and a unique black cultural tradition. This

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., xiii-xiv

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., xv.

essentialist view was evident in his writing and cannot be explained away by the pervasive influence of the Black Aesthetic.

In the first half of the 1970s, Baker had written in support of the Black Aesthetic as a valuable set of ideas from which to establish a black criticism. By 1980 Baker had distanced himself from the Black Aesthetic and his critical overview, while still sympathetic, did not acknowledge his own commitment to those ideas. In the last chapters of *The Journey Back* (1980), Baker challenged the Black Aesthetic for its moralizing and didacticism.<sup>54</sup> Rather than creating literary theory, he argued, people were bogged down by “conative utterances”, attempting to “*will* into being a new literature and criticism”.<sup>55</sup>

To a greater extent than most will acknowledge, the history of black American literary criticism is rooted in the conative mode. The critical canon is filled with statements by men and women whose conceptions of black literature have been guided by idealism and desire rather than by general analytic notions that can be fruitfully applied to the study of literature. The black literary text, that is to say has been continually evaluated in ways that have forced it into harmony with various idealizations of the world.<sup>56</sup>

In defence of Black Aesthetic critics, Winston Napier, in his article “From the Shadows: Houston Baker’s Move Toward A Postnationalist Appraisal of the Black Aesthetic”, criticised Baker’s views, stating that Baker himself had written in a similar

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<sup>54</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr. *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literary Criticism* (London: University Chicago Press, 1980. This edition 1983).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 133-134. Conative utterance was a term used by Houston Baker to describe a prescriptive approach to literary analysis. He borrowed it from the Eastern European critic Roman Jakobson, who defined a conative utterance as “not liable to the test of truth”. 134.

<sup>56</sup> Baker, *The Journey Back* 137.

vein. Napier challenged Baker's inability to distinguish between the conative utterance and referential insights on language. Napier argued that Baker's analysis of men like Gayle and Baraka was unfair, and suggested that Baraka, for instance, in the midst of his "nationalistic rhetoric" was still investigating the structure of black language styles.<sup>57</sup>

While I accept Napier's view, I believe that the Black Aesthetic critics (and I include Baker here) were more concerned to establish the need for black criticism and their right to a unique critical language rather than the actual development of such a critical framework.

Through the themes of blackness, revolution, cultural nationalism and the value of the black experience, black writers used the notion of a Black Aesthetic to create a literature that affirmed the unique experiences and expressions of black cultural life. In response to this approach to black literature, Black Aesthetic critics sought to promote the idea of black criticism that included an evaluation of the social, economic and political themes in black writing. The development of such criticism within the framework of the Black Aesthetic, like the Black Aesthetic itself, was unwieldy, with a variety of people agreeing similar aims and ambitions but spending very little time applying them to black literature.

The best example of a black literary theory came from Stephen Henderson's theory for black poetry, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>57</sup> Winston Napier, "From the Shadows : Houston Baker's Move Toward A Postnationalist Appraisal of the Black Aesthetic", New Literary History Vol.25 (Winter 1994): 160.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Critical Approaches to Blackness and the New Black Poetry**

#### **I**

Our literature, our art and our music are moving closer to the forces motivating Black America. You can hear it everywhere, especially in the music...Our music has always been the most dominant manifestation of what we are and feel, literature was just an afterthought, the step taken by the Negro bourgeoisie who desired acceptance on the white man's terms...But our music is something else. The best of it has always operated at the core of our lives, forcing itself upon us as in a ritual. It has always, somehow, represented the collective psyche. Black literature must attempt to achieve that same sense of the collective ritual, but ritual directed at the destruction of useless, dead ideas. Further, it can be a ritual that affirms our highest possibilities, but is yet honest with us.<sup>1</sup>

Larry Neal's influential essay "And Shine Swam On" was a manifesto for revolutionary black writing and a mandate for black writers to produce poetry and prose that, like music, could "operate at the core" of black people's lives. Black artists recognised the importance of music as an example of black creativity. They were well aware of the accessibility of black music and how it was received and embraced by black people. It was the desire of black writers to evoke a similar response from black people to their poetry, drama and fiction and move black literature from "just an afterthought" to become a crucial expression of the black experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On", The Black Aesthetic 653,654,655.

Poetry represented the most prolific area of creativity in the Black Arts Movement. It was the ambition of the New Black Poets, such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Clarence Major, Carolyn Rodgers, Mari Evans et al., to liberate the black community from the authority of white people's discourse. Most of the poems produced by the New Black Poetry Movement were written during the mid-sixties and early 1970s and focused on the dissonance between the black communities in which the poets lived and their experiences in American society. The poems also celebrated blackness, cultural nationalism and the promotion of social action through art. In writing for black people in the black vernacular, the New Black Poets made a conscious effort to commit themselves to the masses that is , the poor, working class men and women, whose urban environment was reflected in the experiences and language they shared.<sup>2</sup>

In my examination of the New Black Poetry Movement,<sup>3</sup> I will outline the poetry anthologies, discuss critical accounts of the themes and the poets' use of language and then assess Stephen Henderson's theory of saturation in relation to the ideology of blackness. Firstly, I would like to outline the historical relationship between black music and notions of black essentialism to explain the influence of black music on black writers and poets.

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois published his famous collection of essays *The Souls Of Black Folk*.<sup>4</sup> In his introduction he described "two-ness", being both American and Negro, as the most significant factor in the experience of black people in America:

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<sup>2</sup> The poets concentrated on the black urban experience but there were still a significant number of black people living and working in the rural south.

<sup>3</sup> In Chapter Seven I will discuss in greater detail different poetry styles and give examples of the revolutionary poetry of the time.

<sup>4</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk 1903, (New York: New American Library, 1982).

One ever feels his two- ness, ...two warring ideals in one dark body..He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. <sup>5</sup>

In the final chapter, “Of the Sorrow Songs”,<sup>6</sup> DuBois described the sorrow song as the “singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people”.<sup>7</sup> For DuBois, black music was perhaps the only arena where the Negro was not “ever conscious of his two-ness” and was a form of cultural and spiritual expression that was exclusive to black people and distinguished their experiences.

Ninety years later, Paul Gilroy published *The Black Atlantic* (1993), in which he examined the effects of trans-cultural exchange between America, Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. His theory drew together the different cultural and political routes that have criss-crossed to create what he calls “Black Atlantic” traditions. Gilroy praised *Souls of Black Folk* as a testament to the importance of music in the history of the diaspora. He credited *Souls* with “sensitis(ing) blacks to the significance of the vernacular cultures that arose to mediate the enduring effects of terror”.<sup>8</sup> However, where DuBois in 1903 saw black music as a purely American Negro form that was a valuable measure of Negro development, Gilroy, in 1993, regarded music as a distillation of trans – Atlantic, cross-cultural fertilization. In making this comparison I am conscious that DuBois was referring to black music in America, and Gilroy to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>6</sup> DuBois’s claims for spirituals were generalised and problematic. The writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston challenged such views in an article “Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals”: “The idea that the whole body of spirituals are ‘sorrow songs’ is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossipers to Death and Judgment..... What is being sung by the concert artists and glee clubs are the words of Negro composers or adaptors based on the spirituals.” *The Negro: An Anthology* ed. Nancy Cunard (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1970) First published 1934 223-225 .

<sup>7</sup> DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* 265.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (London:Verso,1993)119,120. Gilroy, perhaps in part because of some of the claims made for music by writers and commentators in the ‘60s, was adamant about the importance of hybridity and its role in preventing music from being hijacked for particular social and even racial ends.



black music across the diaspora. However, my main point is about black essentialism and the opposing views that these two writers represent. For DuBois, black music – still, one could argue, a hybrid of American and Negro - was essentially ‘black’. For Gilroy, ‘black’ music was a hybrid expression of identity which, because of its many influences, could not be regarded as an exclusively black product:

Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists and language gamers.<sup>9</sup>

The Black Arts Movement was located chronologically between DuBois and Gilroy but ideologically its affinities lay with DuBois. Movement writers and activists believed there was an essential blackness in black music and thus for them, black music could *only* be understood as a “fixed essence”. In “Music as Metaphor of the Black Experience”, an essay published in 1996, Stephen Henderson – emphasising his main points in bold - argued that music is not only “the **metaphor** of the Black Experience, it is the **embodiment** of the **essence** of that experience, and is hence “black particularism.”<sup>10</sup> For black writers striving to articulate the unique feelings of their blackness, the black particularism that black music represented was enormously attractive as a model for what could be achieved through the arts.<sup>11</sup> Also, black music

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 102 .

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Henderson, “Music as Metaphor of The Black Experience”, Fertile Ground ed. Kalamu Ya Salaam and Kysha N. Brown, ed. (New Orleans: Runagate Press, 1996) 130.

<sup>11</sup> In a 1981 interview with John Runcie, Archie Shepp pointed out the political nature of black music. “Some aspects of Negro music are always concerned with communication. . . Black music, whether it comes from Cecil or Trane or Ornette or James Brown or Mahalia Jackson, strives for fundamental communication with an audience. . . And, as Dr. DuBois pointed out, it is impossible to separate our lives from certain political events, so the message has to be, in part, political.” John Runcie, “The Future of Black music: Conversations with Archie Shepp”, Over Here: An American Studies Journal Vol.1 No.2. (Spring 1981):17. Shepp does not expand on his definition of what is a political music but, like other black artists, applied political motives to the expressive arts.

represented black traditions from Africa and contemporary America and was a form of cultural expression that was, as David Smith points out, part of black people's everyday lives:

Unlike writing, music is accessible to virtually anyone in a culture, without a requirement of formal education, though certainly learning to perform requires training, and appreciation exists at various levels of sophistication. The black musical tradition is thoroughly incorporated in the social lives of black people as a vehicle of self-expression, worship, dance, socialising, artistic performance and entertainment.<sup>12</sup>

Through this vehicle of self expression, musicians and writers created some innovative work. In 1964 "The New York Art Quartet", Roswell Rudd, John Tchicai, Lewis Worrell and Milford Graves produced their first album, *The New York Quartet*. The third track included Amiri Baraka's recitation of his poem, "Black Dada Nihilismus" over Roswell Rudd's composition, "Sweet".<sup>13</sup> This blending of the spoken word with music became more popular and The Black Poets, Gil Scott Heron and Nikki Giovanni all made successful poetry performance albums during this period. Also the saxophonist and playwright Archie Shepp, who had studied dramatic literature at Goddard College, included his own poems and reconfigurations of folk sayings in some of his 1965 recordings on the *Impulse* label.

The freedom of the interaction between the art forms was indicative of the freedom of the new music that was dominating the jazz scene. The new music, or "new jazz", was not a single style, but referred to the creative experimentation with form that different musicians were attempting in their work from the early 1960s.

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<sup>12</sup> David Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and its Critics", *American Literary History* Vol.3 No.1 (Spring 1991):99.

<sup>13</sup> "The New York Art Quartet". Recorded at Bell Sound Studios, New York City, November 26<sup>th</sup>, 1964.

Harmony was identified with European music, so breaking free of that was to break free from European influences. The ‘new jazz’ musicians did not want their music to be expropriated by white musicians and therefore challenged the harmonies and the formal unities of Western music. However, its experiment with form and the iconoclastic approach of some of its practitioners made the new jazz a source of consternation to some black and white critics.<sup>14</sup> Leslie B. Rout in his essay “Reflections on the Evaluation of Post-War Jazz”, included a section on “The New Thing”. He suggested that from 1959 onwards, black musicians “interpreted the jazz they played to be a condemnation of [American]society”.<sup>15</sup> Rout’s essay, along with essays by J.A. Rogers, Jimmy Stewart, an excerpt from Baraka’s “The Changing Same” and Ron Welburn’s “The Black Aesthetic Imperative”, were all included in a music section in Gayle’s *The Black Aesthetic*. All of the essays suggested a link between black music, black nationalism and black politics.

For James Stewart, as for Baraka, Milner and many others, the strength and political potential of the jazz avant-garde resided in its apparent racial exclusivity. The more these restless experimenters challenged Western conceptions of harmony, rhythm, melody and tone to create a music which was by turns dense and austere, powerfully primitive and dazzlingly complex, the more their supporters felt they projected an image of uncompromising and uncompromised black identity.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In his article “Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies”, John Gennari cited a ‘stunning anti-jazz diatribe’ on the decline of jazz since 1940 from Philip Larkin’s “All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961-1971”: “...It was with Coltrane, too, that jazz started to be *ugly on purpose*: his nasty tone would become more and more exacerbated until he was fairly screeching at you like a pair of demonically-possessed bagpipes. After Coltrane, of course, all was chaos, hatred and absurdity, and one was almost relieved that severance with jazz had become so complete and obvious.” John Gennari, “Jazz Criticism : Its Development and Ideologies”, Black American Literature Forum Vol. 25 No.3 (1991): 488.

<sup>15</sup> Leslie B. Rout, Jr. “Reflections on the Evolution of Post-War Jazz”, The Black Aesthetic (New York: Anchor, 1971) 150.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Ward, Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations (London:UCL Press, 1998) 410.



While there was a powerful group of black critics supporting the “uncompromised black identity”, there were others, the Black Panthers for instance, who argued that soul music was a more representative expression of black people’s experiences.

Unlike the cultural nationalists, however, the Black Panthers never really embraced the jazz avant-garde as an example of a self-consciously engaged, economically independent, politically useful black art form. The Panthers’ street-orientation and their powerful identification with the “lumpen” – the urban underclass and dispossessed among whom they believed genuine revolutionary potential lurked – meant that soul was the most acceptable, if by no means perfect, vehicle for their few musical forays into cultural politics. For the class-conscious Panthers, popular and populist soul music had little of the intellectual pretension or elite cliquishness of the jazz scene.<sup>17</sup>

My own view is that, as Ron Welburn argued, both soul and jazz were styles of black music for black people of all social groups.

Soul music of the mid-sixties, and jazz since 1960, were attempts to keep the music of black people in the black idiom...In jazz it is the mystical sensibility within Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra that caused them to create a music in 1957 that unwittingly on their part was to become an expression of black nationalism by 1963.<sup>18</sup>

Welburn’s point about both types of black music and the black idiom is important but he is astute in recognising that it was the new jazz’s “mystical sensibility” that made it attractive as a model of black nationalism. That mysticism was part of what some

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<sup>17</sup> Ward also commented on the attitudes of the cultural nationalists: “Many cultural nationalists, unsettled both by soul’s obvious popularity with whites and its relationship with a white-dominated recording and radio industry, preferred to put their faith in modern black jazzmen like Archie Shepp, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, Pharoah Sanders, Eric Dolphy and the ghost of Charlie Parker.” Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding* 412, 409.

<sup>18</sup> Ron Wellburn, “The Black Aesthetic Imperative”, *The Black Aesthetic* 128.

critics chose to interpret as the “inner dynamic” of black music that was committed to the black idiom, black nationalism and black culture.<sup>19</sup> Despite groups like the Black Panthers suggesting that soul music was more redolent of the experiences of the black masses, the Black Arts Movement was, as I pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, a movement divided into community activism and intellectual discourse. Led by the intellectuals, the music that the Movement endorsed would almost inevitably be that music that lent itself to the interests and expressions of the intellectuals. Thus the new jazz about which black critics such as Jimmy Stewart and Ron Welburn wrote, with such activist musicians as Archie Shepp and Max Roach, became the music of choice for a movement whose critics were looking for a model black particularism. Ultimately, however as Amiri Baraka stated,

Negro music is essentially the expression of an attitude, or a collection of attitudes, about the world, and only secondarily an attitude about the way music is made.<sup>20</sup>

Generally the Panthers and cultural nationalist critics alike accepted this view and the real issue was not about the kind of music but the attitude that black music represented to black people and how this attitude could be recreated in other creative disciplines.

The poet and former member of BLKARTSOUTH Kalamu Ya Salaam, discussed the importance of musicians for other artists in the Movement.<sup>21</sup> Salaam

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<sup>19</sup> Jimmy Stewart “Introduction to Black Aesthetics in Music”, The Black Aesthetic 90.

<sup>20</sup> LeRoi Jones, “Jazz and the White Critic”, ed. William J. Harris The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1991) 181.

<sup>21</sup> “BLKARTSOUTH is a southern Black arts organization based in New Orleans. It began in 1968 as a workshop within the structure of the Free Southern Theater, the radical Black theater in the South.” Abraham Chapman, New Black Voices (New York: Mentor, 1972) 370.

Trying to establish a black literary style was part of the black aesthetic enterprise. I discussed this with Salaam in an interview on 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2000. Salaam tried to illustrate the importance of rhythm in black poetry and the traditions of making music and instruments from any available source. He talked about the influence of the saxophone on the sound that black poets tried to recreate through their verse. He also referred to the typewriter as a timpanic meter driver, and demonstrated how the sound of the striking of the keys made its own beat which,

particularly cited John Coltrane, whose music some writers saw as blending political, artistic and black nationalist aims.<sup>22</sup> Significantly, some of the New Black Poets tried to apply the structures of black music to their work and to explore new experimental forms. In fact the impact of Coltrane’s music generated poems about him and poems that tried to emulate his sound. Don L. Lee’s poem “Don’t Cry Scream: For John Coltrane/from a black poet/in a basement and apt. crying tears of “you ain’t gone” ” is an excellent example of this. Lee tried to recreate the sound of Coltrane’s saxophone in his use of repetitive vowels:

SCREAMMMM/we-eeeeee/screeech/tee	improvise
Aheeeeeeeee/screeeeeeee/theeeee/ee	with
AsHHHHHHHHH/WEEEEEEEEEE/scrEEE	feeling
EEE	
We-eeeeeeeWE-EEEEEEEEWE-EE-EEEEEE <sup>23</sup>	

Lee also provided musical direction, suggesting the word ‘scream’ as a refrain to be sung ‘loud and high with feeling’ between the verses.

Jayne Cortez’s “How Long Has Trane Been Gone” is a lamentation, not just for John Coltrane but for

“Mothers with sons  
 who need John Coltrane  
 Need the warm arm of his music  
 like words from a Father  
 words of Comfort  
 words of Africa

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certainly in the earliest creative stages, contributed to the rhythm of the poem. Interview with the author, 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2000, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>22</sup> Coltrane himself was not a nationalist, his music was influenced by eastern mysticism as well as Pan Africanism and a response to what was happening in local black communities. It was his artistic genius that became the symbol of independent black artistry to which black writers aspired.

<sup>23</sup> Don L. Lee, “Don’t Cry Scream: For John Coltrane from a black poet/in a basement and apt. crying tears of “you ain’t gone” ”, Don’t Cry Scream (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969) 29.



words of Welcome”<sup>24</sup>

For Cortez, Coltrane “had the whole of life wrapped up in B flat” and, “Like Malcolm was a True image of Black Masculinity”. Written one year after James Baldwin’s *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone*, and using Trane’s name as a metaphor for movement, Cortez’s poem sadly notes that too many Tranes have gone that black people have missed.

Poets like Michael S. Harper were inspired by music’s ability to embody “sweet and funky” blackness and sometimes tried to emulate the sound in experimental verse. Thus Harper’s tribute “Dear John, Dear Coltrane” began with a biography of Trane’s life that answered the rhetorical refrain within the poem:

*Why you so black?  
cause i am  
why you so funky?  
cause i am  
why you so black?  
cause i am  
why you so sweet?  
cause i am  
why you so black?  
cause i am  
a love supreme, a love supreme.*<sup>25</sup>

Having identified the significance of black music that, to the Black Arts writers, was “essentially expression of an attitude”, in the following section, I will focus on the critical debate about how that attitude should be expressed by the writers and assessed by the critics.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jayne Cortez, “How Long has Trane Been Gone”, *Pisstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares* (New York: Phrases, Texas, 1969) 12.

<sup>25</sup> Michael S. Harper, “Dear John, Dear Coltrane”, *Images of Kin* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 15.

<sup>26</sup> LeRoi Jones, “Jazz and the White Critic”, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* 181.

## II

The poetry was called "Black" to distinguish it from the Negro poetry which came before it and which was still being written by those poets who felt that they were poets first and "Black" people second. The "Black " poetry was written by those who felt that they were Black first and writers second. Although that distinction seems trivial at first glance, it was and is critical to an understanding of the poetry of those writers and the period in which they worked.<sup>27</sup>

Part of the major group in Houston Baker's discussion on generational shifts, the New Black Poets distanced themselves from what they saw as the mimicry of "white" art and literature that they saw in the work of older black artists. Although most of the poetry was about black people and their contemporary struggles and triumphs, Dudley Randall's poem "Primitives", for instance, gives an example of the attitudes of older black artists that the New Black Poets challenged. Here, Randall criticised the interpretation of African images by such artists as Picasso and the irony of black artists' mimicry of such interpretations.

### **Primitives**

Paintings with stiff  
homuncules, flat in iron  
draperies with distorted  
bodies against spaceless landscapes.  
Poems of old  
poets in stiff  
metres whose harsh  
syllables  
drag like  
dogs with  
crushed

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen E Henderson, "Black Poetry : The Continuing Challenge", Fertile Ground 144.

backs.

We go back to  
them, spurn difficult  
grace and symmetry,  
paint tri-faced  
monsters,  
write lines that  
do not sing, or  
even croak, but that  
bump,  
jolt, and are hacked  
off in the mid-  
dle, as if by these dis-  
tortions, this  
magic, we can  
exorcise  
horror, which we  
have seen and fear to  
see again:

hate deified,  
fears and  
guilt conquering,  
turning cities to  
gas, powder and a  
little rubble.

The New Black Poets were concerned about the cities that were turning to rubble and unlike the earlier generation of poets made such concerns the focus of their work. This emphasis on political issues fuelled the frustration that writers like Saunders Redding vented against what they saw as the New Black Poets' concentration on events and their politicised racial and cultural identity rather than on the quality of their writing:

Judging from the latest anthologies of American Negro  
poetry more Negroes than ever before are writing poetry.  
Still, there are fewer good poets than ever before, and



several of the best of those still living (and working?) belong to the past. . . . The new Negro poets (and they are not alone) have made a school of nonsense and obscurity, or of obscure nonsense.<sup>28</sup>

Redding's dismissal of the New Black Poetry revealed the gap between the two generations of writers. One group saw themselves as writers who happened to be black and the other, a group of black people expressing their blackness through poetry. The New Black Poets' response to the legacy of the black literary tradition was deliberately less deferential than that of their black literary predecessors and they were far more critical of the white literary canon. Insisting on their blackness, the New Black Poets dismissed the desire to celebrate the fact of the "double image of American and Negro" which the integrationists thought all writers should accept.<sup>29</sup> In a scathing critique, another integrationist writer, Blyden Jackson, challenged the philosophies underpinning the whole New Black Poetry Movement:

Clearly this poetry is largely a poetry of reaction, not only in the theories of politics and cultures which underlie its attitudes, but also in the nature of its origins. Clearly it is young and radical at the same time that it is its own totalitarian state supported by a nationalist mythology, a pantheon of heroes and saints, and, in the scriptures of Frantz Fanon, a holy writ.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Saunders Redding, "Since Richard Wright", African Forum 1 (Spring 1966):28-29. The writer Owen Dodson was also concerned about the quality of black poetry: "They want Nicki (*sic*) Giovanni poems now. You know these poems. You can make them up in a minute. You can say: "Look, man, I am black/Don't you see how black I am?/ I'm black as my fingernails/ and I'm black to my toes/ and if you smell me/ I am black/ And now I want you to give me a job/ because I am black." That's the end of the poem. You can make them up by the minute. I myself have a sense of humor about the whole thing." Owen Dodson, Interviews With Black Writers ed. John O'Brien (New York:Liveright, 1973) 56. The views of writers like Dodson, who were not in the integrationist school but challenged the Black Aesthetic and the ideologies of the New Black Poetry, will be discussed in Chapter Six.

<sup>29</sup> Redding, "Since Richard Wright", 31.

<sup>30</sup> Blyden Jackson, "From One New Negro to Another 1923-1972", Black Poetry In America ed. Blyden Jackson and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., (Baton Rouge:Louisiana State University Press, 1974) 92. Jackson was concerned that too much faith was being placed in a defensive blackness that was supposed to meet all the political, social and cultural needs of the black community.

While Jackson may be correct in saying that the poetry was a poetry of reaction, the New Black Poets argued that, at least in the themes of their poems, they were rejecting a passive acceptance of the ‘white theorizing’ that had made objects of black people and their culture.<sup>31</sup> I would add that, certainly by the early 1970s, black poets were focusing on themselves as a community, rather than reacting against attempts by white America to marginalise black people and their work.<sup>32</sup> There is little evidence that the New Black Poets entered into dialogues with the older poets or attempted to refute their views.<sup>33</sup> Either refusing to dignify such statements with a response or more conscious that the integrationists views would not be expressed by the audiences they wanted to reach, the New Black Poets expended their energies on writing and performing their work. There was a developing interest in the spoken word, particularly through workshops and community-based performance evenings, but it was through individual collections and particularly in anthologies, that the New Black Poets attempted to uplift black people.

Most anthologies had a lengthy introduction, where the editor placed the poems in a contemporary social and political context. All of the anthologies brought together the works of well known and lesser known poets. The editors emphasized the importance of contemporary black activism and presented the poems as part of those revolutionary activities.

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<sup>31</sup> Houston Baker commented on “race theorizing by whites”, in *Long Black Song*. He continued: “Fully aware of white America’s denials, fully aware that white America’s talk of race differentiation is sheer superstition, black Americans are now engaged in a rejuvenating examination of the body of intellectual and imaginative work that reflects their own unique culture.” Baker, *Long Black Song* 17. Black writers were conscious of race theorising on their imaginative work and wanted to challenge the ideas behind such theorising in their poetry.

<sup>32</sup> This focus on black people rather than their relationships with the white world is particularly evident in black women’s writing, which is the subject of Chapter Seven.

<sup>33</sup> Dialogue did take place during the earlier symposia, but as the differences between the camps became more distinct, the various factions organized their own symposia and the opportunity for sharing ideas diminished.



*The New Black Poetry* (1969) was edited by Clarence Major.<sup>34</sup> It concluded with “A Statement on Poetics” in which each poet wrote a few lines stating their understanding of poetics. The statements indicated the poets’ commitment to blackness, to the Black Aesthetic and demonstrated the strong link between the New Black Poetry and politics. The dominant views in those statements were that black art was for black people, that black poetry should reflect a black lifestyle, that black writers should write for black people and for a black revolution and that black poetry should contribute to attaining a “state that could be called *black*”.<sup>35</sup>

December 1971 saw the publication of *The Black Poets*, edited by the publisher Dudley Randall.<sup>36</sup> Randall attempted to present the full range of black American poetry and divided his anthology into folk poetry, poetry of the forerunners such as Lucy Terry and Phyllis Wheatley and poetry from the Harlem Renaissance. The anthology concluded with a section of 1960s poems. In 1968 Abraham Chapman edited *Black Voices* followed in 1972 by *New Black Voices*. Both volumes were divided into sections: fiction, poetry and criticism with poetry providing the largest

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<sup>34</sup> Clarence Major, (b. 1936), was a poet, novelist, essayist and anthologist. Born in the South he moved to Chicago at the age of ten, where he studied at the Chicago Art Institute and, perhaps more importantly, was influenced by the movement in Chicago through the work of Gwendolyn Brooks and Don L. Lee. Major selected poems for the anthology based on the quality of the poetry and the “social black consciousness of the poet’s work”.

<sup>35</sup> Clarence Major, *The New Black Poetry* 11. Larry Neal suggested that the writers should take on their responsibilities as “bearers of the ancient tribal tradition”. Another poet, Elton Hill – Abu Ishak, said the role of the poet was to call all black people to “come to terms with their minds”. Ibid., 139, 141, 142. It is also worth noting that in his introduction, Clarence Major highlighted the number of women in the anthology as an important step towards endorsing the work of black women poets. 16% of the contributors to the anthology were women. This is discussed more fully in Chapter Seven.

<sup>36</sup> Dudley Randall, ed., *The Black Poets* (New York: Bantam, 1971). Dudley Randall, who set up the Detroit-based Broadside Press, was perhaps the most influential and successful black publisher of the period. “Virtually all of the young black poets who gained national reputations and national followings between 1967 and 1972 were first and sometimes exclusively published by Broadside Press. This black control of black publishing, minimal as it has been in the case of Broadside Press (and its offshoot, Don Lee’s Third World Press), has been of incalculable importance in insulating the movement from the pressure-demands of the ‘larger audience’ thus making possible a degree of autonomous development unprecedented in the history of Afro-American literature.” Abraham Chapman, ed. *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Afro-American Literature* (New York: Mentor, 1972) 7.



section. Much of the verse - particularly in performance- was new and vigorous, as Stephen Henderson later noted in his review essay on black poetry of that era:

These poems were often frankly propagandistic and, technically speaking, quite often not very interesting. They were meant to be “throw-away” poems. Perhaps then they should be examined in this light- they were raps for the occasion ...<sup>37</sup>

What Henderson describes as “throw-away” poems were more like literary grenades, with an immediate impact and long-lasting effect. Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Art”, with its famous line “we want poems that kill”, is a good example of such literary ammunition:

“...We want poems  
like fists beating niggers out of Jocks  
or dagger poems . . .  
We want “poems that kill.”  
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
guns. poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
and take their weapons leaving them dead  
with tongues pulled out. . .”<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to my argument that the Black Arts Movement was about developing institutions and a canon of black works, C.W.E. Bigsby suggests that the poets were only concerned with the message of the poem for that time and place:

Black poets did not see their work as a series of artifacts or an anthology of monuments. They were less concerned with establishing a corpus of black literature than with engaging in dialogue with the black community. It was not

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<sup>37</sup>Stephen Henderson, “The Question of Form and Judgement in Contemporary Black American Poetry: 1962-1977”, A Dark and Sudden Beauty: Two Essays in Black Arts Movement Poetry by George Kent and Stephen Henderson Houston Baker, Jr. ed. (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977) 35 .

<sup>38</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, “Black Art”, (1969) ed. Dudley Randall, The Black Poets (New York: Bantam, 1971) 223.

for nothing that they tended to reiterate the appropriateness of music, not merely as the basis for poetic rhythm, but as an image of black art.<sup>39</sup>

Concentrating on the message, Bigsby argued, the poets did not pay sufficient attention to the conventions of style and form in their work. Although the New Black Poets were not trying to sustain “an anthology of monuments”, I would argue, in agreement with the following critics, that the New Black Poets were committed to institution building and making their own unique contributions to the “corpus of black literature”.<sup>40</sup>

In two essays, "Contemporary Afro-American Poetry As Folk Art" (1973) and the more retrospective, “Black Poetry: A Double -Edged Sword” (1981), Bernard Bell loosely identified the themes of the New Black Poetry as a nostalgic interest in Africa,<sup>41</sup> a rediscovery and reevaluation of black folk values, the celebration of black communities and the validation of the blues, jazz, ballads, sermons and black idiom as poetic material. Bell’s literary schema did not point to anything new. Indeed, many of

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<sup>39</sup> C.W. E. Bigsby, The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature (London: Greenwood Press, 1980) 300.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Bell’s link between African slaves and contemporary black poets was a wistful assumption of a black experience that identified with a perfect African past. It was an assumption because, as LeRoi Jones’s poem “Notes for a Speech” (1961), illustrated - in what the critic William J. Harris described as Jones’s “beat period” - not all black poets were committed to Africa and African identity:

#### **Notes for a Speech**

African blues  
does not know me. Their steps, in sands  
of their own  
land. A country in black & white, newspapers  
blown down pavements  
of the world. Does  
not feel  
what I am.

This is one of Jones’s early works and reflected an ambiguity about Africa that was later exchanged for a Third World Marxist perspective. However this poem is one example that illustrates that at times, for some black artists, Africa was a “foreign place”. LeRoi Jones, “Notes for a Speech”, ed. William J. Harris, The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1991) 14-15.

the themes he outlined were reminiscent of the folk expression and self-determination identified by Alain Locke in *The New Negro* in 1925.<sup>42</sup> Writing in 1973, Bell reiterated the “validation of the poetic qualities of black speech and music” and the significance of vernacular expression in contemporary poetic works. For Bell then, it was these literary qualities in addition to the influence of the contemporary political climate, that were the main concerns of the black poets.

However, in the later essay “Black Poetry: A Double-Edged Sword”, Bell was less adamant about the superiority of the poetic impulse over the political imperative. He did not explain his own changing views but I would speculate that perhaps, during the 1970s, when critics were dismissing the poems of the ‘angry black’ as political dogma, Bell defended the literary and linguistic expressions of the poets’ work. But by 1981, as the New Black Poetry Movement had become a phase in black literary history, Bell’s reconsidered view was that a “serious study of the new black poetry gives evidence of an unprecedented revolutionary fervor and commitment to the concept of art as weapon”.<sup>43</sup> Bell’s review of the period acknowledged the dominance of revolutionary politics and he recognised the poets’ political commitment as an equally important part of the New Black Poetry Movement. Referring to Baraka’s poem “Black Art”, Bell concluded that “Black art must be a double-edged sword”,<sup>44</sup> the two sides of which would be the “realistic evaluation of Black folk values” that he mentioned in 1973 and his 1981 conviction about the power of the poem to galvanize black people to political resistance and social action.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Alain Locke, *The New Negro* 1925 (New York: Touchstone, 1997) 7.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Bell, “Black Poetry: A Double-Edged Sword”, *College Language Association Journal* XV (Sept. 1981):42, 43.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*,40.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Bell, “Contemporary Afro-American Poetry As Folk Art”, *Black World* (March 1973):87.



Stephen Henderson summarised the purpose of the New Black poems: “[T]hey were raps for the occasion, and the occasion was the Revolution...”<sup>46</sup> As a result of this raising of consciousness, Henderson continued, “many of these poems were written by non-poets, by ordinary people in a state of excitement and fervor which they felt compelled to express”.<sup>47</sup> In my view, such community involvement was a strength of the Movement, although this widening of access to the reading and writing of poetry caused some friction between the “real poets” and the “non-poets”. However, while the creative product of these outpourings might not always have been artistically satisfying, black men and women were seizing opportunities to express their ideas and challenge the status quo; a significant political, if not literary, achievement for post Civil-Rights black America.

One of the Movement’s literary achievements was the way artists chose to experiment with the black vernacular. In an essay that focused on blackness in poetic language, Donald Gibson noted how poets attempted to represent the voices of their urban contemporaries by bringing together phrases, music, story-telling and individual experiences:

The language of the black urban ghetto is used to emphasize unity, commonality of experience, identity. We all know how meaning can be carried by the level of language one uses – implications of class, social and

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen Henderson, “The Question of Form and Judgement in Contemporary Black American Poetry: 1962-1977”, 35. Henderson’s view is reminiscent of the third stage in Frantz Fanon’s analysis of intellectual and cultural resistance. “In the first phase, the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power...In the second phase we find the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is...Finally in the third phase which is called the fighting phase...*men and women who up till then would never have thought of producing a literary work, now that they find themselves in exceptional circumstances – feel the need to speak to their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action*”. (italics mine). Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963, 1968 edition) 222-223.

<sup>47</sup> Henderson continued: “This was not a function of education or class necessarily, though many were obviously written by college students. In a word, then, one should judge these poems in historical context.” Henderson, “The Question of Form and Judgement in Contemporary Black American Poetry: 1962-1977”, 35.

economic status, education, intelligence, sensibility. In the same way, a certain language has come to be identified with black experience, with commitment to certain goals and ideals; and this language, with its nuances of meaning, its conscious difference from standard English, its renaming of things and events (its recasting of experience into its own terms), gives unique character to the poetry.<sup>48</sup>

Gibson's essay highlighted the importance of a language that was its own 'black sound' and true to what the black poets felt was the diction of the people in their communities. They preferred "the language of the ghetto [as] a means of expression consonant with the poet's aims to communicate with people of a certain socioeconomic level; it [wa]s also an expression of a complex of attitudes and feelings".<sup>49</sup> This early urban Ebonics, Gibson argued, offered a kind of shorthand for black writers that recognised "certain language identified with black experience".<sup>50</sup> That "certain language" was challenging and accusatory, with calls for revolution, using contemporary phrases from popular music, occasional examples of black church rhetoric and old, black, southern homilies. Structurally too, the poets were committed to a kind of technical iconoclasm in their use of repetition and a kind of note-taking shorthand.<sup>51</sup>

Sandra Govan, in her essay "The Poetry of Black Experience As Counterpoint to The Poetry of The Black Aesthetic"(1974), identified Black Aesthetic themes in the New Black Poetry:

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<sup>48</sup> Donald B. Gibson, ed. Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973)11.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> "Ebonics" is a contemporary term that was not used at the time that describes black urban vernacular. The New Black Poets, choosing to favour the working class perspective, identified the black experience with that of poor, working class black men and women living in urban communities. This choice meant that people like the critic Ellen Holly who stated that she had "never been poor, had never eaten a chitlin' and was not ghetto bred", could not readily identify with the language and themes of the New Black Poetry. Although hers was a minority view, Holly was pointing out that there was no singular black experience and not all black people were members of the urban working class. Ellen Holly, "The Negro In The Arts - A Symposium: Black Vs Black in the Arts", The Crisis Vol.77 No.9 (Nov 1970): 381.

<sup>51</sup> See Don L. Lee's poem, cited on page 96 of this chapter, "Don't Cry Scream: For John Coltrane from a black poet/in a basement and apt. crying tears of "you ain't gone" ", for an example of this style.



The poetry of the Black Aesthetic regards the language of the street, with all the different classifications such as 'frank' , 'honest', 'obscene', 'colorful', or 'vulgar' as its special province. It is generally nonpersonal in the sense that the poet does not reflect his own inner feelings on a subject but voices the collective feelings of the people or exhorts to a collective audience on a subject that concerns the community. It celebrates Afro-American and African cultural and national heroes; it has a close relation to Black music. Black Aesthetic poetry does not tolerate white (Western/European/American) critical standards, nor does it show any regard, special or otherwise, for a white audience.<sup>52</sup>

According to Govan, the blackness of the New Black Poetry was evident in the language of the poets. Although she tried to suggest a breadth of black linguistic expression which she described as “obscene, vulgar”, etc. (a choice of words that suggests an apologia for the extremes of language used), it was very much an urban working class diction that was being expressed.<sup>53</sup> Rather than being “nonpersonal”, I would argue that the content of the poetry was incredibly personal and self-expressive, especially as the New Black Poetry Movement created opportunities for black people to make statements on their immediate concerns and circumstances. Govan said that the poetry celebrated national cultural heroes. I would add that the poetry was also an attempt to get to know who those heroes were and immerse black communities in a knowledge of their culture.

In an attempt to classify that language , the poet Carolyn Rodgers, in her essay “Black Poetry- Where it’s At”, summarized nine categories of black poetry – I have

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<sup>52</sup> Sandra Govan, "The Poetry of Black Experience As Counterpoint to The Poetry of The Black Aesthetic". Negro American Literature Forum Vol.8 No.4 (Winter 1974):289.

<sup>53</sup> That 'sound', though probably the loudest, was not necessarily the language of the majority of black people in an America experiencing the social consequences of the last big migrations from the South. This was a concern to some, particularly, middle class , black men and women.



paraphrased these below and listed, in each category, the ways in which Rodgers suggested they could be expressed.<sup>54</sup> Rodgers gave examples of the themes and language styles, mainly influenced by black music, that contributed to black expression. Her essay, written in the language of black vernacular, also discussed the themes of the New Black Poetry. Rodgers' leading category was 'signifying', which she felt was the main way in which black poets communicated their ideas.

1. *signifying* – The main category. A vernacular tradition 'a way of saying the truth that hurts with a laugh'.
  - a. open
  - b. sly
  - c. with or about
2. *teachin/rappin* – This category seeks to define and give direction to black people.
3. *Coversoff* – To inform and reveal.
  - a. rundown
  - b. hipto
  - c. digup
  - d. coatpull
4. *spaced (spiritual)* - The role of this type of poetry was to encourage a return to ancestral wisdom and natural laws.
  - a. mindblower (fantasy)
  - b. horizon of black awareness.
  - c. Coolout
5. *bein - (self/reflective)* This category was a tool for every new writer who wanted to write about how black people really are.
  - a. upinself
  - b. uptight
  - c. dealin/swingin
6. *love* – A category celebrating love between black men and women.
  - a. skin
  - b. space (spiritual)
  - c. cosmic (ancestral)
7. *shoutin* - (angry/cathartic)- Telling off the 'subhuman'
  - a. badmouth
  - b. facetoface (warning/confrontation)
  - c. two faced (irony)
8. *jazz*
  - a. riffin

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<sup>54</sup> Carolyn Rodgers, "Black Poetry- Where it's At", Negro Digest XVII (September, 1969):7-16.

- b. cosmic (Trane)
  - c. grounded (Lewis)
  - d. du –wah
  - e. dittybop
  - f. behop
9. *pyramid* - (getting us together/building/nationhood)

Rodgers' categories were crucial in contributing to a critical perspective to evaluate the creative language of the black poets.<sup>55</sup> Her essay underlined celebration, black awareness and nation building as positive aspects of the New Black Poetry. As part of an essentialist approach to black literature, identifying a unique black language style was fundamental to Rodgers criticism. Finally, Rodgers also posited categories of black expression not influenced by other (white) artistic movements, a point which was the subject of debate between Black Aesthetic critics like Donald Gibson and integrationist writers like A.X. Nicholas.

An eclectic approach to their writing allowed the New Black Poets to pick and mix from a variety of styles and traditions in the development of their own new forms. Donald Gibson, in his introduction to *Modern Black Poets*, suggested that the poets' desire for freedom to express themselves became a metaphor for the unique style that they were trying to create:

Language scatological in nature is allowable as another means of expressing the poet's desire to escape the restraints of the system of institutions and conventions which oppress him.... Its freedom from the restrictions of traditional structure matches its general antitraditional bias and its attempt to establish its own particular nature. The number and variety of inventions in form and style may well be the best reflection of black poetry's iconoclastic spirit.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> In Chapter Seven, where I discuss women's poetry and fiction, I argue that there was a significant shift in their approach to their work after 1970. Rodgers' essay reflects that shift as she is more concerned with positive blackness rather than revolutionary anger.

<sup>56</sup> Gibson, *Modern Black Poets* 10,12-13.

However, the variety of inventions did not come solely from the black experience. For example, the New Black Poets were influenced by the Beat poets from which, Gibson argued, “the black-poetry writers caught the spirit of iconoclasm and social criticism”.<sup>57</sup> While this may be the case, with the influence of the Black Power Movement and the impact of urban rebellions, black writers were not dependent on a white middle-class avant-garde movement for examples of iconoclasm and social criticism. There was an irony, however, in the New Black Poets claiming a uniqueness while employing some of the technical structures from the Beat poets who were, for the most part, white members of the middle-class avant garde.<sup>58</sup>

Ironically, the techniques of new black poetry that some critics decry as gimmickry and others consider exclusively black in origin - unconventional capitalization, line and word spacing, abbreviations, unclosed parentheses and quotation marks, esoteric images and the like are actually derivative of E.E. Cummings, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson a la LeRoi Jones.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>58</sup> The people from whom they sought to distance themselves were not only the white middle classes of the literary ‘establishment’. The black writers also tried to distance themselves from the black middle class who, they felt, were not really interested in popular black culture and vernacular expression.

<sup>59</sup> Bernard Bell, “New Black Poetry: A Double-Edged Sword”, 43. Where Gibson and Bell remarked ironically on the various influences on black poets, older writers like A.X. Nicholas and Darwin Turner were disappointed in the younger writers whose impulse was to discuss their literary antecedents as old-fashioned and placid. Nicholas refuted this notion by suggesting that his generation had, themselves, been inventive and that this new generation had, in part, based some of their innovations on borrowed ideas: “By refusing to read or to study the older poets, oftentimes they unwittingly repeat the things that the older poets have already done. When you discard punctuation, for example, you are really going back to something very old because the oldest printing was done without punctuation. When poets use the slash (/), for example, they may think it’s new and revolutionary, but, in actuality, this method is taken from white business reports. . . Young Black poets adopted this method thinking that it was a “Black thang” when, in reality, it was a “white thang.”” A.X. Nicholas, “A Conversation with Dudley Randall”, *Black World* Vol.21 No.2 (December 1971): 30.



The use of a Beat style format, alongside a manipulation of black language phrases and expressions, added to the black poets' sense of doing something different. The New Black Poets were committed to being *new* Black Poets and relished their roles as iconoclasts. Ignoring any suggested links to modernists and the Beats, the New Black Poets concentrated on developing their own style based largely on the notion of blackness which, as the white critic Richard Gilman stated, pervaded their work:

These Negro writers I am speaking of take their blackness not as a starting point for literature, or thought and not as a marshaling ground for a position in the parade of national images and forms, but as absolute theme and necessity. They make philosophies and fantasias out of their color, use it as weapon and seat of judgment, as strategy and outcry, source of possible rebirth, data for a future existence and agency of revolutionary change.<sup>60</sup>

Blackness, though arguably an ambiguous and imprecise tool, became a prerequisite for the New Black Poet whose obligation it was "to always affirm Blackness in his writing". Making that claim, the writer and critic Alvin Aubert said that the black poet "should never forget that he is Black and that he has an obligation to Black people - to uplift their spirit to enable them to reckon with their predicament".<sup>61</sup>

### III

A critical approach to the assessment of blackness in the New Black Poetry was posited by Stephen Henderson. He sought to find home-grown critical

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<sup>60</sup> Richard Gilman, "White Standards and Negro Writing", Negro American Literature Forum Vol. 3 No.4 (Winter 1969): 111. Gilman also commented on his role as a white critic and expressed his willingness to withdraw from commenting on a cultural expression that was not his own.

<sup>61</sup> Martha Ellison, "Velvet Voices Feed on Bitter Fruit: A Study of American Negro Poetry", Poet And Critic Vol. 4 (Winter 1967-1968 ):39.

frameworks to put control of black criticism and the interpretation of black culture into the hands of black people. Henderson's theory of 'saturation', in his 1968 essay "Survival Motion: A Study of the Black Writer and the Black Revolution in America", was perhaps the most important literary theory to come out of the Black Aesthetic period. His central premise was that black poets wrote black poetry as an expression of their blackness:

To write black poetry is an act of survival, of regeneration, of love. Black writers do not write for white people and refuse to be judged by them. They write for black people and they write about their blackness, and out of their blackness, rejecting anyone and anything that stands in the way of self-knowledge and self-celebration. The poets and the playwrights are especially articulate and especially relevant and speak directly to the people.<sup>1</sup>

Commenting obliquely on the contemporary anthologies, Henderson's deliberations culminated in his book *Understanding The New Black Poetry* (1973). Its aim was to explore how blackness, having boosted the esteem and awareness of a community of artists and intellectuals, could be the foundation of a theory that could be applied to black poetry. Paraphrased below are Henderson's definition of the poetry's five main characteristics:

1. Any poetry by any person or group of persons of known Black African ancestry, whether the poetry is designated Black or not.
3. Poetry which is somehow *structurally* Black, irrespective of authorship.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Stephen Henderson, "Survival Motion: A Study of the Black Writer and the Black Revolution in America", The Militant Black Writer in Africa and The United States eds. Mercer Cook and Stephen Henderson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) 65.

<sup>63</sup> Black speech patterns and the 'jazzy rhythmic' effects of black music are the main structures that Henderson identified.

4. Poetry by any person or group of persons of known Black African ancestry which is *also* identifiably Black in terms of structure, theme or other characteristics.
4. Poetry by any identifiably Black person who can be classed as a 'poet' by Black people. Judgment may or may not coincide with judgments of whites
5. Poetry by an identifiably Black person whose ideological stance vis-à-vis the history and the aspiration of his people since slavery is adjudged by them to be 'correct'.<sup>1</sup>

Henderson's five characteristics were contradictory. The first, for instance, suggested that black poetry could only be written by people of African descent, the second seems to say that poetry could be structurally black "irrespective of authorship".<sup>1</sup> In the last three categories, Henderson included the judgement of the audience as part of the process of literary evaluation. However, there were no tools or guidelines for their judgement, nor was there any distinction made between the critic and the audience, nor any means of dealing with disagreements within the audience.

Henderson posited three main categories in his critical framework. His first, 'theme' was informed by the idea of a homogenous community and based on the assumption that this community shared a collective black consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

Henderson's second category, 'structure', derived from two basic sources - "Black speech and Black music".<sup>1</sup> Henderson argued that a poem should reflect certain black rituals, styles and cultural practices, with a "sympathetic knowledge of Black music

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<sup>64</sup> Stephen Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1973) 7. Here Henderson is referring to the community for whom the poet is writing.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>66</sup> To a degree, Henderson was right. The group of artists working within the black aesthetic ideologies were a community of people of like mind. However, one feels that perhaps the collective consciousness to which Henderson referred made an assumption about the black community as a whole rather than what in reality was the collective view of an exclusive group of black writers.

<sup>67</sup> Henderson, Understanding the New Black Poetry 31.



and Black speech and - let us be plain- the Black people who make the music and who make the speech”.<sup>1</sup> Henderson’s third category, ‘saturation’, was the central idea of his critical theory and it refers to the will to invoke blackness in one’s writing.

Henderson was preaching to the converted, as those who chose to be ‘saturated’, or chose to demonstrate their ‘saturation’, would inevitably write within that particular framework. Saturation was the unknown quantity that resided in the ontology, the very being, of blackness.<sup>1</sup> It was a “communication of Blackness based on an observed and intuited truth of the Black experience”.<sup>1</sup> An accumulation of shared historical and political experiences, saturation represented the experience of being black in a white world. Most importantly, in my view, saturation expressly acknowledged the essentialist ‘feeling’ of blackness that writers sought to articulate in their work. Saturation purported to be the same thing to all black people. What distinguished saturation from Henderson’s other two categories was that it was both a feature of black poetry and an expectation of the black audience; saturation was achieved by the interaction between a saturated work and an audience duly saturated.<sup>1</sup>

Saturation theory endorsed black writers’ innovations and encouraged their creative explorations in black music and the black vernacular. As such it was an important landmark in black American letters. The significance of this theory was noted in Houston Baker’s retrospective defence of Henderson, in his essay “Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature”:

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>71</sup> The role of the critic to determine the saturated was a political act that could have significant social and literary consequences, particularly in a movement where, as I have already argued, the political position of the critic was often more important than his/her critical analysis.

I think the romanticism of Henderson and his contemporaries - like that of romantics gone before who believed they were compelled to 'create a system or be enslav'd by another Man's' - lay in their metaphysical rebelliousness, their willingness to postulate a positive and distinctive category of existence ('Blackness') and then to read the universe in terms of that category. The predication of such a category was not only a radical political act designed to effect the liberation struggles of Afro-America, but also a bold critical act designed to break the interpretative monopoly on Afro-American expressive culture that had been held from time immemorial by a white, literary-critical establishment that set a single standard of criticism.<sup>1</sup>

As a respected academic, Henderson's "radical political act" in postulating the category blackness linked the black experience with contemporary intellectual discourse. He developed a nascent critical language for the experience of blackness by tapping into this very personal, 'feelings- orientated' poetic movement. However, the tools Henderson provided for understanding the New Black Poetry were limited. For instance, it was not possible to use Henderson's theory to analyse how different class or gender groups in black communities articulated (if at all) their blackness.

The confusion of his circular argument was compounded rather than explained by his later essay, "Saturation : Progress Report On A Theory of Black Poetry". This follow-up essay, written in 1973, was intended to offer a "systematic response" to some of the questions that *Understanding The New Black Poetry* had raised.<sup>1</sup> However, Henderson began the essay with the following citation from his original text, which only served to endorse the self-serving argument he had already proposed:

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<sup>72</sup> Houston Baker, "Generational Shifts and the Recent Criticism of Afro-American Literature," Black American Literature Forum Vol. 14 No. 1 (Spring 1980):9.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Henderson, "Saturation : Progress Report On A Theory of Black Poetry", Black World 24 (June 1975):4-17.

(The) perception of Blackness, then, means that Blackness is, or can be, a value in the creation, in the description and in the criticism of Black poetry. This is so . . . not because I say so, but because poets say so, musicians say so, either directly, or by implication.<sup>1</sup>

According to Henderson, those who perceived blackness could mould it for their own creative or critical ends. Without any evidence other than his assurance that he and a few others had explicitly or implicitly acknowledged the importance of blackness, Henderson proposed blackness as the basis for black intellectual and creative discourse but gave no justification for its literary value. The theory seemed exclusively intended for the community of Black Aesthetic artists who already invoked blackness in their work. Implicit in his essay was the suggestion that blackness endorsed the experiences of black people and celebrated the impalpable feeling of being black, but this was not, in itself, a literary judgement. In many ways saturation theory exemplified the problems of essentialist discourse. It was self-generating and self fulfilling; saturation was blackness and could only exist through blackness.

### **Application**

Despite the limitations that I have outlined, Henderson created a framework for black critics to celebrate black literature and proved the most significant contemporary theory of black poetry. By endorsing blackness through a critical framework, Henderson contributed to the development of rigorous academic discourse on black literary theory and criticism. Thus, notwithstanding my reservations, it is appropriate to apply this theory in a brief textual analysis, to two poems of that period. In order to avoid discussion of the well-known poet rather than the poem, I have deliberately chosen poems by poets who were not active in the Black

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.,4.



Aesthetic debate or in poetry performances and workshops. Mindful that Henderson described a saturated poem as only having to fulfil one of his categories, my analysis will concentrate on the levels of saturation according to Henderson's criteria. The first poem, "Black Henry", was written in 1967 by Tejumola Ologbani and published in *New Black Voices*.<sup>1</sup> The second, "The Race Question", was written by Naomi Madgett in 1965 and published in *The Black Poets*.

In "Black Henry", Henry's physiological blackness was the central image of the poem. The transformed behaviour and attitudes of the peripheral characters were charted by their changing relationship to Henry's blackness. "Black Henry" was the story of a community who learned to appreciate physical blackness and, at the same time, understand blackness as a metaphor for the philosophical, political and cultural ideals of black liberation.

### Black Henry

When Henry was a baby  
Folks'd tell his momma, "My, but  
Your son is BLACK  
his momma just smiled  
like she knew something they didn't

When Henry went to school  
It was always, "Git back  
Too big  
Too BLACK  
smut colored Henry  
but he still kinda  
held his head up tho'  
with the beginnins of a smile  
like he knew something  
they didn't

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<sup>75</sup> Tejumola Ologbani, "Black Henry", *New Black Voices* Abraham Chapman, ed. (New York: Mentor, 1972) 311-312.



vernacular.<sup>1</sup> There is also a poignant, tragic blues understatement as Henry faces ‘intra-black’ rejection.

Henderson’s third category, saturation, requires a degree of saturation from the audience to enable them to enjoy at least “subliminal recognition of the poetry’s message”.<sup>1</sup> Even though they might have understood what was at issue, the meaning of the poem could have differed significantly for the different social groups within the black community.<sup>1</sup>

In Naomi Madgett’s poem “The Race Question”, we see a very different approach to blackness. Where “Black Henry” was about a community coming to terms with their blackness, “The Race Question” is about one individual’s gaining strength from the privacy of her blackness. Madgett resists the unwelcome overtures of what now might be described as beneficiaries of the ‘race industry’ in her determination to cherish her blackness on her own terms.<sup>1</sup>

### The Race Question

*(For those whose fame depends on keeping The Problem a problem)*

Would it please you if I strung my tears  
In pearls for you to wear?  
Would you like a gift of my hands’ endless beating  
Against old bars?

This time I can forget my Otherness,  
Silence my drums of discontent awhile  
And listen to the stars.

Wait in the shadows if you choose.  
Stand alert to catch

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<sup>76</sup> Henderson, Understanding The New Black Poetry 35,37.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>78</sup> In a poetry movement that was mainly concerned with the experiences of working class, urban blacks, middle class black people, unaccustomed to the ‘ghetto experience’ would not necessarily have been saturated in the language and experiences of some of the poems.

<sup>79</sup> The difference between the individual approach of Madgett and the collective community approach in Ologbani’s poem is unusual. As I will discuss in Chapter Seven, the collective community approach was a strong feature of the fiction and poetry of black women writers, and less so in the poetry written by black men.



The thunder and first sprinkle of unrest  
Your insufficiency demands.

But you will find no comfort.  
I will not feed your hunger with my blood  
Nor crown your nakedness  
With jewels of my elegant pain.<sup>1</sup>

The title of the poem suggests that the poet is responding to a question, but the poem is not an answer; it is a statement of intent. Here, Madgett distances herself from attempts, by anyone, to use the pain of her 'otherness' for their own political purposes. Madgett worked like a trickster as she posed the framework for a 'protest poem' and then signified on that style with her rather restrained tone. The conceit in the poem was that she was 'signifying' on detractors of any hue. At first glance the poem does not divide neatly into Henderson's three areas of theme, structure and saturation. The theme concerns black people but it does not assume a community of shared black consciousness. Indeed, 'those whose fame depends on keeping the problem a problem,' could be black or white. The structure of the poem does not obviously reflect specific black rites or styles, although signifying was important in black cultural expression. There is an inversion of the tragic blues in that the intent of the poem is to avoid making black life a tragic blues for other people to hear. The third category, saturation as "intuited truth of the black experience", is evident in her choice to voice her feelings in the ways she does by hinting at her experiences. The whole point of the poem is that the reality of that experience, the tears from that 'elegant pain', would not be 'strung in pearls' to be worn by parasites feeding off the black race.

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<sup>80</sup> Naomi Madgett, "The Race Question", ed. Dudley Randall, The Black Poets. (New York: Bantam, 1971) 196.

However, if one applies Henderson's five criteria defining black poetry, Madgett's poem falls into most of his categories. She is a black woman poet whose themes were identifiably black. Madgett's ideological stance was against the prostituting of the emotional pain of black people. Her choice not to 'use' her experience is quite a different approach from that of many of her contemporaries, who chose to use their black experience as a persuasive polemic. Speaking from this confident position Madgett momentarily silenced her drums of discontent, swimming against the tide of the Black Aesthetic mandate that required not the silencing, but the loud beating of the poet's drum.<sup>1</sup>

"The Race Question" demonstrates that Henderson's theory was an interesting but limited starting point for a critical evaluation of the New Black Poetry. Saturation theory, when applied to both poems, illustrated similarities behind the ideas but also showed that as varied and diverse as the New Black Poetry was, Henderson's theory would not provide a paradigm through which all of these poems could be understood.

#### IV

Like black music which the New Black Poets embraced as "essentially expression of an attitude", the New Black Poetry Movement offered opportunities to a variety of poets to express their attitudes towards themselves and their experiences as black people in America. The Movement attempted to make poetry accessible to new poets and new audiences. There was a significant amount of criticism surrounding the New Black Poetry Movement, but the relationship between the critical suggestions and the actual poems was not straightforward. Since many of those critics were

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<sup>81</sup> Chapter Six considers those who did not fall neatly into the black aesthetic framework and Naomi Madgett's poetry is an example of this independent and individual response to black poetry.

themselves “New Black Poets”, there was a sense in which they were suggesting ways to approach their work, or perhaps providing a critical counter-narrative to explain and validate the creative and political intentions in their work. Even though the anthologies attempted to represent new, and lesser-known poets, there were rarely any of those poets –unfamiliar to a general readership at the time – who produced single volumes of their own work, whose work was discussed critically or were included in anthologies in the following years. Despite this, the New Black Poets whose work contributed to the canon are still referred to today: Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee and Ishmael Reed to name but a few. So, ultimately, in terms of the aims of the Black Arts Movement, black poetry was the most successful producer of creative works contributing to the black literary canon. Equally, the criticism surrounding this work contributed to the development of a body of black critical writing for the canon.



## Chapter Five

### **Building Black Institutions: The Development of Black Theatre.**

In turning the theater onto new streets - Black streets - Jones legitimized for many others the notion that a play could be validated by the reaction of Black people to it. What Jones had begun with his own work - in terms of an artistic and cultural forum distinctly oriented to community interest - developed into a notably larger and more ambitious experience for Black writers, particularly playwrights.<sup>1</sup>

While the New Black Poets were performing their poems in workshops and community programmes, the black dramatists were developing repertory theatre experiences for black audiences with a view to establishing black theatres within the black community. Creating theatre groups contributed to the Movement aim to create black-owned centres of artistic production by and for black people.

The black theatre movement of the 1960s and early 1970s represented a prolific period of black drama production. The development of black theatre, particularly in New York, was part of a special creative ‘buzz’ in black communities. Community inspired theatre and dance companies were springing up, mainly in New York, but also on the West Coast and in cities like Chicago and New Orleans. Virginia Johnson, an artist based in the Harlem School of Arts, said the period was about “making possibilities... a tremendous sense of inspiration”, as she emphasized: “with so much destruction it was great seeing something being built”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater", ed. Addison Gayle, The Black Aesthetic (New York: Anchor Books Edition, 1972) 303.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Johnson, Open University Harlem in the '60s (BBC2 20.10.99). Produced by Amanda Willett, 1998. A brief history of black theatre growth in the period between 1964 - 1974 shows how artists tried to create new opportunities for the black community. Mance Williams' Black Theatre In The 1960s And 1970s: A Historical-

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the development of black theatre and drama as part of the Black Arts Movement. I will provide a brief outline of the black theatre companies that emerged. Analysing plays by Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and Alice Childress, I will evaluate the themes of exclusion and self awareness identified by Clayton Riley in his essay “On Black Theater”:<sup>3</sup>

Black theater . . . has a unique degree of perceptive possibility and potential based on the fact of being peopled by a membership grown to adulthood with a clarity about America- Black and white – *developed on the one hand by an exclusion resulting in a forced awareness, and by a self-awareness proceeding from a pride in knowing intimately of survival and endurance.*<sup>4</sup> (Italics mine).

Before discussing the development of independent black theatre companies and exploring the themes of exclusion and self-awareness, I would like to refer to W.E.B DuBois’s views on black theatre in 1926 to place the aims of the 1960s black theatre groups into a wider historical context. Writing in *Crisis* in 1926, DuBois discussed the development of a theatre movement in Harlem. He used the Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre as an example of this movement and applauded their four fundamental principles:

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. *About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. *By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today.

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Critical Analysis Of The Movement (London :Greenwood Press, 1985) has been enormously helpful in identifying trends in black theatre. Chapter three of his book offers a detailed discussion of the theatre groups.

<sup>3</sup> In choosing plays by these three playwrights, I attempt a snapshot of black drama of the period and use these plays as examples of the drama of the time.

<sup>4</sup> Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater", 296-297.

3. *For us*. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. *Near us*. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people.<sup>5</sup>

## I

While most of the black theatre companies in the 1960s fulfilled the Krigwa principles, they had three additional, if broadly similar, aims. Firstly, that the theatre should be a black institution, controlled by black people contributing to the development of a black canon.<sup>6</sup> Most of the theatre companies had strict policies regarding independence and echoed the ideas of Harold Cruse, who felt that black people must have complete control of the finances, the artistic direction and the technical and administrative organs before a theatre could be called their own.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, through the content and form of the plays, theatre was to be a tool of rebellion, promoting black consciousness, as the critic Shelby Steele highlighted:

. . .the function of the New Black Theater is the development of a revolutionary and nationalistic consciousness, the creation of a Black frame of mind which ultimately redefines the world in the self-interest of Black people.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre", *Crisis* Vol.32 No.3 (July 1926):134. DuBois discussed these fundamental principles as the only way for a "folk-play movement of American Negroes" to be established. Having identified the aims, DuBois continued to discuss the difficulties the theatre movement would encounter in attempting to achieve its aims by keeping to its fundamental principles.

<sup>6</sup>This aim for control was implicit in the Harlem movement in the 1920s and 1930s, and an important part of DuBois's own political philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> Cruse was adamant about black control of finance, technical and artistic matters, but conceded that in certain circumstances he would 'make room for a mixed-cast play'. Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* 536.

<sup>8</sup>Shelby Steele, "Notes on Ritual in the New Black Theater", Errol Hill, ed. *The Theater Of Black Americans* (Vol.1) *Roots And Rituals: The Search For Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall 1980) 32.



Thirdly, the theatre was to be committed to audience development. Several of the companies saw audience creation as central to their artistic mission. Black people were not great theatre goers and audience figures were traditionally low. This was a source of consternation to the theatre director Roger Furman:

I have yet to see Black Theatre have lines around it . . . we have no choice but to do theatre for the people and my only plight is how to get the people into the theatre . . . it's just a handful of people and there's not enough Black Panthers or radicals to break the box office. <sup>9</sup>

These three aims augmented the four Krigwa principles and were largely reflected in the different companies that emerged.

In *The Black Aesthetic*, theatre critic Clayton Riley argued that black theatre was divided into two types: the theatre of Negro participation and the black theatre.<sup>10</sup> Rather like Houston Baker's integrationists, the theatre of Negro participation valued universal themes and was not committed to specific political goals. The directors aimed to develop trained theatre actors and technicians for whom they could later provide opportunities to work in stimulating performances. This type of theatre was committed to art that represented the experiences of black people and could be performed for the enjoyment of all members of the theatre - going public.

The Negro Ensemble Company, founded in 1967 by Robert Hooks and Douglas Turner Ward, was an example of the theatre of Negro participation.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Furman, *Black Theatre : A Periodical of the Black Theatre Movement* No. 5 (1971):5 .

<sup>10</sup> Clayton Riley, "On Black Theater", 296-297.

<sup>11</sup> For the title of the company, the choice of the word Negro, rather than Black or African at this particular time in black political history, was a clue to the company's own political stance: " At the time we got started, the word 'black' was just in its ascendancy and 'Negro' was being given an almost pejorative connotation. I felt that was wrong. The word 'Negro' has a long, honored history. I like 'black' – it makes a positive statement about what we are – but I loathed the posturing and attitudinizing that went with the total put-down of the word 'Negro'. Douglas Turner Ward, "Seasons with the Negro Ensemble Company", *New York Times* (2 March 1975), Section 2, Page 5.

NEC produced a wide repertoire of plays, some of which were about the black experience but not necessarily written by African Americans. Scathing about revolutionary plays as “bad plays”, the NEC was criticised for its integrationist stance - and more so after Ward wrote an article in the *New York Times*, “American Theatre: For Whites Only?”<sup>12</sup> In an eloquent argument stressing the need for a Black theatre for all America, Ward’s article caught the attention of the Ford Foundation, which later offered the NEC a grant. However, the NEC, conscious of its integrationist reputation, had a 1968-1969 season of black authored plays and in 1971-1972, a season called “Works in Progress” that showcased the works of young black playwrights.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding the company’s naturalistic style and obvious engagement with ‘black’ issues and concerns, contemporary black dramatists regarded the NEC as theatre of the black and white middle classes. Some of its administrators were white and, therefore, within the Crusean definition of Black theatre, the NEC failed as an independent body promoting black culture. The NEC also moved into different media, such as television, and continued into the early 1980s mainly thanks to its funding by the Ford Foundation. After their decision to be independent of such funding and some unsuccessful forays into television and film, the company folded.

Most of the new black theatre companies were in the black theatre category, described by Clayton Riley:

Black theater, as opposed to the theater of Negro participation, has the distinct advantage of being responsible for its own mistakes and triumphs. . . It is often an unsubtle, relentlessly candid theater, brutalized and brutalizing in the candor displayed, unsettling in the way it

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas Turner Ward, “American Theater: For Whites Only?” The New York Times (Sunday August 14, 1966) Section D/2 Page 2.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s 71.

exposes truths long submerged and disquieting information  
we have deliberately closeted away.<sup>14</sup>

Generally, each company had a cultural nationalist outlook and reflected the tenets of the Black Aesthetic. Most had one dynamic leader who tended to write, direct and perform. As with poetry and fiction, the playwrights were both the producers of the drama and the critics of their own and each others' work. They all conducted training for writers and performers, and workshop sessions that explored rituals within the black community.<sup>15</sup> Several companies focused on street theatre, which generated fewer overheads and could capture an audience more easily. Inevitably, however, there was a move away from street theatre, and dramatists developed initiatives to invite people off the streets and into the theatre space devoted to black arts. Working within the community was crucial; through black 'consciousness raising', the aim of the black dramatists was to promote shared aspirations by bringing together the critical and creative roles of performers and audience members.<sup>16</sup>

The Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School was opened by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal in 1965 in the centre of Harlem, with a huge parade of artists and musicians along 125<sup>th</sup> Street. Performers included Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, John Coltrane and Albert Ayler. It was partly funded by money raised after a benefit at the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>15</sup> Abiodun Jeyifous, "Black Critics on Black Theatre", *The Drama Review* Vol. 18 No.3 (September 1974):41. With a very strict approach to their discipline, the critic Abiodun Jeyifous suggests, the dramatists were almost equally ritualistic in the way they organized their work:

"As they wrote manifestos and issued critical broadsides, they *built* functioning and disciplined groups, wrote plays, prodigiously created improvised enactments ("rituals"), and experimented ceaselessly with new forms, new ideas. Significantly, their best interpreters (such as Larry Neal and Clayton Riley) were partisans intimately connected with them by a commonality of aspirations and ideological persuasion, thereby proving, in the face of the rigorously fragmented, specialized separation of critical and creative tasks in the American theatre, that both functions are, in the best of conditions, ultimately inseparable."

<sup>16</sup> This blending of those two roles was a feature of the Black Aesthetic that has been discussed in earlier chapters.



Village Gate on 28<sup>th</sup> March in 1965 and supported by HARYOU funding.<sup>17</sup> The BART/S sent out floats into communities, presenting music, drama, fine arts and poetry workshops. However, it was closed in 1966 after its funders withdrew and the police found weapons in the building. There were great expectations for this spontaneous theatre movement, which was over-burdened with the hopes and aspirations of the artistic, creative and cultural communities of Harlem and New York. Harold Cruse suggested that the “Black Arts Theater was not a failure in achievement, so much as a failure in its inability to deal with what had been achieved”.<sup>18</sup> The spontaneity of the BART/S was both its success and its failure. In this burgeoning arts movement, there was no rigid ideological focus and little planning or prioritising of aims. With scant opportunity for links between the theatre movement and funding institutions, BART/S collapsed. Baraka moved the operation to New Jersey, where he set up Spirit House and widened the focus of their artistic interests beyond theatre.

In 1966 the Afro-American Studio was formed by Ernie McClintock. Located in the heart of Harlem’s black community, it was committed to producing work created by black people. The Afro-American Studio had a system of actor training that stressed observation and the study of black life-styles. This was to enhance the actors’ own personal experiences and thus their performances. It successfully outgrew its first permanent home in Harlem and, by 1971, was increasing the number of productions it was able to put on. With funding from a variety of local and national, public and non-

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<sup>17</sup> The HARYOU Act was part of Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” programme set up after the 1964 riots. Although these funds were dedicated to the arts and directly linked to black communities, purists could argue that the acceptance of these monies meant BART/S did not comply with Cruse’s conditions.

<sup>18</sup>Cruse, The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual 539. Part VI, “Black Arts Theater-New Dialogue with the Lost Black Generation”, 533-543, provides a detailed examination of the Black Arts Repertory Theater.

public sources, the Afro-American Studio developed the skills of several artists who later left in order to pursue their own work.

Inspired in part by the work of Ernie McClintock, The National Black Theatre was founded in 1968 by Barbara Ann Teer, to educate black people about themselves and their culture. Teer was particularly concerned to develop a base of community support and was committed to ritualistic black theatre forms. The National Black Theater has been located on Lenox Avenue (Malcolm X Boulevard) since 1968 and still performs for local audiences.

Finally, the New Lafayette Theater, founded by Robert McBeth and Adam Miller in 1966, was also based in Harlem. Like the other theatre groups, New Lafayette's aim was to bring black artists and national and international black communities into closer contact. This company was later joined by Ed Bullins and became known for its experimental and revolutionary theatre:

We don't want to have a higher form of white art in black-face. We are working towards something entirely different and new that encompasses the sound and spirit of Black people, and that represents the whole experience of our being here in this oppressive land.<sup>19</sup>

The experimental nature of Bullins' work and his use of ritual concerned some of the NLT's members. However, the commitment to such work continued until the New Lafayette Theater was producing almost exclusively Bullins' plays. By 1972 the influence of Bullins had increased, his over-emphasis on ritual and the exclusivity of the experimental form continued to clash with the ideas of his partners and the NLT

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<sup>19</sup> Ed Bullins, in an interview with Marvin X, New Plays from the Theater (New York: Bantam, 1969) xii.

folded. Bullins continued to write drama and committed himself to writing a cycle of twenty plays about the lives of African Americans between 1900-1999.

It is difficult to quantify the exact number of theatre groups that sprang up in the 1960s as there were many shifts and mergers and small, grass roots organisations formed for specific events. Although my overview concentrates on New York, there were several other theatre companies in black communities across America. The Free Southern Theater in New Orleans was an excellent example of a theatre company successfully moving from a Civil Rights to a Black Nationalist agenda. Other notably successful companies were Concept-East in Detroit and Kuumba in Chicago. The companies started out with enthusiasm, political commitment, time-limited funding and, quite often, under the leadership of a strong personality. Very few companies began with a strong audience or financial base and most were dependent on revenue income that could only come through the development of committed audiences. There were capital resource difficulties for all of the companies as lighting, properties and set design were required. Added to that was the limited number of skilled practitioners able to undertake the technical requirements of the work. Most of the companies learned on the job and were dependent on sporadic funding and fund-raising opportunities.

In 1971, some of the theatre groups decided to establish a guild of theatre arts. The Black Theatre Alliance was formed as an umbrella organization committed to the main principles that governed the managerial and creative work of the majority of the black theatre companies. Two years later, its first newsletter stated its purpose to be:



a collective to solve common problems, to share information and resources and to create an instrument to validate Black Theatres as community institutions.<sup>20</sup>

“AuDelCo” (The Audience Development Company) was also established to improve participation from those who came to see the plays. The formation of these alliances was a significant achievement that placed a much needed focus on black theatre, both in terms of what was produced and how it was received.

In the following section, I will elaborate on the themes of exclusion (leading to forced awareness) and self-awareness (resulting from black pride) by referring to specific plays.

## II

The themes of exclusion and self-awareness frequently recurred in black dramatic work of that time.<sup>21</sup> Exclusion dealt with the idea of alienation from the dominant white culture and was clearly recognisable in terms of both plot and character. This exclusion would result in a forced awareness and ultimately recognition of self. Consequently, a sense of black pride would emerge and true self-

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<sup>20</sup> Black Theater Alliance Newsletter No.1 (Schomburg Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York):1. ed. Mance Williams, Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s 41.

More specific goals included the development of a wider audience base, the establishment of a clearinghouse for information related to the theatre, the implementation of new funding sources and new programs, the promotion of member companies, and the provision of low-cost graphics and technical equipment. Also included was a provision that provided touring assistance and information. At the time the first newsletter was published, there were 16 member companies, all based in the New York City area.

<sup>21</sup> Lonne Elder's *Ceremonies in Old Dark Men* conveyed the “groping heroism of ordinary but persecuted people”. In William Wellington Mackey's *Requiem for Brother X: A Homage to Malcolm X*, the play's central theme celebrated the fact that black people, “through supreme acts of self-revaluation (sic) and efforts of the will, rescue themselves from a malignant history, and through their own energy and genius...recover”. William Mackey, ed. William Couch, Jr. New Black Playwrights (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) xxii. The themes of exclusion and self awareness were particularly notable in plays in homage to Malcolm X such as LeRoi Jones' *The Death of Malcolm X* and N.R. Davidson's *El Hajj Malik*. ed. Bullins, New Plays from The Theatre (New York: Bantam, 1969).

awareness be achieved. Dealing with the forced awareness of exclusion from white society, black dramatists wanted to explicitly portray the effects of that marginalisation in the relationships between black and white people and within black communities.

Baraka's *A Black Mass* was first performed at Procter's Theater in Newark in 1966 with music by Sun Ra's Arkestra. The play is science fiction and loosely tells Elijah Muhammad's creation myth about Yacub, the black scientist who "created" the white race. The play never examines the basis and central premise of the Yacub myth nor its relevance to a black community moving towards self-affirmation. Baraka's Yacub enters "one solution in the other" and creates "the new substance of life". He produces a figure, "Absolutely cold white with red lizard-devil mask which covers the whole head", who then terrorised and killed black people.<sup>22</sup> Sun Ra's Arkestra performed live during the play and created sounds in response to the actors' performances:

The instrumentalists worked their music in among the actors' lines, calling and responding to them, phrasing and inflecting their parts like human voices. At one point the actors and musicians joined together to hum "The Satellites Are Spinning." The play mixed science fiction and Muslim mythology, and as Larry Neal (echoing Sun Ra) suggested, it led the audience to "understand that all history is someone's version of mythology."<sup>23</sup>

With the music supplied by Sun Ra's Arkestra, *A Black Mass* was a creative juxtaposition of science and the ritual of verbal and musical antiphony. The play crudely focused on alien behaviour to illustrate the alienation of black people from

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<sup>22</sup> LeRoi Jones, "A Black Mass", *4 Black Revolutionary Plays* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1969) 29.

<sup>23</sup> John Szwed, *Space is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra* (London: Payback, 1997) 211-212.



white people and the effect of that alienation, or exclusion, on their awareness of their position as black people in white society.

Baraka was respected by fellow artists because of the revolutionary nature of his work. Part of his credibility came from his involvement in front line rebellion and his desire to confront and reveal political and social concerns through drama.<sup>24</sup>

As an artistic and political leader on the East Coast, [Baraka] has given dramatic form to scenes that show the black man triumphing over a fallen white man. No criticism can minimise the emotional effect of such scenes upon young black people who thrill to seeing, perhaps for the first time in their lives, strong black men triumphing over the white. . . What they are perceiving is that a race stereotyped as cowardly has finally chosen to fight, and is winning.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly during this period of his career, Baraka was openly scathing in his comments about white people. Many of his audiences wanted to see this attitude on stage and were delighted by the use of derogatory language and images of white

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<sup>24</sup> "I joined and helped create organizations, political and cultural, to work at the social transformation I sought. I wrote poetry and essays and plays and stories towards this end as well. It was, and I am still certain of this, part of the same work.

In organization, in finding mutual commitment, in the actual works, there is the materialization of the ideas. In Newark, with Spirit House, or the Committee for Unified Newark or the Congress of African People or the Revolutionary Communist League (MLM) it was the same thrust, and this information is literary as well. That is, I write from my own deepest feelings, and the political forms of my life, whether the Black Power Conference or National Black Assembly or African Liberation Support Committee, are at least as cogent and authentic as writing about or inspired by it!!" Amiri Baraka, "Preface to the Reader", 1990, William J. Harris, ed. The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991) xii-xiii.

"Jones has focused his vision on himself and his life with such intensity and honesty that he has made himself a symbol of America's deepest troubles." Henry S. Resnick, "Brave New Words", Saturday Review (Dec.9, 1967): 287. Although Resnick claimed Jones made himself a symbol of America's troubles, it is fair to say that, like most people in leadership roles, Jones' position was a mixture of self-publicity, personal zeal, political and cultural anger and a real need to express himself in a particular way. That he forged his identity into this expression says more about a community wanting to hear his message than the quality of the message itself and the impact of the messenger.

<sup>25</sup> Darwin T. Turner, ed. An Anthology: Black Drama in America Second Edition (Washington D.C. : Howard University Press, 1994) 36. In an interview with John O'Brien, the poet Owen Dodson paid tribute to Baraka's drama:

"Well, I think that the strength and power of a work like Jones' *Dutchman* is tremendous. He had a drama there, he knew about conflict, knew about all the things that were important, that make drama work. So I have a great respect for what he has written in drama but not for what he has written in poetry". Owen Dodson, John O'Brien, ed. Interviews with Black Writers (New York: Liveright, 1973) 57.



people. In *The Toilet*, which takes place in a high school lavatory, a fight takes place between black Ray and white James and others join the fray. When James is punched unconscious, Ray returns to hold James in his arms. The audiences responded positively to the crude images on the stage and to the symbolism of the title. Thus it was the fight, rather than Ray's return to cradle James's head, that was the most enduring scene in the play. What brought many audiences to the theatre was the anticipation of the ritual degradation of white people through domestic scenes in which black men triumphed. The impact of such scenes on stage, particularly in the short, political plays, was very attractive, especially to young audiences and perhaps, was gratifying to the dramatists. However, Harold Cruse argued that Baraka erroneously expected the impact of such images to make significant social change:

Jones is confusing an art method with a social method - a method of social change. It is *not* the content of plays (Jones' or anybody else's) that changes the world. On the contrary, it is a world changed (or in the process thereof) by a social method that also changes the contents of plays. Mr. Jones, when he discusses the content of revolutionary theater, thinks this content alone has the power to change society. But nothing is further from the truth...(Jones is) long on intense ideology, but very short on structural conceptions of what constitutes revolutionary or reformist social change under capitalistic conditions.<sup>26</sup>

In a review article in the journal *Soulbook*, Langston Hughes, using the provocative title "That Boy LeRoi," also challenged Baraka's work. He rejected the idea that the structure or the impact of Baraka's work was uplifting to the race or contributing to the future of black theatre and dismissed his plays as "basic filth":

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<sup>26</sup>Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* 531. If one accepts William Harris's four stage organization of Amiri Baraka's intellectual life, then the production of Baraka's major dramatic pieces appeared mainly during the Transitional period (1963-1965) and the Black Nationalist period (1965-1974). The points raised by Cruse are examined by Baraka more fully in the Third World Marxist period after 1974.

It is the fashion for young authors of Negro plays nowadays to make their heroes all villains of the darkest hue, or crazy, living in crazy houses. The whites are for the most part villains or neurotics, too, so I gather that contemporary Negro playwrights do not like anybody any more -- neither their stage characters, their audience, their mothers, nor themselves. For poetry in the theater, some of them substitute bad language, obscenities of the foulest sort, and basic filth which seemingly is intended to evoke the sickest of reactions in an audience. . . Both "The Toilet" and "The Slave" may be taken as serious exercises in masochism and sadism, fully (*sic*) of bloody kicks. . .<sup>27</sup>

The plays were angry but the "basic filth" referred to an exploration of some of the baser degradations of black urban living. Hughes contends that Baraka and other Black Arts writers portray a black community in the grip of a hopeless and powerful lethargy. It is almost a defeatist theatre, he argues, particularly the naturalistic drama that portrays black people in situations of powerlessness and resignation, creating a blues song for black theatre audiences. Black dramatists had gained the confidence to be derogatory, rude and abusive of white people and crude and explicit about urban black life. Through their work they began to reveal what they regarded as the realities of black life, often at their most sordid and degraded.

Although Baraka has been both praised and criticised for his revolutionary work and, particularly in plays like *The Slave* and *The Toilet*, for his aggressive

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<sup>27</sup> Langston Hughes, "That Boy LeRoi", *Soulbook* (Spring 1965):1,111,112. With an inflammatory title, Langston Hughes 'plays the dozens' on LeRoi Jones by his own use of the very vernacular that Jones attempts to appropriate. By 'calling him outside his name' and placing his boyhood at the feet of the artistic elders, both black and white, Hughes was pulling rank across cultural and artistic fronts. Thus Jones, in disrespecting his elders, was seen as crossing boundaries that would only be abused by an immature and ignorant young boy. Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" inspired writers like Baraka and Neal to the extent that they included his work in their anthology *Black Fire*. However, he was dismissed as anti-revolutionary, when he found it difficult to endorse some of the Black Arts Movement's plays. The editor of *Soulbook*, Bobb Hamilton, a contemporary of Jones', responded to Hughes' 'put-down':

"If LeRoi spouts verbal excrement, consider the fact that this culture is mired in manure, and that the role of the artist is to hold up a lens so that his society might better see itself. If Langston wants to see a play that pleases his masters - and I am sure he does, let him write one of his own."



dismissal of white people, his plays were more than just an attack on white society. Baraka explored psychological weaknesses in characters and did not assume that all black people were good and all whites bad. His work, therefore, was more sophisticated than his wildly applauding young audiences fully appreciated. The complexities in his one-act play *Dutchman*, for instance, challenged white middle class morality and the aridity of the lives of black people who aspired to such values.

It was LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman* that radically reordered the internal structure of black theatre, first of all by opening up its linguistic range and breaking with the social realism which dominated the forties and fifties, and second (more important and in spite of vague allusions to the theater of Artaud and the absurdists) through the decidedly utilitarian strategy which informs the play - it is implicitly but very clearly addressed to the radical sector of black socio-political consciousness.<sup>28</sup>

The two main characters, a black man called Clay and a white woman called Lulu, enter into a playful, flirtatious dialogue while travelling on a subway train. Lulu, who makes eye contact with Clay on entering the train, invites him to take an apple from a bag of apples she is carrying. The link to Adam and Eve continues into the second scene. As Lulu and Clay benefit from the fruit of knowledge,<sup>29</sup> the banter gets more aggressive and accusatory and Lulu's behavior becomes more manic as the train fills with people. Lulu calls Clay an Uncle Tom; and as her anger builds, Clay's attempts to restrain her rouses other passengers. In anger, Clay hits a passenger and slaps Lulu twice. Clay stops and begins to collect his things, ready to leave the train. Lulu stabs him twice. The other passengers do as Lulu tells them and drag Clay's body out of

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<sup>28</sup> Larry Neal, "Into Nationalism, Out of Parochialism", *Performance* 2 (1972):35.

<sup>29</sup> In the biblical story of Adam and Eve, Eve disobeys God and eats the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge.



the carriage. Another young black man enters the train and he and Lulu exchange glances.

Through the sparring of his two main protagonists, Baraka raises a variety of questions about class, gender relations and racial stereotypes. At first glance, Jones makes predictable digs at white people. Lulu, who continually suggests that she knew Clay or his type, keeps making assertions that she would soon after dismiss. At one point when she says, "I lie a lot. It helps me control the world", <sup>30</sup> Baraka is making a very deliberate point about how white people deal with black people in society. Later on, Clay indignantly dismisses the actions of well-meaning middle class whites:

They say, "I love Bessie Smith." And don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, "Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass." ...Charlie Parker? Charlie Parker. All the hip white boys scream for Bird. And Bird saying, "Up your ass, feeble-minded ofay! Up your ass."<sup>31</sup>

Through Clay, Baraka is scathing about the petit-bourgeois affectations of language that go along with these well-meaning, white middle-class intentions. However, using the Adam and Eve motif, Baraka depicts a black man who, despite his education and apparent "nous", is putty, or indeed clay, in the hands of the fruit sharing Lulu. There is little opportunity for the characters to develop outside their tight racial and social confines, as both Lulu and Clay are restricted by the weight of their history and their mutual expectations. On the one hand, *Dutchman* is a pessimistic confirmation that shows people fixed in certain cultural modes. On the other hand, the play reveals that, notwithstanding our assumptions about others, some of the things we most despise in our enemies are the things we see in ourselves. Thus in *Dutchman*,

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<sup>30</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Dutchman and The Slave* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1964) 9.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 34,35.

the middle-class pretensions that Lulu teases Clay about, are the very things that she as a white liberal has attempted to dismiss in her own life. Finally, the confidence that Clay develops as a result of his education and middle-class values makes it possible for him to enter into light-hearted banter with a strange white woman on a subway train. It is the same ease that allows him to become embroiled in the conversation that occasions his own death.

Similarly to Baraka, Ed Bullins, despite his preoccupation with “filth and obscenity and displaying it to the masses”<sup>32</sup> also created innovative experimental work. *The Theme is Blackness* is an intriguing piece of experimental ritualistic theatre with the following setting, dialogue and stage directions:

### **THE THEME IS BLACKNESS<sup>33</sup>**

**(A one- act play to be given before predominantly white audiences)**

**SPEAKER**

The theme of our drama tonight will be Blackness. Within Blackness One may discover all the self-illuminating universes in creation.

And now BLACKNESS-

*(Lights go out for twenty minutes.*

*Lights up)*

**SPEAKER**

Will blackness please step out and take a curtain call?

*(Lights out)*

**BLACKNESS**

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<sup>32</sup> Ed Bullins, Street Sounds: Dialogues with Black Experience 1970 See note 37.

<sup>33</sup> Ed Bullins, The Theme is Blackness 84. The collection included plays that had been written and performed from the late 1960s.

The “predominantly white” audience is invited to sit in darkness and experience blackness while music is being played in the background.<sup>34</sup> The title, *The Theme is Blackness*, was Bullins’ explanation and his argument. His simplistic reduction of blackness to absence of light is only compounded by his arrogance in expecting people to sit in darkness and his assumption that darkness is the same as blackness. One wonders how a black audience could be enriched or enlightened, by Bullins’ play. For a white audience, towards whom Bullins’ work was directed, sitting in darkness for self-illumination would perhaps offer an opportunity to sit quietly and think, but their thoughts could be about anything and not in any way related to themselves or the nature and feeling of blackness. Similar to Expressionist theatre of early twentieth century Germany, the impact of *The Theme is Blackness* is in its conception rather than its execution. Perhaps as a counter-movement, Bullins was trying to invert the function of the theatrical experience and its use of lights, setting and language as a communication tool.<sup>35</sup> Bullins was committed to portraying black experiences and forcing black and white people to understand what it means to be black. Thus, Bullins insisted on always reminding black people about being black and the effects of exclusion on the way ordinary black people fare in white society.

Ed Bullins, in his approach to the theme of exclusion, depicted black people moving away from direct subordination by white society to experiencing subordination from their own black communities through the effects of poverty and hopelessness. In an overview of these plays as a ‘type’, C.W.E. Bigsby, writing in 1980, listed the themes:

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<sup>34</sup> “Following the basic dramatic structure of the piece, music was later arranged and played by Chebo Evans’ Third World Three Black Music trio.” Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> It was perhaps because of the dominance of this kind of experimental work that there was such disagreement about Bullins’ work.



. . these plays repeatedly stress the impossibility of breaking away, the inevitable loss of innocence, the destruction of lyricism, and the collapse of hopes which are simply transposed into the immediate relief of sex, alcohol, drugs, religion and a violent action which gives the illusion of accomplishment.<sup>36</sup>

Ed Bullins' early plays (written in the 1960s and set a decade earlier), *Clara's Ole Man* and *In the Wine Time* for instance, dealt with black men and women as victims in hopeless situations. *Clara's Ole Man* is about 18 year old Clara, who invites "Ivy-League" Jack to visit her when her "ole man" will not be home. The play depicts black-on-black brutality and confusion and dysfunction in black family life. *In the Wine Time* portrays the hopelessness of Cliff and Lou, who live with Lou's 15 year old nephew, Ray. When Ray stabs another teenager, Cliff takes the blame so that Ray can avoid going to jail. Many of Bullins' plays are immersed in the most anguished experiences of black life and he constructs an almost relentless portrayal of damaging black experiences.

These themes were a source of consternation to several contemporary writers. In an interview with John O'Brien, the poet Owen Dodson, who had already expressed concerns at the quality of the New Black Poetry, discussed the dangers of an arts movement that fed its audience solely on a diet of degradation and powerlessness:

Ed Bullins. . . a man who is presenting or thinks he is presenting a whole race and that race is doing nothing but cursing, fucking, and farting. And that's what he writes about. I don't see any spire [*sic*] of meaning, any richness

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<sup>36</sup> C.W.E. Bisgby, *The Second Black Renaissance* (London: Greenwood Press, 1980) 250.

of hope. . .What he is doing is feeding garbage to people when that's what they've been brought up on.<sup>37</sup>

For Bullins, the balance between depicting the realities of black life and demonstrating opportunities for black people was tipped by his experiences. . .

...when the shit went down under the palms on 103<sup>rd</sup> & Central, there were those of us standing upon a small stage, some miles north of Chief Parker, looking up into bewildered, mostly white faces, explaining why “Clara’s Ole Man” might give them some insight as to why the City of Angels was burning that night. And they pleaded ignorance of not understanding the play or why Black people were ready to destroy everything that they cherished...Those were dramatic times that we Black-theater creators set about dramatizing. Black theater then was to be a revolutionary instrument of change...<sup>38</sup>

Bullins’ plays, as ways of explaining black anger, dealt with black people’s exclusion from the mainstream. Despite his belief that black theatre was a harbinger of revolution, Bullins did not attempt to refute white perceptions of black people nor did he make suggestions about how black people’s lives could be changed. His plays were not so much an instrument of revolutionary change as a portrayal of the damaging effects of the status quo. Thus, Bullins illustrated the forced awareness of exclusion but provided no means to link black people to self-awareness through a pride in themselves as black people.

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<sup>37</sup> Owen Dodson, John O'Brien, ed. Interviews with Black Writers 58.

In a later play Bullins parodied the view expressed by critics like Owen Dodson: “You’re not fulfilling any of the needs of the people that I can see. Look at what you’re doing to yourself and the negative images of the race you create. I wasn’t raised that way. Nobody I knew was. We were refined man. And here you are, at this late date, creating profanity, filth and obscenity and displaying it to the masses, the black people you so hypocritically harp about forever into the future as art and culture.” Street Sounds: Dialogues with Black Experience 1970

<sup>38</sup> Ed Bullins, The Theme is Blackness 6,7.

It was in the work of Alice Childress that this self-awareness was achieved. Set during a Harlem riot, Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) was a domestic drama that reflected black aspiration in "dramatic times". Childress also raised issues regarding the perception of black womanhood and the importance of self-love.<sup>39</sup> Rather than the "collapse of hopes", to which Bigsby had referred, *Wine in the Wilderness* encouraged the audience to look to their own community for an example of hope and to critically examine its examples of self-delusion and snobbery. The play demonstrated that it was often in the uneducated and unsophisticated man or woman that the true value of black experience was best expressed.

The main character, Bill, is a bourgeois black man escaping suburbia. He moves to Harlem to continue his successful career as a fine artist. He is painting a triptych entitled *Wine in the Wilderness*, which depicts examples of black womanhood. Having painted black girlhood to represent innocence and "mother Africa, regal black womanhood in her noblest form", he has one canvas to complete.<sup>40</sup> Bill is looking for a model for the third canvas that represents a black woman as

"far from my African queen as a woman can get and still be female, she's as close to the bottom as you can get without crackin' up...she's ignorant, unfeminine, coarse, rude...vulgar... a poor, dumb chick that's had her behind kicked until it's numb... and the sad part is... she ain't together, you know,...there's no hope for her."<sup>41</sup>

His friends include Cynthia, a social worker, proud of her "natural hair", who feels that she is a 'soul sister', although she has an intellectual rather than an

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<sup>39</sup> That Alice Childress explored issues of self-affirmation, rather than black people's relationships with white society, links her work to that of black women poets and fiction writers that I discuss in Chapter Seven.

<sup>40</sup> Alice Childress, *Wine in the Wilderness* Black Theater U.S.A: Forty-five Plays by Black Americans 1874-1974 James V. Hatch, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1974) 740.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



emotional grasp of black issues. Her partner Sonny Man's blackness is, like Cynthia's, expressed through quite superficial things such as addressing black people as either 'brother' or 'sister'. During the riot, Cynthia and Sonny-Man meet a young woman, "Tommy", who they take to meet Bill, since they feel she is a perfect model for the third part of his triptych. As the play unfolds, it is clear that Tommy is uneducated but has an astute awareness of herself as a black woman. She quickly understands her place in the triptych from the exchanges between the so-called revolutionary artist and his friends. As these characters reveal their shallowness, Tommy's own veracity and integrity are enhanced. This play represents a movement away from subordination to independence. In the conversation between the characters we see Tommy's forced exclusion from white society through her poverty and limited educational opportunities. We also see her alienation from her blackness; her straightened wig and heavily made-up face contrasts with Cynthia's 'natural' and 'African' outfit. Yet, as her character develops, Tommy, despite her wig and make-up, is portrayed as a perceptive, "conscious" black woman who quickly sees through the emptiness of the revolutionary rhetoric spouted by Bill, Cynthia and Sonny-Man. Finally, Tommy takes her place at the centre of the triptych, not representing a "poor dumb chick" but the "African queen", filling the second part of the triptych. In this moment we see the self-affirmation of a black woman proudly aware of her blackness and her identity within her culture.

The notion of exclusion encouraged black dramatists to regard their own communities as muse and model. The playwright Ronald Milner's suggestion that black artists should develop an understanding of the forms and mythologies of their people reflected the views of most of his peers:

As black artists we must go home in every way; go where it is we most feel indigenous and organic and, therefore, a natural observer and commentator. . . The communities, the people, can sustain, assist, and inspire us to essential and brilliant levels in our new black theater, our new visions. But only if we assist and inspire them to the same levels in the new black theater of their living, to new visions of their lives.<sup>42</sup>

Milner placed a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the community to provide a listening and critical ear. Equally he looked to the community to sustain black artists and participate in the dramatization of their artistic visions. In a later essay, "The Aesthetic of Modern Black Drama: From Mimesis to Methexis", Kimberley Benston commented on Milner's views which substantiated his own ideas of black theatre as a ritualistic nurturing of an audience:

Milner's thesis exploits the pre-established symbiosis between Black audience and Black musician. He seeks thereby to free the Afro-American theatre from the shackles of the written narrative, to replace communication with manifestation. Re-presenting encoded modes of thinking as inscribed into a written script gives way here to improvisational action and vocality. The perspectival relationship (and barrier) between seer and seen that is essential to traditional drama is dissolved into the immediacy of ritual flux. *The dramatic event thus posited is one in which Black people can experience communal identity and solidarity during the theatrical happening itself.* (Italics mine)<sup>43</sup>

For Benston, the space between the drama and the audience would be enhanced by a dissolution of the seer/seen dichotomy. The audience response to what is performed would become embodied in the dramatic experience.

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<sup>42</sup> Ronald Milner, "Black Theater - Go Home!" Addison Gayle, ed. The Black Aesthetic 293-294.

<sup>43</sup> Kimberly W. Benston, "The Aesthetic of Modern Black Drama: From Mimesis to Methexis" Errol Hill, ed. The Theater of Black Americans Vol. 1 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Inc., 1980) 62.

Spiritually and technically, this movement is one from *mimesis*, or representation of an action, to *methaxis*, or communal 'helping-out' of the action by all assembled. It is a process that could be described alternatively as a shift from drama - the spectacle observed - to ritual - the event which dissolves traditional divisions between actor and spectator, between self and other. Through this process, the Black beholder is theoretically transformed from a detached individual whose private consciousness the playwright sought to reform, to a participatory member of tribal or, in this case, national ceremony which affirms a shared vision. <sup>44</sup>

The replacement of this 'perspectival relationship' would need to be grounded in traditions of antiphony and black intra-community dialogue. The ritual flux to which Benston referred was not a state of constant change or unmanaged transitions; it was a process of interactive communication between artists and their audiences. In fact, the idea of grass roots portrayal and involvement was critical. Black dramatists were committed to audience development to promote the principle of the black community as its own voice and its own audience. <sup>45</sup>

The demand for this kind of interaction had, in part, been influenced by the success that black music had had in Black Arts. Larry Neal, in his essay "Into Nationalism, Out of Parochialism", posited the view that

The nationalist ideology, with its philosophical trappings, when added to this stress on musical structure, was responsible for the development of new ritual forms, while

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>45</sup> The importance of the audience as inspiration was discussed by the young critic Jeff Donaldson in the journal Black Dialogue: "Our people are our standard for excellence. We strive for images inspired by African people/experience and images which African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience." Jeff Donaldson, Africobra 1 "10 in Search of a Nation" Black Dialogue Vol. IV No.2 (Spring 1970): 18.



the overly political and social aspect of black thinking led to a parallel reliance on naturalistic forms.<sup>46</sup>

Neal's link between musical structure, nationalist ideology and black drama represented an example of what he wanted to achieve rather than what was actually happening within the forms of black drama. Like many artists, Neal's ambition for drama was to effect the kind of response that was produced by a jazz solo, a James Brown scream or the weighty conviction of Mahalia Jackson.<sup>47</sup> The fundamental nationalist ideology to which Neal referred declared that black people constituted a nation within America. However, the "philosophical trappings" of the nationalist ideology had its own extremes that went from believing that black people should have their own separate but equal communities in America, to believing that a Pan-Africanist repatriation was a viable option for black people in America. Neal did not explain or give examples of how nationalism affected the form of ritual drama, neither did his analysis consider the links between ritual and naturalistic drama.

As an expression of black people moving from exclusion to self-awareness, the drama produced in the 1960s was mainly that of exclusion. Perhaps, as Ed Bullins argued, in the dramatic exchange of the 1960s, black writers had to be committed to showing how black people currently felt about living in white America before they could present the counter-movement of self-awareness that the celebration of their blackness would ultimately demand.

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<sup>46</sup> Larry Neal, "Into Nationalism, Out of Parochialism", 35, 36, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Larry Neal discussed this in his essay "And Shine Swam On", Addison Gayle, ed. The Black Aesthetic (New York: Anchor, 1971).

The real structures the artists were able to create were institutional. The Krigwa principles of theatre being “about us, by us, for us and near us”, were strengthened by the black theatre principles of black institutional control, theatre as a tool of rebellion and audience development. Although AuDelCo was established to increase the numbers of black people attending black theatre performances, their only successes were reported anecdotally. However, the development of black theatres in the black community raised the profile of drama as part of the range of cultural expressions within black communities.

## Chapter Six

### **“When State Magicians Fail, Unofficial Magicians become Stronger”:Dissent and Aesthetic Variations.**

#### **I**

In the Seventies there's going to be a rich flowering of Black genius, unlike anything that has been seen before. There are young writers coming up who are not so much interested in frightening the Man, meaning Mr. Charley, but in expressing themselves deeply as human beings- writers like *Ishmael Reed* and Cecil Brown and Paul Lofty and William Anderson- writers interested in bringing out the enormous variety of feeling and thought in the Black community, which you weren't allowed to see in the Sixties when Black Anger was the only thing fashionable.<sup>1</sup>(Italics mine)

To bring out the “variety of feeling and thought in the Black community” some artists, like Amiri Baraka, were committed to the Black Aesthetic, which offered a “definite set of aesthetic, moral, etc, judgments based quite literally on a specifically indigenous emotional and psychological response”.<sup>2</sup> Others, like Ishmael Reed, for instance, pointed out that the word “black” was not part of the “critical vocabulary of art”. He continued: “I don't think it's a term which tells you very much about art of any kind. Traditions exist, yes”.<sup>3</sup>

Reginald Martin, in *Ishmael Reed and the Black Aesthetic Critics*, argued that the Black Aesthetic was not an “attempt to break the spirit but to mold it for optimum positive social, political self-awareness and effect”.<sup>4</sup> However, while for

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<sup>1</sup> Al Young, “Interview: *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*”, (May 1970) ed. Abraham Chapman, *New Black Voices* (New York: Mentor, 1972) 32.

<sup>2</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Home:Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966) 31.

<sup>3</sup> John Domini, “A Conversation with Ishmael Reed”, *American Poetry Review* Vol.7 No.1 (Jan-Feb, 1978) 34.

<sup>4</sup> Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988) 47.



some, this moulding of the spirit offered a valuable aesthetic code, for others, the Black Aesthetic was a constraint on their creativity.

The Black Aesthetic was itself a form of dissent; it aimed to move away from the conventions of western literature and to refer, instead, to black culture, black vernacular expression, social action and political resistance. But within this movement of black artists, there were writers who expressed themselves outside the parameters of the Black Aesthetic.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I will assess Ishmael Reed's NeoHooDooism which he called "the true Afro-American aesthetic".<sup>6</sup> Using Frantz Fanon's discussion of tradition in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963),<sup>7</sup> I will compare and contrast Reed's NeoHooDoo aesthetic with Amiri Baraka's work as representative of the principles of the Black Aesthetic. Considering Baraka and Reed as dissenters in different ways, I will compare the similarities in their aesthetic approaches. Finally, I will show that Ishmael Reed, while promoting an innovative literary style, added

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<sup>5</sup> These dissenters tended to promote multiculturalism in their writing. George Schuyler (1895-1977), novelist and satirist, was a staunch assimilationist. . . Schuyler, famous for his 1926 essay "The Negro Art Hokum", believed in promoting equality and the similarities between the races: "On this baseless premise, so flattering to the white mob, that the blackamoor is inferior and fundamentally different, is erected the postulate that he must needs be peculiar; and when he attempts to portray life through the medium of art, it must of necessity be a peculiar art. While such reasoning may seem conclusive to the majority of Americans, it must be rejected with a loud guffaw by intelligent people." George Schuyler, "The Negro Art Hokum", 1926 ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay *The Norton Anthology: African American Literature* (Norton, New York, 1997) 1174 . Albert Murray's (b. 1916) most famous work, *The Omni-Americans*, was published in 1970. His thesis was that black Americans are the most representative group of multicultural America and are thus Omni-Americans: "But the U.S. is in actuality not a nation of black people and white people. It is a nation of multicolored people...the people of the U.S. are being mislead [*sic*] by misinformation to insist on *exaggerating* their ethnic differences. The problem is not the existence of ethnic differences, as is so often assumed, but the intrusion of such differences into areas where they do not belong. Ethnic differences are the very essence of cultural diversity and national creativity." Albert Murray, *The Omni Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1983 edition) 3. Similarly Ralph Ellison's Negro-ness in the context of his American identity, lent his work a complexity that appealed particularly to white readers and critics. Ironically, it was his firm placing of himself within an American context that some, but by no means all, of the younger Black Aesthetic writers and critics despised. His own revolution was in his dignified refusal to do less than his best for himself and in his commitment to excellence in American cultural life. "Speaking from my own special area of American culture, I feel that to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience. It is also to forget that the small share of reality which each of our diverse groups is able to snatch from the whirling chaos of history belongs not to the group alone, but to all of us. It is a property and a witness which can be ignored only to the danger of the nation." Ralph Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States", *Shadow And Act* (London: Martin Secker And Warburg, 1967)166.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 59.

<sup>7</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

dimension and breadth to the Black Arts Movement and to the development of black aesthetics.

Ishmael Reed was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1938 and raised in Buffalo, New York. He moved to New York City in 1962. After joining the *Umbra* collective of black writers based in Manhattan, Reed contributed to their political arts magazine.<sup>8</sup> The group split in 1965 and while some of the members moved to Harlem and got involved in the Black Arts initiatives there, Reed moved to California where he began teaching at the University of California, Berkeley.

Reed embraced his Native American and African ancestries as part of his commitment to multi-culturalism. His own NeoHooDoo aesthetic, which was a variety of ideas, beliefs, rituals from the many cultures within Africa and the Americas, contrasted with the exclusivity of the Black Aesthetic.<sup>9</sup> Reginald Martin described Reed's NeoHooDoo as a "syncretic and synchronic literary method which would trace black contributions to literature and world culture".<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Robert Gover, Reed reiterated the open-ness and breadth of NeoHooDooism:

Now some people think Voodoo is Black esthetic, but Voodoo is eclectic. Always has been eclectic. It picks up whatever ideas are around. It's always contemporary.....Voodoo doesn't compartmentalize the mind. The mind is open-ended. There are always new experiences that can be added, 'real' or unreal....It also recognizes the existence of more than one physical reality, which I think the West abandoned with the Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Elliot Fox, in a biographical overview of Ishmael Reed, described his involvement with *Umbra* as "participatory and adversarial". This statement succinctly describes Reed's relationship with the Black Arts Movement and the black literary establishment. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 624.

<sup>9</sup> As well as the term Neo-HooDoo, Reed used the terms HooDoo, Voodoo and Vodun.

<sup>10</sup> Reginald Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 59.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Gover, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed", *Black American Literature Forum* (Dec. 1978):13. The critic Patrick McGee offered his own definition of Voodoo: "Vodun, however, is not irrational so much as it is counterrational. It offers a different logic and a different mode of story that does not rely on the master narratives of Western culture though it is not the opposite or negation of that culture either. Going back to the



Reed's concept of NeoHooDoo goes back to Ancient Egyptian pantheistic and syncretic religion prior to Menes (1<sup>st</sup> dynasty). These belief systems evolved into West African religions such as Yoruba and Juju. Brought to the Caribbean, Juju became Voodoo and reached its zenith between 1650-1800. Ultimately, Reed argued, there was a transformation of Voodoo to Hoodoo by African slaves in America:

Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist's a Priest...Neo-HooDoo borrows from Haiti, Africa and South America. Neo-HooDoo comes in all styles and moods... Africa is the home of the Loa (Spirits) of Neo-HooDoo although we are building our own American 'pantheon.'<sup>12</sup>

Ishmael Reed saw himself as both an instrument of the Loa and an agent for the NeoHooDoo aesthetic which emerged in his first novel, *The Free-lance Pallbearers*.<sup>13</sup>

NeoHooDoo begins in 1967, when I began to read about Marie Laveau's work in New Orleans...She saw herself as a descendent of Yemoja ('she danced with the fish'). I am part of this tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Belonging to that tradition, Reed was the personification of Hoodoo; he played the role of the medium that the African Loa used to comment on black people's interactions with each other and the world. Unlike the exclusivity of the Black

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ancient tradition of Voodoo allowed Reed the flexibility to make his literary and historical explorations." Patrick McGee, *Ishmael Reed and the Ends of Race* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997) 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* (Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972) 21.

<sup>13</sup> This overview of the geneology of NeoHooDoo comes from Reginald Martin's *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 107.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Dick, "A Conversation with Ishmael Reed 1997" ed. Bruce Allen Dick, *The Critical Response to Ishmael Reed: Critical Responses in Arts and Letters* Number 31 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenport Press, 1999) 231.



Aesthetic, Reed's NeoHooDoo aesthetic represented an understanding and appreciation of the links between the different cultural groups in America. Something of a precursor to Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and prefiguring 1980s debates on multiculturalism and hybridity, Ishmael Reed's syncretic aesthetic recognised that all of America's arts were based on its multi-cultural history.<sup>15</sup> Building on that knowledge, Reed's NeoHooDoo aesthetic attempted what the critic Michelle Wallace called a "gumbo" rather than "an innocuous paste". She continued:

The potential appeal of Neo-HooDoo is that it offers the possibility of intellectual alternatives for nonwhites committed to aggressive adaptation rather than passive assimilation or blending in.<sup>16</sup>

Through Voodoo, Reed argued, African Loa used "men and women as their mediums. Men and women of all races, and classes."<sup>17</sup> However, despite this statement and its supposed syncretism, NeoHooDoo was an aesthetic for nonwhites based on their shared multicultural roots. NeoHooDooism was not as starkly exclusive as the American canon or the Black Aesthetic but it was particularly aimed at non-white people from ancient African and native American traditions.

In order to represent these different cultures, the NeoHooDoo Aesthetic needed to adapt itself to its environment and allow art to be anything it wanted to be, as the character Loop claimed in *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1967).

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<sup>15</sup> The main theme of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* was that the routes of black existence need to be part of any assessment of the roots of black cultural experiences. These themes were discussed in Chapter Five.

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York: Verso, 1990) 152.

<sup>17</sup> Ishmael Reed, ed. *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* (New York: Avon Books, 1979) 12.

What's your beef with me Bo Shmo.....No one says a  
novel has to be one thing. It can be anything it wants to  
be....<sup>18</sup>

The openness to different ideas, cultures, forms and styles was at the heart of this  
eclectic aesthetic and Reed summarised this philosophy in the final stanzas of his  
poem "catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church"(1970):

DO YR ART D WAY U WANT  
ANYWAY U WANT  
ANY WANGOL U WANT  
IT'S UP TO U/WHAT WILL WORK  
FOR U  
So sez d neoamerican hoodoo  
Church of free spirits who  
Need no  
Monarch  
No gunhoguru<sup>19</sup>

Reed regarded his willingness to draw from the rituals of other cultures  
as a "new form". <sup>20</sup> His approach was imaginative and his blending of cultural  
praxis was unusual but this did not itself create a new form. Really, Reed was  
experimenting with such genres as the detective novel and the slave narrative.  
Reed's novels did not have stereotypical heroes and villains and down-trodden  
black people as victims of white society. His non-linear, thematic approach  
was in itself an exploration of the role of narrative and our expectations of  
fictional text. A brief look at his first five novels written in the mid-1960s will  
reveal some of the innovations he made with established literary forms.

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<sup>18</sup> Ishmael Reed, Yellow Back Radio Broke Down (Chatham, N.J., 1969):36.

<sup>19</sup> Ishmael Reed, "catechism of d neoramerican hoodoo church", ed. Abraham Chapman New Black Voices  
(New York: Mentor, 1972) 334.

<sup>20</sup> Challenging the Black Aesthetic writers, Reed pointed to his work as evidence of the innovation that the  
Black Aesthetic purported to support: "these people who fly around ought to stay home sometime and try to  
come up with a new form. I think I've come up with a new form." Ishmael Reed in an interview with Joe  
Goncalves, "When State Magicians Fail", Journal of Black Poetry 1 (Summer 1972):72.

*The Free Lance Pall Bearers* is a *Bildungsroman* published in 1967. It satirised contemporary American politics and used inventive word-play to denounce attempts by the state to control communication. At a time when the Black Aesthetic was *de rigueur* for black writers, Reed's first novel was seen as a challenge to black writers and intellectuals who were trying to control creative production.

*Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (1969) is written in the style of a Western and brought together European, African and American influences. This novel dealt with, among other things, issues of power, politics and the militia. It included an exploration of Voodoo as a viable religion through parodies of Judaeo-Christian faith and satirising of the Pope. Reed's willingness to challenge these beliefs made his work controversial and daring. His dissent was not merely against white power structures but equally against religious and political views that many black people regarded as exclusive to their culture and necessary to their black identity.

In *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Reed's Hoodoo detective Papa La Bas tries to put together a black aesthetic from pieces of literary and cultural history. Reed's purpose was to explore how an aesthetic is constructed. By demonstrating that anyone was free to suggest an aesthetic, Reed was contesting the view that there was one valid black aesthetic model created by a designated intellectual few. Henry Louis Gates described *Mumbo Jumbo* as a "thematic allegory of the Black Arts Movement".<sup>21</sup> *Mumbo Jumbo* was Reed's attempt to challenge the structure of the modern novel and to write a non-conformist's charter for NeoHooDoo literature. Reed challenged the stereotypical figures of the matriarchal black

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<sup>21</sup> "A more interesting allegory, however, is that found in the antithetical narrative, which is a discourse on the history and nature of writing itself, especially that of the African American literary tradition. *Mumbo Jumbo*, then, is a text that directs attention to its own writing, to its status as a text, related to other texts which it signifies upon." Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Blackness of Blackness: a Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey", ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Black Literature and Black Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, 1984) 311.



woman (and to some extent replaced the stereotype with a portrayal that was equally mean and ugly), the emasculated black man and the superior and supremacist white leader. In *Mumbo Jumbo* in particular, Reed was also dismissive of the quality and rationale of academic discourse.<sup>22</sup>

*The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974) is a novel of comic irony, wrestling with the themes of good and evil. It was a kind of detective novel whose main protagonist was a Hoodoo Private Eye. The novel did not have the rigidity of a linear plot-line and involved a satirical look at the Women's Movement.<sup>23</sup>

*Flight to Canada* (1976) is a slave narrative satire on the death of a slavemaster Arthur Swille. In this novel Reed explored the relationships between slaves and slavemasters and forced the readers to examine their ideas of literary and historical 'types'.

Like other Black Arts writers, Reed blended the black vernacular with Standard English to create a narrative style reflecting the diversity of contemporary diction.<sup>24</sup> Reed also explored how different groups of people could

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<sup>22</sup> "Reed sees as useless much of the business of the scholarly profession, and, thus, writers are often satirized. Associated with their uselessness is Reed's condemnation of their corruption which allows them to believe that they are doing something worthwhile with their lives by pursuing their pointlessly cryptic writing and research, while the harder issues of the day, such as poverty and racism, go unchecked." Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 66.

<sup>23</sup> Reed was known for his cruel caricatures, both male and female. In the 1980s however, his very personal verbal attacks on black women writers caused great concern in the black community and across academic disciplines which helped to alienate Reed from his peers. Reed is also well known for his criticism of how black women writers have been 'courted' by the publishing establishments and the ways in which they, in Reed's estimation, have colluded with those establishments to exclude black men.

In an interview with Reginald Martin in 1984 Reed argued: "all the feminists are criticizing black males now, black feminists and white feminists, but they got all their strategies from black men. The black males are the ones whose strategies are used all over the world- - Martin Luther King in Ireland, Russia, these Pentecostals in Russia singing "We Shall Overcome. So black men are geniuses, and many times their desperation, their position as being pariahs, leads them to great originality... I call black feminists like Alice Walker, the kind of novels they write, I call them "neo-confederate" novelists, the kind of writing that Thomas Dixon wrote in *The Clansman*. This kind of plantation literature, they're just reviving these notions, whipping up hysteria". Reginald Martin, "An Interview with Ishmael Reed", *Review of Contemporary Fiction* Vol. 4 No.2 (Summer 1984):179.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 73. "Reed extends the notion of syncretism into the level and texture of language he uses, thus creating a kind of contemporary bathetic language, whose principal rules of discourse are taken from the streets, popular music, and television. It is not uncommon to find the formal blend of language mixed with the colloquial because it is Reed's contention that such an occurrence in a narrative is more in keeping with the ways contemporary people influenced by popular culture really speak".

use language either as an effective weapon to diminish the already dispossessed and the powerless, or to empower the ignorant and the venal. In *The Free-lance Pallbearers*, the character Allen Hangup rebuked Doopeyduk's 'vile language about the land we all love'.

"Mr. Doopeyduk, this is the bastion of liberty and democracy, the citadel of fair play, the bulwark of individual liberty".

Doopeyduk replied:

"Aw man, cut out the stone walls. Why, anybody in his right mind knows this is a BIG WAY-OUT BRINGDOWN..... There are things going on in HARRY SAM that will give you the willies".<sup>25</sup>

Another character who demonstrated Reed's satirical skills and trickster signifying was U2 Polyglot, the Dean of the University, who was preparing a paper entitled "The Egyptian Dung Beetle in Kafka's Metamorphosis". Reed used U2 and his research to continue the theme of excreta in the novel and to signify on the quality and relevance of some academic discourse.<sup>26</sup> The dictator Sam pointed out:

You gotta watch these eggheads...The only thing they're good for is handing out honorary degrees to my generals and Screws, on commencement day at all Harry Sam Universities.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ishmael Reed, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers: An irreverent novel* 1967 (New York: Anthem, 1988 edition.) 114.

<sup>26</sup> In an interview with Bruce Allen Dick, thirty years after the publication of *Freelance Pallbearers* Reed- who never completed his own degree- continued to challenge the use of 'intellectuals': "You can see why the establishment is pushing Northeastern Ph.D. intellectuals as the new black intellectuals. They serve a missionary function. The establishment is tired of being burned by extra-curricular and autodidactic intellectuals like Malcolm X, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, and John Henrik Clarke, and so they create a new intellectual rump regime". Bruce Dick, "A Conversation with Ishmael Reed 1997", 231.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, *The Free-lance Pallbearers* 129.



Reed's argument was directed against the unwarranted approbation that academic discourse received and its open-ness to manipulation by the state. His distrust was similar to that of many black critics who were sceptical of white critics and their analyses of black music and literature.<sup>28</sup> He was not against the innovative use of language and ideas, but demonstrated how such manipulation could be used as a dangerous political weapon to diminish particular groups.

Reed is a keen scholar of Voodoo and ancient Egyptian mythology and identified himself with various musicians, notably Bill Dixon, the organiser of the October Revolution,<sup>29</sup> and Sun Ra, the innovative leader of the Arkestra, who was also a scholar of Egyptology. Reed explored the sophistication of ancient civilizations that he felt demonstrated centuries of black intellectual life that had been omitted from history.<sup>30</sup> Blending Egyptian myths, Voodoo and black music traditions, Reed was often perceived as mocking and trivialising sacred beliefs and spinning fantastic 'historical' yarns. However, Reed was proud of his cultural alchemy and felt that his novels, in their satirical blending of history and contemporary social and political events, were intellectually demanding, inviting the reader to think critically about activities conducted in the name of black culture.

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<sup>28</sup> Reed's attack on academic language was linked to his public debates with Irving Howe and later, women writers like Susan Brownmiller.

<sup>29</sup>"I'm not flying around the country in a dashiki talking about what I'm going to do; I'm trying to do it. Just like Cecil Taylor's trying to do it, just like Bill Dixon's trying to do it, just like Sun Ra's trying to do it." Ishmael Reed in an interview with Joe Goncalves "When State Magicians Fail", Journal of Black Poetry (Summer –Fall, 1969) 73.

"In mid-1964 fluegelhornist/trumpeter Bill Dixon decided to organize a series of presentations of what was at the time being called the "new thing," a music too new to be named or defined, but which was audaciously emerging in the face of the recent folk embattled jazz mainstream. Having been closed out of conventional jazz clubs and concert halls and told by record companies that there was no interest in this music, Dixon set out to prove that there was an audience for the next phase of jazz, and to demonstrate how musicians might further their own cause. He booked the Cellar Cafe, a small coffee house on West 91st Street, for four days and nights, and scheduled 40 musical events and panel discussions on the state of the music." Kalamu Salaam, The Magic of Juju: The Black Arts Movement (Unpublished work) 151.

<sup>30</sup>"Two correlative sources of Reed's subversive imagery, sources tied closely to hoodoo, are jazz history, with its abundant depiction of the playful artist, and black Egypt, an Egyptology promoting the black Osiris over the white Nefertiti." Martin, Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics 185.



Having briefly discussed Reed's NeoHooDooism and its significance in the structure of his work, in the following section I will use Frantz Fanon to compare Ishmael Reed's ideas with the views of Amiri Baraka. Like Reed, Baraka was not just against white supremacy in the arts but against the conservatism of his most recent literary predecessors.

## II

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon analyzed the "legitimacy of the claims of a nation" and the significance of cultural tradition as part of that claim.<sup>31</sup> Firstly, he outlined how, in revolutionary times, people questioned and challenged tradition. He then considered the role of the artist, the methods used to represent traditions and the impact of revolutionary change on artists and intellectuals. Finally, Fanon discussed the dangers of demagoguery. He argued that often the leaders became alienated from the people in their challenge and rejection of tradition. I have chosen Fanon's outline as it largely reflects the stages of Reed and Baraka's development as writers. Both Reed and Baraka saw their work as either continuing or reconfiguring black tradition. Both writers had distinct views of the role of the artist as a creator and as a representative of a community of thinkers. Baraka and, to a more limited extent, Reed were leaders in developing new approaches and had to balance the leadership role with the role of artist and creator. Baraka saw blackness and black nationalism as part of a process towards liberation and, as his later alliances show, this process would include socialism and class struggle.<sup>32</sup> Both Baraka and Reed pursued black independence from the white

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<sup>31</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 207.

<sup>32</sup> There were many phases in Baraka's political alliances and I include here one example of a political shift that he had obviously already discussed with his friend, Larry Neal: "I am glad that you think the switch to Scientific Socialism "is cool" and that it "feels correct" because not only do we feel that based on our analysis of the material condition, we know that." November 7<sup>th</sup> 1974 letter from Imamu Amiri Baraka to Larry Neal Larry Neal Collection Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. SCM 88-49 Box 6 of 8 files, private letters.

establishment, Baraka by setting up “Spirit House” and Reed through the development of his own publishing enterprises.

Fanon’s first point in his analysis of nationhood addressed the role of tradition in revolutionary times:

When a people undertakes an armed struggle or even a political struggle against a relentless colonialism, the significance of tradition changes. All that has made up the technique of passive resistance in the past may, during this phase, be radically condemned.<sup>33</sup>

In an almost parricidal rejection of what had gone before, Baraka, dismissing the passive resistance of his literary predecessors, argued for the dismantling and reconstruction of the black literary tradition.

His controversial essay “The Myth of a Negro Literature”(1962) began with the sentence “The mediocrity of what has been called ‘Negro Literature’ is one of the most loosely held secrets of American culture”.<sup>34</sup> This essay, and the arguments that ensued, demonstrated Baraka’s own dissenting views about the quality of his recent black literary heritage. It was an attack on black literary tradition that dismissed the creativity of generations of black writers as merely middle-class concerns for a middle-class readership.<sup>35</sup> Baraka caustically dismissed the work of

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<sup>33</sup> Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth 224.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, “The Myth of A Negro Literature”, Home: Social Essays (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1966)105.

<sup>35</sup> The writer, Cecil M. Brown, took great exception to Jones’ suggestion and challenged his views on a series of fronts. He began by questioning the negation of black literary traditions. (Amiri Baraka was writing as LeRoi Jones at this time). “Assuming we do give up traditional Black literature, where would Jones, as a manifesto poet, lead us?... What strikes one about this assessment of Negro literature is that it is too facile; at a first glance, it seems credulous; but on a second reading, one finds one’s self being asked to swallow something quite unnatural. Jones’ attack on the Black bourgeoisie is mis-directed; his frustration results from the unwillingness of literary form to be used as a social and political weapon, as propaganda. Literature is, in fact, notoriously bourgeois, middle-class conservative, backward-looking in its nature. Literature looks backward to its own conventions, and those conventions look back to original myths”.

Finally, Brown reminded Jones that the very fact of writing placed his work within a developing tradition which, if one followed Jones’ own manifesto for art, was exactly the kind of canon development he claimed to desire: “But revolutionary literature is a contradiction in terms, for the moment anything revolutionary hits the stage or the printing press, it is magically transformed into literary tradition, then looks back into literary history for its predecessors, and ceases to find its referent in the outside world.” Cecil M. Brown, “Black Literature and LeRoi Jones”, Black World Vol. XIX. No.8 (June 1970): 25,30.



earlier black writers as being of “an almost agonizing mediocrity”, which neither he nor his contemporaries should ever emulate.<sup>36</sup>

In “Myth”, Baraka questioned the very existence of Negro literature, arguing that it should “disengage itself from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it, and use its very existence as evidence of a more profound America”:<sup>37</sup>

Where is the Negro-ness of a literature written in imitation of the meanest of social indulgences to be found in American culture, ie the white middle class?... The Negro artist, because of his middle-class background, carried the artificial social burden as the "best and most intelligent" of Negroes, and usually entered into the 'serious' arts to exhibit his familiarity with the social graces, *i.e.*, as a method or means of displaying his participation in the 'serious' aspects of American culture. To be a writer was to be "cultivated" in the stunted bourgeois sense of the word... And the literary and artistic models were always those that could be socially acceptable to the white middle class, which automatically limited them to the most spiritually debilitated imitations of literature available. <sup>38</sup>

In his condemnation, Baraka made huge generalisations about social class bias and pandering to middle class taste, but did not give any clear examples of this. He named writers but did not quote examples of this bias in their work.<sup>39</sup> This made his essay vague, a little cowardly, and far too general to be regarded as rigorous critical discourse. “The Myth of a Negro Literature” illustrated Baraka’s commitment to a new approach to literature. It was a provocative objection of the

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<sup>36</sup>Jones, “Myth”, 115.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., In his own aesthetic, as William Harris has pointed out, there was evidence that Baraka was influenced by Western traditions of subversion. Perhaps, in adopting some of the styles of absurdist drama, Baraka was selecting the less ‘heinous elements’ of the dominant culture.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, “The Myth of a Negro Literature”, 107, 108, 110.

<sup>39</sup> Baraka commented on the middle class nature of artists’ work but gave no examples: “. . . it is only recently that formal literature written by American Negroes has begun to approach the literary standards of its model, *i.e.* the literature of the white middle class. And only Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have managed to bring off examples of writing in this genre.” Ibid.



passivity Baraka saw in a complacent middle-class literati. Because of the controversy, however, Baraka's opposition to black literary tradition contributed to Black Aesthetic discourse and to dialogue on the importance of truth and representation in black art.<sup>40</sup>

Ishmael Reed's dissent was significant because he did not so much challenge the recent black literary tradition, as the contemporary approach that writers like Baraka, through the Black Aesthetic, were trying to develop. Reed's NeoHooDoo Aesthetic excavated old cultural customs, bringing "abandoned traditions to life", which was Fanon's second point:

The artist who has decided to illustrate the truths of the nation turns paradoxically toward the past and away from actual events. What he ultimately intends to embrace are in fact the castoffs of thought, its shells and corpses, a knowledge which has been stabilized once and for all. But the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. He must go on until he has found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge.<sup>41</sup>

According to Fanon's analysis, one could crudely argue that Reed was the artist illustrating truths, while Baraka was the native intellectual searching for authenticity through realities. Reed was a consummate researcher, picking his way through the 'castoffs of thought' in an effort to blend the various traditions of African and American culture to create his own multi-layered multicultural literary expression:

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<sup>40</sup> These ideas were extended to the issue of criticism, some of which I have explored in Chapter Two in my discussion on William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

<sup>41</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 225.

Voodoo is the perfect metaphor for the multiculture.  
Voodoo comes out of the fact that all these different  
tribes and cultures were brought from Africa to Haiti . .  
. It's an amalgamation like this country. <sup>42</sup>

Reed's vast amount of historical research was interlaced with contemporary issues, a complex mix of myth and reality.

Baraka, on the other hand, was the native intellectual who sought the realities of the black experience in such plays as *The Toilet* and *The Slave* and in poems like "Black Art". Although he was very interested in ritual and performance, Baraka always wanted his work to be grounded in a social realism to which a black audience could relate. Thus Baraka's essays, plays and poems were the expressions of a black community that was a seething pot kept bubbling by his own political activism and his inflammatory writings.

In the third part of his analysis, Fanon suggested that "during the period of struggle, traditions are fundamentally unstable and are shot through by centrifugal tendencies".<sup>43</sup> Indeed, during the 1960s, there was unprecedented political and cultural instability in black American cultural and political life. Baraka's aim was to protect black writers and their work from instability by promoting a Black Aesthetic approach to literature and drama. Ishmael Reed, too, encouraged widening access to the arts, however he embraced the instability of this time as contributing to the NeoHooDoo aesthetic. That culture and ideas were not fixed, nor racially exclusive, appealed to Reed. Rather than following the agenda of the Black Aesthetic to work together to create a "uniform art", Reed played the role of "agent provocateur", using the uncertainty of the time to promote an open-minded, open-ended aesthetic.

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<sup>42</sup> Ishmael Reed, ed. *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans* 232-233.

<sup>43</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* 224.

The uniformity of Black Art that Baraka desired, and against which Reed railed, was dependent on a few people who galvanized black writers to produce this style of writing. In the final part of his observations, Fanon expressed concern about the effect and influence of such leaders whom he felt were prone to “demagoguery”.<sup>44</sup> For Baraka, his role - outside of producing poetry, fiction and drama - was to promote black particularism. Through conferences and symposia he attempted to guide black writers and contribute to the shaping of the Black Aesthetic.<sup>45</sup> Baraka was committed to a politicised literature and, as a spokesman for Spirit House, wanted to establish a revolutionary black literature that linked black people, black art and black politics. As an influential leader, he needed to show that his work, and work that came out of Spirit House, would effect change in the lives of black people. Ishmael Reed, however, challenged the role of leaders who tried to force black artists into working in a particular way. He was interested in the political context of literature but wanted to divorce the arts from a political focus that diverted the artist away from creative exploration and the development of diversity in his/her work.

To summarise Reed and Baraka’s work within the context of Fanon’s framework, both men wrote against the “current of history”, by challenging some of the ideas of their own people.<sup>46</sup> Baraka’s opposition was directed against his immediate literary forefathers and Reed’s against his contemporaries. Both writers wanted to “illustrate the truths” of the nation, Baraka through social realism and Reed through mythical exploration and experimentation. Baraka and Reed were

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> In an essay “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic”, Addison Gayle described the Black Aesthetic writers as iconoclasts who were “the idol smashers of America”. Baraka assumed the role of iconoclast and revolutionary and perhaps he wrote “The Myth of a Negro Literature” because he felt that, as the Black Arts Movement’s leading spokesman, he had authority to say what others could not or would not express. Addison Gayle, “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic”, ed. The Black Aesthetic (1971) (New York: Anchor Books Edition, 1972) 44.

<sup>46</sup> Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth 207.



leaders in their own way, Baraka within the Black Arts Movement and Reed against its dogma.

Generally, Reed was sanguine about Baraka's insistence on his own leadership and control.

I believe Baraka, along with all of the new black aestheticians of the 1960s, saw himself as a nurturing father-figure to something he loved, something which he believed to be positive, and anything perceived as a threat to the growth of his child, quite naturally, was considered negative and evil.<sup>47</sup>

However, Reed had to battle against Baraka and the Black Aesthetic critics as his own work was seen as part of the threat they considered "negative and evil". Reed needed to confront his critics - both his own black peers and white critics and writers - and felt that this was his main contribution; to confront and challenge the developing black literary establishment.

In his "Black Power Poem" (1968), Reed claimed his right – even as a dissenter- to identify with 'Black Power' and, in so doing, to challenge its proponents.

"a spectre is haunting america – the spectre of hoodooism.  
all the powers of old america have entered into a holy  
alli  
ance to exorcise this spectre : allen ginsberg timothy  
leary  
richard nixon richard daley time magazine the new york  
review  
of books and the underground press.  
may the best church win . shake hands now and come out conjuring".<sup>48</sup>

"Black Power Poem" was not just directed at Black Aesthetic writers and critics; Reed declared his opposition to the alliance of critics, writers and publishers and

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<sup>47</sup> Ishmael Reed in, Reginald Martin, Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics 58.

<sup>48</sup> Ishmael Reed, "Black Power Poem", (1968) ed. Dudley Randall The Black Poets (New York: Bantam, 1971) 288.

“all the powers of old america” that he felt had “entered into a holy alliance” against NeoHooDooism. Reed’s battle was a literary one that he felt he had won, not by “flying around the country in a dashiki talking about what I’m going to do”, but by defying the pressure to conform to the dictates of the Black Aesthetic and creating his own NeoHooDoo aesthetic.<sup>49</sup>

As a satirist, constantly challenging structures and impositions on cultural praxis, Reed was as much a trickster as his protagonists, trying to subvert the power of the establishment over the individual. Reed refused to reduce the relationship between races to a discussion that was solely about power and control over institutions and access to them. Reed also explored some of the dysfunctional relations between black people as well as the oppressive use of power by whites against blacks.<sup>50</sup> Thus, as Reginald Martin pointed out

the complicity of different individuals from different strata in the black community is lampooned at least as viciously as are whites and the white way of doing things.<sup>51</sup>

In an interview with Bruce Allen Dick, Reed discussed his trickster role:

One of the roles of the trickster fiction is to raise issues that others won’t raise. This has its hazards, because once in a while you’ll do a send-up exposing the foibles of a powerful special –interest group.<sup>52</sup>

In his literary exploration of the anti-hero and under-dog, Reed deliberately placed himself in the role of ‘agent provocateur’, a position which he obviously relished

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<sup>49</sup> Ishmael Reed in an interview with Joe Goncalves, “When State Magicians Fail”, 74.

<sup>50</sup> Ironically this was an attitude towards black writing that was similar to that of the black women writers, with whom Ishmael Reed had many other ideological differences.

<sup>51</sup> Martin, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* 64.

<sup>52</sup> Bruce Dick, “A Conversation with Ishmael Reed 1997”, 236.

and used in his essays. Reed was courageous in speaking out against the popular writers of the day, despite risking possible ostracism from the writing and cultural fraternities. Aware of the threat to his own creative freedom by the Black Aesthetic critics, he took any opportunity to challenge them openly for what he regarded as their spurious literary policing. In a 1976 “Harlem Renaissance Day” speech, delivered at Washington Irving High School in New York, Reed savagely challenged their destructive rather than constructive critical style.

A literary Banana Republic approach to things by those who’ve forgotten that the mainstream aspiration of Afro-America is for more freedom, and not slavery- including freedom of artistic expression. . . . Apostles Of the Black Aesthetic held ‘writers’ conferences’ which served as tribunals where those writers who didn’t hew the line were ridiculed, scorned, mocked, and threatened.<sup>53</sup>

While the Black Aesthetic critics were busily attempting to construct a black literary establishment, Reed was determinedly knocking at the walls of the building and pointing out its very shaky foundations. Reed’s aim, in his criticism and fiction, was clearly pointed out by John O’Brien:

He is . . . after a reform of the ‘imagination,’ and to this end his fiction satirizes and takes out after the emblems of the cultural establishment and its underlying values.<sup>54</sup>

The critic C.W.E. Bigsby also commented on Reed’s “conscious attack on American cultural tradition”:

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<sup>53</sup> Ishmael Reed, “Harlem Renaissance Day Speech” delivered on May 4, 1976 at Washington Irving High School, New York. *New York Times* (Aug 29, 1976):297.

<sup>54</sup> John O’Brien, ed. *Interviews with Black Writers* (New York: Liveright, 1973) 165.



[H]e accomplished his objective by guerrilla warfare, using a parodic Negro dialect simultaneously to mock both the white tradition and the white image of the Negro. . .<sup>55</sup>

Bigsby's term "guerrilla warfare" is exactly how Reed's 'antics' were perceived by his critics. It was as if Reed, like Harry Sam of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, had set up an underground movement to challenge the ruling party.

In a now famous exchange with the critic Irving Howe, Ishamel Reed began what would become an uneasy relationship with literary critics.<sup>56</sup> In his review of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, Howe made the following summation:

Mr. Reed...announces his style to be 'literary neo-hoodooism'; without a chuckle, without the shade of a smile...He may intend his books as a black variation of Jonathan Swift, but they emerge close to the commercial cooings of Captain Kangaroo.<sup>57</sup>

Reed's reply was caustic and concise:

Howe writes of my novels in typical White chauvinistic manner. Perhaps I intended the books to be a variation of Afro-American novelists Wallace Thurman and George Schuyler but it seems that Howe is illiterate of Afro-American literature written prior to 1938; a fact which raises serious doubts about his ability to intelligently evaluate this novelistic tradition which dates back to 1854.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> C.W.E.Bigsby, *The Second Black Renaissance :Essays in Black Literature* (London:Greenwood Press, 1980) 300.

<sup>56</sup> Ralph Ellison conducted a similar debate with Irving Howe, chronicled in his essay "The World and the Jug", *Shadow and Act*.

<sup>57</sup> Irving Howe, "Books: New Black Writers" Rev. of *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* and *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, *Harpers* (December 1969): 141.

<sup>58</sup> Ishmael Reed, "Books in Black", Letter *Harpers* (March 1970):6-7.

He concluded his reply with a statement of intent that marked him out as one of American literature's mavericks:

A dying culture will always call up its intellectual warhorses, no matter how senile they may be, when pagans are breaking down the gates. Mr. Howe's hysteria—LeRoi Jones is called an 'anti-Semitic Bulgarian' --proves that we have drawn blood and we will now do what pagans have always done when confronted with a racist, imperialist, tyrannical system. We will move in for the kill, and this is what the Seventies will be all about.<sup>59</sup>

Reed's response to Howe was a pugnacious defence of black writing that showed a real contempt for uninformed criticism. In this 1969 defence of black writers. Reed was declaring a short-lived alliance with Baraka and other black writers against criticism from those "illiterate of Afro-American literature". Thus, while Reed battled with the Black Aesthetic writers and critics for his individuality as a writer, he was also fighting for them and other black writers against a racist system of literary criticism. In ending his response to Howe, declaring 'we will move in for the kill', Reed was reiterating what he had said in his battling 1968 "Black Power Poem", "may the best church win... shake hands now and come out conjuring". However, because Reed seemed to criticise Black Aesthetic writers more than he defended them, his personal defence of black writers against such critics as Irving Howe was not reciprocated by his peers. Reed was later to enter into a protracted debate with black and white male critics and feminists from the 1970s which, in varying degrees, continues to this day.

One of the issues about which Reed felt strongly was the way in which some black writers (and he included black women here) allowed themselves to be

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Robert Moss, "The Black Arts in America", Saturday Review November 15, 1975.

guided and fêted by white critics and the publishing establishment. Reed felt they often colluded with such forces to promote only one style, one leader and one type of black literature. Thus, in response to an article “The Arts in Black America” (1975) by the journalist Robert Moss, Ishmael Reed disputed Moss’s claim about Baraka:

Baraka was made founder of the ‘new breed’ of black poetry so that Mr. Moss, and people like Richard Ellman, in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, could say that the black poets took their techniques from ‘Ginsberg and Co. . .’ because of Baraka’s close ties to this group.<sup>60</sup>

Reed was conscious that by identifying a movement with one man who had had links with an influential group of white writers, critics would credit the success of Baraka and indeed, of the Black Arts Movement, to its association with this group of Beat poets. Reed resented this and therefore his argument was not so much with Baraka himself as with the way in which the white critics wanted to limit what was a vibrant movement, to the influence of one man and one aesthetic. Reed was also perhaps a little hurt that he had not been mentioned as one of the major innovators in the development of black aesthetics.

In his 1980 essay “Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle”, Baraka reflected on the Black Arts Movement and identified certain writers, Reed included, who were “drawn by the revolutionary upsurge”.<sup>61</sup> Baraka regarded Reed and others writing outside the Black Aesthetic as conservatives who, quite opportunistically in his view, aligned themselves to the Black Arts Movement in order that their work could get exposure. Baraka cited Reed’s poem, the *catechism of d neoamerian hoodoo church* which includes the following verses:

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<sup>60</sup> Ishmael Reed, “Crushing the Mutiny”, *Shrovetide* 275.

<sup>61</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle”, *Negro American Literature Forum* Vol. 14 No. 1 (1980):8.



“ our pens are free  
do not move by decree. accept no memos  
from jackbootd demogs who wd exile our minds.  
dare tell d artist his role. issue demands on  
cultural revolution...

i do not write solicitd  
manuscripts – oswald spengler said  
to joseph goebbels when askd to make a  
lie taste like sweet milk...

DO YR ART D WAY U WANT  
ANYWAY U WANT  
ANY WANGOL U WANT  
IT’S UP TO U/WHAT WILL  
WORK FOR U.”<sup>62</sup>

Baraka cited this poem as evidence of Reed’s personal recognition of black rebellion and his attempts to become part of the Movement in order that he could join the ‘legitimate’ black literary rebellion. Because Baraka saw the Black Aesthetic as the only aesthetic framework of any significance, he divided writers into those who reflected the tenets of the Black Aesthetic as he saw it and those who didn’t. Writers like Reed, who were argumentative and quick to challenge white and black critics, were important in the rebellion but Baraka was only able to endorse their contributions if it was within the context of dissent that he understood.

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<sup>62</sup> Ishmael Reed, “catechism of d neoamerian hoodoo church”, Abraham Chapman, ed. New Black Voices 329-334.

During the years of vibrant debate on the Black Aesthetic, there was little scope for the writer whose aim was to challenge the need for the particularism of the Black Aesthetic itself. Reed objected, as we have seen, to this 'closed shop' approach to black literature. In fact, he fulfilled his own ambitions when he set up Yardbird publications and began to produce and publish works that represented the multi-cultural America to which he laid claim.<sup>63</sup>

In 1970 Reed edited the anthology *19 Necromancers From Now*, a series of essays which explored the diversity of the Black American experience. By including a variety of writers from various cultures, Reed aimed to demonstrate that differences and diversity made cultures strong.<sup>64</sup> Reed encouraged independent publishing houses that allowed individuals to commission work from the many cultural groups that made up America's 'minorities'. His work, John Domini argued, represented a "struggle of many cultural influences against a single cultural influence".<sup>65</sup>

Like Baraka, Ishmael Reed vociferously defended the value of his aesthetic. Like the Black Aesthetic critics he was adamant and self-confident. However, unlike them, he did not have the relative power (nor, I think would he choose to

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<sup>63</sup> "Reed was editor of *19 Necromancers From Now* (1970), co-founder of Yardbird Publishing Co.(1971), produced 5 volumes of the Yardbird Reader 72-76, co-founded Reed, Cannon and Johnson Communications 1973 established the 'Before Columbus Foundation' 1976, served as editor in chief of Y'Bird magazine 78-80, and co-founded Quilt in 1980". Richard Walsh, "'A Man's Story is His Gris-Gris': Cultural Slavery, Literary Emancipation and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*", *Journal of American Studies* Vol.27 Part 1 (April 1993) 70.

<sup>65</sup> Darwin T Turner, "Afro-American Literary Criticism", *Black World* Vol.XIX No.9 (July 1970) 63.

<sup>66</sup> In an interview with Reginald Martin in 1984, Ishmael Reed recognised the importance of the multi-layered, multicultural approach: "I encourage Afro-American critics to become multicultural critics because that's the wave of the future as more and more the country becomes multicultural and multinational." 34.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

use that power) to make his prejudices work effectively against other writers, or at least male writers.

By the late 1970s, Ishmael Reed was no longer the recalcitrant revolutionary of African American letters and was being read by young critics such as Robert Stepto and Henry Louis Gates who, like Reed, were dismissing many aspects of the Black Aesthetic. Ishmael Reed made significant contributions to the Black Arts Movement as he wrote fiction, nonfiction and poetry, established his own journals and magazines and encouraged a coterie of writers (like Trey Ellis, for instance, whose work has continued in the fashion of Reed's own rueful satire on black cultural expression).<sup>66</sup> Ishmael Reed was a dissenter from within a dissenting tradition. He insisted on the importance of diversity in art to reflect the diversity of American culture. Proud of his iconoclastic role, Reed's activities in establishing journals and encouraging debate contributed to the development of a canon of American works and to the widening scope of black American literature and critical discourse.

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<sup>66</sup> Trey Ellis studied under Reed and his first novel Platitudes (New York: Vintage, 1988), is a satire that deals with balancing the issue of representing images and representation of black people and experiment in black literary fiction.



## Chapter Seven

### **The Second Stage: Revolutionary and “Womanist”**

### **Essentialism in Black Women’s Poetry and Fiction.**

#### **I**

When we say complement, completes, we mean that we have certain functions which are more natural to us, and you have certain graces that are yours alone.

Imamu Amiri Baraka “Black Woman” (1970)<sup>1</sup>

In 1970, the writer Toni Cade edited *The Black Woman*, a collection of black women’s essays, poems and stories. The publication belonged with the tradition of anthologies such as Alain Locke's *New Negro* (1925) and Jones and Neal’s *Black Fire* (1968). *The Black Woman* was the first anthology to debate and contextualise the role of black women in contemporary American society and was an important step towards the development of a canon of black women’s writing.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, “Black Woman”, *Black World* Vol.XIX No.9 (July 1970):8.

<sup>2</sup> A selection of the poetry published by black women during the period of the “Black Arts Movement”: Gwendolyn Brooks: *The Bean Eaters* (1960), *In The Mecca* (1968). Alice Walker *Once* (1968). Nikki Giovanni: *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968), *Black Judgement* (1969), *Re:creation* (1970), *Gemini* (1971), *Ego Tripping* (1973). Sonia Sanchez: *Homecoming* (1969), *We A BaddDDD People* (1970), *It’s A New Day* (1971), *A Blues Book For Blue Black Magical Women* (1973), *Love Poems* (1973), *Adventures Of Small Head, Square Head And Fat Head* (1973). Carolyn Rodgers: *Paper Soul* (Third World, 1968), *Songs of a Black Bird* (Third World Press, 1969), *How I got Ovah* (Anchor, 1976). Black women poets had published an impressive body of work but the level of their inclusion in the anthologies did not reflect this. In *Black Fire* (1968) Lethonia Gee, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Simmons, Carol Freeman and Julia Fields contributed poems and essays; and later, in 1971 only Sarah Webster Fabio and Carolyn F. Gerald were included in *The Black Aesthetic*. Black women poets were represented in the main poetry anthologies *Black Voices* (1968), *New Black Voices* (1972) and *The Black Poets* (1971), but it was Clarence Major’s *The New Black Poetry* (1968), which first included a significant number of women writers (and even then, women represented a mere 16% of the writers) about which Major proudly boasted: “For the first time in any anthology to my knowledge, here is a fair representation of female poets and, as a matter of fact, this is the first truly black anthology of its kind to be published in the United States.” Clarence Major, *The New Black Poetry* (New York:International Publishing, 1968) 20.

In her introduction, Cade complained that in literature the “‘experts’ are still men, black or white, while the images of women are still derived from their needs, their fantasies, their second - hand knowledge, their agreement with the other ‘experts.’”<sup>3</sup> It was because the ‘experts’ were not black women that Cade decided to bring together ideas and perspectives on the lives of contemporary black women. She described *The Black Woman* as a response to the call for social and political change coming out of feminist, peace and black nationalist movements. Through the impact of such movements, Cade sensed “a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other”. She continued:

What typifies the current spirit is an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.<sup>4</sup>

In the spirit of embracing the community, black women explored issues of black womanhood and the role of the black woman as a sexual partner, carer for children and nurturer of the community.<sup>5</sup> In a way that was as challenging to the literary canon as the ostensibly revolutionary themes promoted by Black Aesthetic writers and thinkers, black women writers examined domestic black life, supported community activism, challenged racism and were critical of the effects on their communities of current social policies and welfare programmes. There were a range of essays, including the singer/actress Abbey Lincoln’s “Who Will Revere the Black Woman?”, to “Black

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<sup>3</sup> Toni Cade, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Mentor, 1970) 9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>5</sup> The term community is ambiguous and can describe particular or even generic social groups. My own definition of community is influenced by the work of Benedict Anderson who, in his book *Imagined Communities*, analyzed the concept of the nation which he described as “an imagined political community”. He argued that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined”. During the 1960s and early ‘70s there was not so much a falsity of the style in which community was imagined but a range of expectations and assumptions about what community should be. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) 6, 7.



Pride? Some Contradictions”, by Ann Cook, a teacher based in New York. There were also excerpts from women’s group working papers, such as the “Poor Black Women’s Study Papers by Poor Black Women of Mount Vernon, New York”.

1970 was a significant year for black women’s poetry and also marked the emergence of black women’s fiction. Poetry publications in that year include Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Riot*, Mari Evans’ *I am a Black Woman* Nikki Giovanni’s *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk/Black Judgement* and *Recreation*, Audre Lorde’s, *Cables to Rage* and Sonia Sanchez’s *We a BaddDDD People*. Published that same year were Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker’s *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland*. There is no single reason why 1970 was such a productive year, but the publication of these different texts serendipitously caught the mood of the time. 1970 marked a major thematic and ideological shift in black women’s poetry.<sup>6</sup>

For their poetry, this thematic shift was from black women’s “revolutionary” to what I call “womanist” poetry. (I will explain this term below.) Womanist themes were also evident in the fiction produced by black women writers at the time. In this chapter I will discuss the difference between the two types of poetry and explore these differences in the work of three poets. I will also consider the similarities between the themes in womanist poetry and two examples of black women’s fiction.

Revolutionary poetry was written by black men and women and explored such subjects as war, political change and social action, in language that reflected their hatred and anger. Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Art” is perhaps the best demonstration of the aims of the revolutionary poetry that was being written. Baraka demanded “ ‘poems that kill’. Assassin poems...” and his final stanza declared:

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<sup>6</sup> One can speculate that the timing of these publications was motivated by a strategy deployed by the different publishing houses, although there is no real evidence to support that supposition. The theory that there is a kind of conspiracy among publishers to choose black women writers over their male counterparts did not really develop until the 1980s and was an argument promoted specially by Ishmael Reed – See Chapter Six.



“Let there be no love poems written  
until love can exist freely and  
cleanly....  
We want a black poem and a Black World.”<sup>7</sup>

Trying to recreate a black world through their poems, black women poets, quite daringly, wrote in the strong uncompromising language of their black male counterparts.<sup>8</sup>

Phillip B. Harper, in his essay “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s”, suggested that the bravado of these revolutionary poets was reflected in a sophisticated rhetorical style that made the expression of the word almost equal to its meaning, transforming revolutionary language into a form of revolutionary action.

The positing of this violent rhetoric as performative language predicates the status of Black Arts poetry as being *heard* by whites and *overheard* by blacks. For if, in the performative logic of the Black Arts work, to be heard is to annihilate those persons who effect one’s oppression, to be *overheard* is to impress upon one’s peers just how righteous, how fearsome, how potently nationalistic one is, in contradistinction to those very peers who are figured as the direct addressee of the Black Arts works.<sup>9</sup>

The very act of performance - stating your intent by expressing it before an audience - was sufficiently potent, Harper suggested, to convince the audience that a declaration

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<sup>7</sup> Amiri Baraka, “Black Art”, (1969) ed. Dudley Randall, The Black Poets (New York: Bantam, 1971) 223-224.

<sup>8</sup> “Theme and language was their major trademark. The use of obscenities and Black speech patterns was a very brave act indeed, especially for female artists.” Bettye J. Parker-Smith, “Running Wild In Her Soul: The Poetry Of Carolyn Rodgers”, ed. Mari Evans, Black Women Writers 1950-1980 (New York: Anchor, 1984) 405.

<sup>9</sup> Phillip B. Harper, “Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s”, Critical Inquiry Vol 19 No.2 (Winter 1993): 254.

of revolution had not just been heard but experienced. Harper noted that revolutionary black poets needed to convince their black audiences that poetry could defend the black community and bring white people to account for their actions. By positing violent rhetoric to “annihilate and impress”, the status of the poet, as well as his/her poetry, was enhanced. Such violent rhetoric was important for black women revolutionary poets who needed to show that they could master the language of revolutionary action, particularly as they were writing at a time when many of their black male contemporaries had been involved in actual physical battles with the police in places like Newark, Watts and Detroit.<sup>10</sup>

Harper’s idea of a performative annihilation of the oppressor through an inventive and passionate delivery of verse is a useful way of demonstrating the intentions of revolutionary poets to harm their oppressors. It also provides a crude distinction between revolutionary and womanist poetry; the former as the angry words for white people to hear and experience and the latter as the poetry for black people to share with each other in order to build up their own communities.

The term ‘womanist’, from the writer Alice Walker, describes “a black feminist or feminist of color who is committed to survival and wholeness of entire peoples”.<sup>11</sup> The intention of womanist poetry, therefore, was to improve relationships between black people. Thus, unlike revolutionary poetry, it was more inward looking, exploring relationships within the black community rather than the black community’s embattled relationship with the white world. In womanist poetry, black women wrote about their intimate relationships as opportunities for a revolution of

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<sup>10</sup> That is not to say that all writers had been involved in physical battles. Many of them felt that their fighting was in their writing.

<sup>11</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (San Francisco: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983) xi.

caring and respecting themselves and their loved ones through the enrichment of their domestic lives.

The critic Karen Jackson Ford, in *Gender and the Poetics of Excess*, argues that there were two types of black women's writing during the Black Arts Movement that reflected two gendered extremes:

Having first attempted to imitate the model  
hypermasculine revolutionary poet, some female poets  
retreated from its vulgarity and violence into a  
hyperfeminine mode that provided relief from certain  
stereotypes even as it imposed others.<sup>12</sup>

Jackson Ford's argument follows a sequence of ideas concerning the Movement's "aggressively heterosexual masculine persona" which was a "response to a long history of white racist assaults on black manhood, evidenced by the physical, economic, and political castration of African-American men".<sup>13</sup> Those experiences, she suggested, encouraged a "reified" view of black masculinity through which black men attempted to reposition themselves at the head of the black community.

This history, Jackson Ford argued, stifled black women's writing and imposed on their work a commitment to supporting black manhood that did not recognize their abilities as artists and activists. For Jackson Ford, black women retreated into a style of "hyperfeminine" writing, rather than advancing into feminist writing like their white female counterparts. Owing to the limitations of the Black Aesthetic movement, Jackson Ford expected black women writers to establish their own feminist movement that centred on their unique perspective as artists to be shared with their white sisters and black brothers. However, this was not the case. In 1970, the year of the National

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<sup>12</sup> Karen Jackson Ford, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, Jackson, 1997) 196.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.



Organisation of Women's first nationwide strike for equality, black women writers were writing in a style not wholly commensurate with feminist ideology. Thus while N.O.W. were pressing for "full participation, power and voice in the mainstream, inside the party, the political process, the professions, the business world",<sup>14</sup> black women writers were committing their art and activism to their families and communities. This is not to suggest that black women were not sympathetic to N.O.W.'s aims, but "power and voice in the mainstream" were not their primary concerns.<sup>15</sup> Black women poets, as womanists "committed to survival and wholeness of entire peoples", needed to write from a perspective that included social action for the benefit of their communities. A recent model had come from the Civil Rights Movement where black women activists had worked *with* their black male counterparts to develop community activism.<sup>16</sup>

In her follow-up to the *Feminine Mystique* (1963), the founder of N.O.W, Betty Friedan, wrote a second book, *The Second Stage* (1981):

The second stage cannot be seen in terms of women alone,  
our separate personhood or equality with men.  
The second stage involves coming to new terms with the  
family – new terms with love and with work.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>15</sup> "Because the decade of the sixties was so intensely political, a great deal of Afro-American literature leaned decidedly in the direction of public encounter. The writer, then and since, however private his concerns, has been compelled to function in an atmosphere of speech-making --- particularly when much of this speech-making concerns his very function as an artist. Thus the black writer finds himself torn between the arena and his study. He may, on the one hand, develop a sense of guilt concerning his lack of public commitment to the political struggle, or he may attempt to distil the militant language of struggle and deliberation into a self-contained world of art. Whatever his choice, some faction lies in wait to decry his decision such is the nature of critical debate." Larry Neal, "The Black Contribution To American Letters: Part II", ed. Mabel M. Smythe, *The Black American Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1976): 767-768.

<sup>16</sup> In an earlier unpublished work, I discussed "Womanpower" as an alliance in black women's political activism during the Civil Rights Movement:

"That which inspired black women was a dual mission of female activism for community advancement. Black women were not in any way supportive of male political hegemony but were displaying a careful consideration of black issues that demanded community-centred and woman-centred political interplay." Yvette Hutchinson, "Womanpower In The Civil Rights Movement", Unpublished M.A. Thesis, (1991) 3.

The second stage may not even be a women's movement.  
Men may be at the cutting edge of the second stage.<sup>17</sup>

Those principles highlighted the basis of womanist poetry after 1970. Rather than retreating into the hyperfeminine, black women by-passed the feminists' first stage to promote womanist concerns in their work. The reasons behind these changes were not, as Jackson Ford argued, a retreat from "vulgarity and violence", particularly as some of the black women poets were creating some of the most violent and explicit poetry of the time. Black women poets began to question the application of "revolutionary" ideas and their usefulness in building up a black nation.

At a time when they were beginning to raise their own families, the black women poets were unable to sustain their vehement anger against amorphous symbols of social, political and cultural inequality. Instead, they considered the effect that a revolution should be having on their lives and that of the next generation. Thus, for Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Carolyn Rodgers, their consideration for their children and the communities in which they would live, brought about changes in their work. There is an example of the significance of motherhood for the writers in Nikki Giovanni's 1970 book of poetry *Re:Creation*, which she dedicated to her son:

to tommy who...  
defined my nature  
and gave me a new name (mommy)  
which supersedes all others  
controls my life.<sup>18</sup>

Womanist fiction shared many of the themes of black women's poetry as the black women writers deployed a kind of "womanist essentialism" that placed family

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<sup>17</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Second Stage* (London: Sphere Books, 1983) First published in 1981.

<sup>18</sup> Nikki Giovanni, *Re:Creation* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1970).

and community at the heart of their work. The term womanist I've already described as the perspective of a black feminist committed to her people and I define the term essentialism as an assumption that a group or the activities of a group has defining features exclusive to its membership. Womanist essentialism, in this context, describes black women's writing and their themes of being committed to black women as agents for change in the black community.<sup>19</sup> To evaluate this womanist essentialism in black women's poetry and fiction. I will explore the development of revolutionary and womanist poetry in the work of Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Carolyn Rodgers. In the second part of the chapter I will briefly discuss Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* as examples of black women's fiction that assess healing and harm in the relationships between black people within their communities.

## II

Sonia Sanchez is perhaps the most prolific black woman poet of her generation. She was married to the writer/activist Etheridge Knight, whose imprisonment, during the 1960s, had a profound effect on her early writing. Her first book of poems, *Homecoming* (1969), was followed by *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *It's A New Day* (1971) and, in 1973, *A Blues Book For Black Magical Women* and *Love Poems*. It was in her first two collections that her revolutionary poetry was most marked.<sup>20</sup> "For Unborn Malcolms" (1969), lamented the death of Malcolm X and the

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<sup>19</sup> Because these black women were concentrating on their black communities and their own perceptions of their community, their ideas, while not exclusive to black women, had little relevance to their white female counterparts and was strikingly different from many of the views being expressed by black men.

<sup>20</sup> In 1971 Sanchez published her first children's book "It's a New Day" and has since published ten more books including prose and drama.



potential loss of his biological and ideological heirs. The poem was also an invitation; recruiting new revolutionaries to take on black rebellion. “For Unborn Malcolms” was a retaliation against the violence that black people suffered at the hands of white people. Perhaps also, in the post Civil-Rights era, it was a reaction against the many years of nonviolence.

git the word  
out that us blk/ niggers  
are out to lunch  
and the main course  
is gonna be white meat.<sup>21</sup>

“For Unborn Malcolms” demonstrates Harper’s theory of the revolutionary poet using words, as “annihilation” and, at the same time, impressing her peers with her own fearsome challenge to white people. However, despite her accusatory language, Sanchez was realistic about the *actual* effect of harsh words against violence which she debated in her poem “blk rhetoric”:

Who’s gonna make all  
that beautiful blk/rhetoric  
mean something  
like  
i mean  
who’s gonna take  
words  
Blk/beautiful  
and make more of it  
than blk/capitalism  
U dig?  
i mean  
like who’s gonna  
take all the young/long/haired/  
natural/brothers and sisters  
and let them

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<sup>21</sup> Sonia Sanchez, “For Unborn Malcolms”, Black Women Writers 1950-1980 438.

growtill  
         all that is  
 imp't is them  
         Selves  
                 moving in straight/  
 revolutionary/lines/toward the enemy  
 (and we know who that is)  
                 like.   Man.  
 who's gonna give our young  
         blk people new heroes.....

like. this. is an S.O.S  
 me. calling . .  
         calling . . . .  
                 some/one.  
 pleasereplysoon. (1969)<sup>22</sup>

“blk rhetoric” was written partly in response to Amiri Baraka’s 1969 poem ‘SOS’:

“Calling black people  
 Calling all black people, man woman child  
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in  
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling  
 you, calling all black people  
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come  
 on in”.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike Baraka’s imperative summons, ‘blk rhetoric’ was a plea for something more  
 and something better than the litany of revolutionary anger. Feminists might have  
 argued that Sanchez asked “who will?” because in a very masculine movement,  
 Sanchez recognised that she, as a woman, would not be expected or even encouraged  
 to “move in straight revolutionary lines towards the enemy”.<sup>24</sup> While that may be the  
 case, I am particularly interested in how “blk rhetoric” demonstrated Sanchez’s

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<sup>22</sup> Sonia Sanchez, “blk rhetoric”, *We a BaddDDD People* (Detroit: Broadside, 1970) 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, “SOS”, ed. William J. Harris, *The LeRoi Jones/ Amiri Baraka Reader* 218.

<sup>24</sup> Paraphrased from “blk rhetoric”.





of am I not yo/woman even if u went on shit again”, is in the form of a one-sided dialogue in which Sanchez explored a difficult domestic situation (influenced, quite possibly, by her relationship with her then husband, Etheridge Knight) :

**answer to yo/question  
of am I not yo/woman  
even if u went on shit again**

& i a beginner  
                                in yo love  
say no  
                i wud not be                yo/woman  
& see you disappear  
                                each day  
befo my eyes  
                                and know yo/  
reappearance  
                                to be  
                                a one/  
                                nite/ stand  
no man.  
blk/  
                lovers                cannot                live  
in wite powder that removes  
them from they blk /selves  
                                cannot ride  
majestic                /wite/ horses  
                                in a machine age.  
blk / lovers  
                                must live /  
                                push against the  
devils of this world  
                                against the creeping  
witeness of they own minds.  
i am yo / woman  
                                my man.  
                                and blk/women  
deal in babies and  
                                sweet / blk / kisses  
and nites that

multiply by twos.<sup>26</sup> (1970)

Thus Sanchez begins with a declaration of her love and then makes a political point through the metaphor of whiteness; in the evils of drug abuse and whiteness as a state of mind to erode black people's black consciousness. Finally, Sanchez beseeches her muse to turn his back on the devils of this world in order to deal in babies and sweet black kisses. This was a private poem which, to cite, Toni Cade, demonstrated black people "getting basic with each other".<sup>27</sup>

To return to Harper's theory of revolutionary black poets writing for a white audience to hear and for a black audience to overhear, in this poem, Sanchez demonstrated that she was not writing as a revolutionary, but as a womanist poet who had gone beyond caring about white people hearing (or overhearing) what she said. Sanchez was almost whispering in her muse's ear as she concentrated on saving her black man and black family life. Sanchez's work continued in this vein. In her brief membership of the Nation of Islam, Sanchez found rules that assisted her in her quest for providing for her black family:

I think, finally someone would have to come up and say  
'Look, there ain't no woman's role as such, other than  
loving her man, respecting her King, raising them kids, and  
if she has a special talent, being able to use that special  
talent within the context of the nation. <sup>28</sup>

This comment, made in a 1971 interview, seemed to be a dilution of Sanchez's revolutionary passion into the mild acquiescence of domesticity or, as Jackson Ford

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<sup>26</sup> Sonia Sanchez, "answer to yo/question of am I not yo/woman even if u went on shit again", *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>27</sup> Toni Cade, *The Black Woman* 4.

<sup>28</sup> Sebastian Clarke, "Woman Of The Times", *Black World* (June 1971):97.

would have it, retreat into hyperfemininity. However, the idea of black women using their special talents in the context of the *black* nation – rather than the Nation of Islam – expresses the main themes of womanist poetry, which continued to influence Sanchez’s work for the next three decades.

Nikki Giovanni regarded her own special talent to be a poet of the people who identified strongly with literature committed to political and social change. In her 1968 collection, *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, Giovanni published “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black Vs Negro”:

Nigger  
Can you kill  
Can you kill  
Can a nigger kill  
Can a nigger kill a honkie  
Can a nigger kill the Man  
Can you kill nigger  
Huh? nigger can you  
kill  
Do you know how to draw blood  
Can you poison  
Can you stab-a-jew  
Can you kill huh? nigger  
Can you kill  
Can you run a protestant down with your  
'68 El Dorado  
(that's all they're good for anyway)  
Can you kill  
Can you piss on a blond head  
Can you cut it off  
Can you kill  
A nigger can die  
We ain't got to prove we can die  
We got to prove we can kill  
They sent us to kill  
Japan and Africa  
We policed europe  
Can you kill  
Can you kill a white man  
Can you kill the nigger



in you  
 Can you make your nigger mind  
 die  
 Can you kill your nigger mind  
 And free your black hands to  
 strangle  
 Can you kill  
 Can a nigger kill  
 Can you shoot straight and  
 Fire for good measure  
 Can you kill them  
 Can you splatter their brains in the street  
 Can you kill them  
 Can you lure them to bed to kill them  
 We kill in Viet Nam  
 for them  
 We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US  
 And everywhere for all alphabet but  
 BLACK  
 Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK  
 Learn to kill niggers  
 Learn to be Black men.<sup>29</sup>

Giovanni excoriated real and imagined oppressions in a hate poem against those she identified as her enemies. More directly than Sanchez's "blk rhetoric", Giovanni was not asking "who will"? but "can you"? For Jackson Ford, Giovanni's question revealed that she only had two choices; to "mimic the male persona who embodies the Black Arts movement program, and risk sounding ridiculous", or to "call him to action, and accept her own inaction and subordination".<sup>30</sup> While there may be some truth in Jackson Ford's argument, Giovanni was not a hapless victim of subordination, flailing around in the masculine language of revolution. Giovanni posed those questions because she insisted on making demands of black men and putting their revolutionary claims to the test. In the midst of her inflammatory call to

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<sup>29</sup> Nikki Giovanni, "The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black Vs Negro", The Black Poets 318-319.

<sup>30</sup> Jackson Ford, Gender and the Poetics of Excess 195.

violence, Giovanni's goading distinguished between black men and incapable "niggers", or as Phillip Brian Harper described this latter group, "the Negro subject whose sense of self-worth and racial pride has yet to be proven".<sup>31</sup> Ironically the venom and anger of this poem contrasts with Giovanni's recurring theme of despair about black people's capacity to protect the vulnerable and, at the time, the capacity of revolutionary poetry to focus people's minds on social action.

In "For Saundra", Giovanni's telling introductory line "i wanted to write a poem that rhymes but revolution doesn't lend itself to be-bopping" began to separate revolutionary action from artistic endeavour. Giovanni reconsidered the nature of what was generally regarded as "poetic", and dismissed its relevance to the revolutionary times. Accepting the notion of poetry as something that rhymes, that lends itself to be be-bopping and talk about beauty, Giovanni, having assessed the sadness of an urban black community, concluded with the lines "perhaps these are not poetic times at all".<sup>32</sup> "For Saundra" is a pivotal poem because it raises the concerns and contradictions that moved Giovanni from writing revolutionary to womanist poems.

By 1970, in her poem "Revolutionary Dreams", Giovanni's ideas had changed considerably. Giovanni reconsidered the very nature of revolution and, in her re-evaluation, saw revolution as intrinsic to black womanhood and not an extrinsic battle with a disinterested outside world.

### **Revolutionary Dreams**

i used to dream militant  
dreams of taking  
over america to show  
these white folks how it should be done

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<sup>31</sup> Harper, "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s", 250.

<sup>32</sup> Nikki Giovanni, "For Saundra", The Black Poets 321-322.

i used to dream radical dreams  
of blowing everyone away with my perceptive  
powers  
of correct analysis  
i even used to think I'd be the one  
to stop the riot and negotiate the peace  
then i awoke and dug  
that if i dreamed natural  
dreams of being a natural  
woman doing what a woman  
does when she's natural  
i would have a revolution.<sup>33</sup>

Giovanni woke from her militant dream a transformed woman. She laid aside her weapons and took on the stewardship of the black community as a “natural” function of her black womanhood. “Revolutionary Dreams” is an example of the essentialism of womanist poetry that saw black women - as of right - the established agents for change in their communities. Giovanni did not define this natural black womanhood but the term was taken from “the natural” or afro unprocessed hair-style that was the height of contemporary black fashion. Those who chose this natural appearance generally had a strong black nationalist outlook and their external naturalness represented an ideological commitment to “black-conscious”, “Afro-centric” living.<sup>34</sup> For Giovanni, only a certain kind of woman - a natural black woman like herself, one assumes - could effectively create a revolution. Or, perhaps, the only revolution a black woman could create would be through the medium of her natural black self. In many ways, this was a powerful message to share with black women and men, but Giovanni’s natural black woman could, I fear, stop dreaming radical dreams and attempting to blow everyone away with perceptive powers of correct analysis and

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<sup>33</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “Revolutionary Dreams”, *Ego Tripping and other Poems for Young Readers* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1973) 28. This collection was the second of several books of poetry for young people. For Giovanni who felt herself defined by motherhood, writing for children became an important part of her work.

<sup>34</sup> “Black conscious” is a term used widely in black revolutionary circles that suggested a commitment to black culture and experiences.



instead become someone whose role in the revolution was “prone”.<sup>35</sup> Giovanni then, who in 1968 was writing “can you splatter their brains in the street”, by 1970, was declaring her ability to effect a revolution without guns or bullets but by emanating a natural black womanhood.

William J. Harris, in his consideration of Nikki Giovanni’s work, also defined two stages in her literary career:

When the revolution failed her, Giovanni turned to love and began writing a more personal poetry, signalling the onset of the second stage of her career. The literature of the seventies was quite unlike those of the hot and hopeful sixties....The sixties stood for endless possibility: the seventies for hopelessness and frustration... she seeks an alternative to public commitment and finds one in domestic love.<sup>36</sup>

To illustrate her alternative to public commitment Harris cited Giovanni’s poem “My House”, which presented a domestic contentment in an ideal community :

i’m saying it’s my house  
and i’ll make fudge and call  
it love and touch my lips  
to the chocolate warmth  
and smile at old men and call  
it revolution cause what’s real  
is really real...<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> During the Civil Rights Movement, at a 1964 meeting, Stokely Carmichael is alleged to have said that the position for women in the movement was ‘prone’. Carmichael has denied saying this and offered several explanations for the possible misunderstanding. However, despite Carmichael’s denials, there was huge debate about this statement and its effect on black and white women in the movement was profound.

<sup>36</sup> William J. Harris, “Sweet Soft Essence of Possibility: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni”, *Black Women Writers 1950-1980* 222.

<sup>37</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “My House”, *Ibid.*, 223 .

While I agree with much of Harris's analysis, I disagree with the idea that the revolution failed Giovanni. It might be more appropriate to describe this second phase, not as an alternative to public commitment, but as a different commitment to her most important personal and intimate relationships.<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the most dramatic segue from revolutionary to womanist poetry came from Carolyn Rodgers. A member of the Organization of Black Arts and Culture in Chicago, Rodgers attended the Writers Workshops run by Gwendolyn Brooks.<sup>39</sup> Rodgers' first book of poetry, *Paper Soul*, was published in 1968 and *Song of a Blackbird* in the following year. After 1969 Rodgers, who had been contributing to the Black Aesthetic debate in *The Negro Digest* and other journals, continued to write criticism. By 1976 Rodgers' next book of poetry, *How I Got Ovah*, reflected her new found Christian faith and a refutation of her earlier revolutionary ideas.

Rodgers' early writing was possibly the most strikingly revolutionary. She was described as a "product of the Black Arts Movement of the sixties...an exemplar of the 'revolutionary poet'".<sup>40</sup> Rodgers was committed to revolution and experimentation with form and structure and her use of language and imagery "represented a total rebellion against the restrictive English language".<sup>41</sup> In her

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<sup>38</sup> It is worth noting that it was also during this "second stage" that several of the poets, Sanchez and Carolyn Rodgers in particular, became committed to religious beliefs which were later reflected in their work. William Harris argued that this second stage was not just a religious change chosen by woman poets: "Giovanni is not the only figure to seek a new alternative in the seventies; Cleaver found God, Baraka found Marxism; Julian Bond shifted allegiances from the activist organization SNCC to the staid NAACP". Ibid. Harris's comment may be a little unfair as the move from SNCC to the NAACP happened partly because SNCC had effectively folded by 1968.

<sup>39</sup> Rodgers was perhaps the only direct beneficiary of a matrilineal literary heritage in this way.

<sup>40</sup> Bettie J. Parker-Smith, "Running Wild In Her Soul: The Poetry Of Carolyn Rodgers", *Black Women Writers 1950-1980* 405.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. "Carolyn Rodgers, nationalist poet and critic, was the most adamant of all the artists about the question of language... She also was presumptuous enough to criticize the language of Gwendolyn Brooks (ah the folly of youth) and to complain about the un-Black diction of Kereopetse (Willie ) Kgositsile, whose native tongue and language of creation is the African language, Tswana (how much blacker can you get?)" Jennifer Jordan "Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s: Politics and Poetry ed. Adolph Reed, Jr. *Race, Politics, And Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s* (New York: Greenwood, 1986) 41.

introduction to *Paper Soul* Rodgers outlined her rebellion against the conventions of poetry and fiction:

I will write about things that are universal. So that  
hundreds, maybe even thousands of years from now, White  
critics and readers will say of me, Here is a good Black  
writer, who wrote about truth and universal topics . . . I will  
write about Black people repossessing this earth, a-men.<sup>42</sup>

Signifying on the idea of universal themes for literature, Rodgers' suggestion that she would write for the approval of future generations of white people was typically sassy. In her writing was a wry, provocative refusal to conform to conventions of any kind. Another critic, Angeline Jamison, described Rodgers' early poems as a time when Rodgers "whipped with a lean switch, often bringing down her wrath with stinging, sharp, and sometimes excruciating pain".<sup>43</sup> Rodgers' early poetry was also argumentative and often very humorous. She used her wit to particular advantage when challenging those for whom black revolution was the latest fad:

"YEAH , I IS UH SHOOTIN OFF AT THE MOUTH, YEAH, I IS UH FAIRY TALE  
OR YEAH, I IS UH REVOLUTIONIST!"

i is uh revolutionist

i has uh blue newport dashiki

and uh solid gold tiki.

my girlfriend, she got uh natural

and i does too

my mother, she go tuh breadbasket

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<sup>42</sup> Carolyn Rodgers, "You Name It", *Paper Soul* (1968). Bettye J. Parker-Smith, "Running Wild in Her Soul: The Poetry of Carolyn Rodgers", *Black Women Writers: 1950-1980* 393-408.

<sup>43</sup> Angeline Jamison, "Imagery in the Women Poems: The Art of Carolyn Rodgers", *Ibid.*, 396.



ev'ry sat. morning  
and we is saving to buy as many  
Black businesses as we can.  
i is uh revolutionist  
cause i don't' eat pig no mo  
cause i dun read Fanon &  
Malcolm and i quote LeRoi &  
Karenga & my brotha – he be-  
long to the Black Panther  
Party!  
Yeah, i is uh revolutionist  
and i belongs to uh revolutionary  
group What GOT FunDED (!) . (and we is got some guns)  
and was telling the wite folks (out in whatchamacallit)  
what we was gon do tuh them.  
i gives the fist everytime i ·  
see uh brotha, i speak swa-  
hili ½% of the time and i  
stay on the wite boys and  
negroes case  
i write poetry since day befo yesterday  
and i use words like muthafucka & goddamn to show  
that i'm bad---i listens to coltrane ev'ry morning  
when i take my shower and i dream about sun-ra & the  
cosmos. yeah, i is uh revolutionist, yeah YOU BET!

i is Uh ReVoLuTioNiST!!!!

BOOOOOOOOOOOM

Ladies & Gentlemen- We are sorry to announce that  
our REVOLUTIONIST for this week's  
installment of AESOP'S FAIRY TALES  
just shot his mouth off with  
his tongue..... (3-3-69)<sup>44</sup>

This poem shows Rodgers at her best. Her fast –paced signifying illustrates how easy it is for revolution to become a fashionable trend for followers of popular culture. An acute social observer, Rodgers blended the important revolutionary influences like Fanon, African identity and black economic independence, with the reduction of black revolution to certain styles of dress, language, images and art forms. Thus, even in her revolutionary poetry, Rodgers, like Sanchez and Giovanni, was commenting on rhetoric that did not effect change in black people's lives.

However, perhaps more than Giovanni and Sanchez, Rodgers was deliberately provocative, trying to push the boundaries of what was acceptable for her to say as a black woman poet. The best example of her provocative insistence to challenge convention is in her poem "The Last M.F." (1969). There Rodgers signified on perceptions of black womanhood and on those who wanted to dictate what a feminine role should be. The poem was also Rodgers' own response to some hurtful criticism from fellow black (male) poets.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Carolyn Rodgers, "YEAH , I IS UH SHOOTIN OFF AT THE MOUTH, YEAH, I IS UH FAIRY TALE OR YEAH, I IS UH REVOLUTIONIST!" *Songs of A Blackbird* (Third World Press, Chicago Illinois, 1973) 28-29.

<sup>45</sup> In his introduction to Rodgers second volume of poetry *Songs of A Blackbird*, David Llorens noted that Rodgers forthright poetry had been particularly challenging to some of her black male counterparts. "Some 'revolutionary' brothers had put the 'bad mouth' on her." These 'brothers' had asked Llorens to check her out and in his

## The Last M.F.

they say,  
that i should not use the word  
muthafucka anymo  
in my poetry or any speech i give . . .  
as the new black womanhood suggest a softer self . . .  
i say,  
that i only call muthafuckers, muthafuckers  
and all manner of wites, card-carrying muthafuckers  
and all manner of blacks (negroes too) sweet  
muthafuckers, crazy muthafuckers, lowdown muthafuckers,  
cool muthafuckers, mad and revolutionary muthafuckers,  
But anyhow you all know just like I do (whether I say  
it or not), there's plenty of MEAN muthafuckers out  
here trying to do the struggle in and we all know  
that none of us can relax until the last m.f.'s  
been done in.<sup>46</sup>

Like Sanchez and Giovanni, Rodgers was distinguishing between blacks, Negroes and those “trying to do the struggle in”. Ostensibly “The Last M.F.” is Rodgers’ bullish farewell to obscenities and to the revolutionary while contradicting this assertiveness with evidence of her softer self within the poem:

i say,  
that i am soft, and you can subpoena my man, put him  
on trial, and he will testify that i am  
soft in the right places at the right times  
and often we are so reserved , i have nothing to say.

---

introduction Lloren applauded the new energy that her work represented and encouraged men and women to listen carefully to her message.

In Chapter Two I discussed the authenticating preface in slave narratives in the context of William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In a crude sense, Lloren’s introductory essay was an authenticating preface from a black man of repute, who endorsed the work of a black woman to a black male readership.

<sup>46</sup> Carolyn Rodgers, “The Last M.F.”, *Black Women Writers 1950-1980* 406-407.



In this candid poem, Rodgers almost capitulated to her male critics as she assured her reader of her femininity.

“The Last M.F.” was not Rodgers’ only farewell. In the same year she wrote an essay “Uh Nat’chal Thang- The Whole Truth – Us” (1970), where she challenged revolutionary poetry and looked back critically at some of its characteristics:

Many of the poets of the Sixties shouted, screamed and writhed on paper in pain. Others wrote pure desire to *off* the man and were often fantasy-oriented. There were gorried (*sic*) imagination and over-romanticization of ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

Rodgers included herself in both categories and argued that in revolutionary poetry there was insufficient emphasis on humanity “except in terms of ridicule, put downs and signification”. She did not publish any poetry for several years and began an exploration of the Christian faith which, in earlier poems like “Testimony,” she had dismissed as a psychological tool to keep black people down. In her 1976 collection “How I Got Ovah”, Rodgers contrasted revolutionary tactics and Christian beliefs and endorsed what the critic Estella Sales called the “metaphorically symbolic bridges” of her Christian faith, her family, her church community and the wider black community.<sup>48</sup>

### **Some of Me Beauty**

The fact is  
That I don’t hate any body any more  
I went through my mean period  
If you remember I spit out nails

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<sup>47</sup> Carolyn Rodgers, “Uh Nat’chal Thang- The Whole Truth – Us”, Black World (September 1971): 6-7.

<sup>48</sup> Estella M. Sales, “Contradictions in Black Life: Recognized and Reconciled in ‘How I Got Ovah’”, CLA Journal Vol.25 No.1 (Sept. 1981):74-75, 81.

Chewed tobacco on paper  
And dipped some bad snuff. . .  
I woke up one morning  
And looked at my self Carolyn  
Not Imani man jua or soul sister poetess of  
The moment  
I saw more than a “sister” . . .  
I saw a Woman, human.  
And black.  
I felt a spiritual transformation  
A root revival of love.<sup>49</sup>

The emphasis on her humanity in this poem contrasts with Rodgers earlier insistence on using obscenities in her battle against M.Fs “trying to do the struggle in”. In this retrospective poem that is almost an apology for her earlier attitudes and work, Rodgers appraised herself as an individual black woman. Her “spiritual transformation” was perhaps similar to Giovanni’s militant dream that transformed her into a “natural woman”, and comparable with Sanchez’s desire to “deal in babies and /sweet/blk/kisses”. For Rodgers, like Sanchez and Giovanni, the evolution from revolutionary to womanist poetry was a transformation that took her away from revolutionary invective and towards an expression that put her as a woman with her “special talents” at the heart of her poetry. These transformations did not stop black women from writing poems, nor did it restrict them to domestic themes, but allowed them to explore ideas similar to Friedan’s second stage and come “to new terms with the family – new terms with love and with work”.<sup>50</sup>

### III

These new terms also reflected the aims of the black women novelists emerging at the same time. The novelists, however, unlike the poets, had not been

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<sup>49</sup> Carolyn Rodgers, “Some of Me Beauty”, *How I got Ovah* (New York: Anchor, 1976) 53.

<sup>50</sup> Friedan, *The Second Stage* 28.

part of a movement for revolutionary black fiction – indeed, they had been semi-detached from the Black Aesthetic and their approach to their work was not so obviously linked to the work of black male writers. Thus I have not argued for a change from revolutionary to womanist novels as the emergence of black women's fiction did not clearly evolve from revolutionary ideological foundations. The punchy, short-lived bursts of revolutionary anger were more fitted to poems rather than to the character explorations of the novel. For the black women novelists, coming to new terms with the family, love and work, as Alice Walker pointed out, was the basis of their writing:

Black women continue to talk about intimate relationships so that we can recognise what is happening when we see it, then maybe there will be some change in behavior on the part of men *and* women.<sup>51</sup>

There was a sense that the black community had to be a haven for black people who were victims of oppression by white society. Black women novelists were, therefore, demanding that black men and women be responsible members of their communities, to change their behaviour in order that their communities could be places of refuge.

Casting their buckets where they were, so to speak, black women novelists investigated personal relationships and tried to understand their community and guide

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<sup>51</sup> Alice Walker, "We black women writers know very clearly that our survival depends on trust. We will not have or cannot have anything until we examine what we do to and with each other. There just has not been enough examination or enough application of finding to real problems in our day-to-day living". Sherley Anne Williams made a similar point in the same book of interviews: "Twentieth -century black women writers all seem to be much more interested in the black community, in intimate relationships, with the white world as a *backdrop*, which is certainly the appropriate perspective in my view." ed. Claudia Tate, Black Women Writers At Work (England: Oldcastle Books, 1985) 181, 206.

The critic Barbara Christian argued "White culture, of course, has an impact on these communities, for it inflicts psychic terror upon them. But the definition of the community does not come solely from its confrontation with white culture." Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition (London: Greenwood, 1980) 240.



its purpose.<sup>52</sup> In her book *Mooring and Metaphors*, Karla Holloway discussed how this community focus was extended to the way black women writers used “the word”:

The province of the word for black women commands a perspective that does not isolate it from its community source...Black women writers seem to concentrate on shared ways of saying, black males concentrate on individual ways of behaving.<sup>53</sup>

Black women novelists developed characters who worked *with* their communities rather than preached at them from a distance. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, in particular, assessed the positive and negative aspects of black life and made demands on their characters to “do right” by themselves and their communities.<sup>54</sup> In her first novel, *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland* (1970), Walker dealt with ‘tough love’, critically acknowledging the sweet and bitter experiences that came from the same source. In Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison too questioned how ‘community’ could be a positive and negative force for black people. The black feminist critic Barbara Christian compared both novels and challenged the response of the female characters who, like the community in which they were placed, accepted their ascribed social position.

In both novels, the community is directly responsible for the tragedies of the major characters - for the madness of Pecola Breedlove, for the suicide of Margaret Copeland,

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<sup>52</sup> In his 1901 Atlanta Exposition Address, Booker T. Washington admonished the audience of black and white gentlemen to “Cast down your buckets where you are...It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.” Black women writers were beginning at the base of community life by examining the relationship between black people. Booker T. Washington “Atlanta Exposition Address” ed. Joanne Grant, *Black Protest: History Documents and Analyses 1619 TO THE PRESENT* (New York: Fawcett, Premier, 1968)195-199.

<sup>53</sup> Karla F.C. Holloway, *Mooring & Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 7.

<sup>54</sup> I’ve taken this phrase from Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. In one of the novel’s most important scenes, the main character Celie announced her decision to leave her husband ‘Mister’. In response to his scorn she said: “Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail.” *The Color Purple* (London: Women’s Press, 1983) 176.

and for the murder of Mem Copeland by her husband. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison emphasises the women's view of themselves. In *Grange Copeland*, Walker stresses the men's view. In these novels it is not only that an individual heroine accepts the sexist and racist definitions of herself, but that the entire black community, men and women, accept this construct-- resulting in the destruction of many black women.<sup>55</sup>

While I agree with Christian's summary of the community contribution to the harm in these women's lives, I disagree with her suggestion that Walker's and Morrison's heroines were passive in the face of their oppression. To consider how black women fiction writers balanced their appraisal of the black community, I will refer to the idea of the "grotesque aesthetic" posited by the theologian and critic Victor Anderson in *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995).

The grotesque aesthetic holds in tension the ambiguities between attraction and repulsion, and exposes both the light and dark sides of culture, it recognizes that things can be otherwise than how they appear.<sup>56</sup>

The grotesque aesthetic suggests a way of making balanced critical judgments between the rhetoric of "Black is Beautiful" and the ugliness of abusive relationships that fractured black people's lives. The exposure of the "light and dark sides of the culture" was the goal of black women novelists who saw black women as leading communities to critically examine their actions and their consequences. Exploring these ideas, Toni Morrison stated:

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<sup>55</sup> Barbara Christian, "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction", (1983) *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives On Black Women Writers* (London: Pergamon, 1985) 178.

<sup>56</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995) 14-15. See the introduction for a discussion of Anderson's theory.



Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure...They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We, black women, do both. We don't find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive.<sup>57</sup>

Thus in black women's fiction, a depiction of the black community was not "a vision which in its romantic evocation of the rural and the folk avoids some of the most crucial and urgent issues of cultural struggle".<sup>58</sup> Black women writers "outed inside business" in their candid discussion of black community life. There were disagreements between black women critics about 'internal' issues and those to be discussed publicly and Edith Hambrick, in response to the inflammatory essay "Black Woman to Black Man"<sup>59</sup> by Gail A. Stokes, penned a bitter reply "Black Woman to Black Woman":

Whenever there is a revolution there is an urgent need for unity and secrecy. The members of a camp never publicly give vent to their discontent or disagreements. These are settled clandestinely.<sup>60</sup>

Morrison and Walker, however, were unwilling to settle their disagreements clandestinely. In *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland*, Walker's main themes were judgement and redemption. The story is set in 1920s Georgia and concerns the sharecropper Grange Copeland, who lives with his wife Margaret and son Brownfield. Their abject poverty, and Grange's anger at his treatment by white landowners, contribute to his physical and verbal abuse of his family. This ends when Grange

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<sup>57</sup> Toni Morrison, Black Women Writers At Work 122.

<sup>58</sup> Hazel V Carby, Reconstructing Black Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 175.

<sup>59</sup> Gail A. Stokes, "Black Woman to Black Man", Liberator Vol. 8 No. 12 (1968): 21-22

<sup>60</sup> Edith Hambrick, "Black Woman to Black Woman", Liberator Vol.8 No.12 (1968):23-27. Years later in a 1984 interview with Claudia Tate, Lucille Clifton offered a similar view: "I don't believe that I should only talk about the beauty and strength and goodness of my people but I do believe that if we talk about our room for improvement we should do it privately. I don't believe in public family fights. But I do think sometimes a good fight is cleansing. We are not perfect people. There are no perfect people." Lucille Clifton, "A Simple Language", Black Women Writers at Work 137-138.



moves to New York. He returns to Georgia to find his wife dead and his son married. Grange sees that his son has a similarly abusive relationship with his wife Mem, who, after years of abuse, commits suicide. Grange takes custody of his grand-daughter Ruth and through his relationship with her is redeemed by his actions in his 'third life'. Walker, however, was criticised for her negative portrayal of male characters. She refuted this criticism by pointing out that she was trying to create a real society and that the wickedness of the character Brownfield is balanced by the redemption of the character Grange.

*The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is a very realistic novel...I will not ignore people like Brownfield. I want you to know I know they exist. I want to tell you about them, and there is no way you are going to avoid them. You are going to have to deal with them. I wish people would do that rather than tell me that this is not the right image.<sup>61</sup>

Forcing her readers to "deal with" people like Brownfield, Walker's novel typified the "hard-hearted attempt to get basic with each other,"<sup>62</sup> that Toni Cade noted in her introduction to *The Black Woman*. In "getting basic", Walker's work was similar to that of Sanchez and Giovanni's earliest womanist poems. Walker portrayed her concerns about her community's difficulties and asked her community, "how are we to deal with them? Who is going to make a judgement?" She continued:

They think that to be nonjudgmental is progress. But in fact, it isn't when your non-judgment means that people suffer. And they do because there is no one saying with the

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<sup>61</sup> Alice Walker, *Ibid.*, 176-177.

<sup>62</sup> Cade, *The Black Woman* 7.

whole authority of the community that what you are doing is hurting us as a community.<sup>63</sup>

Walker's "realistic" characters, like Brownfield and 'Mister' in *The Color Purple*, demanded judgement from her readers and offered judgement as a solution to the warnings in her novels.<sup>64</sup> However, Walker did not say how these judgements could be made and what sanctions and consequences should be exacted. Thus Walker, even though she illustrated the light and dark sides of black culture, gave no suggestions as to how a damaged people begin to "do right".

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* also examines harm and psychological danger and is probably one of the best examples of attraction and repulsion in modern black fiction. The narrative is told through the changing seasons and uses flashbacks to chart Pecola Breedlove's descent into madness. Morrison begins each chapter with a heading from a Dick and Jane story; and the dissonance between Pecola's experience and the Dick and Jane ideal symbolises the effect of poverty and racism on black people's lives.<sup>65</sup> Self-hate, alongside the community's inability to love without damaging each other, is an important theme in Morrison's work.

Both Morrison and Walker develop complex characters whose most heinous behaviour was, Morrison argued, understandable within the context of their experiences, a view that she strongly defended:

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<sup>63</sup> Alice Walker, *Black Women Writers at Work* 181.

<sup>64</sup> Alice Walker cited Ntozake Shange's 1975 play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Euf* (1975) as an example of how art could confront negative behaviour. The piece was comprised of dramatized personal stories "which were to explore the realities of seven different kinds of women". Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Euf* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977 edition) xii. "When you see *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Euf*, for example, and you see what the behavior looks like on stage and you recognize it, you are recognizing it as behavior you've seen in the real world and you can judge the consequences of it. This recognition has to become very ordinary for all black people. We must be able to see what is happening, recognize such behavior and make a judgment. Judgment is crucial because judgment is lacking in black people these days". Alice Walker, *Black Women Writers at Work* 181.

<sup>65</sup> Dick and Jane are first grade primer reading books similar to the Janet and John stories in the U.K.

I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to *look* at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left.<sup>66</sup>

Asking her audience to look at the relative powerlessness of her characters, Morrison tried to explain how black men and women, located in a certain community at a given time, could injure themselves and their loved ones. She showed the tenacity of black woman authors who through their female characters tried to “expose the light and dark sides of culture” to recognise that “things can be otherwise than how they appear”.<sup>67</sup> In Morrison's and Walker's novels, their characters accept that they can not walk away from their experiences or abandon their commitments but have to deal with them in the context of their communities. And, as the critic Barbara Christian pointed out, black women writers, like their characters, while “critical of their own communities... come back to them [to] work out their resistance in that territory”.<sup>68</sup>

### III

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<sup>66</sup> Toni Morrison, *Black Women Writers At Work* 125.

<sup>67</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* 17.

<sup>68</sup> Barbara Christian, "Trajectories Of Self-Definition", 180. Such women are described by the critic Audrey McCluskey in an essay on the poetry of Lucille Clifton as “going-on women”: The ‘going -on’ women ... know that the world is not a sane and rational place, but it is the only world that we have. So they have learned to manipulate the chaos - not control it - to ensure their individual and collective survival.” Audrey T. McClusky, “Tell The Good News: A View of the Works of Lucille Clifton”, *Black Women Writers 1950-1980* 145.



Before 1970, social inequality, rage and killing preoccupied the poets' vision. They responded to this with "poems that kill". By 1970 there was a distinctly different style emerging from black women poets and fiction writers as their revolutionary fervour was channelled within the black community. Black women writers were fighting against patriarchy and perhaps against a white feminist agenda which did not appreciate the black woman's role as one who contributed to making a refuge for her people in her community. Black women novelists appropriated the women's sphere not as their only arena for expression but as the most important aspect of black life, an area for which they embraced the responsibility.

I began this chapter with a quotation from Amiri Baraka's 1970 essay "Black Woman". I would like to end the chapter with another part of Baraka's essay:

[i]t must be Black consciousness that is given to our babies with their milk, and with the warmth of the Black woman's loving body. Black consciousness, survival training, inspiration.<sup>69</sup>

Baraka's entreaty was not as patriarchal as it might first appear. Black women writers, through their own work, began to recognise the significance of the personal. They understood the importance of developing black consciousness in their most intimate relationships, which in its turn, would have an impact on the black community. They took it upon themselves to express concern over dysfunctional black families, the effects of self-hate on young black women's minds and the dangers of not engaging with issues that were damaging black people's lives. Black women writers made a significant and determined choice to write things as they saw them, refracted by the

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<sup>69</sup> Imamu Amiri Baraka, "Black Woman", Black World Vol.XIX No.9 (July 1970):9.

black women's experience and through the personal and intimate, sought to reconcile black people with themselves.

## Conclusion

### **“Relanguaging” Black People in a Black Consciousness.<sup>1</sup>**

#### **I**

In my introduction I described the Black Arts Movement as “loosely” beginning in 1965 with the death of Malcolm X and the establishment of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School. I used the term “loosely” because the Movement was a combination of a variety of artistic activities, some of which had actually begun almost a decade earlier. It is equally hard to propose a definite end date as the spirit of the Movement and its impact on artistic disciplines has, in many ways, continued to this day. There were, however, some significant events in 1974 that heralded the diminution of specifically Black Arts and Black Aesthetic initiatives. By 1974 some of the artists who had gravitated to New York in the 1960s had returned to their own communities to set up their own projects there. For Amiri Baraka, who “changes ideologies , but not his direction”,<sup>2</sup> 1974 was the year when he became a Third World Marxist, a shift in loyalties that he explained in his 1975 essay “The Congress of Afrikan People: A Position Paper”.<sup>3</sup> Baraka’s ideological shift occurred when in August of that year, at the Pan African Congress in Tanzania, “race-based struggle was repudiated/renounced by most of the strongest forces in Africa”.<sup>4</sup> Also, in November 1974, after the first such symposium since 1968, the first National Annual Conference of Afro-American Writers was held at Howard University. After the frenzy

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<sup>1</sup> A statement made by Max Rodriguez during the National Black Writers Conference at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York. National Black Writers Conference . Friday 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Thomas, “The Shadow World: New York’s Umbra Workshop & Origins of The Black Arts Movement”. *Callaloo* Vol.1 No. 4 (October 1978): 70.

<sup>3</sup> Amiri Baraka, “The Congress of Afrikan People: A Position Paper”, *Black Scholar* (Jan/Feb, 1975):5.

“Nationalism is backward when it says we cannot utilize the revolutionary experience of the world . . . the theories and experience of men like Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung . . . Fidel Castro. . . to utilize all this revolutionary experience and revolutionary theory, by integrating it with the concrete practice of the black liberation movement.”

<sup>4</sup> Kalamu Ya Salaam, “The Black Arts Movement”, William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris. eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 74.



of conferences and symposia that had taken place during the mid –1960s, the 1974 conference, after a six year break, heralded the return of symposia dedicated to black intellectual discourse, whose emphasis now was the examination of black literature and critical discourse within academic institutions.

Throughout the Black Arts Movement, there was a crude division between the community activism and intellectual pursuits of the participants and in this thesis I have concentrated on the intellectual ambitions and the attempts of the artists to make those ambitions compatible with a commitment to black community development. The aim to establish black institutions was successfully achieved, particularly on a local community level through the development of black theatre groups. Later, projects like Spirit House in Newark widened the scope of the black theatre projects to include other arts initiatives and cultural programmes. Also, within existing institutions, there was a significant development of Black Studies programmes in traditionally black colleges such as Howard University, led by Stephen Henderson, and Spelman led by Vincent Harding. There were other examples of black people's involvement in institution building, as critics like Houston Baker, for instance, established themselves as literary critics with a special interest in black literature in universities outside the Negro College system.<sup>5</sup>

The other aim of the Movement, the development of a canon of works, was even more successful. Through such anthologies as *Black Fire*, *The Black Aesthetic*, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* and *The Black Poets* and, of course, in the four year Black Aesthetic debate in the *Negro Digest*, a notable body of plays, poetry and fiction was produced. There was also an increase in the number of

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<sup>5</sup> There had always been notable black academics writing about black people, but there was an increase in Black Studies programmes, particularly in white institutions.

regular journals such as the *Journal of Black Poetry* as well as odd spasmodic journals like *SoulBook*, *Black Expressions*, *Black Dialog* and *The Cricket*.<sup>6</sup>

Black ownership of these publications and the inspiring role of such editors as Hoyt Fuller at *Negro Digest* and Joe Goncalves at *The Journal of Black Poetry* were crucial factors in the achievement of the aim to develop black institutions. These editors also offered an oblique leadership in the organisation of critical discussion on black literature and culture.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the involvement of these editors and the profusion of works, the Black Arts Movement activities and discussions were not part of a planned programme. The Movement was not led by a particular individual, its events were rarely national and did not benefit from positive press coverage. Yet the Movement, in a period of immense social change, made black consciousness and black identity the lingua franca of black artists and this was reinforced in music, styles of dress, African language salutations and through the reciprocal dialogue in the writing of black revolutionary writers.

The Black Arts Movement's most important achievement was in creating a sense of blackness for a generation of black writers. Believing in an exclusive black experience, the black writers argued for a theory to represent the total experience of black people's lives in America. From this perspective of blackness they based their

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<sup>6</sup> "If one examines the members of the workshops, the editorial boards of journals like *Umbra*, *Black World*, *Nommo*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Soulbook*, *Dialogue*, *Black Expressions*, the *Black Collegian*, and *Black Books Bulletin* and the contributors to these journals, one can discern that there existed, with the aid of the jet plane and money from Black Studies programs, a network of writers and critics who, though limited in number, cooperated with and reacted to one another on a national level." Jennifer Jordan, "Cultural Nationalism in the 1960s: Politics and Poetry" ed. Adolph Reed, Jr. *Race, Politics and Culture: Critical Essays on the Radicalism of the 1960s*. (New York: Greenwood, 1986) 39.

<sup>7</sup> The ownership of the means of creative and critical production appealed to grass-roots organizations and from such beginnings came the development of black publishing houses such as Dudley Randall's Broadside Press and Baraka's Jihad Publications. In an interview with Susan Kelly, Sonia Sanchez talked about the significance of Dudley Randall's Broadside Press and discussed how she and other black poets wanted to support independent black publishing and ploughed their royalties back into the companies. Susan Kelly, "Discipline and Craft: An interview with Sonia Sanchez" *African American Review* Vol.34, No.4 (Winter,2000):679-687.

essentialist approach to art, which they attempted to theorise through the Black Aesthetic.

The debate about a Black Aesthetic became the platform for new black writers to express their ideas and engage in critical dialogue.<sup>8</sup> Insisting on blackness and, as Stephen Henderson suggested, saturation in blackness, was one way in which black writers were able to maintain the exclusivity of the Movement; away from white critics, from whose uninformed criticism they wished to protect their work.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately

black writers embraced blackness for personal and political reasons, to counteract the deluge of whiteness they faced in the history, literature and music of their formal education and in their American literary heritage.

## II

The Black Arts Movement was a period of heightened black artistic activity, when black writers attempted to define a philosophy of blackness, revelled in that blackness and in raising the black consciousness of black people. The notion of blackness inspired the Black Aesthetic, which was an important contribution to black American literature, independent black publishing and the development of new black writers. It influenced black and white attitudes towards black cultural expression and, perhaps most importantly, in the promotion of a shared black identity, was part of black consciousness raising for black people during the 1960s and '70s and a legacy for the following generations.

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<sup>8</sup> There was good example of such an exchange on black cultural nationalism between Ron Karenga and James Cunningham in *Negro Digest* (1968).

<sup>9</sup> Challenging white criticism of black writing was not the sole province of Black Aesthetic writers and both Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed had challenged Irving Howe's criticism.



From the next generation, Trey Ellis, the novelist, screenwriter and former student of Ishmael Reed, wrote an essay entitled “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989). Ellis discussed how a new group of black men and women “have inherited an open-ended new Black Aesthetic from a few Seventies pioneers that shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines”. Ellis was positing a theory of a new black aesthetic that recognised the influence of the Black Arts Movement and the ambitions of its participants. In a response to subsequent criticism of his essay, Ellis argued the following:

this new movement is fueled by naïve exuberance and a for now unshakeable belief that our youthful black power can perfect society and perfect the soul...It is within this exuberance that you find our leftist, neo-Nationalist politic. We realize that a poem, no matter how fiery, isn't going to feed a homeless black child or make a black junkie clean his syringe. But it can perhaps disseminate some small corner of truth- either political, historical, or psychological – stumbled upon by the young artist.<sup>10</sup>

The unshakable belief that a poem “can perhaps disseminate some small corner of truth- either political, historical, or psychological” was the dream of such writers as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Larry Neal, Nikki Giovanni, Ishmael Reed and Carolyn Rodgers as it was, thirty years later, for Ellis and some of his contemporaries. The “naïve exuberance”, the sense of “black power” and the hope to “disseminate some small corner of truth” demonstrate the impact of a Black Arts Movement, whose Black Aesthetic legacy continues to evolve and influence black literary discourse to this day.

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<sup>10</sup> Trey Ellis, “Response to NBA Critiques”, Callaloo Vol.12 No.1 (Winter 1989): 250.

During the National Black Writers Conference in New York, in March 2000, as part of his introduction to an evening of performance poetry, the publisher and conference co-organizer Max Rodriguez placed the current interest in performance poetry in context with earlier black performance poets such as Sonia Sanchez and Kalamu Ya Salaam, both guests at the event. Reminiscing, Rodriguez discussed the impact of the Black Arts Movement, which he described as a pivotal event in black literary history. He concluded that the effect of the Black Arts Movement on black people was to “relanguage us in a black consciousness”.<sup>11</sup> And indeed, the Black Arts Movement provided the poetry, the lyrics and the prose for black America’s 1960s revolution.

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<sup>11</sup> Max Rodriguez, National Black Writers Conference at the Schomburg Center, Harlem, New York. National Black Writers Conference . Friday 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2000.

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