Historical Overviews of The Black Arts Movement

Kaluma ya Salaam

Both inherently and overtly political in content, the Black Arts movement was the only American literary movement to advance "social engagement" as a sine qua non of its aesthetic. The movement broke from the immediate past of protest and petition (civil rights) literature and dashed forward toward an alternative that initially seemed unthinkable and unobtainable: Black Power.

In a 1968 essay, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal proclaimed Black Arts the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." As a political phrase, Black Power had earlier been used by Richard Wright to describe the mid-1950s emergence of independent African nations. The 1960s' use of the term originated in 1966 with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee civil rights workers Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks. Quickly adopted in the North, Black Power was associated with a militant advocacy of armed self-defense, separation from "racist American domination," and pride in and assertion of the goodness and beauty of Blackness.

Although often criticized as sexist, homophobic, and racially exclusive (i.e., reverse racist), Black Arts was much broader than any of its limitations. Ishmael Reed, who is considered neither a movement apologist nor advocate ("I wasn't invited to participate because I was considered an integrationist"), notes in a 1995 interview,

I think what Black Arts did was inspire a whole lot of Black people to write. Moreover, there would be no multiculturalism movement without Black Arts. Latinos, Asian Americans, and others all say they began writing as a result of the example of the 1960s. Blacks gave the example that you don't have to assimilate. You could do your own thing, get into your own background, your own history, your own tradition and your own culture. I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that.

**History and Context**. The Black Arts movement, usually referred to as a "sixties" movement, coalesced in 1965 and broke apart around 1975/1976. In March 1965 following the 21 February assassination of Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) moved from Manhattan's Lower East Side (he had already moved away from Greenwich Village) uptown to Harlem, an exodus considered the symbolic birth of the Black Arts movement. Jones was a highly visible publisher (*Yugen* and *Floating Bear*magazines, Totem Press), a celebrated poet (*Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note,*1961, and *The Dead Lecturer,*1964), a major music critic *(Blues People,*1963), and an Obie Award-winning playwright (*Dutchman,*1964) who, up until that fateful split, had functioned in an integrated world. Other than James Baldwin, who at that time had been closely associated with the civil rights movement, Jones was the most respected and most widely published Black writer of his generation.

While Jones's 1965 move uptown to found the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) is the formal beginning (it was Jones who came up with the name "Black Arts"), Black Arts, as a literary movement, had its roots in groups such as the Umbra Workshop. Umbra (1962) was a collective of young Black writers based in Manhattan's Lower East Side; major members were writers Steve Cannon, Tom Dent, Al Haynes, David Henderson, Calvin C. Hernton, Joe Johnson, Norman Pritchard, Lenox Raphael, Ishmael Reed, Lorenzo Thomas, James Thompson, Askia M. Touré (Roland Snellings; also a visual artist), Brenda Walcott, and musician-writer Archie Shepp. Touré, a major shaper of "cultural nationalism," directly influenced Jones. Along with Umbra writer Charles Patterson and Charles's brother, William Patterson, Touré joined Jones, Steve Young, and others at BARTS.

Umbra, which produced *Umbra Magazine,*was the first post-civil rights Black literary group to make an impact as radical in the sense of establishing their own voice distinct from, and sometimes at odds with, the prevailing white literary establishment. The attempt to merge a Black-oriented activist thrust with a primarily artistic orientation produced a classic split in Umbra between those who wanted to be activists and those who thought of themselves as primarily writers, though to some extent all members shared both views. Black writers have always had to face the issue of whether their work was primarily political or aesthetic. Moreover, Umbra itself had evolved out of similar circumstances: In 1960 a Black nationalist literary organization, On Guard for Freedom, had been founded on the Lower East Side by Calvin Hicks. Its members included Nannie and Walter Bowe, Harold Cruse (who was then working on *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,*1967), Tom Dent, Rosa Guy, Joe Johnson, LeRoi Jones, and Sarah Wright, among others. On Guard was active in a famous protest at the United Nations of the American-sponsored Bay of Pigs Cuban invasion and was active in support of the Congolese liberation leader Patrice Lumumba. From On Guard, Dent, Johnson, and Walcott along with Hernton, Henderson, and Touré established Umbra.

Another formation of Black writers at that time was the Harlem Writers Guild, led by John O. Killens, which included Maya Angelou, Jean Carey Bond, Rosa Guy, and Sarah Wright among others. But the Harlem Writers Guild focused on prose, primarily fiction, which did not have the mass appeal of poetry performed in the dynamic vernacular of the time. Poems could be built around anthems, chants, and political slogans, and thereby used in organizing work, which was not generally the case with novels and short stories. Moreover, the poets could and did publish themselves, whereas greater resources were needed to publish fiction. That Umbra was primarily poetry- and performance-oriented established a significant and classic characteristic of the movement's aesthetics.

When Umbra split up, some members, led by Askia Touré and Al Haynes, moved to Harlem in late 1964 and formed the nationalist-oriented "Uptown Writers Movement," which included poets Yusef Rahman, Keorapetse "Willie" Kgositsile from South Africa, and Larry Neal. Accompanied by young "New Music" musicians, they performed poetry all over Harlem. Members of this group joined LeRoi Jones in founding BARTS.

Jones's move to Harlem was short-lived. In December 1965 he returned to his home, Newark (N.J.), and left BARTS in serious disarray. BARTS failed but the Black Arts center concept was irrepressible mainly because the Black Arts movement was so closely aligned with the then-burgeoning Black Power movement.

The mid- to late 1960s was a period of intense revolutionary ferment. Beginning in 1964, rebellions in Harlem and Rochester, New York, initiated four years of long hot summers. Watts, Detroit, Newark, Cleveland, and many other cities went up in flames, culminating in nationwide explosions of resentment and anger following Martin Luther King, Jr.'s April 1968 assassination.

In his seminal 1965 poem "Black Art," which quickly became the major poetic manifesto of the Black Arts literary movement, Jones declaimed "we want poems that kill." He was not simply speaking metaphorically. During that period armed self-defense and slogans such as "Arm yourself or harm yourself' established a social climate that promoted confrontation with the white power structure, especially the police (e.g., "Off the pigs"). Indeed, Amiri Baraka (Jones changed his name in 1967) had been arrested and convicted (later overturned on appeal) on a gun possession charge during the 1967 Newark rebellion. Additionally, armed struggle was widely viewed as not only a legitimate, but often as the only effective means of liberation. Black Arts' dynamism, impact, and effectiveness are a direct result of its partisan nature and advocacy of artistic and political freedom "by any means necessary." America had never experienced such a militant artistic movement.

Nathan Hare, the author of *The Black Anglo-Saxons*(1965), was the founder of 1960s Black Studies. Expelled from Howard University, Hare moved to San Francisco State University where the battle to establish a Black Studies department was waged during a five-month strike during the 1968-1969 school year. As with the establishment of Black Arts, which included a range of forces, there was broad activity in the Bay Area around Black Studies, including efforts led by poet and professor Sarah Webster Fabio at Merrit College.

The initial thrust of Black Arts ideological development came from the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a national organization with a strong presence in New York City. Both Touré and Neal were members of RAM. After RAM, the major ideological force shaping the Black Arts movement was the US (as opposed to "them') organization led by Maulana Karenga. Also ideologically important was Elijah Muhammad's Chicago-based Nation of Islam.

These three formations provided both style and ideological direction for Black Arts artists, including those who were not members of these or any other political organization. Although the Black Arts movement is often considered a New York-based movement, two of its three major forces were located outside New York City.

As the movement matured, the two major locations of Black Arts' ideological leadership, particularly for literary work, were California's Bay Area because of the *Journal of Black Poetry*and the *Black Scholar,*and the Chicago-Detroit axis because of *Negro Digest/Black World*and Third World Press in Chicago, and Broadside Press and Naomi Long Madgett's Lotus Press in Detroit. The only major Black Arts literary publications to come out of New York were the short-lived (six issues between 1969 and 1972) *Black Theatre*magazine published by the New Lafayette Theatre and *Black Dialogue,*which had actually started in San Francisco (1964-1968) and relocated to New York (1969-1972).

In 1967 LeRoi Jones visited Karenga in Los Angeles and became an advocate of Karenga's philosophy of Kawaida. Kawaida, which produced the "Nguzo Saba" (seven principles), Kwanzaa, and an emphasis on African names, was a multifaceted, categorized activist philosophy. Jones also met Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver and worked with a number of the founding members of the Black Panthers. Additionally, Askia Touré was a visiting professor at San Francisco State and was to become a leading (and longlasting) poet as well as, arguably, the most influential poet-professor in the Black Arts movement. Playwright Ed Bullins and poet Marvin X had established Black Arts West, and Dingane Joe Goncalves had founded the *Journal of Black Poetry*(1966). This grouping of Ed Bullins, Dingane Joe Goncalves, LeRoi Jones, Sonia Sanchez, Askia M. Touré, and Marvin X became a major nucleus of Black Arts leadership.

**Theory and Practice**. The two hallmarks of Black Arts activity were the development of Black theater groups and Black poetry performances and journals, and both had close ties to community organizations and issues. Black theaters served as the focus of poetry, dance, and music performances in addition to formal and ritual drama. Black theaters were also venues for community meetings, lectures, study groups, and film screenings. The summer of 1968 issue of*Drama Review,*a special on Black theater edited by Ed Bullins, literally became a Black Arts textbook that featured essays and plays by most of the major movers: Larry Neal, Ben Caldwell, LeRoi Jones, Jimmy Garrett, John O'Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Marvin X, Ron Milner, Woodie King, Jr., Bill Gunn, Ed Bullins, and Adam David Miller. Black Arts theater proudly emphasized its activist roots and orientations in distinct, and often antagonistic, contradiction to traditional theaters, both Black and white, which were either commercial or strictly artistic in focus.

By 1970 Black Arts theaters and cultural centers were active throughout America. The New Lafayette Theatre (Bob Macbeth, executive director, and Ed Bullins, writer in residence) and Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre led the way in New York, Baraka's Spirit House Movers held forth in Newark and traveled up and down the East Coast. The Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) and Val Grey Ward's Kuumba Theatre Company were leading forces in Chicago, from where emerged a host of writers, artists, and musicians including the OBAC visual artist collective whose "Wall of Respect" inspired the national community-based public murals movement and led to the formation of Afri-Cobra (the African Commune of Bad, Revolutionary Artists). There was David Rambeau's Concept East and Ron Milner and Woodie King’s Black Arts Midwest, both based in Detroit. Ron Milner became the Black Arts movement's most enduring playwright and Woodie King became its leading theater impresario when he moved to New York City. In Los Angeles there was the Ebony Showcase, Inner City Repertory Company, and the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles (PALSA) led by Vantile Whitfield. In San Francisco was the aforementioned Black Arts West. BLKARTSOUTH (led by Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam) was an outgrowth of the Free Southern Theatre in New Orleans and was instrumental in encouraging Black theater development across the south from the Theatre of Afro Arts in Miami, Florida, to Sudan Arts Southwest in Houston, Texas, through an organization called the Southern Black Cultural Alliance. In addition to formal Black theater repertory companies in numerous other cities, there were literally hundreds of Black Arts community and campus theater groups.

A major reason for the widespread dissemination and adoption of Black Arts was the development of nationally distributed magazines that printed manifestos and critiques in addition to offering publishing opportunities for a proliferation of young writers. Whether establishment or independent, Black or white, most literary publications rejected Black Arts writers. The movement's first literary expressions in the early 1960s came through two New York-based, nationally distributed magazines, *Freedomways*and *Liberator*.*Freedomways*, "a journal of the Freedom Movement," backed by leftists, was receptive to young Black writers. The more important magazine was Dan Watts's*Liberator*, which openly aligned itself with both domestic and international revolutionary movements. Many of the early writings of critical Black Arts voices are found in *Liberator.*Neither of these were primarily literary journals.

The first major Black Arts literary publication was the California-based *Black Dialogue*(1964), edited by Arthur A. Sheridan, Abdul Karim, Edward Spriggs, Aubrey Labrie, and Marvin Jackmon (Marvin X). *Black Dialogue*was paralleled by *Soulbook*(1964), edited by Mamadou Lumumba (Kenn Freeman) and Bobb Hamilton. Oakland-based *Soulbook* was mainly political but included poetry in a section ironically titled "Reject Notes."

Dingane Joe Goncalves became *Black Dialogue*'spoetry editor and, as more and more poetry poured in, he conceived of starting the *Journal of Black Poetry*. Founded in San Francisco, the first issue was a small magazine with mimeographed pages and a lithographed cover. Up through the summer of 1975, the *Journal* published nineteen issues and grew to over one hundred pages. Publishing a broad range of more than five hundred poets, its editorial policy was eclectic. Special issues were given to guest editors who included Ahmed Alhamisi, Don L. Lee (Haki R. Madhubuti), Clarence Major, Larry Neal, Dudley Randall, Ed Spriggs, and Askia Touré. In addition to African Americans, African, Caribbean, Asian, and other international revolutionary poets were presented.

Founded in 1969 by Nathan Hare and Robert Chrisman, the *Black Scholar,*"the first journal of black studies and research in this country," was theoretically critical. Major African-disasporan and African theorists were represented in its pages. In a 1995 interview Chrisman attributed much of what exists today to the groundwork laid by the Black Arts movement:

If we had not had a Black Arts movement in the sixties we certainly wouldn't have had national Black literary figures like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Alice Walker, or Toni Morrison because much more so than the Harlem Renaissance, in which Black artists were always on the leash of white patrons and publishing houses, the Black Arts movement did it for itself. What you had was Black people going out nationally, in mass, saving that we are an independent Black people and this is what we produce.

For the publication of Black Arts creative literature, no magazine was more important than the Chicago-based Johnson publication *Negro Digest / Black World.*Johnson published America's most popular Black magazines, *Jet* and*Ebony*. Hoyt Fuller, who became the editor in 1961, was a Black intellectual with near-encyclopedic knowledge of Black literature and seemingly inexhaustible contacts. Because *Negro Digest,*a monthly, ninety-eight-page journal, was a Johnson publication, it was sold on newsstands nationwide. Originally patterned on *Reader’s Digest, Negro Digest*changed its name to *Black World*in 1970, indicative of Fuller’s view that the magazine ought to be a voice for Black people everywhere. The name change also reflected the widespread rejection of "Negro" and the adoption of "Black" as the designation of choice for people of African descent and to indicate identification with both the diaspora and Africa. The legitimation of "Black" and "African" is another enduring legacy of the Black Arts movement.

*Negro Digest / Black World*published both a high volume and an impressive range of poetry, fiction, criticism, drama, reviews, reportage, and theoretical articles. A consistent highlight was Fuller's perceptive column Perspectives ("Notes on books, writers, artists and the arts") which informed readers of new publications, upcoming cultural events and conferences, and also provided succinct coverage of major literary developments. Fuller produced annual poetry, drama, and fiction issues, sponsored literary contests, and gave out literary awards. Fuller published a variety of viewpoints but always insisted on editorial excellence and thus made *Negro Digest / Black World*a first-rate literary publication. Johnson decided to cease publication of *Black World*in April 1976: allegedly in response to a threatened withdrawal of advertisement from all of Johnson's publications because of pro-Palestinian/anti-Zionist articles in *Black World.*

The two major Black Arts presses were poet Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit and Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press in Chicago. From a literary standpoint, Broadside Press, which concentrated almost exclusively on poetry, was by far the more important. Founded in 1965, Broadside published more than four hundred poets in more than one hundred books or recordings and was singularly responsible for presenting older Black poets (Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling A. Brown, and Margaret Walker) to a new audience and introducing emerging poets (Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, Don L. Lee/Haki Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez) who would go on to become major voices for the movement. In 1976, strapped by economic restrictions and with a severely overworked and overwhelmed three-person staff, Broadside Press went into serious decline. Although it functions mainly on its back catalog, Broadside Press is still alive.

While a number of poets (e.g., Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez), playwrights (e.g., Ed Bullins and Ron Milner), and spoken-word artists (e.g., the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, both of whom were extremely popular and influential although often overlooked by literary critics) are indelibly associated with the Black Arts movement, rather than focusing on their individual work, one gets a much stronger and much more accurate impression of the movement by reading seven anthologies focusing on the 1960s and the 1970s.

*Black Fire*(1968), edited by Baraka and Neal, is a massive collection of essays, poetry, fiction, and drama featuring the first wave of Black Arts writers and thinkers. Because of its impressive breadth, *Black Fire*stands as a definitive movement anthology.

*For* *Malcolm X, Poems on the Life and the Death of Malcolm X*(1969), edited by Dudley Randall and Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs, demonstrates the political thrust of the movement and the specific influence of Malcolm X. There is no comparable anthology in American poetry that focuses on a political figure as poetic inspiration.

*The Black Woman*(1970), edited by ToniCade Bambara, is the first major Black feminist anthology and features work by Jean Bond, Nikki Giovanni, Abbey Lincoln, Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Gwen Patton, Pat Robinson, Alice Walker, Shirley Williams, and others.

Edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Black Aesthetic*(1971) is significant because it both articulates and contextualizes Black Arts theory. The work of writers such as Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and J. A. Rogers showcases the movement's roots in an earlier era into sections on theory, music, fiction, poetry, and drama, Gayle's seminal anthology features a broad array of writers who are regarded as the chief Black Arts theorists-practitioners.

Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) is important not only because of the poets included but also because of Henderson's insightful and unparalleled sixty-seven page overview. This is the movement's most thorough exposition of a Black poetic aesthetic. Insights and lines of thought now taken for granted were first articulated in a critical and formal context by Stephen Henderson, who proposed a totally innovative reading of Black poetics.

*New Black Voices*(1972), edited by Abraham Chapman, is significant because its focus is specifically on the emerging voices in addition to new work by established voices who were active in the Black Arts movement. Unlike most anthologies, which overlook the South, *New Black Voices*is geographically representative and includes lively pro and con articles side by side debating aesthetic and political theory.

The seventh book, Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices, The Mission of* *Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History*(1976), is a surprisingly thorough survey that has been unjustly neglected. Although some of his opinions are controversial (note that in the movement controversy was normal), Redmond's era by era and city by city cataloging of literary collectives as well as individual writers offers an invaluable service in detailing the movement's national scope.

**The Movement's Breakup**. The decline of the Black Arts movement began in 1974 when the Black Power movement was disrupted and co-opted. Black political organizations were hounded, disrupted, and defeated by repressive government measures, such as Cointelpro and IRS probes. Black Studies activist leadership was gutted and replaced by academicians and trained administrators who were unreceptive, if not outright opposed, to the movements political orientation.

Key internal events in the disruption were the split between nationalists and Marxists in the African Liberation Support Committee (May 1974), the Sixth Pan African Congress in Tanzania where race-based struggle was repudiated/denounced by most of the strongest forces in Africa (Aug. 1974), and Baraka’s national organization, the Congress of Afrikan People (CAP), officially changing from a "Pan Afrikan Nationalist" to a "Marxist Leninist" organization (Oct. 1974).

As the movement reeled from the combination of external and internal disruption, commercialization and capitalist co-option delivered the coup de grace. President Richard Nixon's strategy of pushing Black capitalism as a response to Black Power epitomized mainstream co-option. As major film, record, book, and magazine publishers identified the most salable artists, the Black Arts movement's already fragile independent economic base was totally undermined.

In an overwhelmingly successful effort to capitalize on the upsurge of interest in the feminist movement, establishment presses focused particular attention on the work of Black women writers. Although issues of sexism had been widely and hotly debated within movement publications and organizations, the initiative passed from Black Arts back to the establishment. Emblematic of the establishment overtaking (some would argue "co-opting") Black Arts activity is Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls,*which in 1976 ended up on Broadway produced by Joseph Papp even though it had been workshopped at Woodie King's New Federal Theatre of the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side. Black Arts was not able to match the economic and publicity offers tendered by establishment concerns.

Corporate America (both the commercial sector and the academic sector) once again selected and propagated one or two handpicked Black writers. During the height of Black Arts activity, each community had a coterie of writers and there were publishing outlets for hundreds, but once the mainstream regained control, Black artists were tokenized. Although Black Arts activity continued into the early 1980s, by 1976, the year of what Gil Scott-Heron called the "Buy-Centennial," the movement was without any sustainable and effective political or economic bases in an economically strapped Black community. An additional complicating factor was the economic recession, resulting from the oil crisis, which the Black community experienced as a depression. Simultaneously, philanthropic foundations only funded non-threatening, "arts oriented" groups. Neither the Black Arts nor the Black Power movements ever recovered.

**The Legacy**. In addition to advocating political engagement and independent publishing, the Black Arts movement was innovative in its use of language. Speech (particularly, but not exclusively, Black English), music, and performance were major elements of Black Arts literature. Black Arts aesthetics emphasized orality, which includes the ritual use of call and response both within the body of the work itself as well as between artist and audience. This same orientation is apparent in rap music and 1990s "performance poetry" (e.g., Nuyorican Poets and poetry slams).

While right-wing trends attempt to push America's cultural clock back to the 1950s, Black Arts continues to evidence resiliency in the Black community and among other marginalized sectors. When people encounter the Black Arts movement, they are delighted and inspired by the most audacious, prolific, and socially engaged literary movement in America's history.

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Reginald Martin

**Background**. A central problem in the paradigmatic development of art and literary "history" has always been whose ideas of art and literature will be empowered and, thus, whose ideas will be used to judge what is "good" or "bad" art. The question of who empowers and validates certain literary critical trends is beyond the scope of my inquiry here. But such battles are historically frequent in the sometimes purposely stagnated progression of art "theory." The problems that the progenitors of the Black Arts Movement faced were merely synecdochal of the many traditional and frequent battles in art and literary history fought to decide whose ideas will be censored and whose ideas will be validated and propagated. In other words, stipulative skirmishes have always been fought within the larger battleground of general censorship to decide whose ideas will be codified as a part of the taught canon of art history and criticism. The trials of museum director Dennis Barrie in Cincinnati in the Mapplethorpe controversy and the rap group 2 Live Crew (Luther Campbell, Mark Ross, Christopher Wongwon) in Florida are other similar and related skirmishes. Those whose art triumphs over others' art know that the spoils of that war are certificates of deposit and cold hard cash, not whether one songwriter's love-making lyrics are more acceptable than another's, nor whether nude heterosexual images should preclude nude homosexual images.

**History and Development**. The precursors to what is now called the Black Arts Movement (ca. 1962-1971) are many and interwoven. One could reasonably argue that there had been a call for a separate black letters in the American literary mainstream since Frederick Douglass's "What the Negro Wants" (1868). But the literary events that took place in the 1960s, influenced by social events from the 1950s and 1960s, overshadowed all work in black letters that had gone on before.

During this volatile period, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka) wrote in his essay "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature’" (1962) that "a Negro literature, to be a legitimate product of the Negro experience in America, must get at that experience in exactly the terms America has proposed for it in its most ruthless identity," and that the Negro, as an element of American culture, was "completely misunderstood by Americans." In discussing why, in his opinion, there was so little black literature of merit, Jones wrote,

... in most cases the Negroes who found themselves in a position to pursue some art, especially the art of literature, have been members of the Negro middle class, a group that has always gone out of its way to cultivate any mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, ie., Negroes.

Further, Jones wrote that as long as the Negro writer was obsessed with being accepted, middle class, he would never be able to "tell it like it is," and, thus, would always be a failure, because America made room only for white obfuscators, not black ones. It was from such thoughts by Jones and the thoughts of many like-minded theoreticians such as Hoyt Fuller, that the Black Arts Movement (BAM) took its origins.

In 1969, during his black nationalist period, Baraka laid concrete boundaries for a "nationalistic art." Baraka wrote in "nationalism vs. Pimpart":

The Art is the National Spirit. That manifestation of it. Black Art must be the Nationalist's vision given more form and feeling, as a razor to cut away what is not central to National Liberation. To show that which is. As a humanistic expression it is itself raised. And these are the poles, out of which we create, to raise, or as raised.

In this difficult passage, Baraka was proposing (in typical 1960s rhetoric) specific and limited boundaries for acceptable art. Though a writer on all aspects of the BAM, Baraka's areas of greatest interest were the related arts of literatures and literary criticism, and it was, indeed, the debate on the content of black letters that would fuel the heat of the BAM from 1969 to its last official flickerings in 1974, when Baraka wrote his amazing essay "Why I Changed My Ideology." After Baraka formally announced that he was a socialist, no longer a black nationalist, his guidelines for "valid" black writing changed, but his new requirements, with slightly different emphases (liberation of an classes, races, genders) and a slightly different First Cause (Monopoly Capitalism), were as rigid as his prior requirements. And at this time, Baraka was powerful enough to influence others to codify his vision of acceptable art.

Baraka saw certain black writers as disrupting the essential and beautiful Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. Baraka called these writers "capitulationists," and says their movement was simultaneous with and counter to the Black Arts Movement. Baraka felt that the simultaneity was no accident. In his long essay "Afro-American Literature and the Class Struggle" in *Black American Literature Forum* (Summer 1980), Baraka, for the first time, made several strong, personal attacks on Ishmael Reed, the fiction writer and poet, and also attacked several black female writers whom he felt fit into the capitulationist mold. And, again, Baraka reiterated that he believes that the groundbreakers in the Black Arts Movement (among them, the new black aesthetic literary wing, including Addison Gayle, Houston Baker, and Clarence Major) were doing something that was new, needed, useful, and black, and those who did not want to see such a flourishing of black expression were "appointed" to the scene to damage the movement.

Naming Reed and Calvin Hernton as "conservatives," Baraka wrote:

Yes, the tide was so strong that even some of the "conservatives" wrote work that took the people's side. (The metaphysical slide [sic] of the BAM [Black Arts Movement] even allowed Reed to adopt a rebellious tone with his "Black power poem" and "sermonette" in *catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church,*1970, in which he saw the struggle of Blacks against national oppression as a struggle between two churches: e.g., "may the best church win. shake hands now and come/out-conjuring." But even during the heat and heart of the DAM, Reed would call that very upsurge and the BAM "a goon squad aesthetic" and say that the revolutionary writers were "fascists" or that the taking up of African culture by Black artists indicated such artists were "tribalists."

Much of the labeling of Reed as a conservative and a "house nigger" began with the publication of *The Last Days of Louisiana Red,*in which a group of characters Reed labeled as "moochers" loiter around Ed Yellings, a small black business owner who is making active efforts to earn a living and who, through practicing voodoo, finds a cure for cancer. Critics interpreted "the moochers" as being stipulative of some of the BAM group. Supposedly, *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*contains autocratic figures who do little more than emphasize Reed's definition of moochers, and who continually reenact negative, black stereotypes. Ed Yellings, the industrious black, is killed by black moocher conspirators. Does this mean blacks will turn against what Reed believes to be the good in their own communities? Ed Yellings is a business and property owner. Baraka wrote,

Ishmael Reed and Stanley Crouch both make the same kind of rah-rah speeches for the Black middle class. Reed, in fact, says that those of us who uphold Black working people are backwards ... Focus on the middle class, the property owners and music teachers, not the black masses (Ralph) Ellison tells us. This is the *Roots*crowd giving us a history of the BLM [Black Liberation Movement] as a rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger tale in brownface, going off into the sunset and straight for Carter's cabinet or the National Book Award....

Baraka also set up a dichotomy for a "white arts movement" and a "black arts movement," but while defining the two--one would assume toward the end of endorsing one or the other--Baraka shows only the failings of each and discusses his points of divergence from the "Black Aesthetic Crowd."

In Baraka's dichotomy, the "white aesthetic is bourgeois art--like the 'national interests' of the U.S. at this late date when the U.S. is an imperialistic superpower." Immediately following this passage, Baraka seemed to defend the black aesthetic group over Ellison's negative criticism of them. Baraka wrote that Ellison said of the black aesthetic crowd that they "buy the idea of total cultural separation between blacks and whites, suggesting that we've been left out of the mainstream. But when we examine American music and literature in terms of its themes, symbolism, rhythms, tonalities, idioms, and images it is obvious that those rejected 'Negroes' have been a vital part of the mainstream and were from the beginning." Baraka responded, "We know we have been exploited, Mr. Ralph, sir; what we's arguing about is that we's been exploited! To use us is the term of stay in this joint. . . ." Baraka's point is that it makes no difference if the corrupt personage is black; the issue is still corruption, and it is a double insult to the oppressed when that corrupt person turns out to be black. But it is at that point that Baraka separated himself from others in the new black aesthetic movement:

Where I differ with the bourgeois nationalists who are identified with the "Black Aesthetic" is illuminated by a statement of Addison Gayle's: "An aesthetic based upon economic and class determinism is one which has minimal value for Black people. For Black writers and critics the starting point must be the proposition that the history of Black people in America is the history of the struggle against racism" ("Blueprint for Black Criticism," *First World,*Jan.-Feb. 1977, p. 43). But what is the basis for racism; ie., exploitation because of one's physical characteristics? Does it drop out of the sky? ... Black people suffer from national oppression: We are an oppressed nation, a nation oppressed by U.S. imperialism. Racism is an even more demonic aspect of this national oppression, since the oppressed nationality is identifiable anywhere as that regardless of class.

Baraka reminded the reader that his disagreement with the new black aesthetic elite was not to say that there was no such thing as a black aesthetic, but that his conception of a black aesthetic manifested itself in his definition of it differently than it did for others. For him it was "a nation within a nation" that was brought about by the "big bourgeoisie on Wall Street, who after the Civil War completely dominated U.S. politics and economics, controlled the ex-planters, and turned them into their compradors." Further, black aesthetic ideas had to be subsumed under the larger category of the Black Arts Movement so that its ideas would be in concert with those black ideas from drama, dance, and graphic arts.

Baraka claimed that several women writers, among them Michelle Wallace and Ntozake Shange, like Reed, had their own "Hollywood" aesthetic, one of "capitulation" and "garbage." Toward the end of his article, Baraka said that the "main line" of his argument bad been that "class struggle is as much a part of the arts as it is any place else." His pleas and support were reserved for those artists who were "struggle oriented," those who were trying to "get even clearer on the meaning of class stand, attitude, audience, and study, and their relationship to our work."

And, thus, Baraka's argument is epanaleptic, as it turns back for support upon the same core of arguments of the other black aestheticians with whom he has said he is in disagreement; those arguments form a complete circle with Baraka's stated premise that black literature, black art must do something materially positive to help black people. Art must be socially functional.

The heat and heart really left the BAM after Baraka changed from black nationalist to Leninist/Socialist (1974) and after the death of Hoyt Fuller (1971). Baraka was by far the strongest voice in the movement, and when he changed his ideas and said that before he had been absolutely wrong about his views on black art and that now his Leninist/Marxist vision was absolutely correct, many of his adherents lost faith. The basic tenets of the movement included the ideas that art by black Americans could never be accepted by white Americans, and separate criteria needed to be developed by black artists to appraise properly the talent of black artists. Also, all art should be toward a political/humanistic end that would elevate all people--but especially black people--to a higher consciousness and a better life. In a retrospective on this artist/censor exchange, W. Lawrence Hogue wrote in "Literary Production: A Silence in Afro-American Critical Practice" from his book *Discourse and the Other: The Production of the Afro-American Literary Text* (1986) that the writers of the BAM:

in using literature to further their political ends ... understand the political function of literature. Their strategy is to promote those Afro-American texts that present an aesthetic theory of literature. But that strategy is silent completely on how established literary institutions and apparatuses, throughout American literary history, have affected the production of Afro-American literature. . . . Of course, such a discussion would cause these black aestheticians to confront openly the ideological nature and function, and therefore the constraints and exclusions, of their own cultural nationalist critical practices.

Thus, at least in theoretical discussion, an expansive, stylistically, thematically, and racially absorptive and syncretic "aesthetic" would put itself arguably above what Hogue calls the "nationalistic criteria" of the BAM regimen. In theory, a racially syncretic aesthetic would even absorb any facets of the BAM platform it could find useful, transform them, an produce new "discursive formations" (Foucault) that helped to explain itself or explain any kind of art text it chose. It is partly the syncretic idea that the proponents of the BAM fought against. For them, the only way to artistic purity was through separation from the mainstream.

Most recently, Baraka has reassessed Leninist/Marxist theory as an applicable filter for African-American literature. He now finds that, while perhaps a Leninist/Marxist grid is not the best way to assess and form the black arts, he still feels that at the root of any authentic black art endeavor must be the love of black people and the love of self-affirmation.

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