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The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics

David Lionel Smith

Professional critics of the 1980s and 1990s generally hold writing of the Black Arts Movement in low esteem. Though the literary output by black writers of the 1960s and early 1970s was substantial, there is a paucity of scholarly literature on this body of work. Various characteristics common to Black Arts writing make it unappealing to many literary scholars: it often confuses social theory with aesthetics, failing to articulate the complex relationship between the two; much of it is predicated upon crude, strident forms of nationalism that do not lend themselves to careful analysis; and too often the work is marred by the swaggering rhetoric of ethnic and gender chauvinism. The extremes of this writing are so egregious that we may come to equate all the work of the movement with its worst tendencies.

By "paucity" I do not mean that the scholarly literature is weak or that there simply needs to be more of it. I mean, rather, that even the most rudimentary work in this area is yet to be done. We do not have a single book, critical or historical, scholarly or journalistic, devoted explicitly to the Black Arts Movement. Carolyn Fowler's extensive bibliography on the movement is a valuable research tool, but it was published privately in an edition that is available only directly from the author. A fair amount has been written on Black Arts theater; many articles and several books have been written on the work of Amiri Baraka. Yet except for Eugene B. Redmond's useful, albeit sketchy, history of black poetry, *Drumvoices* (1976), Reginald Martin's intriguing monograph, *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics* (1988), and a few notable articles, the Black Arts Movement remains unresearched. A review of the *MLA Bibliography* for the past 10 years gives the clearest picture of this dearth. Under the cross-indexed headings "Black Aesthetic," "Black Arts Movement," and "Black Poetry Movement," one finds seldom more than three or four listings in any given year. Because roughly a third of those articles have appeared in European or Australian journals, in most years there

are only a couple of articles under these headings that one can easily obtain through normal channels. Furthermore, many of the movement's basic documents, such as *Black Fire* (edited by LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal) and *The Black Aesthetic* (edited by Addison Gayle, Jr.), are now out of print. The work of some poets, such as Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) and Sonia Sanchez, remain available from small presses, but books by Carolyn Rodgers and many others are long out of print. Thus, even the materials for studying the movement are increasingly scarce.¹

Basic questions about the Black Arts Movement—such as when did it begin and end, which writers and styles did it include and exclude, what were its cultural origins and characteristic tendencies, who were its factions, and how were its works developed and disseminated—await serious discussion. And clearly, a single, authoritative answer to such questions will not suffice. Instead, we need an ongoing critical discourse around these issues. Scholarship, after all, is a process of learned critical discussion, not merely a series of unconnected publishing events. At present, the silence regarding the Black Arts Movement is deafening.

I want to identify some of the basic issues raised by Black Aesthetic literary theorists and to suggest a continuing influence of Black Aesthetic theory in the work of some current theorists of black literature. I also want to indicate certain inadequacies in Black Aesthetic theory. The Black Arts Movement suggested exciting creative possibilities that have not yet been fully realized, but it also fostered certain habits of thinking which we would do well to abandon. My purpose here is to describe both tendencies and to note the role of several critics in the development of these ideas.

1. What is the Black Aesthetic?

The concept of “the Black Aesthetic” has been integrally linked with the Black Arts Movement, yet even at the height of that movement, there was no real agreement about the meaning of this term. In his introduction to one of the central documents of the movement, *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), Addison Gayle remarked: “The Black Aesthetic, then, as conceived by this writer, is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism, and offering logical, reasoned arguments as to why he [sic] should not desire to join the ranks of a Norman Mailer or a William Styron”

(xxii). For Gayle, the Black Aesthetic is an ideological tonic that cures misguided assimilationist tendencies.

By contrast, Hoyt Fuller, in the lead essay, defines the Black Aesthetic in terms of the cultural experiences and tendencies expressed in artists' work. He notes: "In Chicago, the Organization of Black American Culture has moved boldly toward a definition of a black aesthetic. In the writers' workshop sponsored by the group, the writers are deliberately striving to invest their work with the distinctive styles and rhythms and colors of the ghetto, with those peculiar qualities which, for example, characterize the music of a John Coltrane or a Charlie Parker or a Ray Charles" (9). Interestingly, when Fuller elaborates on what he means by black style, he does so by quoting several paragraphs from an essay by a white writer, George Frazier, who grudgingly praised black style in an essay he wrote for *Esquire*.

By focusing on rhythm and style as the essential aspects of a black literary aesthetic, Fuller identifies themes central to discussions of what is distinctive about black expression. Nonetheless, his essay reveals certain peculiarities. Though he does not follow Gayle in defining aesthetics as a form of political enlightenment, Fuller's account takes musicians as models for literary expression. Furthermore, though he stresses "styles and rhythms and colors of the ghetto," none of these musicians grew up in "the ghetto." Coltrane was from North Carolina, Parker from Kansas City, and Charles from Georgia. Fuller's long quotation from Frazier cites musicians, athletes, dancers, politicians, but not a single writer. This reflects a common problem among Black Aesthetic theorists in finding literary precedents for Black Arts Movement writing. Indeed, many of these critics asserted that no prior writing existed that deserved to be called "black writing." But the greatest irony here is that Fuller resorts to a white writer—a writer whom he identifies as hostile to "the likes of LeRoi Jones" (10)—in order to illustrate the quintessence of black style.

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. The nature of the problem can be readily illustrated in semantic terms.

Consider the difference between “the Black Aesthetic” and “Black Aesthetics.” The former suggests a single principle, while the latter leaves open multiple possibilities. The former is closed and prescriptive; the latter, open and descriptive. The quest for one true aesthetic corresponds to the notion of an essential “blackness,” a true nature common to all “black” people. This is the logic of race, a logic created to perpetuate oppression and not to describe the subtle realities of actual experience. The choice of “the Black Aesthetic” rather than “Black Aesthetics” represents a fundamental theoretical failure of the Black Arts Movement. Yet erroneous or not, this is the choice that Black Aesthetic theorists made, nor is it difficult to understand why, given the social imperatives of the time. Nevertheless, while we must assess the historical record as it stands, we might consider what it means to envision the African-American cultural tradition as plural, not singular. After all, most current theories of black culture are just as singular as “the Black Aesthetic,” though less forthrightly political. A black pluralist historiography remains to be explored.

The problem of historical understanding is a central issue for Black Aesthetic critics. How writers conceive themselves in relation to their literary antecedents is important for several reasons. It defines what they explicitly embrace and reject, but even more important, it defines that broader field of works which they feel an obligation to know—in other words, the basis of their literary education. Both writers and critics of the Black Arts Movement frequently articulated the notion that they had few if any antecedents. For them, past black writing was mostly a chronicle of evasions: failures or refusals to discover and express authentic black consciousness. In *The Way of the New World* (1975) Addison Gayle concludes his discussion of early black fiction by declaring: “The inability of the black novelist to build upon the foundation laid down by [Martin] Delany meant that no viable literary tradition was possible until after *Native Son*” (29). For Gayle, “viable” black writing is that which expresses rage at and rejection of white people. Consequently, except for Delany, the first century of black fiction was entirely an exercise in false consciousness. A critic or writer who holds such a view is unlikely to learn much from those generations of writers whom he has dismissed. In effect, such an attitude embraces historical ignorance as a critical premise.

The consequence of such thinking is egregiously apparent in LeRoi Jones’s essay, “The Myth of a Negro Literature.” First published in 1962, this essay is an important articulation of Jones’s early aesthetic thinking. He begins with a stark decla-

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ration: "From Phyllis Wheatley to Charles Chesnutt, to the present generation of American Negro writers, the only recognizable accretion of tradition readily attributable to the black producer of a formal literature in this country, with a few notable exceptions, has been of an almost agonizing mediocrity" (*Home* 105). Jones proceeds to dismiss subsequent black writers as well, with a sneering condescension: "[O]nly Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin have managed to bring off examples of writing, in this genre, that could succeed in passing themselves off as 'serious' writing, in the sense that, say, the work of Somerset Maugham is 'serious' writing. That is, serious, if one has never read Herman Melville or James Joyce. And it is a part of the tragic naiveté of the middle class (brow) writer, that he has not" (107). According to Jones, all Negro writers ("with a few notable exceptions") have aspired to middle-class respectability, which he sees as a quest for mediocrity. It is furthermore a rejection of these writers' own black identity and of their honesty in rendering their own experience, because the black middle class has always spurned honesty as pernicious to its hopes of being accepted by white people. "High art," Jones declares, "must issue from *real* categories of human activity, *truthful* accounts of human life, and not fancied accounts of the attainment of cultural privilege by some willingly preposterous apologists for one social 'order' or another" (*Home* 109).

The claim to be a defender of truth against a horde of liars is most interesting for how such a posture uses ideas about race as a grounding for aesthetic claims. Jones's black neoromantic equation of art, truth, and beauty entails two conceptual problems. First, Jones defines middle-class experience as inherently dishonest. Hence, any art, no matter how accomplished, dealing with middle-class experience would be false and mediocre. Among other things, this formulation reveals a wholly inadequate understanding of the class perspective of the writers Jones claims to admire. Second, Jones equates black with lower class. Hence, by Jones's prescription, for middle-class black writers to produce "high art," they must repress the truth of their own actual experience and write instead as though they were lower class. Though Jones claims that his aesthetic is a rejection of class bias in favor of truth, it is in fact a rejection of one class-perspective in favor of another. Needless to say, fair-haired, white-skinned, upper-class African Americans like Chesnutt and Toomer cannot become more authentic as artists by masquerading as Lightnin' Hopkins. What Jones really articulates here is the familiar posture of the bohemian, who always flees

from class origins in quest of an aesthetic realm perceived as the margins of society.²

In this gospel according to Jones, black writers have failed because they have not been blues people. That is, they were doomed to fail by being real African Americans, not idealized exotic Negroes, and by being writers, not musicians. Interestingly, Jones does not acknowledge the efforts of writers such as Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown—one of his teachers at Howard—who did in fact embrace the folk and the blues. Perhaps they rank among his unnamed “notable exceptions,” though, actually, his comment appears to refer to himself. In any case, the most conventional racial notion in Jones’s argument is the assumption of black inferiority. Negro writing, he argues, is inferior writing. Negro writers are not honest, and, furthermore, they are ignorant. American racial discourse makes assertions of Negro ignorance inherently credible. Still, how could anyone read the first 10 pages of *Invisible Man* and claim that Ellison has not read Melville and Joyce? How could any reader of *Cane* dismiss it as a defense of middle-class values? Jones’s comments suggest that he probably had not read the work of these authors. In accusing them of ignorance, he reveals his own, but to be ignorant of Negroes is no sin in our culture. After all, we assume Negroes to be unworthy of serious attention. Being black does not necessarily exempt us from the condescending modes of race thinking.³

Quite the contrary, race thinking exists to perpetuate hierarchical claims to privilege. These claims of superiority to “the Negro” are available to anyone who participates in this discourse, regardless of race. Thus, much of Jones’s self-vindication in this essay depends upon his claim to be an exception to the Negro rule. Though Gayle and Jones are distinct individuals, they are splendid examples of the tendency in the Black Arts Movement to dismiss the accomplishments of previous black writers and to define blackness as a quality that other blacks have failed to realize.

Black Arts theorists consistently refused to acknowledge literary antecedents, and this refusal is closely linked to the movement’s peculiar tendency to cite nonliterary (mostly musical) models as antecedents in a tradition of authentic black expression. In one sense, the movement’s theorists correctly observed that black musical forms such as the blues and jazz are more profound expressions of black particularity than most black writing has been. But their attempts to explain why have usually depended upon claims, in one form or another, that black writers have erred in attempting to be white or to use

white models. This argument is inadequate for many reasons—most of all because it fails to distinguish between quite different aesthetic modes and to consider the social means of producing, communicating, and perpetuating particular aesthetic forms.⁴

Black music is a strong aesthetic force because it belongs to a tradition many centuries old, imported directly from Africa and developed continuously in the New World. 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 into the social lives of black people as a vehicle of self-expression, worship, dance, socializing, artistic performance, and entertainment. Music is an integral part of African cultures and of African-American cultures as well. It is as fundamental and as ubiquitous to black people as speech.⁵

Though writing has existed in Africa at least as long as in Europe, probably longer, the culture of the book has been, until this century, more important for Europeans than for Africans. In any case, an African book culture certainly did not survive the Middle Passage, and even if it had, slaveholders would have extirpated it. Consequently, if we speak of black literature, we must necessarily speak of a tradition based on European models. Therefore, it makes no sense at all to compare black literature to black music, because the two have different social origins and different histories. Black literature must necessarily be a mixed mode, growing out of European language and European literary models. The example of the spirituals, which derived largely from European hymns, should indicate to us that authentic black models can develop from European models. Similarly, Sidney Bechet, Coleman Hawkins, Parker, and Coltrane took the instrument patented by the Frenchman Antoine-Joseph Sax in 1846 and made it into an instrument that is now inseparably associated with jazz. Black musical expression is not limited to forms or instruments created in Africa, and this need not be the case for black literature either.

If we take African music as the quintessential form of black cultural expression, one interesting implication seems clear. The aesthetic implied in the relationship between the music and the people is a very egalitarian, participatory one. The model does not stress roles of performer and audience but rather of mutual participation in an aesthetic activity. How such an African participatory aesthetic might be transferred to the realm of literature is a challenging problem. And perhaps the impulse to approximate such an aesthetic helps to explain why the creative

energy of the Black Arts Movement was directed disproportionately into theater; for community-based writers' workshops, such as OBAC in Chicago and The Watts Writers' Workshop, and the emphasis on live performances of poetry, and on publishing broadsides and chapbooks were products of this spirit of inclusiveness. Although we cannot pursue here the social history of the movement, it should be clear that such a participatory aesthetic is radically at odds with the essentially modernist, elitist, and exclusionary aesthetic promoted by Jones and other black bohemians. Of course, Jones soon changed his name and modified his rhetoric. Whether that transformation led to a more African aesthetic remains a matter of contention.

Among the Black Arts theorists, Larry Neal was perhaps the most discerning about the implications of "the Black Aesthetic."⁶ Neal was willing to declare explicitly that literature as we know it is inadequate to the requirements of a black aesthetic. He remarks in his afterword to *Black Fire*:

Black literature must become an integral part of the community's life style. And I believe that it must also be integral to the myths and experiences underlying the total history of black people. New constructs will have to be developed. We will have to alter our concepts of what art is, of what it is supposed to "do." The dead forms taught most writers in the white man's schools will have to be destroyed, or at best, radically altered. We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to the cadences in Malcolm's speeches, than from most of Western poetries. Listen to James Brown scream. Ask yourself, then; Have you ever heard a Negro poet sing like that? Of course not, because we have been tied to the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it. The key is in the music. Our music has always been far ahead of our literature. Actually, until recently, it was our only literature, except for, perhaps, the folktale. . . . 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. And that is precisely why the literature has failed. It was the case of one elite addressing another elite. (Jones and Neal 653-4)

Like Gayle, Jones/Baraka, and others, Neal sees almost nothing of value in past black writing, and he goes a step farther to

assert that “poets must learn to sing, dance, and chant their works” (Jones and Neal 655).⁷ Up to this point the propositions of music as a paradigm for literature have been treated as misguided; and indeed, such formulations do pose serious conceptual as well as practical problems. Nonetheless, Neal’s work allows us to consider this aspect of Black Aesthetic thinking in a different light. Neal obviously recognizes the issues at stake in his call for a new kind of literature. Gayle and Jones both argue, with different ideals in mind, that previous black writers have erred in choosing the wrong literary models. For Neal, literature as we know it is an unsatisfactory form.

What, then, would this mean as a mandate for writers? Most obviously, it emphasizes performance. Neal wants poets to sing or to scream like James Brown. In addition to music, he proposes oratory (“Malcolm’s speeches”) as another paradigm. The emphasis on vernacular performance implies that literature should become an immediate, communal form to be experienced in public, contrary to the private experience of reading a text. Indeed, much of Black Aesthetic theorizing, especially Neal’s, seems to want to replace reading as the dominant mode of literary reception with listening. Theater and poetry readings, once again, represent movement in this direction. Consequently, writers attempting to take “the Black Aesthetic” seriously would be inclined to reject formalist aesthetics and to think most seriously about the sound of their work and its effect upon a listening audience. They would be more concerned with rhythm than with stanzaic form, more with rhyme sound than with the formal pattern of rhyme, and, in particular, they would be concerned with diction based upon conversational norms rather than upon literary conventions. The use of allusion as a device would not vanish from such an aesthetic, but its focus would shift away from bookish references and into the realm of black historical experience and popular culture. An obvious area for literary exploration would be modes in which verbal effect and narrative converge. A striking example of the latter kind of innovation is Baraka’s ritual drama, *Slave Ship*.⁸ Thus, if Black Aesthetic theorizing proscribed writers’ use of existing literary traditions, it also opened up exciting new possibilities of artistic experimentation, and it sought to redefine the relationship between writer and audience. In effect, this meant both liabilities and opportunities for writers, audiences, and critics. Neither the liabilities nor the innovations have been adequately understood. Regardless, the commitment to ground literature in black vernacular culture was a definitive characteristic of Black Aesthetic theory.

2. The Black Aesthetic Critics

The relationship of criticism to the Black Arts Movement is complicated. Some of the most knowledgeable and discerning critics of the movement, such as Neal, are also important figures within the movement. This is true even of many academically oriented critics, such as Stephen Henderson. On the other hand, some influential recent black critics have been openly hostile to the Black Arts Movement—most conspicuously Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The activists of a movement are not necessarily the ideal persons to assess the actual achievements of that movement, though their comments can be illuminating. Similarly, the ideological opponents of a movement are not the most reliable sources of careful and dispassionate analyses. Unfortunately, most criticism regarding the Black Arts Movement has been deeply partisan, for or against. The fierce polemics surrounding the movement have discouraged careful and balanced scholarship. Yet without such scholarship, the achievements and failures of the movement can never be clearly understood.

A conspicuous difference between Black Arts writing and the work of previous black writers such as Wright and Baldwin is that Black Arts writing directly addresses a black audience. Thus, it immediately demands of its reader (or listener) a sympathy and familiarity with black culture and black idioms—and in many cases, with black nationalist cultural politics as well. In particular, since such writing addresses common black people, it demands that the critic be familiar with the common experiences of black people—or more precisely, that the critic share the kind of knowledge that such an audience would likely possess. Finally, since the Black Aesthetic claims to reject European literary models, it requires the writers to develop new forms, new techniques, and new conventions. Therefore, the critic must be prepared to recognize, understand, and assess these new literary forms and experiments. Needless to say, an education in conventional literary studies does not prepare a critic to face these challenges. Consequently, a critic who wishes to study Black Arts Movement writing must be prepared to move beyond university training, which can entail both establishing new criteria and rejecting established ones. (Given the familiar set of incentives, rewards, and punishments within the academy, such boldness could prove very costly to a member of an English department—especially an untenured one.)

Poetry presents the most varied and difficult challenges, and Henderson's work is unique in its attempt to provide new

terms for understanding “the new black poetry.” The long introduction to his aptly named textbook, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, provides the most detailed attempt to establish a black critical vocabulary. This work is illuminating in both its strengths and its weaknesses. Moreover, Gates’s negative commentary on Henderson’s work clearly illustrates several sharp critical disagreements generated by the Black Aesthetic.

The essential spirit of Henderson’s work is tellingly expressed in the opening lines of his essay “‘Survival Motion’: A Study of the Black Writer and the Black Revolution in America”:

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. (Cook and Henderson 65)

“‘Survival Motion’” was written in tumultuous 1968, shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and while it offers many insightful comments on the relationship between jazz and poetry and on particular effects achieved by the poems under discussion, it is an elegiac essay, deeply preoccupied with the themes of death and survival. It is an eloquent meditation on how music and poetry express the capacity of black people to endure with style and with “soul” what they have suffered in violent, racist America.

Henderson’s introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) is much more technical. He begins by explaining what he considers the inadequacy of previous anthologies and what he hopes this one will achieve:

Black poetry in the United States has been widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and undervalued for a variety of reasons— aesthetic, cultural, and political— especially by white critics; but with the exception of the work of a few established figures, it has also been suspect by many Black academicians whose literary judgments are self-consciously “objective” and whose cultural values, while avowedly “American,” are essentially European. . . . [A]n attempt should be made in which the *continuity* and the *wholeness*

of the Black poetic tradition in the United States are suggested. That tradition exists on two main levels, the written and the oral, which sometimes converge. (3)

Unlike those polemical Black Aesthetic theorists who consider earlier black writing to be worthless, Henderson is careful to develop a historical account stressing “the continuity and the wholeness of the Black poetic tradition.” Though his anthology focuses on black writing of the 1960s, he includes selections of folk songs and rhymes and poetry by writers ranging from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Gwendolyn Brooks. He also includes blues lyrics by Ma Rainey, Leadbelly, and others. These inclusions are important for Henderson, because in his view a literary tradition develops out of a whole way of life. Since that way of life is also expressed in nonliterary forms, those forms can be used both as sources and as heuristic models.

The significance of this becomes clearer as Henderson explains his terms for understanding black poetry. He specifies three critical categories: theme, structure, and saturation. “Theme” refers to the characteristic subject matter of black poetry, which for Henderson means reflections on the experience of being black in America. “Structure” is his most deceptive term, for it refers to the sources from which the work is derived and not to the “form” of the work. The two essential sources, according to Henderson, are “Black speech and Black music” (31). In this section he gives eight categories of poetic devices based on characteristics of black speech, along with examples of each, and ten ways in which black music is often used in poems. “Structure,” then, refers to the poetic use of vernacular models. Finally, “saturation” means “(a) the communication of Blackness in a given situation, and (b) a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience” (62). This may seem no different from “theme”; but as one reads Henderson’s brief discussion of this category, it becomes clear that what he means is the *authenticity* with which a work conveys “the black experience.” This is what he apparently intends to underscore later when he comments: “[W]hat we are talking about then is the *depth* and *quality* of experience which a given work may evoke. We are also speaking about saturation as a kind of *condition*” (64).

Henderson’s conclusion demonstrates his commitment to link his critical project with a political agenda of black cultural nationalism. The purpose of his essay is to send readers back “to the poems themselves and to the people who make them”:

“This is the great challenge of our poets as they incessantly proclaim their miraculous discovery that Black people are poems. What this means for the teacher and the student and the critic is that, like the poets, they must not separate themselves or their work, whatever it is, from the concerns of the people. . . . Black people are moving toward the Forms of Things Unknown, which is to say, toward Liberation, which, however I have stammered in the telling, is what it is all about” (69). Clearly, Henderson differs fundamentally from conventional academic critics regarding the function of criticism. This difference leads Gates to caricature the Black Arts critics as “race and superstructure” critics, taking Gayle, Henderson, and Houston Baker as the movement’s chief exemplars.

Gates faults Henderson for failing to distinguish between poetic language and ordinary speech, for failing to acknowledge that much of what he says about black poetry is true of all poetry, and for making the tautological error of assuming “blackness” in order to make claims about “blackness.” Gates’s remarks on the “ultimate tautology,” or “saturation,” exemplify his general rancor regarding Black Arts critics: “[P]oetry is ‘Black’ when it communicates ‘Blackness.’ The more a text is saturated, the ‘Blacker’ the text. One imagines a daishiki-clad Dionysus weighing the saturated, mascon lines of Countee Cullen against those of Langston Hughes, as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Jean Toomer are silhouetted by the flames of our own black Hades. The blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” (*Figures in Black* 35).⁹ This is Gates’s entire discussion of “saturation.” He concludes that he has “belabored” Henderson’s theory not because it is the weakest of the three arguments but rather because Henderson’s “is by far the most imaginative of the three and has, at least, touched on areas critical to the explication of black literature.” The others, by implication, have not. Gates’s conclusion that “his examination of form is the first in a race and superstructure study and will most certainly give birth to more systematic and less polemical studies” (35) constitutes faint praise, indeed.

Gates’s harsh tone reflects the bitter conflict between movement critics and conventional academics. Arguing from the latter perspective, Gates describes a conference sponsored by the MLA at Yale in the summer of 1977. He remarks: “[T]he conference itself, in short, represented an attempt to take the ‘mau-mauing’ out of the black literary criticism that defined the ‘Black Aesthetic Movement’ of the sixties and transform it into a valid field of intellectual inquiry once again” (*Figures*

44). Gates clearly sees his work as implicated in a struggle for authority—a struggle to displace Black Aesthetic critics as the dominant authorities on black literature.¹⁰

In a very direct sense, Gates's difference with the Black Aesthetic critics is summed up in his comment: “[W]e write, it seems to me, primarily for other critics of literature” (*Figures* 56). This expresses the conventional, academic understanding of criticism as the specialized discourse of a professional elite, in direct opposition to the Black Arts vision of a populist, communal discourse. Though Gates often assaults Black Aesthetic critics for having an ideological agenda, the real struggle is between one ideology that rejects the institutional status quo and another that embraces it.

Despite this antagonism, Gates's own criticism has been deeply influenced by Black Aesthetic theory. When Neal wrote his afterword to *Black Fire*, he titled it “And Shine Swam On,” beginning the essay with a quotation from an urban toast called “The Titanic.” Shine is a modern, urban equivalent of the Signifying Monkey, a figure Gates has adopted as the signature of his own critical theory. Furthermore, Gates's acknowledgment of influences in the preface to *Signifying Monkey* includes an homage to Baker: “[M]y reading of his manuscript convinced me that in the blues and in Signifyin(g) were to be found the black tradition's two great repositories of its theory of itself, encoded in musical and linguistic forms” (x). This, needless to say, is a conviction that Neal, Henderson, and other Black Aesthetic critics have long shared.

Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) might be understood as a new evolutionary development of cultural nationalist premises. With its emphasis on “family history” (“family” meaning both immediate family and race), “sound” (the authentic style of black expression), “mastery of form” (performative skill), and “deformation of mastery” (turning the tables on the white oppressor), this book returns to the fundamental themes of the Black Aesthetic critics. Its manner, however, clearly reflects Baker's painstaking study of post-structuralist critical traditions. In Baker's work, deconstruction has not displaced cultural nationalism. Rather, the Black Aesthetic has absorbed deconstruction.

Though one might voice many misgivings about *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* as a general model for literary historiography, it is a fascinating and moving performative work, one that dramatizes the process of one critic's emotional and intellectual coming to terms with black cultural traditions and contemporary critical theory. It is perhaps even erroneous and

unfair to read this book as a work of literary history. Baker has tried to create an altogether new genre of writing, and in those terms, this book makes powerful claims on its readers. His study seems profoundly important because it represents a kind of writing that becomes possible by pursuing certain Black Aesthetic premises to their logical conclusions. Baker has written a book not for other critics, with their academic preconceptions of what a scholarly book should be, but rather for “the family,” in celebration of the family’s own survival, style, and traditions. This book exemplifies the continuing importance of the Black Arts Movement and of the intellectual and aesthetic opportunities and challenges it has created (see Smith, “Black Figures”).

3. Conclusion

Since the turn of the century many black artists have envisioned the development of new aesthetic forms based on black vernacular culture. Nor has this vision been exclusive to black artists. In the nineteenth century Antonín Dvořák chided American composers for not utilizing African-American musical resources, and his *New World Symphony* stands as a monumental rebuke to Euro-American ethnochauvinism. White American writers of the 1920s such as Carl Van Vechten and Dubose Heyward, while rejecting the racist traditions of dialect writing, also regarded black vernacular culture as a rich aesthetic source. Among black writers, James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes made pioneering efforts both to incorporate black vernacular materials into their work and to create new forms based on black culture. Black Aesthetic writers and critics often claimed that they were the first generation to embrace black vernacular culture, but in fact, they simply represented the triumph of a consensus that had been developing throughout the century. We need to understand Black Aesthetic theory and aesthetic forms in this historical context.

Though I have concentrated on the relationship of critics to Black Aesthetic theory and on certain entailments of that theory, the most compelling questions pertain to the art of the movement. At one historical end, we need more study of the movement’s origins, not only in “the African-American tradition” but also in “the European-American tradition.” To what extent did the Beat movement, with its emphasis on jazz as an aesthetic model, influence the Black Arts Movement—especially through poets such as Ted Joans, David Henderson, and Jones? What was the role of the black surrealist poet Bob

Kaufman in this process? In the other historical direction, to what degree did the movement shape the literary sensibilities of female writers such as Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange? Can the form and language of Shange's theater pieces be understood without reference to Black Arts theater? And most intriguing of all, how would our assessment of the Black Arts Movement be affected if its developments in literature, theater, music, and the visual arts were all taken into account?

When we think of the Black Arts Movement, its polemics and excesses are what we often remember. We regard it as something that happened and ended in the efflorescent '60s. Perhaps it is time to reconsider the substantive achievements of the movement. Perhaps they are more significant, enduring, and influential than we commonly acknowledge. It is certain, in any case, that this movement poses a great opportunity and challenge for literary and cultural historians. Though understanding this particular movement and its place in our national history is the immediate issue, meeting this scholarly challenge may well lead us to create new ways of understanding our collective past. If we do, our view of the present cannot stand unaltered.

Notes

1. Baker's *Journey Back* is probably the best starting point for a scholarly assessment of the movement. Lee's *Dynamite Voices* was written as a general introduction to black poets of the 1960s, but it remains useful—not least as an expression of the critical ideas of one of the movement's leading poets. Volume 41 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* offers detailed discussions of most poets considered by Lee plus many others. Chapter 6 of *Propaganda and Aesthetics*, by Abby and Ronald Johnson, called "Black Aesthetic Revolutionary Little Magazines, 1960–1976," is unique for the insight it provides into the ideological debates and factions within the movement. Aside from the anthologies discussed in the body of this essay, two others are notable: Brooks's *A Broadside Treasury* and Parks's *Nommo: A Literary Legacy of Black Chicago*. The latter is the only anthology of writers from the OBAC Writers Workshop. Baraka's cultural nationalist essays are collected in (Jones's) *Raise Race Rays Raze*, and his more recent views on the movement are presented at length, often hilariously, in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. The recent publication of Neal's selected writings in *Visions of a Liberated Future* is a valuable addition to the available writings of and about the Black Arts Movement.

2. Jones's class-based aesthetics is most fully developed in his book *Blues People*. Sollors's study of Baraka is especially useful for its discussion of Baraka's relationship to modernist and bohemian ideas.

3. Baraka's literary essays of the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate that he has discovered earlier black writers. Some of these essays are virtual annotated bibliographies of a tradition that he previously alleged did not exist. His more recent essays and poems, collected in *The Music*, adopt a celebratory tone toward the black tradition. I have discussed some of this latter work in my essay "Amiri Baraka and the Politics of Popular Culture."
4. As a preferable model for cultural analysis, I am thinking of the example provided by Williams in his later books, such as *Marxism and Literature*.
5. See Levine's pioneering study of the central role of music and folklore in African-American culture. In a more recent book, Stuckey provides a striking illustration of how one music-dance-worship ritual (the "ring shout") has sustained itself from its African origins to become a familiar feature of black religious tradition in America. Unfortunately, black literary historiography has never approached the sophistication of such work in history, anthropology, and religious studies.
6. Neal died in 1981 at the age of 44. A special issue of *Callaloo* (8.1[1985]) was devoted to Neal and his work, providing the most thorough discussion we have of this important figure.
7. Neal later moderated this view. See, for example, his essay "Ellison's Zoot Suit" in *Visions*.
8. Neal's comments on this play are astute. See Gayle *Black Aesthetic* 268-69.
9. "Mascon" is Henderson's term. It refers to the "massive concentration" of black experience in particular words or images.
10. Baker offers his own account of this critical history in chapter 2 of *Blues*.

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