

JOHN H. BRACEY JR.,
SONIA SANCHEZ, AND
JAMES SMETHURST

Editors' Introduction

The term "Black Arts Movement" (BAM) was coined by the poet, playwright, critic, and political activist Larry Neal for the outpouring of politically engaged African American art from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s, which Neal described as the "sister of the Black Power concept." BAM encompassed a wide range of ideological and aesthetic stances. Nonetheless, like the Black Power Movement, all strains of BAM were generally united by a belief in the need for personal and social transformation of African Americans to determine their own political and cultural destiny and by a sense that the movement was part of an international struggle against colonialism, neocolonialism, and racism.

One of the ironies in tracing the origins of the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s is that two of its most important catalysts, Malcolm X and John Coltrane, died before it came to fruition. Reflected in their significant presence in the literary and visual works that were to follow, it would be difficult to overestimate the two men's role in setting both the political and the cultural agendas that made BAM such a potent force in the Black Power and Black Liberation Movements.

Rising to prominence during the years between the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the onset of the urban rebellions, Malcolm and Coltrane came to be seen as the twin pillars of the new outlook and attitude that gained full expression in the Black Arts Movement. Coltrane's dismantling the foundations of western music while simultaneously producing beautiful and moving works outside of its constraints demonstrated that a new world was possible. Malcolm's words made explicit the critique implicit in Coltrane's music: Do you want to integrate in a burning house? Do you want human rights or civil rights? He constantly reminded his listeners that Europeans and people of European descent were a small minority of the global population.

The broader context in which Malcolm and Coltrane evolved was the reality of the Cold War and the rapid development of the anticolonial movements stimulated by the impact of World War II on the European colonial powers. In the 1940s and early 1950s, the rise of dynamic independence movements that ultimately led to the emergence of independent states in Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s stimulated a new engagement with traditional African arts and cultures. A number of influential Black musicians, including Art Blakey, Randy Weston, Dizzy Gillespie, Yusef Lateef, Dakota Staton, and Ahmad Jamal, traveled to Africa or incorporated African elements in their music, especially from the cultures of Nigeria. Some even converted to Ahmadiyya Islam (one of the smaller branches of Islam, which, although originating in South Asia, is particularly influential in

West Africa). At the time, despite the growing turmoil among Black artists and the prominence of some leading figures in the more radical sectors of the Civil Rights Movement, there was not a clear or coherent view of exactly what the role of culture was in the broader struggle against racial injustice. Most early assessments of the transition from civil rights to Black liberation do not mention the term "Black Arts Movement." Many of the artists involved during the period were viewed according to their politics and not necessarily in terms of their cultural work.

Malcolm X had performed the magic that turned "Negroes" into Black people, but the exact social, political, and cultural content of this new self designation was not self evident. John Coltrane and the other adherents of what was then called "free jazz" demonstrated that one could transgress the boundaries of "western music" and yet create work of great power and beauty. However, as popular as some of the younger artists were among a college educated audience, their art was not so accessible to many Black people whose cultural tastes were anchored in their traditions of blues, R&B, gospel, and Motown. Askia Touré's prescient essay "Keep on Pushin': Rhythm & Blues as a Weapon" is an indication of what was needed and the connections that would have to be made to generate a culture in tune with a new Black awareness and consciousness. Malcolm's Organization of Afro American Unity had as one of its goals a "cultural revolution." Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* was just being translated, putting into English his harsh critique of the culture of colonization and the need to break both with it and with traditional African cultural forms that did not function to advance the liberation of the colonized.

What validated Malcolm's importance to the incipient Black Arts Movement was his endorsement by older cultural figures such as Ossie Davis, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Burroughs, and Margaret Walker. It was Davis who gave the eulogy at Malcolm's funeral, and it was older poets who produced the first and still most influential responses to what it meant that Malcolm was no longer on this earth—as seen in many of the poems in the early Broadside Press anthology *For Malcolm*, edited by Margaret Burroughs and Dudley Randall. It is at this critical juncture in the immediate aftermath of Malcolm's assassination that Amiri Baraka moved from the East Village to Harlem to begin to lay out a program for the "Black Arts."

In its early days, the Black Arts Movement was relatively gender egalitarian. Given the deep sexism running through U.S. society, it was actually much more open in this regard than the vast majority of cultural and political institutions and formations. Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Margaret Burroughs, Margaret Danner, Johari Amini (Jewel Lattimore), Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, Sarah Webster Fabio, Aishah Rahman, Barbara Ann Teer, Val Gray Ward, and Elma Lewis played leading and very visible roles as artists and as creators of new Black cultural institutions. In the late 1960s, however, Maulana Karenga proposed a clear and influential cultural nationalist model based on neo-Africanist principles that posited women as "complementary, not equal." As Karenga's Kwaaida ideology circulated throughout the Black Power and Black Arts movements, patriarchal notions of art and culture gained increasing currency, although these views never characterized BAM as a whole. Women continued to hold leadership positions in the movement and remained among the most popular artists within the Black community. Both men and women also contested expressions of male chauvinism in BAM. In fact, one result of Kwaaidism and other patriarchal ideologies within the movement was the rise of an explicit Black Power

and Black Arts feminism, exemplified by Toni Cade Bambara's landmark 1970 anthology *The Black Woman* and by the actions of women artists who literally fought their way onto stages with men.

BAM and Its Predecessors

BAM activists sought a usable past not simply in the idea of a general Black artistic tradition but more specifically in antecedent African American cultural movements. By far the most important was the Harlem, or New Negro, Renaissance of the 1920s. Like BAM, the Renaissance was a multidisciplinary and multi-genre arts movement that gave Black artists a national and even international status. Yet, in many respects, BAM artists treated the Harlem Renaissance as a cautionary tale as much as a beloved parent. They judged the artists of the Renaissance to be insufficiently political, not actively enough engaged with the concerns of working-class African Americans, too dependent on the support of jaded white patrons, and (with the exception of a relative few such as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Zora Neale Hurston) distant from the culture of the Black masses. Nevertheless, despite the charges they leveled against the Renaissance, BAM critics like Neal and Addison Gayle Jr. were among the first to take its writers, such as Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, and Claude McKay, seriously. In fact, the rise of Harlem Renaissance studies can be traced to the work of Neal and BAM critics and early Black studies scholars of the 1960s and 1970s.

Also important to BAM activists as both antecedents to their movement and examples of what Harold Cruse would make famous as "the crisis of the Negro intellectual" were the radical political and cultural circles of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, especially those associated with the Communist Party. These circles provided audiences and venues for African American artists, some of whom, like Sterling Brown, Margaret Burroughs, Langston Hughes, John O. Killens, Jacob Lawrence, and Margaret Walker, provided critical support and mentoring for the nascent BAM. Quite a few of the young BAM activists themselves had participated in study groups, lecture series, educational organizations, and the like connected to the Old Left. At the same time, many of the young artists and activists criticized the Old Left (at least its members of the Communist Party) for an undue attachment to the Soviet Union, a romantic fetishizing of white workers and their revolutionary potential, a lack of understanding of the importance and appeal of Black nationalism, an underestimation of the Third World as the leading force for social liberation, and a lack of appreciation of the spiritual dimension of life.

BAM activists and Black Power militants as well were keenly aware of the political and cultural developments in the Third World, especially the debates between the adherents of Négritude, notably Senegal's Leopold Senghor, and what might be thought of as the revolutionary nationalist Africanism of such independence leaders as Guinea's Sekou Touré and Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah. In general, BAM writers and artists, whether they considered themselves revolutionary nationalists or cultural nationalists, sided with the revolutionary activism of Touré and Nkrumah against what they saw as the depoliticized culturalism of Senghor and Négritude. They were also inspired by non-aligned movements that arose out of the 1955 Bandung Conference of newly independent African and Asian nations and

from the often violent independence struggles against colonialism and neocolonialism. Of particular importance was the Cuban Revolution, which actively sought the support of Black artists and intellectuals, sponsoring tours for Black radicals, and having Fidel Castro stay at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem when he came to speak at the United Nations in 1960, for example. Proto-Black Power and Black Arts activists advanced the idea of a "Bandung World," in which Black radicals were part of a worldwide revolutionary movement encompassing the vast majority of the world's people, rather than seeing themselves as a minority within a minority in the United States.

An immediate antecedent to BAM was the bohemian counterculture of the 1950s and early 1960s. Although such literary groups as the Beats, the New York School, and the Black Mountain School are often still characterized as "white," they were actually among the most interracial intellectual circles in the United States at the time, especially in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and the San Francisco Bay Area. Such African American writers as Amiri Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Ed Bullins, Ted Joann, A. B. Spellman, and the seminal Umbra Poets Workshop were intimately tied to the literary counterculture. In fact, Baraka as writer, editor, and publisher was a key figure in creating the idea of a "New American Poetry" in the 1950s and 1960s. The institutionalization of the public reading as a central means of disseminating poetry and the engagement of literature with music and other forms of popular culture, especially Black popular culture, in BAM owed much to the Beats and other bohemian "schools." In the end, though, many important African American cultural activists like Baraka publicly broke with the counterculture as a way of asserting the independence of Black artists.

Not to be overlooked is the continuing presence of older Black artists, writers, and intellectuals, such as Samuel Allen, Romare Bearden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, Margaret Burroughs, Elizabeth Catlett, Alice Childress, Charles Davis, Owen Dodson, Margaret Danner, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, John O. Killens, Jacob Lawrence, Melvin Tolson, Darwin Turner, Margaret Walker, and Theodore Ward. While only a few of these artists can be said to have truly been a part of BAM—most notably Gwendolyn Brooks—many were mentors and critical supporters of younger BAM members, encouraging their work and reminding them of earlier moments of Black political and cultural radicalism.

The Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism

BAM cannot be comprehended outside the context of the rise of Black nationalism in the 1960s. Of course, Black nationalism has a long history in the United States reaching back to the eighteenth century. However, with the mass circulation of the ideas of Malcolm X, first within and then outside the Nation of Islam, and the explosion of the uprisings of the 1960s, especially after the Watts Rebellion of 1965, nationalism exerted a new influence on Black artists and on the African American community in general to an extent unseen since the heyday of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in the 1920s. And even Marcus Garvey never directly affected most Black artists during the Harlem Renaissance in the way Malcolm X moved those who would start BAM in the 1960s. However, Malcolm X's analysis of white supremacy in the United

States and its relationship to imperialism around the world and his call for Black cultural and political independence were taken in different directions after his assassination in 1965 left many key questions unanswered. Artists were extremely important in framing the discussion of what it would mean to be liberated, of what it did mean to be Black, of what the content of Blackness was.

Debates among nationalists turned not only on how liberation might be achieved but also on what a liberated nation would look like and how it should function. Some envisioned a socialist society run on Marxist-Leninist principles. Others imagined communal societies rooted in a vision of African traditional culture. Still others promoted a notion of Black entrepreneurship or Black capitalism. Some insisted that a large, unified state would be necessary to ensure Black independence and national development. Others saw a linked federation of city-states as the natural territory of the Black community in the second half of the twentieth century.

More often than not, African American artists and activists combined many or all of these visions, or considered the answers to the essential questions of liberation to be a process rather than a set of settled alternatives. As a result, the still too common practice of dividing 1960s–70s Black nationalism into separate cultural and revolutionary strands has to be approached carefully, since in many ways that divide owes more to organizational disputes between the Black Panthers and proponents of Maulana Karenga's vision than to ideological distinctions that might be useful now in understanding Black Arts and Black Power. Virtually all the dominant forms of nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s supported the idea of a fundamental transformation of the existing social order as a cornerstone of Black liberation, and all nationalist groups saw culture as an essential arena of political struggle. Similarly, BAM artists saw their cultural work as fundamental contributions to Black liberation. In fact, one of things that most distinguished Black Arts and Black Power from earlier movements is that political organizations were frequently headed by artists, such as Amiri Baraka and the Congress of African People (CAP), or by activists with a deep background in the arts, such as Muhammad Ahmad (Max Stanford) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and Bobby Seale and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

Black Aesthetics

There was never a consensus on a "Black Aesthetic," although there was wide agreement in BAM that the characteristics and content of Black art should define itself from and against "Western" art. There was also a general sense that the development of some aesthetic system for the evaluation, analysis, and creation of revolutionary Black art was necessary, since the dominant aesthetic norms and artistic canons were irrelevant at best and oppressive at worst for Black artists and their African American audience. BAM members vigorously objected to notions of aesthetic universalism promoted by the academy and the intellectual establishment in the United States, seeing those notions as white supremacist particularism. These objections brought BAM into conflict not only with white critics, scholars, and artists but also with some Black artists and intellectuals who continued to subscribe to "mainstream" universalist aesthetic values, leading to sharp debates, for

example, on the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance as well of more contemporary writers like Ralph Ellison and Robert Hayden. Of course, even within the movement there was considerable disagreement over the worth of the work of Ellison and Hayden – though the arguments turned more on the degree to which those writers engaged African American expressive culture rather than on any universalist ideas of art and aesthetic value.

One aspect of the political mission of BAM which had a profound impact on aesthetics was the emphasis on the performative and on artistic genres that lent themselves to public performance and potentially reach masses of people. As a result, the most popular genres of the movement were poetry and theater, since it was comparatively easy to present poems or plays at a political rally, on a street corner, or in a public housing project courtyard or community room. Poetry, too, was particularly important because it could be easily circulated in Black-run journals, newspapers, broadsides, and small press chapbooks in a way that was not possible with longer fiction. Likewise, the public mural became the best-known form of Black visual art during the period, with such landmarks as the *Wall of Respect* on Chicago's South Side becoming sites of political rallies as well as of other artistic events. There was also a stress on art as a process of personal and social liberation rather than as a product or artifact to be sold or appreciated in an abstract way.

One area of considerable debate within BAM was the relation of revolutionary art to Black popular culture, both traditional and contemporary. What, for example, was the value of the blues tradition, both lyrically and formally, to Black art, especially Black music, drama, and literature? How were R&B, doo-wop, soul, soul jazz, and so on, to be assessed in terms of the new Black art? Some BAM members, notably among proponents of Karenga's Kwaiaidism, essentially rejected the blues tradition and modern Black popular culture, positing instead the jazz avant-garde, especially John Coltrane, and a neo-Africanist construct of precolonial African culture as the basis of a new Black counterculture. Others, following an anti-colonial Left position in large measure derived from Frantz Fanon, argued for a vanguard art that rejected both popular culture and traditional African culture, echoing perhaps Marx's famous pronouncement in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that the "social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future." Still others, even some others closely tied for a time to Karenga, such as Amiri Baraka, argued for a cultural continuum stretching from Africa through the blues, free jazz, and such contemporary R&B musicians as James Brown, Curtis Mayfield, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder.

Another characteristic of BAM artistic practice, especially of those BAM members who drew on Black popular culture, was the blurring of the boundaries of artistic genre and medium. Black Arts performances frequently mixed poetry, drama, music, dance, and even visual arts. Similarly, mural painting often entailed multidisciplinary, multi-genre performances at the mural sites. In addition, murals such as the *Wall of Respect* incorporated photographs, literary texts, and works from other artistic mediums. Even in works that were printed, for example, Sonia Sanchez's "A Coltrane Poem" and Haki Madhubuti's "Don't Cry, Scream," writers often tried to recreate aspects of non-literary performance through lineation, typography, spacing, and so on. Finally, many Black artists worked in multiple genres: in addition to being jazz musicians Archie Shepp was an accomplished playwright, Sun Ra and Cecil Taylor wrote poetry, and Marion Brown was a

painter; poet Jay Wright played bass with jazz musician Pharoah Sanders; and poet Jayne Cortez worked in theater and dance.

BAM artists valued jazz musicians such as Max Roach and Charles Mingus who were fairly traditional in formal terms but whose work was often politically radical as much as they valued those musicians – especially John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler, and Cecil Taylor – who created relatively few overtly political pieces but whose formal experimentation was seen as analogous to the search for social liberation. Randy Weston, in many respects, too, a more traditional jazz pianist, was valued for his early incorporation of African music in his work. In short, Coltrane's "My Favorite Things," Weston's *Uhuru Afrika*, Mingus's *Fables of Fabus*, and Roach's *Freedom Now Suite: We Insist* were all admired, if for different reasons. However, it was unquestionably Coltrane's relentless search for a new musical vocabulary and syntax not tied to "Western" values and aesthetics that was most influential.

Circuits of Transmission

The growth of the Black Arts Movement was enabled through the emergence of a new radical African American arts infrastructure run and largely supported by Black people in the early and mid-1960s. The creation of such magazines as *Freedomways*, *Liberator*, *Soulbook*, *Black Dialogue*, and *Umbra* and editor Hoyt Fuller's transformation of *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*) from a *Black Reader's Digest* into the most widely circulating journal of radical Black politics and culture helped create networks of younger (and not so young) African American artists and intellectuals that would form the basis of the Black Arts Movement. Similarly, such institutions as the Ebony Museum (later the Du Sable Museum) in Chicago, the International Afro-American Museum (later the Charles Wright Museum of African American History), the Free Southern Theater in New Orleans, and Boone House in Detroit, the Umbra Poets Workshop in New York, and the Freedom Singers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) provided local examples inspired Black Arts activists in their later institution-building efforts combining art and politics.

In part, these proto-Black Arts and Black Power institutions were the result of the Civil Rights upsurge, especially the more militant wing of the movement manifested in the sit-ins of 1960 and the creation of the SNCC. It was also motivated by a conscious desire to avoid the sort of white patronage that many Black Arts participants came to feel had undermined the Harlem Renaissance. Although the ideological cast of the newly established journals, festivals, conferences, presses, schools, groups, museums, and so on was increasingly nationalist, this impulse toward institution building was also encouraged by the examples of the older Black Left in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, such as Paul Robeson's *Freedom* newspaper, *Negro Quarterly*, *Negro Story*, the Southside Writers Group, the Harlem Arts Center, *Harlem Quarterly*, the Harlem Writers Club, and the American Negro Theater. In fact, veterans of these older Left efforts, including Margaret Burroughs, John Henrik Clarke, John O. Killens, Carlton Goodlett Jr., Margaret Walker, and Elizabeth Catlett, played important roles in the creation of this new framework.

The watershed moment in the development of a Black Arts infrastructure was the establishment of Detroit's Broadside Press by Dudley Randall in 1965. Randall, an active member of the "Detroit Group" of Black writers that coalesced around such institutions as Boone House and Concept East Theater, initiated the press by publishing broadsides written by him and older Black authors such as Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Melvin Tolson, and Sterling Brown. Within a relatively short period of time, however, the press concentrated on chapbooks and broadsides by Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, Haki Madhubuti, Sterling Plump, Johari Amini, and literally dozens of other young Black writers. Between 1966 and 1975 Broadside published a half million volumes, a huge number for a small poetry press—and according to Melba Joyce Boyd more than twice as many books by African American poets than had been issued by the entire U.S. publishing industry in the two decades between 1945 and 1965. Broadside not only made the new Black poetry and criticism available to a national audience, it also inspired the creation of other African American literary publishing ventures, such as Third World Press, the Journal of Black Poetry Press, Lotus Press, and Jihad Productions.

Broadside Press soon became an integral part of a midwestern network of Black artists' groups and institutions that included *Negro Digest*, Concept East, the Organization for Black American Culture (OBAC) with its writers and visual arts workshops, the Afro Arts Theater, Africobra, the Kuumba Theater, and the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), which joined with like-minded groups and institutions across the nation. When Gwendolyn Brooks moved from Harper & Row, one of the largest trade publishers, to Broadside Press in the late 1960s, it was an event of enormous symbolic and practical significance, which led African American writers to publish with Black-run presses (or at least justify why they did not).

To understand the ways in which Black Arts built a national community among artists and found an audience, it is crucial to remember that the Black Liberation Movement did not simply exert an ideological influence over Black Arts; it also aided the cultural movement in material ways. What might be thought of as fundamentally political events, such as the 1970 founding convention of the Congress of African People (CAP) in Atlanta, were also showcases for Black visual art, literature, dance, music, and dramatic performance as well as venues for the discussion of Black aesthetics and the role of culture in political struggle. Very often important local and national political leaders, Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti, for example, were major artists. Frequently, such Black liberation advocates would promote radical Black art as a central part of their organizing efforts. Of course, the reverse was also true: Black artists would help build political organizations like CAP and the African Liberation Support Committee on tours of poetry readings, theater performances, and other cultural events.

Legacies

BAM was arguably the most influential U.S. arts movement ever. Certainly no other radical cultural movement reached such a large American audience. Black Arts cultural groups, writers' and artists' workshops, theaters, bookstores, study circles, dance companies, schools, journals, small presses, reading series, galleries, museums, public art spaces

sprouted up wherever there was a Black community, large or small. Most big cities had multiple Black Arts institutions. Black Arts, too, for a time became a staple of popular culture media aimed primarily at Black audiences, the magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*, for example, the television programs *Soul!* and *Like It Is*, and even such "Blaxploitation" films as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* and *Super Fly*. In short, the movement directly reached a grassroots audience of millions—an amazing achievement for such a politically and aesthetically radical cultural movement.

Many of BAM's members remained artistically active to a degree that few of their living contemporaries from the 1960s could match. Many well-known post-Black Arts artists—the novelist Toni Morrison, the novelist and playwright Pearl Cleage, the playwright August Wilson, the poet and playwright Ntozake Shange, filmmaker Spike Lee, musicians Chaka Khan and Earth, Wind, and Fire (not too mention a huge proportion of the jazz avant-garde), the actors Avery Brooks, Samuel L. Jackson, Denise Nichols, and Danny Glover—were molded by the movement. The movement served as a catalyst for Asian American, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, and Native American cultural movements. It provided an important template for the literature, theory, and criticism coming from the second-wave feminist movement. The more radical "Third World" wing of early multiculturalism, too, largely emerged out of Black Arts and Black Power. Finally, it remains almost impossible to discuss work by African American artists without reference to the criteria suggested by the movement, especially with respect to issues of authenticity and the relationship of art to an idea of Black community.

Black Arts also did much to demolish the distinction between popular culture and "high art." It was a major force in introducing the idea that "high" art can be popular in form and content and popular culture can be socially and artistically serious. Today this is an unremarkable notion, but it was revolutionary in the 1960s and 1970s. This change is perhaps most clearly exemplified in hip hop, where the more "conscious" artists publicly associate themselves with Amiri Baraka, Askia Touré, Sonia Sanchez, and other leading Black Arts poets and vice versa in ways that one could not imagine happening between serious poets and popular musicians to that degree before the 1960s—Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown notwithstanding. This breakdown of genre distinctions and the changed conceptions of audience have also enabled artists like Pearl Cleage to mix popular fiction genres (such as urban romance and detective) with Black nationalist ideology and reach mass Black audiences largely outside "mainstream" channels of publicity, marketing, and critical review. The Black Arts practice of creating a socially engaged mixture of poetry, music, dance, visual arts, and other media performed for a popular audience laid the groundwork for the growth of performance poetry as a popular art form.

Further, Black Arts dramatically altered the landscape of public funding for the arts, and it stimulated the discussion about what kind of work publicly funded art should do. The efforts and model of the Black Arts Movement led to an efflorescence of publicly supported murals, arts centers, workshops, performance groups, and the like within Black communities as well as in many other sorts of communities. In addition, the art-for-the-people efforts of BAM catalyzed the growth of institutions that reached millions of Americans generally, such as the Public Broadcasting System and National Public Radio, both founded in the late 1960s. For better or worse, many of the current debates about culture and public funding that arise perennially over the National Endowment for the Arts, the

The Mission of SOS—Calling All Black People

As happened with Black Power, a new scholarship examining the Black Arts Movement has emerged and gained wide academic attention over the last decade. There is also dramatically increased interest in Black Arts and Black Power outside the academy, especially, but not exclusively, among young African Americans. However, a major problem in teaching courses on the Black Arts Movement is the lack of an anthology that can be used as the primary textbook. Certainly none of the existing anthologies of African American literature adequately capture the ideological, aesthetic, and geographical breadth of BAM. Even the recently reprinted edition of Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal's seminal BAM anthology *Black Fire* comprises only the early days of the movement. Further, so many of the essential documents are inaccessible that anyone without access to a major research library would find it very difficult to get a real sense of BAM. And, of course, access does not of itself identify the documents or provide contextualization.

This collection is intended to remedy those problems. It presents a representative sample of five BAM genres: theory/criticism, statements of purpose, poetry, drama, and short fiction/narrative. This sample demonstrates the ideological, geographical, and aesthetic scope of the movement. We include works that were considered essential at the time as well as others that seem to us significant in retrospect.

In addition to the editors' introduction, the volume includes a foreword and three concluding essays discussing the significance and legacy of the movement. Most sections feature a short introduction as well as a reminiscence by a major practitioner of the genre to give a tangible sense of the moment and the lived feeling of BAM. The volume also includes a selected bibliography of primary and secondary texts.

The Black Arts Movement

By the late 50's the U.S. Civil Rights movement had reached a new height of intensity with the victory of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the emergence of Dr. King and the formation of the S.C.L.C. The Cuban Revolution brought the 50's to a roaring climax with yet another popular democratic victory. By 1960 the Black Student Movement had formed out of the Greensboro black student "sit-ins" and soon S.N.C.C. would step onto the stage of Black peoples' struggle. And now at the beginning of the 60's we welcomed the move into the leadership of Malcolm X.

Clearly, this was the era when, as Mao Tse Tung said, "Countries want Independence, Nations want Liberation and The People want Revolution!" And as we used to quote him often, "Revolution Is The Main Trend In the World Today!"

The African Liberation Movements, from the earlier Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya, were likewise gaining worldwide recognition. And the names Kenyatta, Azikiwe, Toure, Nyerere, Nasser were becoming familiar. In 1961, I 1st met Askia Toure, along with other life long comrades, in front of the U.S. Mission to the U.N. where we were gathered with hundreds of other people, including Aishah Rahman and Mae Mallory and Calvin Hicks to protest the murder of Patrice Lumumba by the U.S., Belgium and the traitorous scum who still sits in the seat of power of Zaire, Joe Mobutu.

For many of us who lived in the "village" in New York, the political dimensions of the times were always muted by the petty bourgeois anarchy of the largely white soi-disant arts community we lived in. But as the whole society heated up with struggle and rebellion and revolution, I suppose the most politically sensitive of us began to pull away from the bourgeois rubric that art and politics were separate and exclusive entities.

So that by the beginning of the 60's not only had I already gone to Cuba to witness the beginnings of the revolution Fidel Castro and the people of Cuba had brought into the world, but when I returned I became quickly involved in helping put together political organizations like *Organization of Young Men*, a political newspaper, *In/Formation*, and became a member of the left organization *On Guard*, headed by Calvin Hicks, along with Archie Shepp.

In a few months I had also become the New York chairman of the Fair Play for Cuba organization. I had gone to Cuba with Harold Cruse, Sarah Wright, Julian Mayfield, Ed Clark, among others, and there had met the great Robert Williams, of Monroe, North Carolina, who had most recently been excommunicated from the NAACP for not only

stating openly that Black people had the right to self defense against the attacks of the Klan, Williams even led his unique branch of the NAACP to ambush the Klan and remove their hoods and guns.

I'm saying all this to set the stage for the coming together of the young Black people who would put forth the concept and the organization called *The Black Arts Repertory Theater/School*.

Not only was the struggle for democracy raging at higher and higher levels, but when Malcolm X stepped into center stage, there came also a wave of Black nationalist agitation and propaganda unlike many of us had ever heard before. Many of us were not familiar with the Nation of Islam, especially if we were living outside Black communities. Elijah Muhammad was unknown, but Malcolm X put words to the volcanic torrent of anger and frustration many of us felt with the Civil Rights Movement.

The "turn the other cheek," "non-violent" approach to the struggle for democracy we rejected. We did not understand why we must continue to let crazed ignorant hooligans attack us to show we were noble or that we deserved to be citizens. The endless television horror shows of Black people being water hosed, beaten, dogged by two and four legged dogs, lynched, jailed, got our jaws tight not only at the sum who did this but the negroes who accepted it.

That's why the Cuban revolution was so heavy in our sensibility. That's why Robert Williams was our hero. That's why we demonstrated for Lumumba and wrestled in those streets with the police despite Ralph Bunche telling us he was embarrassed that we were in public acting like niggaz.

So when Malcolm stepped forward and began to teach Self Determination, Self Respect and Self Defense, it struck a chord deep within the soul of a wide spectrum of Black people, particularly Black youth. And for those of us living outside the community, his impact was deeply profound and life changing.

In some respects it was like Fanon says about the native intellectuals in colonial societies who have become so integrated into the petty bourgeois superstructure and even marginal social life of the oppressor nation that when we first receive that degree of self consciousness that makes us aware of how deeply we have joined with our own oppressors even to taking up the philosophies of our own inferiorization we are deeply mortified.

Fanon says such intellectuals next become blacker than Black or Super African to cover and dismiss their double consciousness, as Du Bois calls it. I think there is very obviously some of this over compensation in some of the interior and public manifestations of the Black Arts Movement. Fanon also said that if such an intellectual continues to struggle in the day to day practical revolutionary movement then there is a chance that they might become authentic revolutionaries rather than compensating poseurs.

We were a group of Black intellectuals living mostly downtown New York, Greenwich Village, or the Lower East Side. Our day to day social life was, for the most part, joined directly, or marginally, with the petty bourgeois arts and intellectual community or at least that was their and our presumption. Except that whatever else the most sensitive of us was doing, what remained is what was the deepest hunger in our souls, the urge to democracy to self determination, the understanding that no matter how much we might be "recognized" or "accepted" or even lionized as artists, we were still somehow burdened with the disorienting realization of alienation.

On the surface, as we grew more conscious we knew that as we demanded an art of struggle, an art that related to the reality of our history and the real life of the world, particularly of the Afro American people, it became clearer and clearer that the standard bourgeois aesthetic of separation of arts and politics was stupid and becoming more and more openly bankrupt.

In a deep sense the music, jazz, blues, new music, these were sustaining elements of our lives. We could feel ourselves, we could become truly self conscious inside it. And as the 60's moved on, a significant sector of Black artists downtown became more and more isolated from that so called "mainstream" by the growing need to fully express our soul and mind connection with Black struggle in our art and in the street. When I met Askia, I didn't even know he was a poet. Ditto Larry Neal, Max Stanford. We were in the struggle to liberate Black people, to liberate ourselves.

We began to come together to discuss the movement. We were in different organizations. *On Guard*, *RAM*, *Umbra*, some even in the *CP* and *SWP*. Black intellectuals and artists seeking true self consciousness. We hit upon the idea of circulating propaganda and agitation among the downtown Blacks to involve ourselves directly in the liberation struggle. When Robert Williams was struggling with the Klan we even discussed sending him guns. One of our group was even busted in a set up by the FBI where he was framed for trying to blow up the statue of liberty, just like the Muslims framed by the FBI and Mossad today for the World Trade Center Reichstag explosion.

We spent much time now traveling back and forth between the Village and Harlem. Working politically in Harlem, that became the badge of our sincerity. No matter we still lived downtown for the most part, some in integrated marriages or what have you.

The explosive transformation of our quantitative frustration, built and genuine desire for liberation into the qualitative persona who must be wholly militant activist in the liberation struggle was Malcolm's murder. His murder by the FBI, the federal government through native agents, Spike Lee, not by the Nation of Islam, was what sent us hurtling out of those various downtowns across the country seeking our "Blackness" like Faust trying to reclaim his soul.

The month after Malcolm's assassination, a group of us arrived in Harlem, this time to seek permanent residence and to avenge Malcolm's murder. We had held fundraisers downtown. Just before we left, we had a fundraiser at the old St. Marks Theater, where my plays, *The Toilet*, and *Experimental Death Unit #1*, featuring Barbara Ann Teer, Charles Patterson's *Black Ice* and *The Black Tramp* by Nat White (who we never heard from again) were performed to raise money to go uptown.

We rented a brownstone on W. 130th St. near Lenox, tore down the 1st floor walls and began our work. The announcement of our arrival in Harlem was a parade, with the small group of young Black artists, led by the great genius Sun Ra and his then Myth Science Arkestra. We still have photos of that. What the people of Harlem thought of that we would find out in various ways as we travailed. But that was the opening. The weird, the interplanetary, the heliocentric world of Sun Ra, our syncopated point and I carried a brand new flag, designed by painter William White, the tragic/comic (like the earth, the south the smile of joy, the north the frown of sadness, dig it) dialectical mask of drama, fashioned into an African shield in black and gold. We walked all the way determined to make a revolution.

The name Black Arts had come in one of our meetings downtown where we gave each other military rank and made a commitment to any means, even armed revolution. We said what should we call this, then, secret Black organization of artists and intellectuals. I remember Larry Neal, Max Stanford, Cornelius Suares, Clarence Franklin, Askia Toure, William White, Charles and William Patterson (the last two from *Umbra*, our in-house trouble makers). And it came to me out of the black hole, I said, the Black Arts!

Part 2

But whatever our vision and theory, it could be nothing but speculation and argument unless we could make them real with the objective "proof" of practice. At best, we were a loose united front, joined most securely around the "new" idea of "Blackness." But what was that? was the relentless question that defined our confusion.

We had put out a manifesto of sorts, as we prepared to go uptown, which said we wanted to draw the most serious and committed Black artists and intellectuals from everywhere in the world to help us create the *Black Arts Repertory Theater School* [BARTS]. We linked the common Eurocentric distortion of Black Arts as an evil magic, as a mystic pursuit. A power used to transform reality. We had long before understood the twisted racism of Europe and America when referring to Black. That everything Black was bad. But we was Bad, in fact we was trying to get Badder dan Nat. We was trying to get outright "terrible." Understanding, in various degrees, that "to turn their Evil backward, is to Live!"

We set up classes on history, politics, drama. Sun Ra even taught "Myth Science" as part of "the Blacker Arts." We began to put on plays in the small downstairs space. We had forums, some of which became near violent ideological shootouts. But one thing was clear, we were not merely subjective in our registration of the tenor of the times, or the motion of history. People came, not only from the larger community of Harlem, but young Black artists began to make the trek to the brownstone on W. 130th St. with the Black & Gold flag hung outside, to find out what was going on — to support this new movement and to participate.

Not only that, but as we began to function, to do our programs, the plays, poetry readings, new music concerts and stalk through the community preaching "Blackness (which differed depending on who you were talking to) the world spread in all directions. And, indeed, talk began to come back to us of a Black Arts Movement!

One escalating program with this united front of Black artists and intellectuals was that among a small group of us, on the inside, we began to struggle each day with more and more intensity. About what? About Blackness. Who was, and who wasn't. What was and what wasn't.

We had made a line of demarcation (we felt) between the artists we'd left downtown and ourselves. We could put them down too easily as "whited out" or as unserious negroes committed only to hedonism and individualism. With serving white people. But certainly that could not be factual in many cases.

We were arrogant and often the Super Black neophytes that Fanon spoke of. But at the same time there was real resistance from many of our erstwhile friends and fellow Afro American artists downtown. There was a common dismissal of our efforts that were crazy and even violent.

Some said we weren't really artists. "How could you be an artist when all you wanted to talk about is Black and Hating White people . . . specially since some of yall just left their company a few minutes ago."

But there was, no matter how crazy and wild and even violent and non-artistic we might have seemed to our one time friends (many of whom now openly denounced us) or to various white folks and negroes, there was a developing line of truth to our ideas and our practice, that part of them not wholly distorted by our continuing ideological confusion. For one thing, in that broad but small united front, there were mainly the petty bourgeois. Certainly most of the leadership was. Which meant that we were given to extremes and occasional fanaticism. It meant we would vacillate from this to that, which was exacerbated by the disciplineless environments many of us had come out of. Yet in spite of these impediments to ideological clarity, plus constant internal conflicts, some manifest as disruptive undermining, others as straight out physical violence, we did accomplish some things of value, both in theory (as we later summed it up) and in actual practice.

For instance, that summer of 1965, we did bring an advanced Black Art to Harlem! But the effort became, even at our most successful and expansive, wrought and torn with ongoing problems. First of all the BARTS was a small group of artist-intellectual-activists who formed the formal organization. All of whom had paramilitary rank and responsibility in the organization. Many of our strongest supporters refused to join the actual organization because they felt some of us were just too crazy and hard to get along with. And there is no disputing that — a couple of those dudes I couldn't even get along with. Ironically, two brothers, who had split from the *Umbra* organization who I did not know well at the outset of our attempt to build an independent institution of Afro American artists and intellectuals, were the sickest, most disruptive negroes in militant clothing I have ever met.

There were brand new Elijah Muslims (at least that was the rhetoric and even the dress and style. I don't know if any of these were ever actually in The Nation. Then there were brand new Sunni Muslims and even a few brand new Hanafi Mussulmen, at least one of whom was related to Brother Khalis whose D.C. HQ was left full of dead brothers and sisters by some crazed hitmen. Some later went to jail when Khalis occupied a building owned by or somehow associated with Jews for making a film about the prophet Muhammad.

Most of us maintained an alienation from the NOI because of Malcolm, but we knew it was the Devil that had him murdered. Baba Oserjeman's Yoruba temple also influenced us. It was, for some of us, the essence of Blackness. The authentic historical presence of our African history and culture. It is not unimportant that all of these groups had distinct and ultimately oppressive roles for women. Particularly their adherents. Whether the veils and segregation of the various Muslims or the polygamy of their tradition and the common practice of the Yoruba. And we were also influenced by these ideas and practices as legitimate forms of *Blackness*.

There were cultural nationalists of all persuasions. Left Right & Centrist. Some as radicals some as progressives some as revolutionaries, some as political Black, some as mystical-spiritual Black. Some as Pick Up The Gun Blacks, most as Hate Whitey Blacks. We had the most unity on that, that being Black meant despising as openly as possible All White People, Groucho or Karl. So that since methodology and ideology are connected, doing anything involved sharp struggle and even violence.

But that one glorious summer of 1965, we did, even with all that internal warfare, bring advanced Black Art to Harlem. We organized, as part of HARYOU ACT, the nation's 1st anti poverty program, a summer arts program called Operation Boot Strap (under the overall direction of Adam Clayton Powell's point cadre, Judge Livingston Wingate). For eight weeks, we brought Drama, Poetry, Painting, Music, Dance, night after night all across Harlem. We had a fleet of five trucks and stages created with banquet tables. And each night our five units would go out in playgrounds, street corners, vacant lots, play streets, parks, bringing Black Art directly to the people.

Young Steve Young was the most trustworthy coordinator. He and my sister, Kimako (who was constantly attacked by certain negroes because she was an independent creative woman). She dealt with drama and dance. Andrew Hill was music coordinator, Joe Gregory coordinated the painters, assisted by Joe Overstreet and William White who came to help us but refused to leave the Village.

One of my closest poet friends, in fact, pulled a pistol on me to emphasize his determination to stay downtown! It was that wild! But Sun Ra and Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders and Milford Graves and Don Pullen and Albert Ayler and at our benefits downtown, John Coltrane, Grachan Moncur, Bobby Hutcherson, and more. And uptown Larry Neal, Askia Toure, Bobb Hamilton, Sonia Sanchez, Ted Wilson, so many poets and black actors, directors, Jim Campbell, Rob Jackson, Kimako (who directed and did the lead role in *Dutchman*), Frank Adu, Barbara Montgomery, Yusef Iman (our stalwart classic Black Arts warrior artist) and his whole family.

That was an important, ideologically impacting and exciting time. Black artists came by constantly to talk, to argue, to join, to support, to learn, to teach. Harold Cruse taught politics, with two agents in his class. One night even Sammy Davis Jr. came uptown and did a benefit on 125th St. And from inside Harlem, artist like poets Clarence Reed and Clarence Franklin, Ojijiko, the Weusi Sanaa artists, Ademola, Rahman, Babatunde added strength to strength, Valerie Maynard, and so many others.

We had evolved through our practice a growing rationale for what we felt and did. We wanted Black Art. We felt it could move our people, the Afro American people, to revolutionary positions (see essay, "The Revolutionary Theater," *Liberator*, July 1965). We wanted Black Art that was 1. *Identifiably Afro American*. As Black as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington or John Coltrane. That is, we wanted it to express our lives and history, our needs and desires. Our will and our passion. Our self determination, self respect and self defense. 2. We wanted it to be a *Mass Art*. We wanted it to Boogaloo (like them Deacons for Self Defense down in Boogaloosa, La., when they routed the Klan). Yeh, Boogaloo out the class rooms and elitist dens of iniquitous obliquity and speak and sing and scream abroad among Black people! We wanted a mass popular art, distinct from the tedious abstractions our oppressors and their negroes bamboozled the "few" as Art. We thought it was Ain't! White Ain't. And we wanted Black Art.

That's why Rap delighted me so and still does (even though now its been widely co-opted by Uncle Bubba and the Mind Bandits) because I could see that some of what came out of us had taken root. An open popular mass based poetry. It arrived, that's why the corporations moved so swiftly to "cover" and co-opt. Why they disappeared Grand Master Flash and Africa Bambaataa, accused Prof Griff of the big A S and brought in flesh rap like Two Live Crew; middle class negro rap such as Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince and finally

the straight out Americans like Vanilla Ice and "Young Black Teen Agers" (white). Gangsta Rap was also brought in to exchange political agitation with ignorant braggadocio and thuggish imbecility, justifying the state nigger youth annihilation program.

The last part of our eventual summation of the Black Arts Movement was that 3. We wanted an art that was revolutionary. We wanted a Malcolm art, a by-any-means necessary poetry. A Ballot or Bullet verse. We wanted ultimately, to create a poetry, a literature, a dance, a theater, a painting, that would help bring revolution!

That was what it *all* was about. That's what the whole movement and essence of The Black Arts was raised and forwarded by, the desire by Black youth to make revolution in the U.S. To resist and finally destroy the slave system of racism and national oppression.

The Black Arts Repertory Theater School lasted formally a little more than a year, but by the end of 1965, there were similar efforts rising all over the country. There was a Black Arts Midwest (Woodie King and Ron Milner), a Black Arts West (Ed Bullins, Marvin X, Furaha Broadus) in San Francisco/Oakland/Berkeley. Both Emery Douglas the Black Panther revolutionary artist and Danny Glover came out of the Black Communications Project that we put together during that period at San Francisco State, and in the then Black Fillmore community. Black Arts South emerged in New Orleans with Val Ferdinand (Kalamu ya Salaam).

At one point Black Arts theaters and poetry organizations sprung up ubiquitously across the country, usually in the larger cities where there were Afro American pluralities or majorities. It was clear there was a torrent of inspiration that lifted the Black artists communities across the country, and the evidence is coming in.

What seemed most important about the BARTS was that it was a living paradigm of what many people had come to feel was the direction Afro American artists and the art with which they expressed the particular culture they reflected had to go. Fundamentally we must pursue what Du Bois called True Self Consciousness and defeat its reverse the Double Consciousness. The Black Arts Movement raised this antagonistic contradiction once again, as part of the cultural revolution still necessary to raise and unite the consciousness of the oppressed Afro American people, so that they better understand themselves as well as better resist their enemies.

We felt (and I still do feel) that the Afro American people were and are still involved in a war. A war for Self Determination, Self Respect and Self Defense. It is a war for equal rights and democracy. But how can we press this struggle to victory if we suffer for a Double consciousness, i.e., if we see ourselves, like Spike Lee and the other new wave Fechts, through the eyes of people that hate us? (Even in Living Color!) If we look at ourselves in that grim mixture of amusement and contempt? As artists we felt that that was our chief function, to reshape the minds of the people. To move them to revolutionary positions.

The dicta we arrived at 1. To create a true Afro American Art 2. To create a mass art. 3. To create a revolutionary art, were simply three of the most important and positive aspects of our methodology, our ideological practice, such as we understood it. This was the broad spearhead of Blackness that emerged and that I feel has lasted yet still to be further summed up.

But this broad credo came under attack fundamentally because we had initially cloaked our call to battle in the starkest terms of cultural nationalism and Hate Whitey language. Yet the essence of our call and our work was to try to unite the Afro American people, by

raising their consciousness by attempting to raise our own consciousness and that of the Afro American artists and intellectuals.

We were new nationalists, older nationalists and others and that was the center of our loose front. But by the middle 70's, many of us still held the general credo of The Black Arts but no longer upheld nationalism. Even so, the three points remain strong and essentially correct. But we received opposition because we called for Black Art to define itself and speak for itself from the security of its own institutions. We were opposed because we withdrew from white people and for many of our downtown contemporaries this was unthinkable or impossible. But at the root of our most profound feeling was that it was the social context and practice of petty bourgeois Liberalism that we wanted to flee.

The Afro American people are an oppressed nation, objectively, with the right of Self Determination. This remains the valid issue of our struggle. But even broadening the take on our opposition, for many of our contemporaries the idea that somehow Black people could express themselves through institutions of their own creation and with ideas whose validity was confirmed by their own interests and measure was absurd.

Certainly in the hot 60's when "Revolution was the main trend in the world . . ." and many people felt they had to give lip service to "Blackness" much opposition was more covert, sub rosa or unable to find broad circulation in the Black community. Opposition was quickly identified as from the "whited out," the bourgeois negroes, the backward – though that was not necessarily always true. There were some people on the Left who occasionally tried to point out the excess and errors of our cultural nationalism. But since that time until the fullest unfolding of the Black Arts concept in the 70's until the eventual reaction that paralleled the shape and direction and dynamic of the overall political movement itself, with its Sisyphus like historic pattern, evidence of the validity and continued existence of the Black Arts stance remains. Even though today, and for several years now, it is also obvious that the rock we rolled to the top of the mountain in the 60's and early 70's has been rolled back down on our heads. And now the essence of the opposition to what the Black Arts stood for and symbolizes has come "full out" – it is even empowered.

The Black Liberation Movement and even the Civil Rights Movement are held up each day to either public ridicule as backward and passé or the most valid ideas of our struggle are replaced with the ideas of the sickest and the most backward of our contemporaries, by Hanging Judges from the Caucasian Chalk Circle. And because of the continuous stream of distorted anti democratic and anti Black and counter revolutionary images in all media have been used to try to "reverse correct verdicts" reached through struggle, to character assassinate the Black Liberation Movement and its chief combatants.

Spike Lee trashed Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, The Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad in the same movie. We hear from Bruce Perry that Malcolm was white and psychosexual. From various ex revolutionaries we are told of the bankruptcy of the Panthers and every day people tell me that the BARTS movement tried to tell people what to write. No, it tried to unite the best of us to fight our oppressors!

And now in the midst of the starkest period of reaction we have ever seen, a new generation of the backward, the Buppies, the little neo negro greed balls bloated with the arrogant ignorance of abject submission to imperialism. The various Fly Boys in The Butter Milk and Affirmative Action Babies, Colored People whose mission like the Spikes and Skips, just like the Tom Ass Clarences and Colon Powells is to attack and give lie to the idea and

movement for Black Self Determination. To make it seem that, Hey! we are all Americans and you all that ain't skipping the light fantastic of celebration by the imperialist super-structure are simply cursed by the Gods for trying to push that Black Shit – when we know it is America, America the Beautiful, that gives our salaries, our prizes, our note, hey, even our ideas.

Yet the deepest problem, aside from our history being covered, and gains won by our struggles being reversed being claimed by our enemies, conscious or un, is that we still have not built organizations and institutions to struggle for Self Determination, Self Respect, Self Defense. If we had built those institutions, those journals (like *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Black Nation*, *The Cricket*, *BARTS*, *The Spirit House*, *The Black House*, *The New School of Afro American Thought*), we would not have to worry about the distortions of the terminally backward, Black or White. We would define ourselves and speak for ourselves and carve up our enemies with the graceful ease of our high art. Duke and Trane and Billie them to death! But our enemies have created our spokespersons, and they speak for us every day, covering and distorting reality and this is the state in which we exist today.

The very people who even denied the existence of Black Art were immediately given grants to claim it. Even in this festival the Neals, Dumases, Sanchezes, Toures, Madhabutis are packed into single readings while opposition forces (remember the name of the festival itself) are given full range now to claim what we painfully struggled to bring into existence! The Lesson, where are our institutions and organizations of the Black Arts? Where are our theaters and newspapers and journals and truly independent films (not skin black but speaking from the essence of the most advanced consciousness of the Afro American people)? That no one has the right to rule our lives for a *second*, the true self consciousness, who we are, who we were and who we would become!

That is the continuing task we face, as revolutionary Black artists and intellectuals, to make Cultural Revolution. To fight in the super structure, in the realm of ideas, philosophies, the arts, academia, the class struggle between oppressed and oppressor. To recreate and maintain our voice as a truly self conscious, self determining entity, to interpret and focus our whole lives and history. And create those organizations and institutions that will finally educate, employ, entertain and liberate us!

AB Atlanta 8/94

And an artist may have any freedom to do what he wishes as long as it does not take the freedom from the people to be protected from those images, words and sounds that are negative to their life and development. The people give us the freedom from isolation and alienation and random searching for subject matter and artists, in view of this, must not ask for freedom to deny this, but on the contrary must praise the people for this. In conclusion, the concept of collective art can best be expressed in the African proverb showing the interdependence of all by saying, "One hand washes the other."

The final thing that is characteristic of Black art is that it must be committing. It must commit us to revolution and change. It must commit us to a future that is ours. In a word, it must commit us to all that is US yesterday, today and the sunrise of tomorrow. It must tell us like Hali's poem, "Maulana and Word Magic," that we must give up the past or be found out and exposed, "as the notes of a new day come tripping through searching each one's heart for any traces of Peyton Place." It must commit us to the fact that the earth is ours and the fullness thereof. As LeRoi Jones says, "You can't steal nothing from the white man. He's already stole it, he owes you anything you want, even his life." So, "Black People take the shit you want, take their lives if need, but get what you want, what you need. Dance up and down the street, turn all the music up." This is commitment to the struggle, a commitment that includes the artist and the observer. We cannot let each other rest; there is so much to do, and we all know we have done so little. Art will revive us, inspire us, give us enough courage to face another disappointing day. It must not teach us resignation. For all our art must contribute to revolutionary change and if it does not, it is invalid.

Therefore, we say the blues are invalid; for they teach resignation, in a word acceptance of reality — and we have come to change reality. We will not submit to the resignation of our fathers who lost their money, their women, and their lives and sat around wondering "what did they do to be so black and blue." We will say again with Brother LeRoi, "We are lovers and the sons of lovers, and warriors and the sons of warriors." Therefore, we will love — and unwillingly though necessarily, make war, revolutionary war. We will not cry for those things that are gone, but find meaning in those things that remain with us. Perhaps people will object violently to the idea that the blues are invalid, but one should understand that they are not invalid historically. They will always represent a very beautiful, musical and psychological achievement of our people; but today they are not functional because they do not commit us to the struggle of today and tomorrow, but keep us in the past. And whatever we do, we cannot remain in the past, for we have too much at stake in the present. And we find our future much too much rewarding to be rejected.

Let our art remind us of our distaste for the enemy, our love for each other, and our commitment to the revolutionary struggle that will be fought with the rhythmic reality of a permanent revolution.

The Black Arts Movement

I.

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. 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. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.

Recently, these two movements have begun to merge: the political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographers, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms. The Black artist has made the same point in the context of aesthetics. The two movements postulate that there are in fact and in spirit two Americas — one black, one white. The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the spiritual and cultural needs of Black people. Therefore, the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers is to confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West. Currently, these writers are re-evaluating western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art. Implicit in this re-evaluation is the need to develop a "black aesthetic." It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible. In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas. Poet Don L. Lee expresses it:

... We must destroy Faulkner, dick, jane, and other perpetrators of evil. It's time for Du Bois, Nat Turner, and Kwame Nkrumah. As Frantz Fanon points out: destroy the

From *TDR: The Drama Review* 12.4, Black Theatre Issue (Summer 1968).

culture and you destroy the people. This must not happen. Black artists are culture stabilizers; bringing back old values, and introducing new ones. Black Art will talk to the people and with the will of the people stop impending "protective custody."

The Black Arts Movement eschews "protest" literature. It speaks directly to Black people. Implicit in the concept of "protest" literature, as Brother Knight has made clear, is an appeal to white morality:

Now any Black man who masters the technique of his particular art form, who adheres to the white aesthetic, and who directs his work toward a white audience is, in one sense, protesting. And implicit in the act of protest is the belief that a change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protestor's "grievance" (the very word connotes begging, supplications to the gods). Only when that belief has faded and protestings end, will Black art begin.

Brother Knight also has some interesting statements about the development of a "Black aesthetic":

Unless the Black artist establishes a "Black aesthetic" he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends (and purify old ones by fire). And the Black artist, in creating his own aesthetic, must be accountable for it only to the Black people. Further, he must hasten his own dissolution as an individual (in the Western sense)—painful though the process may be, having been breast-fed the poison of "individual experience."

When we speak of a "Black aesthetic" several things are meant. First, we assume that there is already in existence the basis for such an aesthetic. Essentially, it consists of an African American cultural tradition. But this aesthetic is finally, by implication, broader than that tradition. It encompasses most of the useable elements of Third World culture. The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors? These are basic questions. Black intellectuals of previous decades failed to ask them. Further, national and international affairs demand that we appraise the world in terms of our own interests. It is clear that the question of human survival is at the core of contemporary experience. The Black artist must address himself to this reality in the strongest terms possible. In a context of world upheaval, ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world. Consequently, the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. And much of the

oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American cultural sensibility. This sensibility, anti-human in nature, has, until recently, dominated the psyches of most Black artists and intellectuals; it must be destroyed before the Black creative artist can have a meaningful role in the transformation of society.

It is this natural reaction to an alien sensibility that informs the cultural attitudes of the Black Arts and the Black Power movement. It is a profound ethical sense that makes a Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in western society is symptomatic of a dying culture.

The term "Black Arts" is of ancient origin, but it was first used in a positive sense by LeRoi Jones:

We are unfair
And unfair
We are black magicians
Black arts we make
in black labs of the heart

The fair are fair
and deathly white

The day will not save them
And we own the night

There is also a section of the poem "Black Dada Nihilismus" that carries the same motif. But a fuller amplification of the nature of the new aesthetics appears in the poem "Black Art":

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts
beating them down. Fuck poems
and they are useful, would they shoot
come at you, love what you are,
breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
strangely after peeing. We want live
words of the hip world, live flesh &
coursing blood. Hearts and Brains
Souls splintering fire. We want poems
like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
of the owner jews . . .

Poetry is a concrete function, an action. No more abstractions. Poems are physical entities: fists, daggers, airplane poems, and poems that shoot guns. Poems are transformed from physical objects into personal forces:

... Put it on him poem. Strip him naked
to the world. Another bad poem cracking
steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth
Poem scream poison gas on breasts in green berets ...

Then the poem affirms the integral relationship between Black Art and Black people:

... Let Black people understand
that they are the lovers and the sons
of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness here in the world

It ends with the following lines, a central assertion in both the Black Arts Movement and the philosophy of Black Power:

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
Or LOUD

The poem comes to stand for the collective conscious and unconscious of Black America – the real impulse in back of the Black Power movement, which is the will toward self-determination and nationhood, a radical reordering of the nature and function of both art and the artist.

2.

In the spring of 1964, LeRoi Jones, Charles Patterson, William Patterson, Clarence Reed, Johnny Moore, and a number of other Black artists opened the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School. They produced a number of plays including Jones' *Experimental Death Unit # One*, *Black Mass*, *Jello*, and *Dutchman*. They also initiated a series of poetry readings and concerts. These activities represented the most advanced tendencies in the movement and were of excellent artistic quality. The Black Arts School came under immediate attack by the New York power structure. The Establishment, fearing Black creativity, did exactly what it was expected to do – it attacked the theatre and all of its values. In the meantime, the school was granted funds by OEO through HARYOU ACT. Lacking a cultural program itself, HARYOU turned to the only organization which addressed itself to the needs

of the community. In keeping with its "revolutionary" cultural ideas, the Black Arts Theatre took its programs into the streets of Harlem. For three months, the theatre presented plays, concerts, and poetry readings to the people of the community. Plays that shattered the illusions of the American body politic, and awakened Black people to the meaning of their lives.

Then the hawks from the OEO moved in and chopped off the funds. Again, this should have been expected. The Black Arts Theatre stood in radical opposition to the feeble attitudes about culture of the "War on Poverty" bureaucrats. And later, because of internal problems, the theatre was forced to close. But the Black Arts group proved that the community could be served by a valid and dynamic art. It also proved that there was a definite need for a cultural revolution in the Black community.

With the closing of the Black Arts Theatre, the implications of what Brother Jones and his colleagues were trying to do took on even more significance. Black Art groups sprang up on the West Coast and the idea spread to Detroit, Philadelphia, Jersey City, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C. Black Arts movements began on the campuses of San Francisco State College, Fisk University, Lincoln University, Hunter College in the Bronx, Columbia University, and Oberlin College. In Watts, after the rebellion, Maulana Karenga welded the Black Arts Movement into a cohesive cultural ideology, which owed much to the work of LeRoi Jones. Karenga sees culture as the most important element in the struggle for self-determination:

Culture is the basis of all ideas, images and actions. To move is to move culturally, i.e., by a set of values given to you by your culture.

Without a culture Negroes are only a set of reactions to white people.

The seven criteria for culture are:

1. Mythology
2. History
3. Social Organization
4. Political Organization
5. Economic Organization
6. Creative Motif
7. Ethos

In drama, LeRoi Jones represents the most advanced aspects of the movement. He is its prime mover and chief designer. In a poetic essay entitled "The Revolutionary Theatre," he outlines the iconology of the movement:

The Revolutionary Theatre should force change: it should be change. (All their faces turned into the lights and you work on them black nigger magic, and cleanse them at having seen the ugliness. And if the beautiful see themselves, they will love themselves.) We are preaching virtue again, but by that to mean NOW, toward what seems the most constructive use of the word.

The theatre that Jones proposes is inextricably linked to the Afro-American political dynamic. And such a link is perfectly consistent with Black America's contemporary

demands. For theatre is potentially the most social of all of the arts. It is an integral part of the socializing process. It exists in direct relationship to the audience it claims to serve. The decadence and inanity of the contemporary American theatre is an accurate reflection of the state of American society. Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is very American: sick white lives in a homosexual hell hole. The theatre of white America is escapist, refusing to confront concrete reality. Into this cultural emptiness come the musicals, an up-tempo version of the same stale lives. And the use of Negroes in such plays as *Hello Dolly* and *Hallelujah Baby* does not alert their nature; it compounds the problem. These plays are simply hipper versions of the minstrel show. They present Negroes acting out the hang-ups of middle-class white America. Consequently, the American theatre is a palliative prescribed to bourgeois patients who refuse to see the world as it is. Or, more crucially, as the world sees them. It is no accident, therefore, that the most "important" plays come from Europe—Brecht, Weiss, and Ghelderode. And even these have begun to run dry.

The Black Arts theatre, the theatre of LeRoi Jones, is a radical alternative to the sterility of the American theatre. It is primarily a theatre of the Spirit, confronting the Black man in his interaction with his brothers and with the white thing.

Our theatre will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that prerevolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. We are preaching virtue and feeling, and a natural sense of the self in the world. All men live in the world, and the world ought to be a place for them to live.

The victims in the world of Jones' early plays are Clay, murdered by the white bitch-goddess in *Dutchman*, and Walker Vessels, the revolutionary in *The Slave*. Both of these plays present Black men in transition. Clay, the middle-class Negro trying to get himself a little action from Lula, digs himself and his own truth only to get murdered after telling her like it really is:

Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, and one poem vanished. A whole people neurotics, struggling to keep from being sane. And the only thing that would cure the neurosis would be your murder. Simple as that. I mean if I murdered you, then other white people would understand me. You understand? No. I guess not. If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn't needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. Just straight two and two are four. Money. Power. Luxury. Like that. All of them. Crazy niggers turning their back on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Just murder. Would make us all sane.

But Lula understands, and she kills Clay first. In a perverse way it is Clay's nascent knowledge of himself that threatens the existence of Lula's idea of the world. Symbolically, and in

fact, the relationship between Clay (Black America) and Lula (white America) is rooted in the historical castration of black manhood. And in the twisted psyche of white America, the Black man is both an object of love and hate. Analogous attitudes exist in most Black Americans, but for decidedly different reasons. Clay is doomed when he allows himself to participate in Lula's "fantasy" in the first place. It is the fantasy to which Frantz Fanon alludes in *The Wretched Of The Earth* and *Black Skins, White Mask*: the native's belief that he can acquire the oppressor's power by acquiring his symbols, one of which is the white woman. When Clay finally digs himself it is too late.

Walker Vessels, in *The Slave*, is Clay reincarnated as the revolutionary confronting problems inherited from his contact with white culture. He returns to the home of his ex-wife, a white woman, and her husband, a literary critic. The play is essentially about Walker's attempt to destroy his white past. For it is the past, with all of its painful memories, that is really the enemy of the revolutionary. It is impossible to move until history is either recreated or comprehended. Unlike Todd, in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Walker cannot fall outside history. Instead, Walker demands a confrontation with history, a final shattering of bullshit illusions. His only salvation lies in confronting the physical and psychological forces that have made him and his people powerless. Therefore, he comes to understand that the world must be restructured along spiritual imperatives. But in the interim it is basically a question of *who* has power:

Easley: You're so wrong about everything. So terribly, sickeningly wrong. What can you change? What do you hope to change? Do you think Negroes are better people than whites . . . that they can govern a society *better* than whites? That they'll be more judicious or more tolerant? Do you think they'll make fewer mistakes? I mean really, if the Western white man has proved one thing . . . it's the futility of modern society. So the have-not peoples become the haves. Even so, will that change the essential functions of the world? Will there be more love or beauty in the world . . . more knowledge . . . because of it?

Walker: Probably. Probably there will be more . . . if more people have a chance to understand what it is. But that's not even the point. It comes down to baser human endeavor than any social-political thinking. What does it matter if there's more love or beauty? Who the fuck cares? Is that what the Western ofay thought while he was ruling . . . that his rule somehow brought more love and beauty into the world? Oh, he might have thought that concomitantly, while sipping a gin rickey and scratching his ass . . . but that was not even the point. Not even on the Crusades. The point is that you had your chance, darling, now these other folks have theirs. *Quietly*. Now they have theirs.

Easley: God, what an ugly idea.

This confrontation between the black radical and the white liberal is symbolic of larger confrontations occurring between the Third World and Western society. It is a confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized, the slavemaster and the slave. Implicit in Easley's remarks is the belief that the white man is culturally and politically superior to the Black Man. Even though Western society has been traditionally violent in its relation with the Third World, it sanctimoniously deplores violence or self assertion on the part

of the enslaved. And the Western mind, with clever rationalizations, equates the violence of the oppressed with the violence of the oppressor. So that when the native preaches self-determination, the Western white man cleverly misconstrues it to mean hate of *all* white men. When the Black political radical warns his people not to trust white politicians of the left and the right, but instead to organize separately on the basis of power, the white man cries: "racism in reverse." Or he will say, as many of them do today: "We deplore both white and black racism." As if the two could be equated.

There is a minor element in *The Slave* which assumes great importance in a later play entitled *Jello*. Here I refer to the emblem of Walker's army: a red-mouthed grinning field slave. The revolutionary army has taken one of the most hated symbols of the Afro-American past and radically altered its meaning.² This is the supreme act of freedom, available only to those who have liberated themselves psychically. Jones amplifies this inversion of emblem and symbol in *Jello* by making Rochester (Ratfester) of the old Jack Benny (Penny) program into a revolutionary nationalist. Ratfester, ordinarily the supreme embodiment of the Uncle Tom Clown, surprises Jack Penny by turning on the other side of the nature of the Black man. He skillfully, and with an evasive black humor, robs Penny of all of his money. But Ratfester's actions are "moral." That is to say, Ratfester is getting his back pay; payment of a long over-due debt to the Black man. Ratfester's sensibilities are different from Walker's. He is *blues people* smiling and shuffling while trying to figure out how to destroy the white thing. And like the blues man, he is the master of the understatement. Or in the Afro-American folk tradition, he is the Signifying Monkey, Shine, and Stagolee all rolled into one. There are no stereotypes any more. History has killed Uncle Tom. Because even Uncle Tom has a breaking point beyond which he will not be pushed. Cut deeply enough into the most docile Negro, and you will find a conscious murderer. Behind the lyrics of the blues and the shuffling porter loom visions of white throats being cut and cities burning.

Jones' particular power as a playwright does not rest solely on his revolutionary vision, but is instead derived from his deep lyricism and spiritual outlook. In many ways, he is fundamentally more a poet than a playwright. And it is his lyricism that gives body to his plays. Two important plays in this regard are *Black Mass* and *Slave Ship*. *Black Mass* is based on the Muslim myth of Yacub. According to this myth, Yacub, a Black scientist, developed the means of grafting different colors of the Original Black Nation until a White Devil was created. In *Black Mass*, Yacub's experiments produce a raving White Beast who is condemned to the coldest regions of the North. The other magicians implore Yacub to cease his experiments. But he insists on claiming the primacy of scientific knowledge over spiritual knowledge. The sensibility of the White Devil is alien, informed by lust and sensuality. The Beast is the consummate embodiment of evil, the beginning of the historical subjugation of the spiritual world.

"In Jones' study of Afro-American music, *Blues People*, we find the following observation: "... Even the adjective *funky*, which once meant to many Negroes merely a stink (usually associated with sex), was used to qualify the music as meaningful (the word became fashionable and is now almost useless). The social implication, then, was that even the old stereotype of a distinctive Negro smell that white America subscribed to could be turned against white America. For this smell now, real or not, was made a valuable characteristic of 'Negro-ness.' And 'Negro-ness' by the fifties, for many Negroes (and whites) was the only strength left to American culture"

Black Mass takes place in some pre-historical time. In fact, the concept of time, we learn, is the creation of an alien sensibility, that of the Beast. This is a deeply weighted play, a colloquy on the nature of man, and the relationship between legitimate spiritual knowledge and scientific knowledge. It is LeRoi Jones' most important play mainly because it is informed by a mythology that is wholly the creation of the Afro-American sensibility.

Further, Yacub's creation is not merely a scientific exercise. More fundamentally, it is the aesthetic impulse gone astray. The Beast is created merely for the sake of creation. Some artists assert a similar claim about the nature of art. They argue that art need not have a function. It is against this decadent attitude toward art—ramified throughout most of Western society—that the play militates. Yacub's real crime, therefore, is the introduction of a meaningless evil into a harmonious universe. The evil of the Beast is pervasive, corrupting everything and everyone it touches. What was beautiful is twisted into an ugly screaming thing. The play ends with destruction of the holy place of the Black Magicians. Now the Beast and his descendants roam the earth. An off-stage voice chants a call for the Jihad to begin. It is then that myth merges into legitimate history, and we, the audience, come to understand that all history is merely someone's version of mythology.

Slave Ship presents a more immediate confrontation with history. In a series of expressionistic tableaux it depicts the horrors and the madness of the Middle Passage. It then moves through the period of slavery, early attempts at revolt, tendencies toward Uncle Tom-like reconciliation and betrayal, and the final act of liberation. There is no definite plot (LeRoi calls it a pageant), just a continuous rush of sound, groans, screams, and souls wailing for freedom and relief from suffering. This work has special affinities with the New Music of Sun Ra, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, and Ornette Coleman. Events are blurred, rising and falling in a stream of sound. Almost cinematically, the images flicker and fade against a heavy back-drop of rhythm. The language is spare, stripped to the essential. It is a play which almost totally eliminates the need for a text. It functions on the basis of movement and energy—the dramatic equivalent of the New Music.

3.

LeRoi Jones is the best known and the most advanced playwright of the movement, but he is not alone. There are other excellent playwrights who express the general mood of the Black Arts ideology. Among them are Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Ben Caldwell, Jimmy Stewart, Joe White, Charles Patterson, Charles Fuller, Aisha Hughes, Carol Freeman, and Jimmy Garrett.

Ron Milner's *Who's Got His Own* is of particular importance. It strips bare the clashing attitudes of a contemporary Afro-American family. Milner's concern is with legitimate manhood and morality. The family in *Who's Got His Own* is in search of its conscience, or more precisely its own definition of life. On the day of his father's death, Tim and his family are forced to examine the inner fabric of their lives: the lies, self-deceits, and sense of powerlessness in a white world. The basic conflict, however, is internal. It is rooted in the historical search for black manhood. Tim's mother is representative of a generation of Christian Black women who have implicitly understood the brooding violence lurking in their men. And with this understanding, they have interposed themselves between their

men and the object of that violence—the white man. Thus unable to direct his violence against the oppressor, the Black man becomes more frustrated and the sense of powerlessness deepens. Lacking the strength to be a man in the white world, he turns against his family. So the oppressed, as Fanon explains, constantly dreams violence against his oppressor, while killing his brother on fast weekends.

Tim's sister represents the Negro woman's attempt to acquire what Eldridge Cleaver calls "ultrafemininity." That is, the attributes of her white upper-class counterpart. Involved here is a rejection of the body-oriented life of the working class Black man, symbolized by the mother's traditional religion. The sister has an affair with a white upper-class liberal, ending in abortion. There are hints of lesbianism, i.e., a further rejection of the body. The sister's life is a pivotal factor in the play. Much of the stripping away of falsehood initiated by Tim is directed at her life, which they have carefully kept hidden from the mother.

Tim is the product of the new Afro-American sensibility, informed by the psychological revolution now operative within Black America. He is a combination ghetto soul brother and militant intellectual, very hip and slightly flawed himself. He would change the world, but without comprehending the particular history that produced his "tyrannical" father. And he cannot be the man his father was—not until he truly understands his father. He must understand why his father allowed himself to be insulted daily by the "honky" types on the job; why he took a demeaning job in the "shit-house"; and why he spent on his family the violence that he should have directed against the white man. In short, Tim must confront the history of his family. And that is exactly what happens. Each character tells his story, exposing his falsehood to the other until a balance is reached.

Who's Got His Own is not the work of an alienated mind. Milner's main thrust is directed toward unifying the family around basic moral principles, toward bridging the "generation gap." Other Black playwrights, Jimmy Garrett for example, see the gap as unbridgeable.

Garrett's *We Own the Night* (see this issue of TDR, pp. 62–69) takes place during an armed insurrection. As the play opens we see the central characters defending a section of the city against attacks by white police. Johnny, the protagonist, is wounded. Some of his Brothers intermittently fire at attacking forces, while others look for medical help. A doctor arrives, forced at gun point. The wounded boy's mother also comes. She is a female Uncle Tom who berates the Brothers and their cause. She tries to get Johnny to leave. She is hysterical. The whole idea of Black people fighting white people is totally outside of her orientation. Johnny begins a vicious attack on his mother, accusing her of emasculating his father—a recurring theme in the sociology of the Black community. In Afro-American literature of previous decades the strong Black mother was the object of awe and respect. But in the new literature, her status is ambivalent and laced with tension. Historically, Afro-American women have had to be the economic mainstays of the family. The oppressor allowed them to have jobs while at the same time limiting the economic mobility of the Black man. Very often, therefore, the woman's aspirations and values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man. Since he cannot provide for his family the way white men do, she despises his weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until, very often, there is nothing left but a shell.

The only way out of this dilemma is through revolution. It either must be an actual blood revolution, or one that psychically redirects the energy of the oppressed. Milner is

fundamentally concerned with the latter and Garrett with the former. Communication between Johnny and his mother breaks down. The revolutionary imperative demands that men step outside the legal framework. It is a question of erecting *another* morality. The old constructs do not hold up, because adhering to them means consigning oneself to the oppressive reality. Johnny's mother is involved in the old constructs. Manliness is equated with white morality. And even though she claims to love her family (her men), the overall design of her ideas are against black manhood. In Garrett's play the mother's morality manifests itself in a deep-seated hatred of Black men; while in Milner's work the mother understands, but holds her men back.

The mothers that Garrett and Milner see represent the Old Spirituality—the Faith of the Fathers of which Du Bois spoke. Johnny and Tim represent the New Spirituality. They appear to be a type produced by the upheavals of the colonial world of which Black America is a part. Johnny's assertion that he is a criminal is remarkably similar to the rebel's comments in Aimé Césaire's play, *Les Armes Miraculeuses* (*The Miraculous Weapons*). In that play the rebel, speaking to his mother, proclaims: "My name—an offense; my Christian name—humiliation; my status—a rebel; my age—the stone age." To which the mother replies: "My race—the human race. My religion—brotherhood." The Old Spirituality is generalized. It seeks to recognize Universal Humanity. The New Spirituality is specific. It begins by seeing the world from the concise point-of-view of the colonized. Where the Old Spirituality would live with oppression while ascribing to the oppressors an innate goodness, the New Spirituality demands a radical shift in point of view. The colonized native, the oppressed must, of necessity, subscribe to a *separate* morality. One that will liberate him and his people.

The assault against the Old Spirituality can sometimes be humorous. In Ben Caldwell's play, *The Militant Preacher*, a burglar is seen slipping into the home of a wealthy minister. The preacher comes in and the burglar ducks behind a large chair. The preacher, acting out the role of the supplicant minister begins to moan, praying to De Lawd for understanding.

In the context of today's politics, the minister is an Uncle Tom, mouthing platitudes against self defense. The preacher drones in a self-pitying monologue about the folly of protecting oneself against brutal policeman. Then the burglar begins to speak. The preacher is startled, taking the burglar's voice for the voice of God. The burglar begins to play on the preacher's old time religion. He *becomes* the voice of God insulting and goading the preacher on until the preacher's attitudes about protective violence change. The next day the preacher emerges militant, gun in hand, sounding like Reverend Cleage in Detroit. He now preaches a new gospel—the gospel of the gun, an eye for an eye. The gospel is preached in the rhythmic cadences of the old Black church. But the content is radical. Just as Jones inverted the symbols in *Jello*, Caldwell twists the rhythms of the Uncle Tom preacher into the language of the new militancy.

These plays are directed at problems within Black America. They begin with the premise that there is a well-defined Afro-American audience. An audience that must see itself and the world in terms of its own interests. These plays, along with many others, constitute the basis for a viable movement in the theatre—a movement which takes as its task a profound re-evaluation of the Black man's presence in America. The Black Arts Movement represents the flowering of a cultural nationalism that has been suppressed

since the 1920's. I mean the "Harlem Renaissance"—which was essentially a failure. It did not address itself to the mythology and the life-styles of the Black community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit. Implicit in the Black Arts Movement is the idea that Black people, however, dispersed, constitute a *nation* within the belly of white America. This is not a new idea. Garvey said it and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad says it now. And it is on this idea that the concept of Black Power is predicated.

Afro-American life and history is full of creative possibilities, and the movement is just beginning to perceive them. Just beginning to understand that the most meaningful statements about the nature of Western society must come from the Third World of which Black America is a part. The thematic material is broad, ranging from folk heroes like Shine and Stagolee to historical figures like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. And then there is the struggle for Black survival, the coming confrontation between white America and Black America. If art is the harbinger of future possibilities, what does the future of Black America portend?

Broadside Press: A Personal Chronicle

Broadside Press did not grow from a blueprint. I did not, like Joe Goncalves when he planned the *Journal of Black Poetry*, save money in advance to finance the press. Broadside Press began without capital, from the twelve dollars I took out of my paycheck to pay for the first Broadside, and has grown by hunches, intuitions, trial and error.

Our first publication was the Broadside "Ballad of Birmingham." Folk singer Jerry Moore of New York had it set to music, and I wanted to protect the rights to the poem by getting it copyrighted. Learning that leaflet could be copyrighted, I published it as a Broadside in 1965. Jerry Moore also set the ballad "Dressed All in Pink" to music, and in order to copyright it I printed this poem also as a Broadside. Being a librarian, accustomed to organizing and classifying material, I grouped the two poems into a *Broadside Series*, and called them Broadside number one and number two. Since Broadside, at that time, were the company's sole product, I gave it the name Broadside Press.

In May 1966 I attended the first Writers' Conference at Fisk University, and obtained permission from Robert Hayden, Melvin B. Tolson, and Margaret Walker, who were there, to use their poems in the *Broadside Series*. I wrote to Gwendolyn Brooks and obtained her permission to use "We Real Cool." This first group of six Broadside, called "Poems of the Negro Revolt," is, I think, one of the most distinguished groups in the *Broadside Series*, containing outstanding poems by some of our finest poets.

At that time my intention was to publish famous familiar poems in an attractive format so that people could buy their favorite poems in a form worth treasuring. A reviewer in *Small Press Review*, however, suggested that I could serve contemporary poetry better by publishing previously unpublished poems. Beginning with Broadside twenty-five, I have attempted to do this. I try to make the format of the Broadside harmonize with the poem in paper, color, and typography, and often employ artists to design or illustrate the Broadside. Some Broadside outstanding for their appearance are number four ("The Sea Turtle and the Shark," by Melvin B. Tolson), designed in blue by sculptor-painter Cledie Taylor; number six ("We Real Cool," by Gwendolyn Brooks), lettered white on black by Cledie Taylor to simulate scrawls on a blackboard; and number eighteen ("Black Madonna," by Harold Lawrence), gold on white with an illustration by painter Leroy Foster.

The first book planned (but not the first published) by Broadside Press was *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and the Death of Malcolm X*. This book had its genesis at the first Fisk