

Postwar American Avant-Garde (AE 117)

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Week 8 "There is no such thing as art for art's sake": The Black Arts Movement and Beyond

From Hammond, Karla. "An Interview with Audre Lorde." *American Poetry Review* March/April 1980: 18-21.

I see protest as a genuine means of encouraging someone to feel the inconsistencies, the horror of the lives we are living. Social protest is saying that we do not have to live this way. If we feel deeply, and we encourage ourselves and others to feel deeply, we will find the germ of our answers to bring about change. Because once we recognize what it is we are feeling, once we recognize we can feel deeply, love deeply, can feel joy, then we will demand that all parts of our lives produce that kind of joy. And when they do not, we will ask, "Why don't they?" And it is the asking that will lead us inevitably toward change.

So the question of social protest and art is inseparable for me. I can't say it is an either-or proposition. Art for art's sake doesn't really exist for me. What I saw was wrong, and I had to speak up. I loved poetry, and I loved words. But what was beautiful had to serve the purpose of changing my life, or I would have died. If I cannot air this pain and alter it, I will surely die of it. That's the beginning of social protest.

IN Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.) *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Black Studies/black consciousness: This was one of the earliest models for cross-cultural studies of peoples affected by colonization, and centred on African peoples who had been transported, enslaved or otherwise made diasporic by colonialism and by slavery. It developed mainly in the United States. In the nineteenth century, black American intellectuals such as Frederic Douglas (circa 1817–1895), Booker T. Washington (1856–1901) and W.E.B. du Bois (1868–1963), men who had either been born slaves or were the children of slaves, as well as others like Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), a Jamaican who settled in the United States, had developed a body of texts and institutions dedicated to black education and black development (most notably perhaps in the founding of the college that later became Howard University). These intellectuals advocated an investigation of the distinctiveness of the African cultural elements in black American and Caribbean societies.

The widespread growth of Black (variably African American or African Caribbean) Studies followed the Civil Rights activism of the 1960s. Black Studies rapidly established itself in United States institutions as a powerful model to investigate any and all aspects of the African negro diaspora. It encouraged investigations of African origins for American and Caribbean language usage and cultural practice [...] and examined the cross-cultural influence on Africa itself of American and Caribbean intellectuals such as Alexander Crummell (1819–1898) and Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832–1912), who had been so influential there in the nineteenth century with the founding of colonies of freed slaves in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Influenced in part by the example of the francophone movement of *négritude*, Black Studies both predated and outlasted that movement. In the 1960s it embraced many of the ideas developed by Fanonist thinkers and, in the form of the black consciousness movement, sought to redress the negative self-image created in many black people by their long history of enslavement and discriminatory treatment, treatment made inescapable, as Fanon had noted, by the visibility of their perceived 'difference' ('The Fact of Blackness' in Fanon 1952:109–140).

FROM Harryette Mullen, 'The Black Arts Movement: Poetry and Drama from the 1960s to the 1970s (African American Writers, 2001)

... the political, social, and cultural upheaval of the 1960s, of which the Black Power and black arts movements were a part, led to widespread interest in "marginal" identities and exploration of "minority" experience, resulting in the emergence of new American writers and literatures under the banner of cultural diversity or multiculturalism as the "mainstream" of culture of the US has come to acknowledge the significance of its constituent subcultures and their evolving relations with the culture of middle-class white Anglo-Saxon protestant heterosexuals. Contemporary manifestation of black cultural nationalism, Afrocentrism, and the appropriation by mass media of the urban vernacular styles of African American youth through the spread of hip-hop culture are phenomena that were influenced by the black arts movement's synthesis and transformation of ideas inherited from previous nationalistic and pan-africanist black movements.

Incorporating elements of both avant-gardes and populist movements, the black arts movement challenged several basic assumptions of modern western culture, including the idea that art should have universal significance, and the association of great works of art with individual genius.

FROM MARTIN LUTHER KING Jr. , I Have A Dream, Aug. 28, 1963, Washington DC

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state, sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

"On Black Art" by Ron Karenga (1978)

Black Art must be for the people, by the people and from the people. That is to say, it must be functional, collective and committing.

Soul is extra-scientific, that is to say, outside of science; therefore we will allow no scientific disproof of it.

All that we do and create is based on tradition and reason, that is to say, foundation and movement. We began to build on a traditional [sic], but it is out of movement that we complete our creation.

Art for art's sake is an invalid concept, all art reflects the value system from which it comes.

We say inspiration is the real basis of education. In a word, images inspire us, academic assertions bore us.

Our art is both form and feeling but more feeling than form.

Our creative motif must be revolution; all art that does not discuss or contribute to revolutionary change is invalid. That is [...] why the "blues" are invalid, they teach resignation, in a word, acceptance of reality--and we have come to change reality.

There is no better subject for Black artists than Black people, and the Black artist who doesn't choose and develop his subject will find himself unproductive.

All art is collective and reflects the values of the people. Therefore what makes us able to identify an artist's work is not individuality, but personality, which is an expression of the different personal experiences of the artist within the Black framework.

Suppose Ray Charles had to sing Beethoven or Bach's Carols, or Miles Davis had to play in the Philharmonic; it wouldn't go off at all. That's why we have to have a pattern of development that is suited to our own needs.

The truth is that which needs to be told, and true creation is that which needs to be created and what we need to create is Black images which speak to and inspire Black people.

We need a new language to break the linguistic straight [sic] jacket of our masters, who taught us his language so he could understand us, although we could hardly understand ourselves.

In terms of history, all we need at this point is heroic images; white people have enough dates for everybody.

All education and creation is invalid unless it can benefit the maximum amount of Blacks.

Art is an expression of soul and creativity, sensitivity, and impulse is the basis. Sensitivity, creativity and impulse are abstract to those who don't have them. There is no art in the world you should have to go to school to appreciate.

Borrowing does not mean you become what others are. What is important here is the choice of what one borrows and how he shapes it in his own images. Whites are no less white by borrowing from Black and vice versa.

There is no such thing as art for art's sake. If that's so, why don't you lock yourself up somewhere and paint or write and keep it only to yourself.

The white boy's classical music is static. He values the form rather than the soul force behind the creation. That is why he still plays tunes written two or three hundred years ago.

All art should be the product of a creative need and desire in terms of Black people. In Africa you won't find artists of great name because art is done by all for all. There is no premium on art in Africa just as there is no premium on dancing in the ghetto. All Blacks can dance.

In African art, the object was not as important as the soul force behind the creation of the object.

All art must be revolutionary and in being revolutionary it must be collective, committing, and functional.

Whites can imitate or copy soul, but they can't create out of that context.

All nationalists believe in creativity as opposed to destruction and a nationalist must create for the Black nation.

Black art initiates, supports and promotes change. It refuses to accept values laid down by dead white men. It sets its own values and re-enforces them with hard and/or soft words and sounds.

All art consciously or unconsciously represents and promotes the values of its culture.

Language and imagery must come from the people and be returned to the people in a beautiful language which everybody can easily understand.

Soul is a combination of sensitivity, creativity and impulse. It is feeling and form, body and soul, rhythm and movement, in a word, the essence of Blackness.

Muddy Waters and those in the same school are very deep, and so when bourgeois Negroes say that Muddy Waters is too deep for them, they are saying, in a word, that Muddy Waters is more down to earth.

Reprinted from *Black Theater 3*, pp. 9-10.

Online Source: <http://www.umich.edu/~eng499/documents/karenga1.html>

FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH AMIRI BARAKA From *The Sullen Art*. Copyright © 1963 by David Ossman http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baraka/interviews.htm

What [did you learn from] . . . the Black Mountain people, and [William Carlos] Williams?

From Williams, mostly how to write in my own language—how to write the way I speak rather than the way I think a poem ought to be written—to write just the way it comes to me, in my own speech, utilizing the rhythms of speech rather than any kind of metrical concept. To talk verse. Spoken verse. From Pound, the same concepts that went into the Imagist's poetry—the idea of the image and what an image ought to be. I learned, probably, about verse from Pound—how a poem should be made, what a poem ought to look like—some little inkling. And from Williams, I guess, how to get it out in my own language.

From "An Interview with Amiri Baraka," from *The Greenfield Review*, Fall 1980, copyright © 1980 by *The Greenfield Review*; all rights controlled by William J. Harris.

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/baraka/interviews.htm

WJH: It seems that your moving to a longer line in your poetry has to do with a rejection of the white world, of "white music" if you will.

AB: I think it has to do with the poetry since the sixties being much more orally conceived rather than manuscript conceived. The poetry is much more intended to be read aloud, and since the mid-sixties that has been what has spurred it on, has shaped it...

AB: The page doesn't interest me that much—not as much as the actual spoken word. The contradiction with that is that I should be recording all the time, which I'm not for obvious reasons. I'm much more interested in the spoken word, and I think that the whole wave of the future is definitely not literary in a sense of books and is tending toward the spoken and the visual. . . . I think that page will be used by people who want to read it aloud. The question to me of a poet writing in silence for people who will read in silence and put it in a library where the whole thing is conceived in silence and lost forever is about over. And I think it didn't really influence many people. I mean if you conceive of how many people are in the world and how many people ever learned how to read.

Black Art by Amiri Baraka

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, wd they shoot
come at you, love what you are,
breathe like wrestlers, or shudder
strangely after pissing. We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood. Hearts 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. Black poems to
smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches

whose brains are red jelly stuck
between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking
Whores! we want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
politicians Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
rrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh
. . . rrrrrrrrrrrrrrr . . . Setting fire and death to
whities ass. Look at the Liberal
Spokesman for the jews clutch his throat
& puke himself into eternity . . . rrrrrrrrr
There's a negroleader pinned to
a bar stool in Sardi's eyeballs melting
in hot flame Another negroleader
on the steps of the white house one
kneeling between the sheriff's thighs

negotiating coolly for his people.

Aggh . . . stumbles across the room . . .

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 beasts in green berets

Clean out the world for virtue and love,

Let there be no love poems written

until love can exist freely and

cleanly. Let Black people understand

that they are the lovers and the sons

of warriors and sons

of warriors Are poems & poets &

all the loveliness here in the world

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

Black Dada Nihilimus

By Amiri Baraka

. Against what light

is false what breath

sucked, for deadlines.

Murder, the cleansed

purpose, frail, against

God, if they bring him

bleeding, I would not

forgive, or even call him

black dada nihilismus

The protestant love, wide windows,

color blocked to Mondrian, and the

ugly silent deaths of jews under

the surgeon's knife. (To awake on

69th street with money and a hip
nose. Black dada nihilismus, for
the umbrella'd jesus. Trilby intrigue
movie house presidents sticky the floor
B.D.N., for the secret men, Hermes, the
blacker art. Thievery (ahh, they return
those secret gold killers. Inquisitors
of the cocktail hour. Trismegistus, have
them, in their transmutation, from stone
to bleeding pearl, from lead to burning
looting, dead Moctezuma, find the West
a gray hideous space

2.

From Sartre, a white man, it gave
the last breath. And we beg him die,
before he is killed. Plastique, we
do not have, only thin heroic blades.
The razor. Our flail against them, why
you carry knives? Or brutalized lumps of
heart? Why you stay, where they can
reach? Why you sit, or stand, or walk
in this place, a window on a dark
warehouse. Where the minds packed in
straw. New homes, these towers, for those
lacking money or art. A cult of death,
need of the simple striking arm under
the streetlamp. The cutters, from under
their rented earth. Come up, black dada
nihilismus. Rape the white girls. Rape
their fathers. Cut the mothers' throats.
Black dada nihilismus, choke my friends
in their bedrooms with their drinks spilling
and restless for tilting hips or dark liver
lips sucking splinters from the master's thigh
Black scream
and chant, scream,
and dull, un
earthly
hollering. Dada, bilious
what ugliness, learned
in the dome, colored holy
shit (i call them sinned
or lost
burned masters
of the lost
nihil German killers
all our learned

art, 'member
what you said
money, God, power,
a moral code, so cruel
it destroyed Byzantium, Tenochtitlan, Commanch
(got it, *Baby!*)
For tambo, willie best, dubois, patrice, mantan, the
bronze buckaroos.
for Jack Johnson, asbestos, tonto,
buckwheat,
billie holiday
For tom russ, l'ouverture, vesey, beau
jack,
(may a lost god damballah, rest or save us
against the murders we intend
against his lost white children

black dada nihilismus

The True Import Of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro (For Peppe, Who Will Ultimately Judge Our Efforts) by Nikki Giovanni

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man
Can you kill nigger
Huh? nigger can you
kill
Do you know how to draw blood
Can you poison
Can you stab-a-Jew
Can you kill huh? nigger
Can you kill
Can you run a protestant down with your
'68 El Dorado
(that's all they're good for anyway)
Can you kill
Can you piss on a blond head
Can you cut it off
Can you kill
A nigger can die
We ain't got to prove we can die
We got to prove we can kill
They sent us to kill
Japan and Africa
We policed europe
Can you kill
Can you kill a white man
Can you kill the nigger
in you
Can you make your nigger mind
die
Can you kill your nigger mind
And free your black hands to
strangle
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can you shoot straight and
Fire for good measure
Can you splatter their brains in the street
Can you kill them
Can you lure them to bed to kill them
We kill in Viet Nam
for them
We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US
And everywhere for all alphabet but
BLACK
Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK
Learn to kill niggers
Learn to be Black men

Nikki-RosaBy Nikki Giovanni

childhood remembrances are always a drag
 if you're Black
 you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
 with no inside toilet
 and if you become famous or something
 they never talk about how happy you were to have
 your mother
 all to yourself and
 how good the water felt when you got your bath
 from one of those
 big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
 and somehow when you talk about home
 it never gets across how much you
 understood their feelings
 as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
 and even though you remember
 your biographers never understand
 your father's pain as he sells his stock

and another dream goes
 And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
 concerns you
 and though they fought a lot
 it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
 but only that everybody is together and you
 and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
 Christmases
 and I really hope no white person ever has cause
 to write about me
 because they never understand
 Black love is Black wealth and they'll
 probably talk about my hard childhood
 and never understand that
 all the while I was quite happy

Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa" from *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*. Copyright © 1968, 1970