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Urban Space, Masculinity, and the Poetics of Resistance in the Black Arts Movement

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Abstract

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s is a point in the cultural and political transformation of the African American literary tradition. The movement, which emerged in the wake of the assassination of Malcolm X, not only attempted to redefine the relationship between art and politics but it was also attempted to redefine the black identity by radically engaging the aesthetic practices. Historians like Yusef 'M. Akbar and McCree have suggested that such a transition was a deliberate move towards a praxis that preempted the political action of black poets, writers, and visual artists as a coherent way of dissent. Poetry especially was the burning ground where the issue of race, maleness, cultural memory and political awareness were smelt into resistance. A kind of so-called political poetics was strategically written into the poetically rhetoric of the time, i.e. the works of Amiri Baraka, Lucille Lynn, etc., which already predetermined the experience of the community, black solidarity, and the recovery of the historical narrative. Here, the structure and the content of verse was employed in a selective way to question and challenge systems of oppression but at the same time producing possible eschatological visions of a free self. By redefining Harlem and other urbanized areas, which could be readily characterized by the discourse of violence and confinement, surveillance, etc., the movement poets captured not only the reality of the racial oppression but also the potential of group empowerment. Their choice to have the urban experience foregrounded allowed the poets to outline contexts that were materialistically repressive as they were symbolically subversive to locate urbanity-as-such as a space of political struggle and cultural reinterpretation. This paper argues that the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, especially when gathered in book form as in Black Fire, is a technique to transform marginalization in the city into a vessel of cultural and political enlightenment. It illustrates that the aesthetic cultures of resistance, masculinity and collective memory exist in a collaborative manner to recover the black identity which in turn promotes the ideological premises of Black Power. In this manner, the poetics of defiance shared by the movement resonate even now, in the modern movement of racial justice, which serves as a temporal link between the struggle of the past and the modern-day movement.
Keywords: *Black Arts Movement, masculinity, black identity, awakening, resistance.*

Introduction

The 1960s in the United States were a decade of great social, cultural, and political turmoil when African-American community was involved in the unprecedented attempts to define, declare, and protect its identity in the context of systemic oppression. The Black Arts Movement, which opened soon after the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and was under the direction of the poet and playwright LeRoi Jones (also Amiri Baraka), was one of the most notable cultural phenomena of this decade. The fact of the appearance of this movement symbolized not only a mixture of creative forces, but also a conscious orientation of the process of the aesthetic production to socio-political goals. As a cultural, political and social

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business, the Black Arts Movement was aimed at redefining the Black experience, as well as to offering an opportunity to express oneself and mobilise.

The creation of the movement could be interpreted as a reaction to the global sociopolitical situation of the 1960s, which was characterized by civil-rights movements, city riots, and the question of equal rights. The Black Arts Movement was primarily centered on Black identification, and the exploration of African origins, which also incorporated an element of reclaiming history as well as defining itself in the present moment. The poetry of the movement became a way by which the African Americans could gain their cultural sovereignty and fight against the ideological imposition of a society dominated by white people. The connection that was formed between art and politics was not just ideological; it was based on the practical experiences of the African Americans who had to deal with racialised social hierarchies, institutionalised violence, and economical marginalisation.

When considering the poetics of this period, it is important to contextualise them within the context of the black power movement which was more focused on political mobilisation and structural change. In this respect, poetry could be viewed as the means of recording, and of challenging the social reality of Black life, as well as of group empowerment. In his essay on the Black Arts Movement, Larry Neal notes that the Black Arts and the Black Power are intertwined notions, as both of them represent a nationalist ethos: the former challenges the nexus of art and politics, the latter discusses the art of political actions. According to Neal, these strands eventually fused together forming a symbiotic relationship where the aesthetic innovation and political activism mutually supported each other over time (29). This idea of the structure is reflected in the majority of the poems of the time where poetic language is incomplete without political awareness.

The volume of poems discussed in the present paper is based on the Black Fire (1968) collection that can be considered a manifesto of the movement. The collection represents an illustration of the application of poetry as the means of the integration of Black identity and the demonstration of racial pride. Black Fire is a classic work that represents the aspirations and aims of the Black Arts Movement. The anthology of Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal compiles a vast number of poets and artists, not only those engaged in the cultural production, but militants in the liberation of African Americans. In his preface to the collection, Baraka describes the authors as a kind of a role call of the willing, noting at the same time both the collective character of the project and the mobilising power of the movement (Baraka and Neal xvii). The poems of this collection show how deeply the artistic work was related to the conscious attempt to affirm the Black cultural identity and to attack the socio-political status

quo. They are both individual and general, expressing the life of each individual poet and yet meeting the collective plight of the African American people.

The anthology serves as a manifesto and a collection of the Black Arts Movement. It is not ordinary as a collection of poems, but it functions as a cultural account of how Black authors and philosophers were trying to break the hegemonic discourse and replace it with defiance. The preface to the anthology already sets the anthology as a roll call of the willing, indistinguishing between activism and art, poetry and mobilisation.

The use of the language of reclamation to articulate the Black identity persistently is one of the most striking characteristics of Black Fire. The statement of Lance Jeffers, My blackness is the beauty of this land, / my blackness tender and strong, wounded and wise, is an assertion that must transform an enforced grouping into a measure of agency and pride (1). Through this, Jeffers does not only oppose the derogatory constructions of white America but also appeals to a reconstituted masculinity that is based on the endurance and historical awareness. The dynamic between delicacy and power in this text makes it difficult to describe Black masculinity in one dimension as aggression. Rather it depicts the manner in which Black men may redefine their lives as humanly vulnerable and politically empowered. We may make here a reference to what Frantz Fanon noted in Black Skin, White Masks that the colonised subjects tend to internalise alien interpretations of their value; the poem of Jeffers turns such handed-down sign into a self-imposed identity sign (Fanon 112).

Equally, the stages of The Visitation by Sun Ra enact the contradiction of being a victim of white segregationist law and at the same time going beyond it. It is all the more political that the refrain, What I am, I am, is a theological statement of being. Sun Ra reveals the dialectical nature of oppression and development of identity by stating that he is simultaneously a product and rejection of segregation. His paradise being chromatic-black redirects the notion of utopia not as becoming whitened but as a proposal of Blackness as the index of wholesomeness.

The anger that strikes in the poem of James T. Stewart titled Announcement explains another aspect of the Black Arts poetics, which is the acceptance of militancy. I am a hammer turns the speaker into a tool and a laborer, and breaks down the distinction between the creation and the destruction. This photo implies the anger of a historically oppressed community that has been bottled up and a reversal of roles, with the Black subject playing the role of the agent of change instead of the object of change. This verse can be heard in the criticism of institutional racism by Carmichael and Hamilton in Black Power (Carmichael and Hamilton

4). The poem itself becomes the hammer in the imagery of Stewart which breaks the illusion of American democracy.

These poems are united by the denial of silence and assimilation. They both demand what Hortense Spillers would later refer to as claiming the flesh, as they both insist that Black embodiment, that has been made evil by dominant discourse as excessive, criminal, deviant, is actually a place of invention, agency, and revolutionary potential (Spillers□□ fetish). Representing Harlem as the location of struggle and harvest, re-conceptualizing masculinity as resistance to white stereotypes, and relying on both biblical and Afrocentric imagery, the poets of the Black Fire produced a corpus of work by which the aesthetical production was intertwined with the greater undertaking of Black nationhood.

The Black Arts Movement poetry is a systematic challenge to the American hypocrisy and the contradiction in its own values. Considering specifically the Vietnam War, it is presented as the place where the African Americans were sent to protect the freedoms in other countries, which were being denied to them in the home country in a systematic way. Martin Luther King Jr., in his 1967 speech *Declaration of Independence From Vietnam* creates a contrast between this and the realities of the Black brothers in the military unit where they were sent. These criticisms find an echo in the modern poetry where the incongruity of realities led by life and the ideological assertions of the American society is revealed.

The Black masculinity stereotypes appear as the main motifs, the fears and the misconceptions of the white America. The socially constructed caricature of black men that is threatened or subhuman as portrayed by literary scholars Hernton and Clarence Reed unveils the historical origin of racial prejudice and its psychological impact to the African American community. Malcolm X becomes a kind of correction of these distortions, as he is fearless, full of moral righteousness, and masculinity reinstated in African Americans.

The critique of middle class Black leaders is another characteristic aspect of Black Arts poetry in that the leaders are complicit as they support systemic injustices through assimilation. In the film by Baraka, Black Art, there is a discussion of leaders negotiating passively with white authorities which is the clash between political expediency and the communal liability. The fact that Baraka requests poems that kill, a metaphorical demand that simply promotes revolutionary aesthetic practices, highlights the fact that the movement demands art to serve as a tool of social intervention and political criticism (Baraka 1921).

To establish the Black cultural presence, the poets use experimental forms, rhythms, and writing modes, including jazz, street language, and novel forms. The topics of race, revolution, hypocrisy, and social justice run throughout the work and encompass the

individual and group experience of oppression and resistance. Harlem and other urban areas are not portrayed as a picturesque haven of cultural diversity, but as the places of structural violence, systematic surveillance and socioeconomic precariousness.

It is depicted by the work of David Henderson, Henry Dumas, Calvin Hernton, Keorapetse Kgositsile, and Jackmoh that the Black Arts poetry reinstated Harlem not as a representative of cultural renaissance but as an experienced geography of displacement, fright, and radical survival. When previous generations were commemorating the place of Harlem as the nest of Black creativity, these poets are demanding a different kind of reality, one that cannot support the decorative surface of progress discourses. The staged sonic landscape of the city in which sound and death and survival merge is depicted in the city of Henderson in *Keep on Pushing. His clotted lines, death static/ over everything/ ripped glass/ shards/ sirens/ gunfire (161-64) reduce the senses to a broken beat of violence. This is not a coincidence; the disjointed enjambments mimic the instability of the urban setting in the first place, reflecting the way African Americans were forced to dwell in the realm of continuous and unprotected observation, law enforcement brutality, and the instability of security. According to Stuart Halls, Harlem of Henderson is a place where the politics of representation and materiality of the daily life meet, which is why the poem is both aesthetic object and socio-political witness at the same time.

This criticism is further reinforced when Hernton describes Harlem in Asphalt Plantation in terms of a contrast between the myth of American democracy and the raw image of city confinement: “Harlem is the asphalt plantation of America / Rat swarmed tenements sway like shanty houses / Stacked one upon another (95101). Through the use of the plantation, Hernton breaks the temporal gap between slavery and the contemporary racial oppression insisting that structural violence remained only transferred into other forms. The tenements are envisioned not only as the precarious housing but as the historical landmarks of the Black suffering. Harlem is simultaneously a part of the American dream and a non-part thereof, being at the center of cultural production of the country and marginalized in its political economy. The poem is therefore against liberal fable of ascending through ladder, which reveals the character of racial oppression.

These works are also complicated by the religious references throughout them, which complicates their image of Harlem. The sceneries are not faithless; on the contrary, they are overwhelmed with biblical echo that serves as a form of comfort and challenge at the same time. The rhythm of the shards sirens gunfire creates an apocalyptic tune, and places the urban crisis into the modern-day Book of Revelation. Here, Harlem itself turns out to be a holy

but profaned territory, where the chance of being redeemed is not in uplifting but in resistance.

It is this theological rebranding that explains the way the poets handle Black masculinity. Poetry was a means of recovery in an environment where decades of stereotypes, servile, hypersexual, criminal, had deformed African American manhood. Malcolm X is found everywhere in the Black Arts writing as the paradigmatic figure of fearless self-definition, as an embodiment of masculinity which is militant, uncompromising, and visionary. The ethos of That Old Time Religion by Jackmoh is glorified in words which appear to be so simple deceptively: no bent back / no trembling knees / the man walks upright (2—6). That poem turns religious idioms into political statements, that faith, when interpreted correctly, provides Black men with self-respect instead of submission.

The Awakening by Kositsile builds up this theme by placing Malcolm in the sociopolitical context of Harlem. His poem asserts that leadership and consciousness are not ideal concepts, but practiced in the beats of community. To Kgositsile, the masculinity of Malcolm cannot be discussed out of the context of pedagogy; he is not just a fighter but a teacher, who opens up the eyes of the collective to the power it has. The theme of awakening reminds the way Frantz Fanon theorized the decolonization process as psychic and cultural rebirth.

However, there are also conflicts within the Black Arts Movement in the way masculinity is glorified in these poems. Whereas Henderson and Kgositsile are emphatic about courage and resilience, there is a sustained problem of placing the male body in the centre at the expense of the feminine voice. A critical reading of the masculinist imagery of Henderson and Jackmoh, then, is to acknowledge that it is a necessity in reaction to historical emasculation and at the same time insufficient in replicating patriarchal hierarchies. In a society, where Black men were continuously denied control over their labor, their families, and their bodies, the poetic reconstruction of masculinity was a counter-narrative, a radical one. The death static by Henderson, asphalt plantation by Hernton turns into more than the picture of hopelessness; it is the landscapes, where new identities are created. In this regard, the city crisis is not merely projected as misery but the ford of change. In the same spirit as W.E.B. DuBois of double consciousness, these poems dramatize the experiences of the African Americans of being both alienated and agentic at once, in the spaces whose designation is predicated upon their negation (DuBois 9).

In such a way, the poetry of Henderson, Hernton, Jackmoh, and Kgositsile represents multidimensional rearticulation of the space, masculinity, and spirituality by the Black Arts Movement. Harlem has ceased to be a dreamy city but a place to fight where to survive is a

creative process. Religion transformed by Black radicalism is no longer an escape, but a tool of engaging with history. Masculinity, which is being constructed by using Malcolm X as the example, does not evolve as a biological principle, but as a political process of resistance. All these works together contribute to the argument that art is not decorative, but rather a tool to change not only the subjectivity of the individual, but the collective memory as well.

Black Arts poetry has a salient dimension of interaction with historical memory and cultural inheritance. Poets establish the temporal and cultural contexts of modern plight by citing African, African American and biblical stories. Both Henderson and Hernton- Passover and Jitterbugging in the Streets are found in Black Fire, and their role in the larger Black Arts Movement initiative of combining aesthetics and political commentary is emphasized. The mention of passover by Henderson, among other examples, relates the African American condition of being oppressed with the historical emancipation of the Israelites implying that the spiritual and political resistance are similar (170). In the same manner, the Black struggle placed in a mythopoetic and symbolic register by Hernton in the use of the serpent symbol of oppression gives the poetry an extra meaning (88).

The conflict between the individual experience and the group identity is the central theme of the Black Arts poetry. Poets express personal problems and wants and needs and at the same time place them in the context of the community of African Americans at large. This two-fold attention enables poetry to be both a witness and an intervention; it is a witness to the systemic injustices and provides, at the same time, the vision of power and change. With the help of this dual lens, poetry is turned into the means of bridging the gap between the lived reality and aspirational identity, disobeying the dominant cultural discourse and reinforcing the presence of the Black self.

The discussion of race by the poets goes past the critique to the affirmation of the Black identity, history and prospects. The celebration of Blackness as chromatic totality by Sun-Ra, the adoption of Blackness as beauty and as a sign of strength by Jeffers and the continuation of the appeal to Black symbols of culture all create a poetics of empowerment. These works describe a shared belief about having the power of narratives back, having self-determination, and learning how to be proud of their heritage. The poetry is therefore a form of cultural memory that not only entraps the memory of the past but also encourages the social and political involvement.

The city, man and identity collide in resistance and agency performances. African American city life, e.g. in Harlem, is depicted by the poets as the place of struggle, creativity, and self-fashioning. In this regard, poetry is a form of protest, a source of aestheticism and social

critique. It confirms the existence and the action of African Americans in a society in which they are usually marginalized. The symbolic register of the poetry is enhanced by religious and mythic allusions, which connect the experience of African American people with other historical accounts of liberation, morality, and continuity. Appealing to biblical tropes, poets address the issue of social hypocrisy, highlight the importance of morality, and place modern conflict/ struggle in a chronologically real progression of opposition and survival. These references show how the poets can combine cultural literacy, historical knowledge as well as creativity into a unified aesthetic practice.

The aspiration of black people to create an independent world where they will be able to create their own stories, identify themselves, and even politically and culturally interact with the larger community is summarized in this call by Baraka towards a black cultural and poetic world. The insistent demand of the movement to be innovative in form, conscious of history, and connected to socio-political conditions makes the Black Arts poetry a practice of a very specific transformation. It is also aesthetic, political and pedagogic, providing information about the state of African Americans and promoting the approaches to self-determination and empowerment.

These poems of the Black Arts Movement show a volatile and intricate interplay of race, male, urban experience, historical awareness, and aesthetic experimentation. Black poetry is the result of the stormy social situation of the 1960s, when poets tried to describe their struggle, hopes, and political facts of African-American citizens. Critical attention to the works of individual poets, prevailing themes, and characteristic stylistic decisions expresses how the role of Black poetry was multidimensional throughout this time, which subsequently dictated the cultural and political importance of the movement. The movement poets used experimental structures, vernacular language, performance oriented forms and militant imagery to confront the current literary practices and reclaim the black identity.

The focus on empowerment and self-expression is one of the most long-standing legacies of the movement because poetry was used both as an artistic and ideological tool of protest. By engaging in aggressive experimentation and not afraid to touch on social matters, the Black Arts poets showed how art could raise critical awareness, claim cultural pride and build community unity. Their art was not just the mirror of oppression but also the projection of other cultural worlds that would be built on the pillars of justice, dignity, and self-determination. In its turn, the Black Arts Movement can be interpreted as an eloquent demonstration of the unlimited power of art to change consciousness, oppose the entire system of tyranny, and reflect the general will of the oppressed people and their demand to find their ways out of the cultural and social decline.

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