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DARING PROPAGANDA FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE HUMAN MIND:
CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING IN POETRY AND DRAMA OF THE
BLACK POWER ERA, 1965-1976

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARKEYSHA DAVIS

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Department of Afro-American Studies
College of Humanities and Fine Arts

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Michael Darwin and Mary Catherine Davis, who have applauded and
prayed for me through every step of this process: The “book” is done.
To my brothers, Michquell Davis and Michael Turner, Jr., and sister Miah Davis: Thank
you for encouraging me to relish in being the “nerdy one.”
To my past students (especially Student Bridges): This dissertation is your “baby” as
much as my own. Thank you for your insight, your collaboration, and your passion for
critical consciousness-raising.
Finally, to the late Imamu Amiri Baraka: Your verse laid the first brick of this project; the
example of your lifelong commitment to the liberation of black people filled out the
foundation. Thank you for the encouragement during our brief meeting.

Rest in Power.
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ABSTRACT


SEPTEMBER 2016

MARKEYSHA DAVIS, B.A., WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

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This dissertation is a literary and intellectual history of the contributions of black American theorists, poets, and dramatists in the 1960s and 1970s towards the establishment of black critical consciousness in order to lay grounds for black people to experience a fuller existence as human beings through black-centered creations and presentations. Through the following chapters, I establish the framework and evolution of black psyche-liberation theories—spanning Du Bois’s theory of double-conscious through the contributions of black artist-theorists like Baraka, Neal, and Woodie King, Jr., followed by examinations at length of the theories of black liberation in praxis by the poets and dramatists of African descent writing in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Many artists I examine—including, yet not limited to, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Ed Bullins—were affiliated with the well-known Black Arts Movement, which focused on a revolutionary, black-centered commentary on American society through the arts with a goal of black liberation and veneration of an African past, the African-American present, the restoration of black masculinity, and the future of the people as a nation. However, other artists of this period, including black
female poets Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara and, later, playwright Ntozake Shange, presented further discussions of the intersections of identity and consciousness not only as black women but as members of the gay/lesbian and feminist struggles for equal rights in America, issues which add a layer of reflection to the calls of Black Arts arbiters for critical consciousness and demands a more complicated and multifaceted examination of what it means to be human and liberated as a black person in America.
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INTRODUCTION

NEGOTIATING THE CONTEXT AND CRITICISMS OF POST-CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT BLACK ARTISTIC PRODUCTION

In 1971, in an editorial reflection on her experience performing the lead role in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, a drama celebrating the life and artistry of Lorraine Hansberry, actress Camille Yarborough shared with her readers the joy she experienced as a participant in a healing community theater that put black people and their experiences at the center. She writes:

> It is very infrequent that we Blacks behold true images of ourselves on stage or television or, until relatively recently, in literature. We had almost forgotten who and what we were and, in the confusion caused by a desperate need for employment, we Black artists sometimes had fallen into the suicidal posture of imitating our imitators imitating us. It wasn’t just lack of money that kept us from going to the theater in large numbers until this day. Why *should* we go? What would we see except insult? As O’Casey wrote from the realities of the Irish experience, only Blacks can write from the realities of the Black experience (Yarborough D3).

What Yarborough observed of her mostly-black viewing audience on the night of the play’s performance was the connection that many black creators and performers of the post-civil rights movement sought from their reading or viewing audiences. One middle-aged black woman, after the show, grabbed Yarborough’s hand and said, “Today I feel like I am somebody,” (D3). Black students in attendance shared “Whitey sho’ needed to hear what you all said up there on that stage,” and “That lady playing the mother reminded me of my mother” (D3). This play, comprised of the words and unpublished works of the late Hansberry and produced (and arranged) by her white ex-husband, Robert Nemiroff, was a used as vehicle to both relay the black playwright’s story and recreate, as Yarborough emphasizes, a communion of experience within the theater. After paying homage to poets, playwrights, and authors including Hansberry, Richard Wright,
James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, and Black Arts contemporaries Ron Milner and Amiri Baraka, she implores her peers to “write on:”

Right on!
   Hold up the mirror that reflects our true image. The strengths and weakness, the hows and whys.
   Strip us of the grotesque and vulgar costumes which distort our Africanisms.
   Cleanse us with the purifying knowledge of our ancient and glorious existence on this planet.
   Wipe us clean of all self-hatred, then clothe us in the robes of knowledge, creativity, wisdom, and the communal spirit of our ancestors.
   Write on! (D3)

The work of connection and communion with the black audience was vital to the black artists creating during the Black Power era, but the route of that connection and communion took a variety of turns. For many, this meant using performance spaces and pages equally to dismantle the idea of white supremacy and black inferiority through the destruction or dismissing of the “white thing,” defined by African-American poet, critic and dramatist Larry Neal as “white ideas…white ways of looking at the world,” specifically within the imaginations of African Americans (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 30). For others, it meant reimagining the historiography of the experiences of people of African descent in the West and revising the cosmology of the race. For all committed to defining, establishing, or contributing to a “black aesthetic,” it meant reimagining freedom, humanity, and liberation of the black nation that could be. But perhaps the most pressing matter of discussion within the mission of building black people up and reconnecting them with themselves, as many artists iterate, was actually defining what blackness meant (or could mean) and how African Americans, particularly, could aspire to nationhood within the diversity of their experiences.
My dissertation is a literary and intellectual history of the contributions of black American theorists, poets, and dramatists in the 1960s and 1970s towards the establishment of black critical consciousness in order to lay grounds for black people to experience a fuller existence as human beings through black-centered creations and presentations. Through the following chapters, I establish the framework and evolution of black psyche-liberation theories—spanning Du Bois’s theory of double-conscious through the contributions of black artist-theorists like Baraka, Neal, and Woodie King, Jr., followed by examinations at length of the theories of black liberation in praxis by the poets and dramatists of African descent writing in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s. Many artists I examine—including, yet not limited to, Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Ed Bullins—were affiliated with the well-known Black Arts Movement, which focused on a revolutionary, black-centered commentary on American society through the arts with a goal of black liberation and veneration of an African past, the African-American present, the restoration of black masculinity, and the future of the people as a nation. However, other artists of this period, including black female poets Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara and, later, playwright Ntozake Shange, presented further discussions of the intersections of identity and consciousness not only as black women but as members of the gay/lesbian and feminist struggles for equal rights in America, issues which add a layer of reflection to the calls of Black Arts arbiters for critical consciousness and demands a more complicated and multifaceted examination of what it means to be human and liberated as a black person in America.

I focus specifically on poetry and drama by black artists during this period because they were often performed within the same physical space in the artistic
workshops, community theaters and centers, and street corners to make the art, as a pedagogical tool, more accessible to black communities and, by centralizing the art within these communities, giving black audiences a sense of ownership over these works. Playwright Ron Milner wrote in the *Negro Digest* in 1968 that the black communities of the United States would be "the theater, and the black artist's house of drama like a weirdly fixed and pointed looking-glass, a light-prism casting warnings, directions, fruitful memories and marvelous imaginings on the walls of the doomed, or soon to be recreated, buildings. Right there in the community are your materials, your situations and conflicts--relevant and powerful," (Milner “Black Theater Go Home,” 310). This idea of theater, of course, included the frequent performance of poetry, dance, live painting, music, and other modes of creative transference. Artist workshops and expositions, like those spearheaded at Baraka’s Black Arts Repertory Theater/School in Harlem in 1965 and the Black Expo in San Francisco in 1972, made these confluences possible. Poetry and drama were more frequently linked because a number of the black artists of this period wrote both poetry and dramatic works and, during their staged performances, featured readings of their own pieces and those of other artists. The communal theater, wherever it would be, made the dissemination of the black artists' messages about identity, nationhood, and liberation accessible to anyone willing to listen, but preferably those "negroes in transition" who would benefit most.

Overall, I contend that the goal of these black artists in conversation with their black audiences and with one another was to shape a fuller life for African Americans in the United States. This included the veneration of the ancient and recent past, assertion of humanity and the right to self-determination, the appreciation of black music forms as
definitive and authenticating elements of African-American culture, and the refiguring of black masculinity into the community after years of psychological and physical suppression as methods of nation-building. For many more, especially black women and homosexual artists and theorists of the Black Power era, recognition of those characteristics, traditions, and elements of their black selves — including concepts of women’s equality and homosexuality — were reflected in their work, often as a counterpoint to the perspectives of allegedly hypermasculinist black artists and activists. Even still, these contributors to the breadth of creativity that define this era attempted to flesh out the wholeness of the various black experiences in America that challenged the sometimes black masculinity-centered and homophobic ideologies and productions of the Black Arts Movement. If the goal of this generation of artists collectively was to, as Yarborough posits in her op-ed, “Hold up the mirror that reflects our true image,” the breadth and scope of their work needed to reflect the diversity of the experiences of African Americans as a whole, not restricted to any one image or dogma.

My first chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for this project, tracing the calls by black artists and theorists for black art and scholarship to confront black existential “double-consciousness.” W. E. B. Du Bois, who theorized double-consciousness in 1898 as a black existential phenomenon and, thusly, a psychological conundrum, was the first to introduce this theory as unique to the experience of African Americans. Furthermore, I trace the lineage of this confrontation of double-consciousness through the works of cultural and political theory more contemporary to the Black Power-era writers, including predecessors Frantz Fanon, Harold Cruse, and Malcolm X and Black Arts Movement theorists and artists Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and
Larry Neal. The selection of theorists for this chapter reflects the discussions of Black Arts theorists, poets, and playwrights themselves and who they gave credit for their idealized approaches to constructing a black nation in their criticisms, prologues and epilogues, essays, and their own artistic products during the 1960s and 1970s. They often recognized the Du Boisian double-consciousness as the product of the imagined “white thing,” and, as Larry Neal writes, a thing to be dismantled or destroyed for the sake of a fuller black consciousness, while crediting the likes of Fanon and Malcolm X for offering them what Madhubuti would call "a new psychology" that placed blackness at the center. This chapter creates a lineage of thought across generations and geographies of black Western artists, activists, and theorists before preceding into the function of the artistic products of the Black Power era themselves, centering the mission of critical consciousness-raising as a pedagogical tool for social change, as used by the artists.

Chapter 2 is a literary analysis of the symbolism of whiteness in Black Arts Movement poetry and drama. Several artists writing during this period--but specifically those aligned with and identified as arbiters of black nationalist ideologies--present whiteness not as a symbol that represents the standard or norm of American identity, but as a symbol that carries what Nell Irvin Painter calls "the mark of guilty malfeasance," the taint of the oppression of black people in the United States since the arrival of the first captive Africans on North American soil (Painter 378). These artists attack the ideas of whiteness and white cultural hegemony—and not white people—as representations of political power and the normative aesthetic standard with a literary assault on the black imagination. This “attack” was often with violent imagery of war against white institutional and political symbols (often in the form of person or, in the case of Baraka’s
Black Mass, a thing) that represent institutions of oppressive power. This imagery, I contend, was not intended as anti-white propaganda but as a propaganda for positive self-image of African-American history and culture in its rejection of Western (white) standards of culture and challenges to the dominant narrative(s) of United States history. This chapter features my critical readings of select writings from Baraka and Neal’s Black Fire (1968), Baraka’s plays A Black Mass (1965) and Madheart (1968); Nikki Giovanni’s psyche-liberation poems in Black Feeling, Black Talk (1967) and Black Judgement (1968); and Ed Bullins’s play The Fabulous Miss Marie (1971). The poetry that I include from Black Fire, those from the Giovanni’s poetry collections, and the selected plays of Baraka and Bullins each harbor a similar theme of illustrating what this turn from the West as a cultural and political paradigm should look like for black people in America. The latter three works by Giovanni and Bullins, especially, establish the foundation for what the next step of this psychological violence against white archetypes entails: the rebuilding and reaffirmation of black self-image and ultimately black culture and black communities.

Chapter 3 weighs in on the attempts of black poets and dramatists of this era to define and promote new paradigms of blackness to their black audiences through their artistic productions. The psychological dilemma between "negroes" -- who held to the politics of integration and white acceptance -- and "black people" -- who subscribed to the new paradigms of blackness that the Black Power and Black Arts movements promoted comes into focus in this chapter (Van Deburg 53-55). I argue here that some black poets and playwrights used the imagined negotiation of "black vs. negro" to call on any black Americans who dared listen to weed themselves out between the two positions -- one
promising a future of power and community ("black") and the other perpetuating compliance with the oppressor and complacency with the racist social systems ("negro").

Like the psychological challenge against white archetypes that I discuss in Chapter 2, the artists attempt at prescriptive blackness calls for a destruction of the "negro" as the acceptable image of black Americanism alongside a critical reevaluation of the values of integration and other issues they deemed counterproductive to unification and restoration of self and community, as are demonstrated in the selected poems of Haki Madhubuti, K. William Kgotsitile, Giovanni, and Deanna Harris and Jimmy Garrett’s We Own the Night (1968). More than this argument, however, there are critiques between the poets and dramatists in conversation with more their more Black Nationalist-minded counterparts that challenge the exclusionary discourse of “black vs. negro,” hypermasculinity, and other intraracial issues they display as inhibitors of liberation. Sonia Sanchez’s The Bronx is Next (1968), as I discuss, speaks most directly to this internal critique within the Black Arts Movement. Baraka and Fundi’s In Our Terribleness (1970), I conclude in this chapter, meant to bring together black people and “negroes” by centralizing the shared experiences—culturally, historically, and existentially—of African-Americans from any level of consciousness.

Finally, Chapter 4 presents a critical literary analysis of the artistic production of black artists who were challenged by the ideological and aesthetic folds of the Black Power and Black Arts movements within their identities but used their works to challenge the critical perspectives of their counterparts. The artists who were most vocal within this conversation were black feminist and homosexual artist-activists, who organized and worked closely with their BAM counterparts but often found the rhetoric of their work
marginalizing. Some black women from within the Black Arts creative circles like Giovanni, Sanchez and Toni Cade Bambara were among the most celebrated authors of their generation, but, as Barbara Christian argues in her essay “The Race for Theory,” when much of the literature of this period used the word “black” to address audiences, in form and function “they meant black male” (Christian 76). I contend in this chapter that many black female (and male) artists challenged this notion of male-centered and often homophobic art being the route to the restoration of black critical consciousness and challenged their peers to think critically about how they might be engaging in the gendered and sexualized oppression of others within the imagined black nation. To support this argument, I examine Toni Cade Bambara's multi-genre anthology *The Black Woman* (1970) to establish the main critical counterpoint of gender and sexuality politics to the consciousness-raising efforts of the Black Arts Movement and a close reading of selected poetry of Audre Lorde, who--as a self-defined “black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet warrior”-- sought to engage the rhetoric of black nationalism as a mode of raising consciousness but challenged her contemporaries to consider the challenges faced by those who did not fit the gender and sexual molds defined within the Black Power and Black Arts movements. Furthermore, the 1969 play *Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress, a predecessor of the Black Arts Movement, challenges Black Nationalist attitudes on racial violence, gender, beauty, class, and education in an attempt to question notions of black "authenticity."

Through my analyses of these works and related criticism and scholarship, it is my goal to demonstrate that some black poets and playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s brought their own versions of critical consciousness-raising efforts to their fellow artists
and the larger black community. These black artists “on the margins” contributed their voices to the discourse on black liberation in order to challenge some of those criteria within the Black Arts Movement’s versions of critical consciousness that excluded some from participation in the imagined black nation as well as to continue the dialogue of reaching for a fuller humanity for black people in America. With my concluding analysis of the legacy of poet/playwright Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), I examine the breadth of influence that all of these consciousness-raising efforts had on the celebrated product of this artist, becoming only the second black woman to have a show on Broadway (1976) and being an admitted “baby” of the Black Arts and Black Power movements (in addition to the Civil Rights, Women’s and LGBT movements of the 1960s and 1970s). It is Shange’s choreopoem that brings me to the present, considering that *for colored girls* was adapted into a motion picture in 2010 by Tyler Perry, one of the most successful and lucrative playwrights and poets of the 21st century (so far). Building this bridge between the multiple angles on consciousness-raising as practiced and discussed by my featured artists, on the one hand, and the effect of these perspectives on Shange and future artists, on the other, I highlight the long-lasting legacy of the black men and women of this era who dared to invest their talents, time, and life’s work into education and involvement of black audiences.

**On Critical Consciousness-Raising as Theory and Action**

By emphasizing “black critical consciousness-raising” as central to this project, I am speaking of the conscious effort of many of the Black Power-era artists I discuss, from roughly 1965 to 1976, to create community-centered art that involved and educated
African-American audiences of historical, cultural, social, and economic issues and often involved them in the process of performing and making the art. My definition of critical consciousness-raising is derived primarily from the influential theoretical work of Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon, as I expand in my discussion through Chapter 1. Undoubtedly connected to earlier theorizations by scholars who studied the oppression and socialization of Afro-descendants in the Western World, like David Walker, Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and his own teacher, the poet and politician Aimé Cesairé and perhaps further inspired by his contemporaries Harold Cruse, Malcolm X, Kwame Nkrumah, and other revolutionaries of color throughout the West and the so-called “Third World” – Fanon’s statements on the necessity of conscienciser, or “consciousness-raising,” among his Afro-Antillean patients within their psychiatric sessions spoke to the need of non-white people of African descent to reconnect with themselves. This, Fanon argues, should be the primary focus of the oppressed. Instead of being faced with the impossibility of having to "whiten or perish," he suggests that liberation could come for his patients if only they became “aware of the possibility of existence,” (Fanon Black Skin, White Masks 73). This practice of reacclimating black minds for existence rather than erasure through the pursuit of inclusion or acceptance by the white West first presented in his study Black Skin, White Masks (1952) is further elaborated in The Wretched of the Earth (1961), which was a theoretical study of the Algerian revolutionary struggle and guide for intellectual, political, militaristic, and aesthetic strategies for liberation. Like Du Bois and Malcolm X, whose aesthetic and political perspectives also figure prominently in Chapter 1, Fanon’s works, especially The Wretched of the Earth, were common (and often required) reading
for the black artists and theorists of Black Power and Black Arts movements, along with the work of other revolutionaries of color like China’s Chairman Mao Tse-tung, Guinea-Bissau’s independence leader Amilcar Cabral, and guerilla leader and theorist of the Cuban Revolution, Ernesto “Che” Guevara.

In the mission of the raising of consciousness and facilitating the self-determination of the oppressed, the theories of Du Bois, Fanon, and Malcolm X met intellectually along the lines of centering the history and present realities of the oppressed—or specifically African Americans, in the cases of Du Bois and Malcolm X—in the creative productions of artists and intellectuals representative of the oppressed. Though he credits Fanon in his analysis of consciousness-raising theory and praxis, it is Brazilian educator and revolutionary theorist Paulo Friere who is most often credited with establishing and influencing this phenomenon within his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968; English translation, 1970). In his study, Friere discloses that “Revolutionary thinkers cannot think without the people, but only with the people […] To simply think about the people, as the dominators do, without any self-giving in that thought, to fail to think with the people, is a sure way to cease being revolutionary leaders” (Friere 132). Friere’s contemporary and colleague, Brazilian revolutionary dramatist, educator, and activist Augusto Boal furthers this insistence on community engagement and involvement in social change and liberation into the arts in his *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974; English translation, 1979), observing of audience engagement in the process of creativity that “Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum he envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts; on the other hand, he often realizes that things are not so easy when he himself has to practice what he
suggests” (Boal 139). However, he continues that imposed ideas, scripts or other factors that might limit the artist and audience initially with regard to engaging the realities, anxieties, and violence of their lived struggles through the creative process could establish such artistic forums, as theater in his example, as “a rehearsal for revolution…Within its fictitious limits, the experience is a concrete one,” (141).

While the works of both Freire and Boal are often cited in contemporary collectives of activists, artists, theorists, and educators centralizing social change strategies in their methods, as I have experienced and practiced within my own pedagogy, their writings and workshops come in the midst of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, not prior to them, and the actions and theories they suggest reflect the praxis centralized by many of the Civil Rights and Black Power/ Black Arts arbiters during the 1960s and 1970s. It would benefit my fellow social justice workers to add black American artists and theorists to their studies of consciousness-raising efforts to see how Fanon’s conscieniser had been exemplified within the context of the United States. For instance, in 1963, the Free Southern Theater—spearheaded by African-American dramatist Gilbert Moses, activist/photographer Doris Derby, and producer John O’Neal—was instrumental in facilitating among their predominantly-black southern audiences what Boal terms in 1974 a theatre practice focused on the “breaking of repression,” or that which asks a person to recall and share within a group of artists and community members a moment of repression in their existence, collectively or personally, as a target of repression, which the artists and community members then “reproduce” together in dramatic form (149-151). In a 1972 interview with Charlayne Hunter, Moses recalls such a workshop in which he and other FST dramatists and organizers met with black
community members in Bogalusa, Louisiana, during which they collected the stories about “the lack of opportunities, the poor quality of education, the ways society treated them,” (Hunter “We Are Starved for Images of Ourselves”). With some of the community members joining the FST troupe on stage and Moses compiling their words into a script, their realities became a dramatic piece. On stage, he says to Hunter, the actors—trained or recruited among the people of Bogalusa—were able to drive away the Ku Klux Klan and speak their minds honestly, while others black community members cheered them on because, “in a sense, this was them.” This context—being among those for whom the art was created—and the practice of including black audiences in the process of creation were key to the consciousness-raising strategies of the artists and activists of the Black Power era.

Further, what Boal coins the “invisible theater” in Theater of the Oppressed—or the public “presentation of a scene…before people who are not spectators,” but unknowing participants in this public theatre—was an immediate tool of engagement among audiences in predominantly African-American communities at the commencement of community-based theatres and workshops presented by the arbiters of the Black Arts Movement. Black Arts dramatist, critic, and institution-builder Woodie King, Jr., reflects on his community arts workshops through the Cultural Arts Program of Mobilization For Youth (MFY) in the summer of 1965 that the organizers and artists, with black and Puerto Rican youth based in Harlem, staged street theatre in youth’s communities based on the issues they discussed together in MFY workshops. One project, Dope! by Maryat Lee, was staged on a street that the participants identified as possessing a narcotics problem. King remembers:
While mothers hung out of tenement windows and young boys lounged on fire escapes, many who’d never even seen a play before got their first taste of theatre that related to their lives. In fact, dope was so real to some members of the audience that they got up on the stage to dance during a party scene and later hissed at the hero when he started to take a fix. [...] An old woman junkie begged the hero not to take the drugs, telling him to look at her, see what dope had done to her (King *The Impact of Race* 36-37).

The willingness of this informal black audience to participate and, further, as the older woman demonstrates, share their experiences within this process of public art speaks to the desire of the black, Puerto Rican, and other communities of color present in Harlem to have their stories told in the art they observed. The practice of street theatre or pieces workshopped with community members was not unique to Moses’s early work with the FST nor King’s workshops with the MFY. In fact, this practice was central to the work of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School, spearheaded by Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Askia Muhammad Touré, and others, in the summer of 1965, with workshops geared towards not only literary, visual, and performance arts but also history, general education, and vocational skills workshops. Under the direction of Barbara Ann Teer, the performers of the National Black Theater troupe were called “liberators,” emphasizing the practices of ritual and call-and-response in their public performances and workshops, as drama critic Clayton Riley highlights in his review of the NBT’s 1972 performance of “Change! Love Together! Organize! A Revival,” (Riley “Face to Face With the Junkies,” D5). To answer to Du Bois’s specific directions to black dramatists about creating institutions and art “About…For...By... [and] Near” black communities, many artists took the extra step of creating meaningful art with [my emphasis] these communities, while documenting the process of this art. This—and the direct writings of a number of poets and dramatists who I discuss in Chapter 1—is evidence that they were drawing on the instruction of Fanon
and perhaps pollenating the budding ideologies to come among the Brazilian theorist-activists Freire and Boal in the early 1970s, thus giving my work a theoretical center and the legacies of these black creators a name.

**The Black Arts Movement: Context and Criticisms**

Prior to 1966, Baraka had written several essays, many included in his collection *Home: Social Essays* (1966), calling for the recognition of African Americans as a nation within a nation (the United States), the struggle of the black community as one of “independence…from the political, economic, social, spiritual, and psychological domination of the white man,” and the necessity of the black artist “to change the images his people identify with, by asserting Black feeling, Black mind, Black judgement” (Jones 103, 276). These would become the foundational terms of the Black Arts Movement, which Neal would define as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” that envisioned “an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” relating directly to the black activists’ desire for self-determination and nationhood for African Americans (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 29). The common thread between the Black Arts and Black Power groups, as James E. Smethurst writes in *The Black Arts Movement*, was “a belief that African Americans were a people, a nation entitled to (needing, really) self-determination of its own destiny” (Smethurst 15). The Black Arts Movement called for a radical reordering, through the work of the black artist and a black aesthetic, of how their African-American audience would perceive the world around them, their communities, their families, their culture, and their oppressors and
even, in some respects, how their oppressors perceived them, as a number of the consumers of Black Arts productions were white (Boyd 261).

Since Baraka’s call for a revolutionary theatre in 1965 and Neal’s Black Arts Movement manifesto in 1967, artist, critics, and theorists alike have attempted to define the purpose of the body of plays, poems, visual arts, music and films linked to Black Power and specifically Black Nationalism created during the 1960s and 1970s. With respect to the poems and dramatic works that are the foci of this dissertation, I have reviewed histories and analyses by creators, historians, critics, and theorists who have written on the topic from the mid-1960s to present, including Doris Abramson, Harold Cruse, Amiri Baraka, Eugene Redmond, Haki Madhubuti, Lorenzo Thomas, Kimberly Benston, Cheryl Clarke, James Smethurst, Lisa Collins and Margo Crawford, Mike Sell, Melba Joyce Boyd, Amy Abugo Ongiri, and Reiland Rabaka, to name a few of many. Outside of the participants’ and scholars’ thorough analyses of the artistic expression and meaning of nationhood in the works of Black Power-era creators, I hope to add the conversation of what these artists meant by the counteraction of Neal’s “white thing” within the African-American psyche, how this destruction would facilitate black nationhood, and, ultimately, how perspectives on gender, class, sexuality, and generational differences within this idea of nationhood complicates and, I argue, enriches the scope of the mission of building collective consciousness and psychological liberation.

Many critics have charged the black artists of this period—especially those aligned with the politics and production of the Black Arts Movement—of being ahistorical to a point, often presenting their art and their theories in a way that indicates
that their ideas about the existential dilemmas of African Americans have never been analyzed before and that their models for black theater, music, poetry, and other art forms are “avant-garde”. Harold Cruse, perhaps one of the earliest public critics (and supporters) of the fledgling Black Arts Movement in his 1967 text *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, argues that the movement “was not a failure in achievement, so much as a failure in its inability to deal with what had been achieved” (Cruse *Crisis* 539). There is some truth to the point that many artists who aligned themselves with the Black Arts Movement explicitly felt that their engagement of black nationhood and ethnocentric expression was novel and had sought to expand upon honest criticisms and examinations of white and black Americans that their predecessors—more specifically, those aligned with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1910s and 1920s, the Chicago Black Renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s, and even the recent Civil Rights Movement—had failed to do before them. In *Hip Hop’s Inheritance* (2012), Reiland Rabaka echoes Cruse’s assertion when he suggests that, prior to the post-Civil Rights era, the Harlem Renaissance artists were actively challenging white supremacy through what historian David Levering Lewis coined “civil rights by copyright” and even the biases of their white liberal supporters, although they (as charged by Madhubuti) did not create lasting institutions on which this generation of black artists could build upon their legacies (Rabaka 84). However, Rabaka continues: “…serious social and political movements, as well as insurgent cultural aesthetic movements, are often not so much about eradicating each and every ill on their perspective agendas as much as they are about critical-consciousness raising and radicalizing others, inspiring them to begin their processes of self-transformation and social transformation,” (94). Whereas the particular political and cultural moment in
which the black liberation movement evolved had created a space for these artists to be more assertive about defining themselves and protesting the social and political oppression of black people in America, their predecessors planted the seeds of public interest in what black people had to say about themselves and the America that they had experienced. This inheritance, as Rabaka positions it, was not lost on artists/theorists like Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Woodie King, Jr., who write creatively and directly (in essays and editorials) about the groundbreaking work, mentorship, and legacies of poets and dramatists like Charles Chesnutt, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Lorraine Hansberry, and others.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his 1979 essay “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext,” argues with the attempt of writers of the Black Arts Movement and their theorists/critics to measure the “Blackness” of a work of literature, and in essence, to deny the contribution of past works to multiple canons of black American literary production, while centralizing themselves as the authentic spokespersons of black art and black life in America. For instance, Gates calls the works of Baraka and Haki Madhubuti “largely insipid rhetoric” (Gates “Preface to Blackness,” 156). In 1994 in Time magazine, Gates would dismiss the Black Arts Movement more directly, as he writes:

The third renaissance was the Black Arts Movement, which extended from the mid-’60s to the early ’70s. Defining itself against the Harlem Renaissance and deeply rooted in black cultural nationalism, the Black Arts writers imagined themselves as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement. Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez viewed black art as a matter less of aesthetics than of protest; its function was to serve the political liberation of black people from white racism. Erected on a shifting foundation of revolutionary politics, this "renaissance" was the most short-lived of all. By 1975, with the Black Arts Movement dead, black culture seemed to be undergoing a profound identity crisis. (Gates “Black Creativity”)

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In 1991, David Lionel Smith wrote of the artists of the Black Arts Movement: “Black Aesthetic writers and critics often claimed that they were the first generation to embrace black vernacular culture, but in fact, they simply represented the triumph of a consensus that had been developing throughout the century. We need to understand Black Aesthetic theory and aesthetic forms in this historical context” (Smith 107). Smith argues then that more scholars should explore the literature, theatre, visual arts, and other artistic production of this period—instead of solely the polemics of race—in order to better understand it, which has been done by Smethurst, Kimberly Benston, Clarke, Mike Sell, Lorenzo Thomas, and Amy Obugo Ongiri, to name a few scholars who have explored these themes since the popularity of studies on the Black Arts Movement increased around 2000.

If one were to take the literature of the Black Arts Movement out of its historical, social, and political context, it would be easy to agree with Gates’s opinion of this creative moment. Looking back, there was definitely ambiguity on what it meant to have a “black aesthetic;” the politics of “blackness”—as many authors theorized in their art—was often predicated on what one was not, this criteria usually being middle-class, pro-integration, or white. In many of the works associated with the Black Arts Movement there was in fact rhetoric that could be positioned by many critics as racism in reverse—“kill whitey” tirades with no aesthetic or theoretical appeal, especially per a number of white and black theater critics of the 1960s and 1970s. However, flaws and all, the Black Arts Movement and the larger creative moment for black artists was influential to generations of artists to follow, especially when one considers the canons of Womanist or Afro-Femme literature, the boom of black-centered film and theatre in the 1970s through
the 1990s, and the development of the urban, multicultural hip-hop and slam poetry movements to advance on the tracks the waning of the Black Arts Movement in the mid-1970s. James Smethurst keenly observes that, because of these lasting influences that the Black Art Movement and other creators had on future artistic production, "the Black Arts Movement was arguably the most influential cultural moment the United States has ever seen," rather than the "short-lived failure" that scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argue that it is (Smethurst *The Black Arts Movement* 373). The artistic output of the 1960s and 1970s by black creators—not limited to the Black Arts Movement—encouraged honest dialogue about what it meant to be black in America, questioning ideas about privilege, disenfranchisement, alienation, sexism, poverty, and other issues and explored solutions to these problems, during this tumultuous time of identity politics, worldwide independence struggles against imperialism, and domestic civil rights battles, on Capitol Hill and on the streets of Watts, Detroit, Newark, and Harlem.

Ongiri argues in her 2010 study, *Spectacular Blackness*, that the attention of contemporary studies of black-produced art of the 1960s and 1970s has been misdirected to portray the works of the Black Arts Movement and other black expression during this time as one-dimensional. She writes, “The critical re-evaluation of Western culture and African-American people’s place in it would not be accomplished through simple, formulaic “mau-mauing” to which later evaluations of the period would reduce it. Rather than simply protesting Western norms, the Black Arts Movement sought to provide new paradigms for understanding experiences that shed light on the destructive nature of existing paradigms” (Ongiri 112). She is correct to assert that shifting the way that one considers the function of the artistic production of this period expands the scope of one’s
understanding of what these creations mean politically, culturally, and historically for their creators and future generations of black Americans who would have access to them.

My dissertation seeks to further establish the lineage of community-based art inherited by Black Power-era artists, especially those affiliated with the Black Arts Movement. The mentorship and support—and the criticisms—of earlier black artists like Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Margaret Burroughs, James Baldwin, Alice Childress, and especially Gwendolyn Brooks and Dudley Randall was essential to informing the work of the black artists of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, many of these older artists were active in the discourse of this era of creativity, through their scholarship, criticism, or their own aesthetic contributions, as I discuss throughout this project. Furthermore, after contextualizing the intellectual and literary history informing this project in Chapter 1, I centralize the dialogical exchanges between black artists and critics in Chapters 2, 3, and 4 as they negotiate what black liberation means and the best routes towards freedom from their respective standpoints and experiences. In my research, I have encountered discussions of Neal’s “white thing” and the call for its destruction, the “black vs. negro” debate, and conversations of gender and sexuality separately or, if all together, in brief overview. My project contributes to the canon of Black Arts and Black Power scholarship in its attempt to shape these perspectives in conversation with one another, focusing primarily on how these writers attempted to reach the consciousness of their black audiences and help them along the way towards psychological and physical freedom from white cultural and political hegemony.

With consideration of the poetry and plays that I have examined for this project, the value of the pieces concerning nationhood are not the themes of physical destruction
or black essentialism that are obviously recurrent in a number of the productions of this era, but the function of what these works—on the page or the stage—cause their audiences to imagine: a world where blackness is centralized and even—in the case of those black artists engaging gender and sexual liberation and intraracial division from a lens critical of the Black Arts oeuvre—made multidimensional. Playwright Ed Bullins, for instance, is an expert in creating multidimensional representations of black America for the purpose of this reimagining, especially in his works *Clara’s Ole Man* (1965) and especially *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1971), which I discuss in Chapter 2. Likewise, the photography-poetry collaboration of Baraka and Fundi (Bill Abernathy), *In Our Terribleness* (1970), attempts to multifaceted view of the black people in Newark, New Jersey, on their streets, at work, and in their places of worship while celebrating what the artists’ define as their rich cultural and historical inheritances and imagining their legacies (as I conclude in Chapter 3). As Baraka posits early on in 1965, this creative moment for black artists—especially the poets and dramatists—was meant to create a “Daring Propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind”—to dare their black audiences to dream and, further, to act towards a better, freer tomorrow (Jones *Home* 237).
CHAPTER 1
BLACK CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AND THE CALL TO PROPAGANDIZE BLACK ART

How can we create a common consciousness, based on a proven humanism—as we stop trying to prove our humanism to those who are un-human? It’s on us; nobody, nowhere will do it for us.

-Haki Madhubuti, (1970)

Black theatre tries to deal with reality, tries to motivate people to change, tries to inform people of the problems that are among them, tries to confront, create conversations among Black people and the society that oppresses them.

-Richard Wesley (1974)

For the artists engaged in and with the Black Arts Movement from 1965 to 1975, the goal of creating art for black audiences with their realities and concerns in mind was a given. Far from their philosophies was the Harlem Renaissance-era debate of “art for art’s sake” versus the adoption of W. E. B. Du Bois’s call that “all Art is propaganda,” (Du Bois and Weinberg 258). In 1965, in his essay “The Revolutionary Theatre,” Amiri Baraka issued an SOS to his fellow black activists-artists that both the space and the function of the black theatre must be revolutionary, to “take dreams and give them a reality,” (Baraka Home 237). He continued:

It must isolate the ritual and historical cycles of reality. But it must be food for all those who need food, and daring propaganda for the beauty of the Human Mind. It must be a political theatre, a weapon to help in the slaughter of these dim-witted fatbellied white guys who somehow believe that the rest of the world is here for them to slobber on (237).

The theatre during the Black Arts Movement, as it was used for the productions and performances of African-American and other African-descendant artists in the United States, was not solely a space of dramatic interpretation of the life realities and dreams
imagined by black people in the United States. It also served as a hub of knowledge, a classroom of sorts for the audiences invited to witness and participate in the performances and production of poetry, music, dance, and visual art, often mixed all together. This “classroom” was a space, whether physical or abstract, that promoted and necessitated black consciousness—the psychological, spiritual and existential need of African Americans to be liberated from the Veil of double-consciousness that Du Bois theorized at the turn of the 20th century and instead to practice “Self Determination, Self Respect, and Self Defense,” which Baraka attributes to Malcolm X’s influence on the Black Arts generation (Rampersad 79; Baraka “Foreword,” xii). As I discuss in brief in the Introduction, the black theater of the 1960s and 1970s was a space in which black creators could lead their audiences, especially through drama and call-and-response poetry and song, in a “rehearsal for revolution,” (Boal 141). This was the intent behind Gilbert Moses’ Free Southern Theater work with the black community in Bogalusa (among other locations), the catalyst behind Teer naming her troupe of performers “liberators,” and what compelled Woodie King, Jr., to move his Mobilization For Youth drama programs to the streets of Harlem, moving community members present for the art beyond spectatorship and into the action of the play. Reflecting on the power of the performance spaces, whether in an off-Broadway theater or on a street corner in Harlem or Detroit, Sonia Sanchez, John Bracey, Jr., and James Smethurst suggest that “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,” (Sanchez, Bracey, Jr., and Smethurst “Introduction,” 6). They identified poetry and drama especially as the most popular genres of the
movement, as they were the most portable, accessible, and relatable pieces to present to black audiences.

Whereas some artists and critics including Larry Neal and Haki Madhubuti highlighted this effort as different from the goals of prior generational movements like the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Movement, the inheritance of their thought and the themes of their creations—including the revisitation of an imagined African past, the celebration of Langston Hughes’ “low-down folk,” and negotiations of what it meant to be black in America—are undeniably connected to those black artists within and outside of the United States who came before them (Hughes “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” 176). It was Du Bois who, before LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, attempted to set the parameters for African-American art and drama creation as tools of social change in his essay “Criteria For Negro Art” in 1926 (Du Bois “Criteria for Negro Art,” 258). Further, before Black Arts, other groups like the leftist Black Chicago Renaissance artists, the black Francophone anti-colonialists of the Negritude Movement, the multiethnic Afrocubanismo Movement in pre-revolutionary Cuba, and black leftist writers of the 1950s into the 1960s would discuss art as a means of propaganda, for protest against racial and economic oppression and for the reeducation of people of African descent living in the West about their histories and their present realities. The artists of the Black Arts Movement and other black artists of this period had much to credit in these earlier generations with regard to their own practice and presentation of such creativity. And, though the terminology was different for the elder groups, at the core of these creations through the generations was the concept of critical consciousness-raising amongst black readers and black audiences alike in the United States.
The concept of black consciousness-raising was at the center of the philosophies of three men who influenced the creative productions as well as the political atmosphere of the Black Power era: W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X. These three men are the foci of this discussion of the foundations of critical-consciousness raising among the poets and dramatists of the Black Arts Movement and the larger black aesthetics movement of the 1960s and 1970s because their names appear most frequently in the list of influential black theorists, artists, and activists whom Larry Neal labeled a pantheon of “ghosts” who had “left us with some very heavy questions of about the realities of life for black people in America,” (Neal “And Shine Swam On,” 640). Undoubtedly, the challenges presented by double-consciousness to African Americans inspired the influential work of each of these men and, further, their centrality to the philosophies of the African-American and other black artists to follow them. This chapter discusses the influences and confluences of the legacies of Du Bois, Fanon and X, the call of the black artists of the Black Power era towards the creation of works that simultaneously entertained, enlightened, and liberated black minds—and pushed towards the end goal of liberating black bodies and black communities—and how this effort was rooted in a philosophical and historical lineage of black activism, social thought, and social action. With the legacies of these black theorists in mind, as I will discuss later in this chapter, we can see how the “SOS” issued by Black Arts creators and other Black Power-era artists and critics reflected earlier black consciousness-raising efforts and how they used the lessons of their predecessors to inform their movement, their aesthetics, and their emphasis on communal art.
W. E. B. Du Bois as Ideological Forefather

Du Bois, first in 1897 in *The Atlantic Monthly* and then in the opening essay of *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, presented his theory of “double-consciousness” as the existential and psychological conundrum that faced African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century (Du Bois *Souls of Black Folk* 9). America, he noted in the 1903 essay, allowed the African American “no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world,” (9). While double-consciousness, he noted, gave African Americans a gift of “second sight” into the problem of racial oppression and suppression in the United States, it seems to be portrayed more as a conflict of psyche than an asset of one’s experience. In presenting his theory of African-American double consciousness, however, Du Bois followed his analysis with a lifetime of work dedicated to theory, art, and action towards consolidating the African-American psyche and addressing the lived realities of black Americans. On the front of academic study, he presented text after text on the experiences of African descendants in America, including *The Negro* (1915), *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (1920), countless essays and articles, and his three autobiographies. Additionally, he theorized about the function of black art, published the works of other African-American artists through his journals, and even wrote his own creative works of drama, poetry, and literature, emphasized the importance of black American artists directing their art at black audiences.

Perhaps more than any other figure, Du Bois is a forefather in theory and praxis to Baraka, Larry Neal, Audre Lorde, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, and countless other African-American artists, activists, and theorists to emerge during the Black Power era. Black Arts poet, publisher and theorist Madhubuti remembered in *YellowBlack: The First*
Twenty-One Years of a Poet’s Life (2005) that encountering Du Bois as a young black man and young black artist—especially Du Bois’s theory of double-consciousness—taught him that he “could appreciate and begin to reconcile the different ‘selves’” that composed his African-American identity (Madhubuti YellowBlack 205). He continued:

Color and psychology color and history, color and enslavement, color and politics, color and economics, color and culture, color and rage, took on new meanings for me. I came to understand that the white images and symbols that assigned me to certain roles in life had nothing to do with the quality and content of my history or my mind (205).

Madhubuti memorialized Du Bois as catalyst for the work of consciousness-raising that was done by the artists-activists of his generation and needed to continue to be done by future generations of African-American and other black creators: “Dr. Du Bois’s work was transforming; it was moral and ethical work. […] The bar has been set. It is now up to us, his cultural sons and daughters, to continue in the tradition of Du Bois and others to contribute to his powerful example” (227). Poet and playwright Sonia Sanchez also acknowledged Du Bois as one of the black scholars to whom she was introduced by Lewis Micheaux, owner of the African National Memorial Bookstore in Harlem while a graduate student, teaching his and other leftist activists of color (to the disapproval of FBI, she reflects in a 2000 interview with Cheo Tyehimba) (Joyce 28). For this generation, the theory, activism, and aesthetics work of Du Bois was not lost. As Larry Neal writes in Ebony in 1969, they were in fact the “sons and daughters” of Du Bois, intellectually, artistically, and spiritually; they had inherited his work (Neal “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation,” 54).

After Du Bois, Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon and African-American orator, organizer and former Nation of Islam (NOI) minister
Malcolm X presented challenges to the idea of this duality of mind during the 1950s through the times of their deaths in the 1960s. For the survival of persons of African descent and other non-white people throughout the world, subjected to white Western imperialism and oppression in the United States and abroad, embracing a collective sense of liberation of psyche and body—they both argue—would encompass both a potentially-violent rejection of white hegemony and a concerted and collective re-evaluation of the histories of people of African descent and the need for redefinition within their current realities. Fanon outlines this methodology in his essays on the Algerian anti-colonial struggle in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Malcolm X echoed such a position from his “Message to the Grassroots” speech in Detroit in November of 1963 and, further, through the speeches and interviews he gave just days before his assassination (Breitman). I argue that the black artists and activists of the Black Power era engaged the theories of Du Bois as well as X and Fanon to emphasize the necessity of consciousness-raising among African Americans with their drama, poetry, and essays. Their other influences were numerous and included a panoply of revolutionary thinkers and actors, from Robert F. Williams in Mississippi to Chairman Mao Zedong in China and Ernesto “Che” Guevara and Fidel Castro in Cuba. However, Du Bois, Fanon, and especially Malcolm X recur in the works of the poets and dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s to a degree that the others do not, due to their direct theoretical assaults on the oppression of people of African descent.

**The Foundations and Inheritances of Black Critical Conscious-Raising**

As aforementioned in the Introduction, critical consciousness-raising, a pedagogical method and social change theory presented by Brazilian educator and social
theorist Paulo Freire in 1970, was adopted by revolutionary educators as a method for educating the oppressed about their conditions and their capacities as stakeholders within their communities to re-educate their compatriots towards social change and action. However, Friere's terminology for this theory, *conscientização*, was borrowed immediately from Fanon's own theory of *conscienciser*—both translating from Portuguese and French, respectively, as "consciousness raising" (Rabaka 33). As he outlines in *Black Skin, White Masks* (originally, *Peau noire, masques blancs*) in 1952, Fanon uses his *conscienciser* on his black Martinican patients to help them better understand the state of their psychosis—rooted ultimately in their oppression by French whites and their own battles with Du Boisian double-consciousness as black French colonial subjects—and counteract it with both awareness and education about the systems that impacted the ways in which they interacted with the white world and other black people. He writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

As a psychoanalyst I must help my patient to "consciousnessize" [the translator's interpretation of conscienciser] his unconscious, to no longer be tempted by a hallucinatory lactification but also to act along the lines of a change in social structure.

In other words, the black man should no longer have to be faced with the dilemma "whiten or perish," but must become aware of the possibility of existence; in still other words, if society creates difficulties for him because of his color, if I see in his dreams the expression of an unconscious desire to change color, my objective will not be to dissuade him by advising him to "keep his distance;" on the contrary, once his motives have been identified, my objective will be to enable him to choose action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict, i.e., the social structure (Fanon, *Black Skin* 73).

Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* provides a greater demonstration of how this *conscienciser* should be applied to revolutionary struggle in colonized societies, as in his
immediate example of revolutionary Algeria. The fate of the national culture of a colonized society, Fanon writes, depended heavily on the abilities and aspirations of the colonized intellectual – the writer, the poet, the creator – whose duties Fanon describes in his essay on national culture. Intellectuals, unlike politicians in liberation struggles, placed “themselves in the context of history” and had the duty of steering the colonized in a cultural direction that reflected who they were, what they represented, and what their social and historical realities were (Fanon Wretched 147). His methodology for the establishment of a national culture within the colonized society is threefold: 1) the recognition of a past before the moment of colonization/oppressive control; 2) the people of the present had to be defined and recreated; and 3) the colonized intellectual writer/creator had to become a “galvanizer of the people” and producer of “combat literature” against the enemy: all forms of oppression that prevented the colonized from actively and effectively participating in the social systems created by the oppressor (163-172).

Fanon presents the black artists and activists of the 1960s and 1970s with what poet Haki Madhubuti called "a new psychology" (Madhubuti We Walk the Way of the New World 5). Sanchez also channels the Martinican revolutionary theorist in her poem “To Fanon…,” reminding her contemporaries that “To Fanon, culture meant …an environment shaped to help us & our children grow, shaped by ourselves in action against the system that enslaves us,” (Sanchez We A BaddDDD People 50-51). She warns her contemporaries, as does Fanon in the essay “On National Culture,” against “rhetoric / hate” and the more superficial adornments and cultural offerings of the era, like African-inspired dress and language as well as “SOUL – rage - leather jackets – slogans /
polygamy – yoruba,” (50-51). Through his studies of the colonial condition of people of color of the world -- *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated into English in 1967 and 1963, respectively-- Fanon offered his African-American comrades a different way to process and educate others on the condition of their oppression in the prime of the Black Power era. As Sohail Daulatzai observes in his discussion of the Black Power Movement in *Black Star, Crescent Moon* (2012), Fanon, “influencing guerillas, artists, and intellectuals in the United States, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and beyond,” became a common reference point in representing “the righteous indignation of the Third World in response to European and U. S. power” (Daulatzai 50). He offered those black artists and activists who were seeking meaning and methods towards black consciousness the tools, through *Black Skin, White Masks*, to look at their current situations critically—from the lens of being the colonized subjects of a white imperialist society--while giving them the language and course of action through *The Wretched of the Earth*. All this was offered for non-white Western colonial subjects to work through a consolidation of consciousness, in addition to shaping both political activism and education of the oppressed with the development of a kind of "combat literature" to confront and challenge the systems of oppression that prevented their full political, economic, and social participation.

With Du Bois's presentation of the problem and an analysis of black American existence at the turn of the 20th century and Fanon's vocalization of a kind of solution to this problem in the form of critical consciousness-raising developed with the oppressed at the center, black artists and theorists who began to discover or rediscover the scholarship of these men came to envision themselves not only as creators but educators of the best
possible routes to positive self-image and nationhood for black Americans willing to learn, adapt and re-educate their peers. However, during this engagement of scholarship, Malcolm X was a more immediate example of the power of critical consciousness-raising through both his words and actions in service to black people in the United States.

More than any other influential figure of this period (perhaps followed by “New Thing” jazz innovator John Coltrane), Malcolm X was memorialized, revisited, and reimagined by the poets and playwrights of the Black Power era. The first conceptual project and second book published by Detroit’s Broadside Press, which was responsible for publishing a number of the African-American poets and theorists at the center of the Black Arts Movement, was a poetry anthology simply entitled For Malcolm in 1967 (Boyd 143). The decade after X’s death also presented a plethora of dramatic works and productions dedicated to his legacy, including William Wellington Mackey’s Requiem for Brother X (1966), Ed Bullins’ Malcolm: ’71, or Publishing Blackness (1971), N. R. Davidson’s El Hajj Malik (1971), and Adrienne Kennedy’s choreopoem tribute Sun: A Poem Inspired by the Death of Malcolm X (1972) (King and Milner 325-347; Bullins and Sell 135-136; Williams 49, 148). As Amiri Baraka reflects in 1994 on the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School (BARTS) in 1965, many African-American artists left the predominantly-white bohemian counterculture in Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side of New York City for black Harlem “to seek permanent residence and…avenge Malcolm’s murder,” a small migration that became the catalyst for the formation of this school and other institutions of radical black aesthetics in New York City and throughout the United States (Baraka “The Black Arts Movement,” 498). Baraka remembers Malcolm X’s messages of “Self Determination, Self Respect, and Self
Defense” as life-changing for the black youth of his generation who would go on to become arbiters of Black Power and Black Arts (496). Most clearly inherited by the aestheticians of this moment from the rhetoric of Malcolm X were his challenges for black people to re-envision the meaning of Blackness in America (counter to the idea of remaining American “Negroes”) and decentralizing whiteness and Western culture in the psyches of black people living in America and instead turning their alliance and attention to other non-white people (especially on the African continent) engaged in anti-imperialist liberation struggles. The aforementioned points will figure prominently in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

With regard to re-envisioning what it meant to be black in America, it seems that Malcolm X drew directly on Du Bois’s theory of African-American double consciousness and, perhaps more, Marcus Garvey’s calls for black self-determination and institution building during the 1910s and 1920s. Larry Neal writes that, within the depths of his mission for black liberation, Malcolm X “wanted to make real the internationalism of Garvey and Du Bois. […] Like Garvey and Du Bois, before him, he linked the general oppression of Black America to that of the Third World,” (Neal, “And Shine Swam On,” 646). Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) founder Marcus Garvey, an opponent of Du Bois, would have an early impact on X’s budding philosophies of Pan-Africanism and organizing, considering his father’s status as a “Garveyite” during the 1920s (X and Haley 1, 10). Whereas Malcolm X admits that, as a young boy listening to his father’s exhortations about the UNIA and African-American selective immigration to Africa as the only way that they would be able to achieve “freedom, independence and self-respect,” he had not then thought much of the black people of Africa, the seed of his
later worldview of the people of the African diaspora was planted during this time, especially as Rev. Little would invite young Malcolm to his UNIA meetings (2-7). The influence of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad might have given Malcolm X a second introduction to the legacy of Marcus Garvey as well. According to historian Theodore Draper, Muhammad had a considerable respect for Garvey, and many elements of the NOI structure echoed those of the UNIA, not limited to the emphasis on establishing economic systems (like clothiers, farms, grocers, and restaurants) separate from mainstream resources (Draper 85). With the exception of the Garvey’s emphasis on returning to Africa as a “motherland” of all persons of African descent the world over and Islamic faith as the religious core of the NOI, there are a great number of similarities between their programs.

It was in late 1948 as an inmate at the Norfolk, Massachusetts Prison Colony that X discovered Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, in addition to the works of black historians Carter G. Woodson and J. A. Rogers, in the prison library (178). This text, as he states to Alex Haley, “gave me a glimpse into the black people’s history before they came to this country,” and he seems to have undoubtedly carried Du Bois’s central theses of America’s problem of the color line and the dilemma of double-consciousness for African Americans within his own proposals for black liberation in his post-NOI orations and activism. While there was no official meeting between Dr. Du Bois and Malcolm X, as Du Bois died in 1963 and X only began his independent political and organizational ventures after his excommunication from the NOI in 1964, he did meet and befriend the late scholar’s widow, Shirley Graham Du Bois, and other African-American expatriates during his visit to Accra, Ghana in 1964 (Marable 413). She was so taken by X during
their initial meeting that she facilitated his introduction to Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of independent Ghana (Horne and Stevens 95). The intellectual relationship that X had with Graham Du Bois might have fostered many of his observations of the state of consciousness (or the lack thereof) that African Americans were limited to in the United States, especially within his independent organizing and the black nationalist perspectives that he vocalized during and after his tenure as an NOI minister and, eventually, the Third World solidarity politics he adopted the year before his death. In one of his most renowned speeches, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” he takes a powerful stance on the state of consciousness of African Americans as citizens of the United States, negating the idea that an African American could think of themselves as American within the context of racial oppression and violent suppression. Delivering this speech during a Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) gathering in Cleveland, X states forcefully:

No, I’m not an American. I’m one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So I’m not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver—no, not I. I’m speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of a victim. I don’t see any American dream; I see an American nightmare (X “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 26).

This “American nightmare” that X references could very well be the Du Boisian “Veil” against which their successors in the Black Power era are working (and creating) against. Du Bois too presents the point that African Americans were continuously victimized and marginalized by the social structures and political mechanisms in the United States meant to reify and cement the prevalence of white supremacy and black marginalization in this nation in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He fictionalizes the process of racial suppression and black powerlessness against racial terrorism (in the forms of rape and lynching) in his
short story “Of the Coming of John;” he recalls the tragedy of racism in his elegy for his son Burghardt, who died a toddler having been rejected by a segregated Atlanta hospital, in “Of the Passing of the First Born,” (Du Bois Souls 162-176, 147-152). Du Bois’s United States at the turn of the 20th century, even within the “gift of foresight” within the Veil provided by double-consciousness, was the “American nightmare” that X proposed to attack in 1964.

Malcolm X continues his attack on “the Veil” in his February 1965 speech “After the Bombing,” titled by socialist publisher George Breitman in his post-mortem collection of X’s speeches and interviews, Malcolm X Speaks (1965). Delivered to an audience in Detroit one day after his family home in Harlem was firebombed and just several days before his assassination, Malcolm X warns his audience to recognize the condition of racial, economic, and social oppression faced by African Americans as a shared state of colonialism experienced by non-white people the world over and for them to recognize the power of solidarity with those in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, taking the anti-colonial struggle head on. However, he beckons his audience back to the domestic torment of African Americans by reiterating that the full integration and inclusion of black citizens into the American fabric was impossible while racial oppression and white supremacy were still central to the social, political, cultural, and economic fabrics of the United States:

…you’d be surprised—we discovered that deep within the subconscious of the black man in this country, he is still more African than he is American. He thinks that he’s more American than African, because the man is jiving him, the man is brainwashing him every day. He’s telling him, “You’re an American, you’re an American.” Man, how could you think you’re an American when you haven’t ever had any kind of an American treat over here? You have never, never. Ten men can be sitting
at a table eating, you know, dining, and I can come and sit down where they’re dining. They’re dining; I’ve got a plate in front of me, but nothing is on it. Because all of us are sitting at the same table, are all of us diners? I’m not a diner until you let me dine. Just being at the table with others who are dining doesn’t make me a diner, and this is what you’ve got to get in your head here in this country (X “After the Bombing,” 172).

Double-consciousness, according to Malcolm X’s interpretations of the phenomenon, was not necessarily a thing to be done away with, so long as African Americans were marginalized and prevented from fully realizing their rights as citizens and the freedom to practice those rights without suppression. The United States of America was the home of black Americans, at least physically. He instead, as Draper observed, “seemed to envisage another type of double consciousness in which Negroes would live in America physically and in Africa psychologically,” (Draper 93). Whereas, through his organizations Muslim Mosque Incorporated and the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU), he was willing to work within African-American communities, with Third World revolutionaries, and even with white allies to push back against systematic and individualized anti-black racism and economic exploitation of black communities. Preceding the work of the Black Power-era activists and artists, and following the examples of Du Bois, Garvey, and others, he even advocated for the creation of African-American educational programs and community-based cultural centers that focused on black-created and sustained resources (The Organization of Afro-American Unity, “For Human Rights and Dignity” 424, 427). He argued that the possibility of the African-American masses claiming the right to citizenship that black integrationists like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement had promoted was impossible given the realities of white American supremacy and black disenfranchisement and suppression.
Malcolm X appeared to have also answered the calls of Du Bois, Fanon, and others to turn to the liberation struggles of Cuba, China, and a plethora of newly-independent African states for inspiration. In his travels to the Middle East and West Africa during a tour in the summer of 1964, he had direct encounters with those closest to Du Bois through his transition from a proponent of African-American inclusion and integration into the United States to a supporter of Third World anti-colonialist and socialist movements. It is impossible to think that, in his conversations with Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah and Shirley Graham Du Bois, he would not have learned more about the late scholar’s visions of what Max Stanford would call a “Bandung world,” in addition to what he had already understood about this phenomenon (Kelley 64). However, what has been less discussed in the scholarship engaged for this project is Malcolm X’s encounters with the philosophies of Frantz Fanon.

During his tour of the liberated nation-states of West and North Africa in 1964, after attending the meeting of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) convention, he stopped in Algeria, the home base of Fanon’s liberation manifesto, *The Wretched of the Earth*. From his speeches and interviews given after this sojourn and after his hajj, we could imagine that, in addition to his relationships with Castro and Guevara, Chairman Mao Tse-tung, and other Third World revolution leaders, he could have also been influenced by the information he gained from the Algerian dignitaries he engaged during his time abroad, which might have included mention of Fanon’s work. But, even still, with the concept of critical consciousness-raising being emphasized through the work and speech of Malcolm X and even its being adopted and practiced by the Black Power-era activists and artists before being named and theorized by Freire in 1970, there was the
possibility of cross-pollination of the plethora ideas, actions, and imaginings of liberation for nonwhite people all over the world, but especially in the West.

Considering this lineage of consciousness-raising ideology, it becomes easier to connect the efforts of the Black Power era artists to those of their forebears. Before Amiri Baraka’s Black Arts Reparatory Theater and School (BARTS) in 1965, there was W. E. B. Du Bois’s NAACP-sponsored African-American community theater, the Krigwa Players and Workshop, in 1924 and 1925 respectively, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance (Edward Smith 47; Ikonné 99). Under the guise of his editorship of the NAACP’s organ, The Crisis, Du Bois—two years before writing his article “Criteria for Negro Art”—attempted to foster black artists of the Harlem Renaissance in the direction of art that was self-possessed and self-expressive with relation to African Americans within the following “four fundamental principles:”

The plays of a real Negro theatre must be 1) About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2) By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3) For us. That is, the theatre must be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4) Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people. (Ikonné 99).

This presentation of “four fundamental principles” predates Amiri Baraka’s call for a “Revolutionary Theatre” and Larry Neal’s manifesto of black creative production, “The Black Arts Movement,” by more than 40 years. Du Bois initiated a “call to consciousness” through the multitude of his endeavors artistically, academically, and otherwise. The African-American artists of the Black Power era followed in this lineage of consciousness-raising, preceded in their efforts by many black artists identified with
the Harlem Renaissance, the Afro-Francophone Negritude movement and the Afrocubanismo movement, the Black Chicago Renaissance, and the black leftist artists and theorists of the 1950s and 1960s, especially those involved with Harlem Writers Guild and black leftist publications like *Freedom* and *Freedomways*.

Black Arts theorist, dramatist and poet Larry Neal criticized the efforts of the Harlem Renaissance artists quite directly when he wrote, at the end of “The Black Arts Movement,” that:

> The Black Arts Movement represents the flowering 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 (Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 39).

This critique, while drawing attention to the failure of the Harlem Renaissance arbiters to create and sustain lasting institutions for black communities and, some of them, catering to white audiences and patrons, failed to take into consideration the lasting influences of the artists and others involved in this creative period. For instance, one cannot negate Langston Hughes’s emphasis on creating work for and about black America’s “low-down folk” as a reflection of Du Bois’s call for accessible, communal and reflective black art for black masses or as a model for the Black Arts poets and dramatists to center their creations on the lived experiences and culture of the black working class. Likewise, one cannot overlook Zora Neale Hurston’s emphasis on the centrality of black southern characters (especially prominent black female protagonists) and customs in much of her fiction and drama—not to mention her African-American and Afro-Caribbean
anthropological research as groundbreaking for African-American artists who came after her and created similar work. Further, the stylistically bold and explicitly homosexual short stories of Richard Bruce Nugent created the space for writers of the 1950s through the 1970s like James Baldwin, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde to explore and celebrate similar themes. Like Du Bois’s own emphasis on the functions of art as propaganda for the uplift of African Americans and its being created “About...By...For...” and “Near” African-American audiences, the Black Arts Movement creators and other black creators of this period sought to create specifically for African Americans and within black American communities. Finally, the legacies of radical organizing and institution building can not only be traced back to Du Bois, but the efforts of Marcus Garvey, Asa Phillip Randolph, Hubert Harrison, Arturo Schomburg, Cyril Briggs, and others during the era of the “New Negroes,” (Smethurst “Poetry and Sympathy,” 261-262; Draper 62).

Reiland Rabaka reflects on this critique of the Harlem Renaissance and others by Black Arts theorists, stating that this disregard for the legacy of the “New Negro aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance” demonstrated the limited vision of some proponents of the Black Arts Movement early on (Rabaka 88). This purview, he continues, “exacerbated and perpetuated African Americans’ historical amnesia by, in the most Manichean manner imaginable, rudely rejecting the cultural aesthetic radicalism of the Harlem Renaissance,” (88). In fact, without the groundbreaking work of the black creators of the Harlem movement of the 1910s and 1920s, the background for the later black-centered creative movements rooted in Chicago, Cuba, among French-speaking black colonials in the West Indies, West Africa, and France, and within the black leftists in the United States would
not have been established, let alone the space for the Black Arts Movement to come into being.

With these cultural and political legacies inherited by Black Power artists, the black artists of the 1960s and 1970s were given a full, though dispersed, foundation on which to build their “black aesthetics” and to initiate and sustain, if only temporarily, those institutions that they felt that their forebears had failed to pass on to them. From the combination of these legacies, they gained the insight and instruction for black community-based creation and performance, the significance of creating art and institutions for the purpose of constructive self/group-reflection and consciousness-raising, and the impetus to embrace and promote black and “Third World” perspectives towards an anti-imperialist and anti-oppressive American society and full liberation. Perhaps both the beauty and the ideological trouble (for some contemporary scholars) of this period of black creativity is that there was not one designated route towards this goal of full humanity and liberation for African Americans. Some black artists, male and female, centered their creative consciousness-raising on the elevation of black men as the key to a liberated society, beckoning the critiques of especially the Black Arts Movement as misogynist and/or homophobic. However, the creative works and essays of black women artists and especially those who self-identified as homosexual pushed these boundaries in invited conversation with the proponents of this “vision for a liberated future,” (Neal).

No other theorist of this era outlined the goals of this period as concretely as Black Arts Movement theorist and poet Larry Neal. In his definitive 1968 essay, “The
Black Arts Movement,” he defines the budding body of work of his black contemporaries invested in re-educating and empowering African Americans as “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 (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 30).

Harkening back to Madhubuti’s aforementioned reflection on Du Bois’s contribution to his generation, Neal contends that, for his generation, “your ethics and your aesthetics are one” (31). As opposed to being abstract, poetry and drama especially should be “concrete,” actions and “physical entities” instead of abstractions to be mused over politely (31). Black art should compel black people to reflect, to act, to elevate, and to educate themselves and others. Neal continues that the function of the black theater—wherever it could be established—was a space for black audiences to be confronted with real reflections of themselves, visions of the oppressiveness of the current state of being, and their own and the artists’ visions of their future. He closes by asking his reader, “If art is the harbinger of future possibilities, what does the future of Black America portend?” (39). To this question, black artists, activists, and others contemporary to Neal or succeeding him have presented their visions of, as Black Arts mother and Philadelphia’s Poet Laureate Sonia Sanchez reflects today, what it means to be human, black, and striving for liberation in a racist society.
SOS: Critical Consciousness Raising in Black Power-Era Poetry and Drama

Building on the legacies and articulations of Du Bois, Fanon, X, and other black liberation-oriented predecessors, black poets and dramatists of the Black Power era, in particular, attempted to share with black audiences their respective visions of black nationhood and community building. They actively pushed aside the Du Boisian “Veil” and inherited the elder scholar’s aesthetic and political responses to American racism to enhance their mission to liberate black minds and bodies. They worked through the “new psychology” of revolutionary nation-building of Fanon and the model of African-American “Self Determination, Self Respect, and Self Defense” from Malcolm X as contemporary pillars on which to build their movement and their art. However, the need for the art to be communal—as was emphasized by Du Bois, Fanon, and X, prior to this movement—was key to the effectiveness of the “SOS” of these black creators to call their audiences to consciousness and to action.

As African-American historian John H. Bracey, Jr., reflects on the Black Arts Movement, the art—but especially the poetry and drama—were meant to be communal. Audience members, he states, would recite Baraka’s poems “It’s Nation-Time” and “Black People!” in unison with the poet himself. Poetry and drama were the most effective forms of black consciousness-raising art, in addition to murals and music, because they were often publicly performed, and poetry was especially rapid, accessible, malleable (performed musically, percussively, with movement, etc.), and memorable. It is no surprise then that central to the mission of BARTS in 1965 was to bring theater immediately to Harlem and the other black community centers of New York. Baraka
recalls that the intention during the short tenure of the school was to involve the black community of New York in their programs and performances:

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 (“The Black Arts Movement” 16).

As this program and other institutions evolved out of black college student and community activism and arts groups, journals, publications, theater groups, public arts programs and a plethora of other institutions created by African Americans and other black American residents in every major urban center throughout the United States, influenced by the varying regional and ideological politics and culture respective those artists-activists involved (Smethurst The Black Arts Movement 368). At the heart of each of their creative strategies, productions and outreach to their respective communities—whether the Broadside Press-Third World Press-Lotus Press publishing hub of the Midwest, the New Orleans-influenced enclave of artists within the BLKARTSOUTH, and the Free Southern Theater, and the journals Soulbook, Black Dialogue, or The Journal of Black Poetry coming out of the Black Arts West project—was the freedom of black people in the United States and throughout the world.

On the West Coast, the Black Communications Project operated by the Black Students Union at San Francisco State College—the birthplace of academic Black Studies programs—was another direct delivery of the messages of black artist-activists to African-American communities (Jones “Communications Project,” 53-57). As the 1967 program was outline in The Drama Review’s special “Black Theatre” issue in the summer
of 1968, the varied levels of communication included publications of newspapers, comic books, posters and other forms of print media in addition to direct encounters like dance, poetry, visual art creation and dramatic performances within black communities in California, with a central focus on San Francisco. The mix of history, politics, arts, economics, and “survival” of African-American community members were at the center of the project, which resulted in a film, *Black Spring*, produced by Baraka (then, LeRoi Jones) and the theater group the Black Arts Alliance, documenting the program and its participants. Today, the film is lost, but the intention of its makers was to document this moment of community consciousness-raising and the Black Arts activity in California (Strub “Recovering The New-Ark”).

Similar work was done by Baraka in documenting the work of the Newark, New Jersey Black Power movement and The Spirit House, a collective of black artists-activists based in Newark, the artist’s hometown. In his recent article on the recently-discovered film (lost for more than 40 years), cultural historian Whitney Straub described the footage of *The New-Ark* as a “Black Power propaganda piece:”

Beginning as a lovely Black Arts city-symphony of Newark streets, buildings, and people, set to wordless chanting, *The New-Ark* quickly arrives at its political imperative: Black Power must be accomplished through nationalism, and “a nation is organization.” So we see canvassing, the passing of leaflets, shaking of hands, political sound-trucks — all the stuff of traditional politics, yet done here by and among proud Black Newarkers. As well, agitprop theater on an open stage in downtown Newark, radical Black pedagogy to Newark youth at Spirit House, and studious kempo self-defense lessons convey the heady sense of cultural nationalism (Straub).

The film, housed in its “lost years” within the Harvard Film Archive, captures the centrality and essentiality of “radical Black pedagogy,” or critical consciousness
pedagogy, for black audiences and especially black youth through the efforts of the black artists-activists of the late 1960s and 1970s. While few documentary films of these efforts exist (or are made public), the texts created by the black poets and dramatists and the reviews and reflections of their creators and their critics serve as testament to the breadth of their efforts. As African-American journalist Earl Caldwell wrote in his review of the September 1972 San Francisco Bay Area Black Expo, although—unlike the above examples of community engagement and community building with Baraka at the center—the black arts contemporaries were fragmented regionally and ideologically, “They were dancers, painters, poets, playwrights, and filmmakers, and while they rarely if ever heard of one another, they were all intent on creating a new black culture” (Caldwell 32). Whether were promoting the tenets of Islam as “the black man’s religion” or illustrating the unique struggles of African-American women through dramatic works or prompting their black audience members to participate in their poetry readings, despite their differences in ideology and genre, their common element was inspiring African Americans with their art.

In his introduction to his collection of works by African-American playwrights, *The New Lafayette Theatre Presents* (1974), dramatist Ed Bullins described the efforts of the black artists of his generation who promoted consciousness-raising in their works, highlighting their emphasis on seeking out their audiences rather than waiting on them to come forth:

The Black masses were sought out in their ghettos and enthusiastically set upon by the new Black revolutionary artists through almost seemingly spontaneous eruptions of Black street plays. An inevitable round of benefits appeared with revolutionary rhetoric and rap interlinked by Black revolutionary theatre, film, music, dance, and art, to aid Black political
prisoners that the social and political climate of the times generated. Black arts festivals proliferated, with numerous conferences and symposiums created to discuss the criteria for evaluating Black arts, the role of the artists in the movement and the creation of an alternate Black communications and media system throughout the black communities of America. […] The Black revolutionary theatre did its thing upon the at first makeshift stages of Harlem, San Francisco, Detroit and New Orleans, while the new Black poets institutionalized the street rhetoric of the day as Black arts centers and groups grew from Baltimore to Santa Barbara, having in common activities and arts efforts that incorporated an African motif and Afro-American soul ethos, a commonality of words couched in Black ideological expression and using a Third World iconology (Bullins “Introduction” 3).

In his portrait of the efforts of his generation of black creators, he centralized the axis of their creations as “black dialetics” (4). “Black dialectics,” as Bullins defined the term, related to the emphasis of black poets and especially dramatists on emphasizing two avenues of discussion—the dialectic of change and the dialectic of experience (4). On the one hand, the dialectic of change, he noted, was embodied in the literature of prior generations who sought to speak directly to whites about the problems of anti-black racism in America, a literary tradition ranging back to the earliest works of African-American literature. Poet Phillis Wheatley and authors Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, James Weldon Johnson, and Richard Wright could be included in this number of authors of “protest literature” for white consumption. The BAM creators, he wrote, attempted to shift the dialectic of change from one of protest to a “Black revolutionary writing,” pointing out Baraka’s shift in focus to black audiences in the early 1960s as a watershed (4).

On the other hand, the dialectic of experience was the track that Bullins and his contemporaries had actively chosen; this shift in address placed African Americans as the immediate audience of the works of the black artists. More than to change the minds of
the oppressors, the works within the dialectic of experience, according to Bullins, sought to educate and uplift the oppressed (African Americans) through the black artists’ attempts to hold a mirror to their daily experiences, create new mythologies of black history and ancestry, and draw its energy from black consumers of, participants in, and audiences of their work. As a unique kind of multimedia piece, Amiri Baraka’s and photographer Fundi’s (Bill Abernathy) photo-poetry-essay book, *In Our Terribleness* (1970), literally draws the reader into the text by including a mirrored title page to include the reader in its listing of “terrible folks,” (Baraka and Fundi). In addition to including the assumed black reader within the images of the text, the long piece that comprises the poetry of this book is predominantly written in first-person, addressing the reader directly. At one of its most powerful moments, Baraka writes:

We understand the cycle now.  
We must ready ourselves for the power to come. The devil done played Out. We must make ourselves ready to assume control of our own destiny.  
As the majority of the world’s people must ready themselves too.  
Like the old people said about the sun shinin on our back door….  
Add the front my man, for sure, the front too (Baraka and Fundi).

Consciousness-raising was not simply located within the performance spaces dedicated to live poetry and dramatic performances of the works of the black artists. As Baraka and Fundi demonstrate, the performative action of consciousness-raising could take place on the page in addition to the stage.

The work of consciousness-raising among African-American artists in the 1960s and 1970s, whatever the medium, had its roots in a rich history of ideological, aesthetic, spiritual, and political contributions by black men and women who had come before them. As Larry Neal notes in 1969—listing the inheritances of his generation from
Harlem and Chicago, from the French-speaking African Diaspora, from the blues singers and jazz players—this was “no new thing” (Neal “Any Day Now,” 54). What was new, however, was the turn inward that many Black Arts theorists and artists emphasized. To counteract the crisis of “double-consciousness,” Neal suggests that the children of Du Bois in the Black Arts Movement “go forth to destroy Double Consciousness, go forth to merge these ‘warring ideas’ into One Committed Soul integrated with itself and taking its own place in the world,” (54). The idea of being “integrated” one’s self definitely call to question the existential dilemma that Du Bois presents symbolically through “the Veil” in 1897, as well as the ways in which he, Fanon and X, as I discuss throughout this chapter, disclose through theory and exemplify by practice multiple routes towards consciousness raising among the oppressed and charting a course towards black liberation. With this goal in mind, black poets and dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s took to task the mission of using their art to centralize the experiences of black people and engage them in art to which they could relate. In order to convince black audiences to join them on their journey towards liberation via black consciousness, however, these artists had to make a case for their new program.

Chapters 2—which discusses Black Arts creations that challenge white hegemony—and 3—which centers the “black vs. negro” debate in black poetry and drama of the 1960s and 1970s—present but two of the manifold interpretations of what Stephen E. Henderson and others designate as a “new black” art, but, whatever the intentions of the artists discussed herein, the goal, as outlined within this chapter, was the development of consciousness for the sake, first, understanding of a black present and a black past, and, further, imagining a liberated black future. Author and critic Toni
Morrison, a contemporary of those involved in the Black Arts Movement, wrote in 1974 that there was once a time, prior to the movements for “Black Power” and a “Black Aesthetic” when African Americans simply had their own expressions and their own spaces: “There was a time, as heretical as it sounds, when we knew who we were. One could see that knowledge, that coherence in our wide-spirited celebration of life and our infinite tolerance of differences. We thought little about ‘unity’ because we loved those differences among us” (Morrison, “Rediscovering Black History,” 50). Morrison’s statements were not false; segregation and suppression had fostered an old culture and institutions and forged new creations to come from the black communities of the United States. However, what a number of her contemporaries sought was the empowerment—politically, culturally, and socially—of African-American people, some with respect to the rich diversity of the group (as I interpret in Chapter 4 of this project). From each of their influences from generations of black cultural and political workers prior, they took what they perceived as the failures and the successes of their politics to imagine a new reality for black people of the United States, beyond the Veil.
CHAPTER 2

"WE ARE IN LOVE WITH THE VIRTUE OF EVIL": THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT AND THE ATTACK ON WHITE HEGEMONY

In tribute to his late “political comrade” and Black Fire co-editor, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka stated in 1983 at the Second Annual Larry Neal Writers’ Conference in Washington, D.C., that they shared and “expressed commitment to destroy white supremacy,” within their missions to create black art for black people (Baraka “Foreword: The Wailer,” ix). With Malcolm X as their “Fire Prophet,” Baraka continues:

We wanted an art that would actually reflect black life and its history and legacy of resistance and struggle!

We wanted an art that was as black as our music. [...] An art that would educate and unify black people in our attack on an anti-black racist America.

We wanted a mass art, an art that could “Monkey” out the libraries and “Boogaloo” down the street in tune with popular revolution. A poetry the people could sing as they beat Faubus and Wallace and Bull Connor to death! (xi).

Many of the artists of their generation, whether or not they promoted their work as products of the Black Arts Movement, spearheaded by Baraka, Neal, poet and playwright Sonia Sanchez, poet/visual artist Askia Muhammad Touré, and many others, shared this vision in their creations, while simultaneously attempting to define the very cultural work they were doing. In his highly anthologized article “The Black Arts Movement,” written for the The Drama Review’s Black Theater Issue in 1968, Neal attempts to provide a blueprint for the generation’s creativity and suggests that the motive for the black aesthetic and, thusly, the Black Arts Movement was “the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world,” with the aim of
liberating black minds (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 30). Such an aim was not without the backlash of white and black critics alike. Baraka recalled that some critics of his plays and others affiliated with his Black Arts Reparatory Theater School in Harlem were called “Hate-whitey dramas” and charged with “black racism” in their promotion of such ideology (Baraka Autobiography 309). However, their intention, as is telling in Neal’s article, was more than a physical rejection of white Americans and white American mainstream culture.

This “destruction of the white thing” was an attack on the normativity of white American culture’s views within black psyches, or as Du Bois describes it, the process of “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (Du Bois The Souls of Black Folk 9). This is what Neal means, perhaps, when he suggests that the first step to psychological liberation for African Americans would be to destroy double-consciousness, and, in this, to destroy any symbols that took black people away from their own histories, expressions, and empowerment. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford describe this “destruction of the white thing,” or the symbolic “killing of the ghosts of oppression,” as one of the core ideologies of the Black Arts ethos and a performance of “aesthetic warfare,” (Collins and Crawford 12). William Van Deburg writes in his seminal study of Black Power politics and culture, A New Day in Babylon (1992), that many black artist/activists of this period felt that “[t]he very act of defining whitey could contribute to the development of black self-esteem, confidence, identity, perhaps even total psychological liberation,” (Van Deburg 265). More, Amy Abugo Ongiri suggests that the Black Arts Movement “attempted ultimately to provide a model for African American advancement that would avoid the pitfalls of mainstream institutional inclusion, including
the disintegration of African American culture and continuity that was believed to have
been produced by the Civil Rights Movement,” by incorporating such symbolism (Ongiri
103). These artists attacked whiteness as a symbol of political power and the desired
normative aesthetic with a literary assault on the black, and often white, imagination,
with violent imagery of war against whites who represented institutions of oppressive
power. This imagery, I argue in this chapter, was not present as anti-white propaganda
but as a propaganda for positive self-image of African-American history and culture in its
rejection of Western (white) standards of culture and challenges to the dominant
narratives of United States history that often excluded or marginalized black bodies and
black experiences.

My foci for this discussion include examples of the poetry and drama that center
on this “white thing” as an object to be destroyed or cast away. The years between 1965
and 1970 especially saw the development of a plethora of Black Arts institutions,
collectives, and publishers across the country. Whereas, as James Smethurst notes, the
Movement itself developed differently from region to region, and even from institution to
institution or between the individuals themselves, there was a shared focus on “black
political and cultural self-determination that…appeared to be an achievable (and
relatively imminent) reality to many,” (Smethurst The Black Arts Movement 368-369).
Especially for those who subscribed to and were in conversation with the Black Arts
Movement, this assault on white/Western symbols of beauty, politics, culture, and
economics was a method of purging black minds of these symbols as truths of their
realities and, further, this was an attempt to inspire them to see their own capacities for
beauty and political and economic power as well as the value of their own culture.
The Black Arts/Aesthetics theory, poetry, and drama selections from Baraka and Neal's *Black Fire* establish the theme of Western cultural hegemony as "a dying creature, totally bereft of spirituality," and the role that black artists and, ultimately, all black people have in destroying the desire to integrate into a dying culture in order to save and rebuild their own and creating the “poetry the people could sing,” as Baraka expressed (Neal “And Shine Swam On,” 648). What Neal proposes as the first step towards black mental liberation at the close of this anthology becomes a recurrent theme in the poetry and drama of the Black Arts Movement, especially in *Black Fire*. In addition to this anthology, poems from Nikki Giovanni’s *Black Judgement* (1968) will also serve as examples of this theme in Black Arts literature committed to this ideological purging. However, within her dismantling of the “white thing,” she also presents some intraracial critiques on the program of liberation within the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, many of her poems in this collection functioning doubly in their effort to disrupt white cultural and political hegemony and call her colleagues—and the masses—to revolutionary task. Finally, what Ed Bullins does in his 1971 play *The Fabulous Miss Marie* is demonstrate the ups and downs of black life and the revolution with an invisible white presence. Whereas he does not thematize violence against whites in the play, the symbol is literally banished from the space and action of the play to allow the narratives of the black characters to take center stage. Bullins’ play, and much of Giovanni’s poetry, on the one hand, is indicative of what Bullins proposed in a 1972 *New York Times* editorial as a work that expresses the “dialectic of experience,” or those stories, poetic or dramatic, centered on the tradition or rituals inherent to black life (Bullins “Black Theater, Bourgeois Critics,” D10). On the other hand, a number of the other poems and
plays reflecting the theme of “anti-whiteness” as analyzed for this chapter focus more on what Bullins defines as the “dialectics of change,” or protest literature, propaganda for the cause of changing black minds and lives and, perhaps by extension, white perspectives alike (D10). Towards the late 1960s, many of the artists, including Baraka, demonstrate a shift in focus towards a dialectics of experience that attempts to draw black audiences and readers in by specifically creating poetry and drama that centered their black audiences without the consideration of white spectatorship or the goal of changing their perspectives on black people.

This theme was not without its criticism from within and without black artistic circles. In a letter to the editor of the Chicago Defender, a man wrote of the irony of LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka], the most vocal of the artists promoting “violent reprisals against ‘Mr. Charlie,’” being a prominent beneficiary of governmental programs subsidizing African-American creativity (Hollander 11). The editorialist, Fred Hollander, continues: “That Jones should do so—after 400 years of slavery and brutalization—is understandable. But it is ironic to see Uncle Sam actually paying him to shoot his mouth off. […] And to keep Negroes in this self-defeating posture, whites will do anything, including subsidization of the hate dramas,” (11). Mr. Hollander was right about the funding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School and many other African-American cultural programs in the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, but he misses the significance of the work being done within such programs for his judgment of their product or those productions of their founders. In its inaugural year (1965-1966), BART/S was financed in part by Johnson Administration-funded Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited and the Associated Community Teams (HARYOU-ACT) and
the donations of members of and subscribers to the school’s programs. Among these members/subscribers Harlem Renaissance poet, author, and theorist Langston Hughes, to whom Jones and the school’s staff sent periodical updates on the BART/S’s schedules and promotions. One such postcard, dated 1966, highlighted a panel discussion, to which Hughes should “FEEL FREE TO BRING YOUR BLACK FRIENDS & RELATIVES” (Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, and Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Postcard to Langston Hughes*). This inclination towards “black chauvinism” was something that, as dramatist and producer Woodie King, Jr. noted in a 2008 interview, Hughes heavily critiqued regarding Jones and the Black Arts creators. King laughed that Hughes felt that “the way Baraka cursed white people was not the way you do it,” and even that this language, as reflected in the creative pieces of many Black Arts poets and playwrights, might limit support within schools, churches, and other black community centers, as well. Hughes and many other black Leftists would explain away the Black Arts Movement, its creations, and its institutions as a phase, at best (Wilson, “Woodie the King Maker,” 104).

Hughes, Margaret Walker, Harold Cruse, and other older leftist scholars, artists, and activists made several critiques of the imagined violence on the page and in performance and the apparent racial separatism that was especially common in the earlier work of the Black Arts Movement. However, as evidenced through the support letters to Hughes and even the involvement of Cruse and historian John Henrik Clarke in the educational workshops within BARTS (as well as the inclusion of the scholarship of Cruse and Clarke in *Black Fire*), they saw the value of not only mentoring but participating in the causes of the younger generation (Black Arts Repertory
Theatre/School, *Course Offering for 8 Week Summer Session*). In his reflective essay on the BART/S and its participants, Cruse wrote in 1968 that “The Black Arts was not a failure in achievement, so much as a failure in its inability to deal with what had been achieved,” and for the failures of generations prior to truly define black cultural nationalism (539). He continued:

When Jones, the radical, avant-garde, literary integrationist, turned nationalist, he did not go far enough in his understanding of nationalism. Moreover, he had too much to overcome—forty-five years of leadership mismanagement on this question. As a result, the Black Arts Theater began without the foundation of a traditional cultural nationalism. Lacking this tradition, the role of the Negro creative intellectual as nationalist is not understood even by the nationalists themselves (Cruse *Crisis* 539).

In his critique, however, Cruse did note that, in his exchanges with the younger black creators at BART/S, he “realized the full potential of the new young black generation,” who were ultimately beyond the apologetic and explanatory politics of their creative forebears, largely directed at white audiences (i.e. Bullins’ “dialectics of change”), and focused on the mental liberation of black audiences (535). In a 1916 critique of “the colored audience” present at a performance of William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, what troubled W. E. B. Du Bois in the black audience’s humored response to the death of Desdemona, a white woman, at the hands of her black husband, Othello, was indicative to him as what might be the audience’s “ignorance or thoughtlessness,” (Du Bois “The Colored Audience” 237). This reaction became the cause of the Black Arts poets and dramatists through their written and performed words. They wanted black people to react to, and ultimately participate in, their creations and concurrently witness the fragility of whiteness and white cultural symbols in such a way. What caused author Richard Wright
to explain the murderous violence of Bigger Thomas through a liberal white defense attorney in *Native Son* (1940) transitioned to black voices proclaiming liberation through violence, a violence which Bigger himself determined must have been “good,” upon his death sentence, if it allowed him to feel alive even just once in his life (Wright *Native Son* 353-370, 390). Even if in fact the hoped-for black audiences whom the artists wanted to be on the receiving end of their messages were in fact black and white (oftentimes substantially the latter), their calls for a mental purging of white superiority and anti-black racism in the black imagination was equally to encourage the liberation of the minds and spirits of their black spectators and also to demonstrate the possibility of agency in giving the action and the words of this violence in this poetry and drama to the black characters and speakers themselves.

“*That Simple Act:*” *Black Fire, White Destruction, and Black Liberation*

Baraka’s celebrated play *Dutchman* (1964), prior to the Black Arts Movement, brought forth the theme of white destruction for black liberation in the protagonist Clay’s monologue at the end of Scene II. Unlike the prior example demonstrated in *Native Son*, it is the black protagonist himself who declares his freedom to be centered in white death. Towards the end of his revelatory statement of his internal inclination towards violence against whites, and for his own and the black race’s liberation, he exclaims:

Just let me bleed you, you loud whore, and one poem vanished. A whole people of 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 begin to understand me. You understand? No. I guess not. If Bessie Smith had killed some white people she wouldn’t have needed that music. She could have talked very straight and plain about the world. No metaphors. No grunts. No wiggles in the dark of her soul. Just straight two and two are
four. Money. Power. Luxury. Like that. All of them. Crazy niggers turning their backs on sanity. When all it needs is that simple act. Murder. Just murder! Would make us all sane (Jones *Dutchman and The Slave* 35).

What is critical about Clay’s statements to Lula, who was up to this point symbolic of both a white bohemian seductress and Clay’s own middle-class aspirations, is that he immediately capitulates to his former position—the “would-be [Negro] poet”—without an external inclination towards race- or revolutionary-consciousness. Even this Lula understands about Clay before he acknowledges this on his own:

LULA. May the people accept you as a ghost of the future. And love you, that you might not kill them when you can.

CLAY. What?

LULA. You’re a murderer, Clay, and you know it. [Her voice darkening with significance] You know goddamn well what I mean (21).

As a symbol of his failure to acknowledge his own consciousness, Baraka instead allows Lula to kill and, thus, discard of Clay, never allowing him to live his expressed understanding it would take for him to be fully liberated—killing the specter of desire of white beauty, bohemianism, and middle-class aspiration and acceptance that was embodied by Lula, even if this “simple act” would save his own life. However, the result of Clay not acting on his own words—or, as he announces, his inclination to kill to free himself—is double-edged. Had Clay killed Lula—for his freedom—he would have died or lost his livelihood nonetheless, as American history has positioned black Americans, real or fictional, in situations of justified or unjustified violence against whites. The instance that he decides not to kill Lula, after announcing that he could and should, Clay relinquishes himself to Lula, a grim reaper of “negroes” trapped in the dead space of their
own double-consciousness. To lift the Veil only to retreat was not enough to save Clay from Lula; as the play closes, we see that nothing Clay could have done would have been enough to save him or other black men like him.

More than a transitional piece of Baraka’s own coming to consciousness, *Dutchman* represented a shift in the larger body of dramatic and poetic works of the 1960s. Clay was representative of the trouble of reconciling the difficulty of being subject to Du Boisian double-consciousness while in pursuit of the promise of the so-called American Dream, Where Lorraine Hansberry stops short in *A Raising in the Sun* (1959) of detailing the drama, or trauma, that lie ahead for the Youngers, especially Walter, in their middle-class aspirations, Baraka demonstrates through Clay’s exchanges with Lula the futility of integration and aspiration within the system of American racism. The notion of killing for one’s liberation is what, as Clay exclaims, keeps him and other black creators writing, singing, and dancing in order to simply live. However, these words become creative actions in the black artists who subscribed to this ideology. If the presentation of the act was enough to encourage black reading or spectating audiences to imagine not only themselves differently but also the symbols of their oppression embodied in ways that shrank the significance of those symbols, this destruction of the “white thing” could be a route towards their freedom from them.

As a product of the participants in the Black Arts Movement, especially those previously affiliated with the BART/S, *Black Fire* was a collective statement towards this call to black consciousness through the destruction of the “white thing” and a call to turn focus on the beauty—and pain—within black American and international cultures within many of its essays, poems, short stories, and plays. In his foreword to the anthology,
Baraka implores its readers to “Look in. Find yr self,” indicating that those black readers seeking to raise their own consciousness might find themselves reflected in the words of the more than 70 black theorists and artists included. First, the essays by James Stewart, historian John Henrik Clarke, Leslie Alexander Lacy, Harold Cruse, Calvin Hernton, Charles Boggs, Stokely Carmichael, Charles E. Wilson, William Mahoney, Lindsay Barrett, A. B. Spellman, David Llorens, and Nathan Hare and those that open and close the anthology by Baraka and Neal, respectively, provide the cultural, educational, historical, and sociological context and vision of the anthology. The creative works that provide the bulk of the anthology’s material flesh out this context and vision richly. Although there are many themes within the anthology—including examinations of the internal lives of African Americans and their communities—what is reflected and repeated throughout the included poems and plays especially is the destruction of symbols of white American oppression and anti-black racism. More than a targeted and overt proclamation of “kill whitey” reactionary art, then, many of the pieces within Black Fire that explore this theme were indicative of the critical consciousness-raising strategies of these black creators to challenge oppressive symbols in the lives of their black reading (or viewing) audience.

Larry Neal expounds on this vision in his afterword essay in Black Fire, entitled “And Shine Swam On.” The title of the essay and its epigraph refer to the well-known African-American toast of Shine the Titanic stoker, and his fictional quest to, first, warn the ship’s white captain of the impending doom of the vessel in the form of an iceberg, unavoidable in the ship’s course, and then his individual quest to survive beyond the lures of the captain and other whites on board. In order to save his own life, Shine avoids the
lures of economic mobility, sex (with the captain’s daughter), Christian salvation from a holy man whom Shine kills (according to black poet Etheridge Knight’s interpretation), and other forces (which vary per the orator of the toast, as is the fluidity of the tradition itself) in order to survive (Knight “I Sing of Shine,” 210). To a man like Shine, who was determined to live, the offerings of doomed white people matter little to his survival in the face of death. With this anecdote, Neal tells his readers, “Now the ship is sinking,” with regard to Western culture and its decline and long rejection of African-American bodies, experiences, and honest narratives, and asks, “but where will we swim?” (Neal “And Shine Swam On,” 638).

Instead of focusing externally and believing in integration, acceptance, and the “promise of America,” as black forebears like Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright (Du Bois and Wright, at least early on), and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had done, Neal implores black creators and black people to turn inward and look within themselves, and within the African diaspora, for real liberation. Neal positions Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X as “lover[s]” of black people, men who wanted to inspire and impress self-love upon people of African descent (643). The cultural and political moment of the 1960s, he argues, had to be seen “in terms of the ideas and persons which preceded it,” (646). The conciliatory aims of Washington, (early) Du Bois, and King were important to consider, just as were the black nationalism of Garvey and X. However, what “Black Power,” and undoubtedly the push towards “Black Arts” were was “a synthesis of all the nationalistic ideas embedded within the double-consciousness of Black America,” (646). Double-consciousness, Neal determines, was a “tension…most often resolved in violence, simply because the nature of our existence in America has
been one of violence,” and the ambition of the black writers present in and beyond *Black Fire* was to target and destroy double consciousness with the goal of “consolidating the African-American personality,” (647). He concludes the afterword with the following:

The artists and the political activist are one. They are both shapers of the future reality. Both are warriors, priests, lovers and destroyers. For the first violence will be internal—the destruction of a weak spiritual self for a more perfect self. But it will be a necessary violence. It is the only thing that will destroy the double-consciousness—the tension that is in the souls of black folk (656).

Within this, Neal suggested that the target of the black creators and activists of this moment was not the literal destruction of white America or “an unseen white enemy,” but the internalized destructive qualities of black people themselves (i.e. self-rejection), with a specific “attack on the Uncle Tomism of the older generation,” (647). With consideration of this observation by Neal, it is possible to see how this is demonstrated through the symbolic white violence in some of the poetry and drama included in *Black Fire*.

The intended audiences of the poems in *Black Fire* range from pre-conscious black Americans to those actively protesting and from passive middle-class “negro” observers to whites potentially overhearing the revolutionary message of the speakers or observers narrating the poems. As evidenced by Baraka’s imploring the reader to “Look in. Find yr self” at the start of the anthology, one could assume that the targeted audience for the entirety of the anthology was in fact those black readers seeking to elevate their consciousness, likewise joining the black artists, critics, and theorists within on their journeys towards liberation. If read closely, however, the works can be seen to envision a broader audience, especially when they thematize the destruction of white symbols.
In Calvin Hernton’s poem “Jitterbugging in the Streets,” for instance, the poem’s speaker targets a white audience with their constant refrain of “you say:”

You say there is violence in Harlem, niggers run amuck
perpetrating crimes against property, looting stores,
breaking windows, flinging beer bottles at officers
of the law
You say a certain virgin gave birth to a baby
Through some mysterious process, some divine conjure,
A messenger turned his walking cane into a serpent
and the serpent stood up and walked like a natural man […]
I say there is no “violence” in Harlem.
There is TERROR in Harlem!
Terror that shakes the foundation of the very assholes of the people
And fear! And corruption! And murder!
(Hernton “Jitterbugging in the Streets,” 207)

For the “fear,” “corruption,” and “murder” imposed by white police through Harlem and the complicity of white “All Americans—housewives, businessmen, civil service/Employees” and others, the black people are revolting, dancing, “Jitterbugging/ in the streets,” demonstrating the “rage of a hopeless people” across the country (205-209). This poem, in its observations of rioting in black communities from, as the poem’s speaker notes, Jacksonville to Harlem, suggests that black people were standing no more for their violent suppression and that whites (observing this message) would do best not to ignore them (205). Scholar Emily Bernard, referencing Philip Brian Harper, argues, similar to the Harlem Renaissance writers before them, white audiences were also pivotal in the consciousness-raising efforts of the Black Arts Movement:

As Philip Brian Harper argues, even though Black Arts poetry derives much of its power through its presentation as a black-only product, “it achieves its maximum impact in a context in which it is understood as being heard directly by whites, and overheard by blacks. So even within this decidedly black-only movement, white influence was inescapable,” (Bernard 263).
Poems by Baraka (credited LeRoi Jones) and Bobb Hamilton also appear to intend such a target audience, with black readers (or listeners) overhearing the capacities of the poems’ speakers “shooting straight” with whites. Baraka’s “Three Movements and a Coda” appears to directly target a white listener, when he writes:

THE LONE RANGER

IS DEAD.
THE SHADOW
IS DEAD
ALL YOUR HEROES ARE DYING. J. EDGAR HOOVER WILL
SOON BE DEAD. YOUR MOTHER WILL DIE. LYNDON JOHNSON,
these are natural
things. No one is
threatening anybody,
that’s just the way life
is,
boss. (Jones “Three Movements” 294)

Perhaps the language and the pretending to be speaking louder and softer to be heard by white surveillance is Baraka’s way of making light of the attack on white “HEROES” and the boldness of a black speaker being direct with influential whites for the humor of his black audience. If “overheard,” this poem is a rather direct warning to white readers that the tide of black compliance with anti-black racism and white political and cultural hegemony was shifting, at least, as the speaker declares, in the minds and actions of the black masses: “These are the words of lovers / Of dancers, of dynamite singers / These are the songs if you have the / music,” (295). More than white readers, however, Erik Nielson argues that the target audience of this poem would have been those, like the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO), surveilling the black artists/activists (Nielson 162). Thus, the louder and softer volumes of the spoken word, indicated by the varying capitalization and sentence-case text in the
poem, respectively, indicate what is meant to be overheard by whites (louder/capitalized) versus what is explained to them (softer/sentence-case). Thus, in order to cement the declaration that “ALL YOUR HEROES ARE DYING” (as we could imagine this note being recorded and held against the speaker, if they were being surveilled), the speaker follows, softly, that these are recorded declarations are “natural things,” and not just any idle “threat,” for whomever is listening (“boss”).

Bobb Hamilton’s “Brother Harlem Bedford Watts Tells Mr. Charlie Where Its At,” functions on its surface as a more direct statement to its white listener, but, like Baraka’s “Three Movements and a Coda,” it could also be read as a poem meant to humor black audiences. As the poem’s title indicates, the speaker—a “Brother Harlem Bedford Watts,” representative of a kind of black urban everyman—targets his words directly at symbolic “Mr. Charlie,” (Hamilton “Brother Harlem Bedford Watts,” 447-451). In the poem, “Brother Harlem” runs down his “case against” Mr. Charlie, calling him a hustler, a liar and a hypocrite for his oppression of African Americans and other world communities of color over the last “[f]our hundred years” (447-451). With regard to the recruitment of black servicemen to fight in Vietnam, for instance, Brother Harlem Bedford Watts declares:

```
Help you fight in
Viet Nam?
Man, them’s my folks
you fucking with over there,
Viet Cong
Or
Hong Kong
They is colored,
And I hope cuzz
Knocks a hole
In your ass
```
Brother Harlem’s exhortation against “Charlie” ends with the claim that he—the angry and oppressed black everyman—“ain’t going/ Nowhere!!,” suggesting that the time is ripe for a black righteous indignation against white imperialism, as the black masses (perhaps through the charge of this poem) are led to disrupt the status quo of white American hegemony or, as indicated by Brother Harlem, cheer on and work in solidarity with other nonwhite revolutionary “cousins” (“cuzz,” as Hamilton writes) as they liberated themselves throughout the Third World.

With the exception of the aforementioned poems by Hernton, Baraka, Hamilton, and a few other authors in *Black Fire* directed at whites but seemingly meant to be overheard by blacks, many of the pieces directly envisioned black readers as the sole audience of the text, or, to echo Baraka, these words were directed at those “who [had] the music,” who possessed (or would come to possess and *make*) the songs of black liberation. As previously mentioned, there was perhaps some empowerment in the black reader observing the audacity of the writers’ black speakers in their poems (and plays) “shooting straight” and delivering unabashed truths to an imagined white audience. However, those pieces aimed directly at the black audience—the black “you” and the black “we” emphasized in many of the pieces in the anthology—had a more instructive message for those audiences, one that the artists seemed to imagine would lead them collectively towards a greater sense of consciousness and, ultimately, towards liberation. Many of these pieces still incorporated the disruptions of symbols of white cultural and political hegemony, specifically in the United States, through a suggested destruction or death. Unlike the music that the speaker in Baraka’s “Three Movements and a Coda”
suggests his white listeners do not have, these artists recognize black people as the song-bearers, and the poems “Keep on Pushing,” by David Henderson and “The Song of Fire,” by Rolland Snellings (Askia Muhammad Touré) each attempt to give new lyrics to their music of liberation.

In “Keep on Pushing,” Henderson provides a poem of six movements to detail the mood and action of the 1964 Harlem Riot, taking the title of the poem and its refrain—“Keep on Pushing”—from the soul song of the same name by Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions (Henderson 239). The six-day rebellion, resulting in one protestor death and hundreds of arrests, was spurred by the shooting death of a black student, James Powell, by Thomas Gilligan, an off-duty white police officer (Flamm “The Legacy of the 1964 Harlem Riot”). According to historian Michael Flamm, Powell’s black neighbors and friends, some of whom had witnessed his shooting death, took to the streets of Harlem (and the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn), looted a number of white-owned stores, and threw bricks and bottles at police in protest. In its first stanza, Henderson’s poem observes the desperation, oppression, and protest occurring on Lenox Avenue in Harlem and gives special attention to the both the white economic and police presence in the community—even prior to the calls for “Black Power” and “Black Arts” to come within the next two years. At times, the repeated phrase “Keep on pushing” in the poem seems to act dually. At once, in the second stanza of the poem, it seems a warning to the white “owners and keepers” of the businesses in Harlem and the white police, responding to the riot, who are congregating with one another, yet few, if any, of the other policemen speak to the “Negro cop” walking alongside the barricade (Henderson 240). “Keep on pushing,” the poem warns whites against the building
tension of the moment, speaking to the levels of oppression within Harlem and other black communities. However, in the third stanza of the poem, the instruction to “Keep on Pushin’” comes back, but this time directed at the black actors in (and, by extension, the readers of) the poem:

At night Harlem sings and dances […]
Come out of your windows
dancehalls, bars and grills  Monkey  Dog in the streets
like Martha and the Vandellas
Dog for NBC
The *Daily News* and the *Christian Science Monitor*
Dog for Adlai Stevenson
And shimmy a bit
for ‘the boys upstate’
’cause you got soul
Everybody knows…
Keep on Pushin’ (241-242)

After detailing the nightlife internal to black Harlem, a cue into the separate spaces of the rebellion and black celebration as Harlem “sings and dances” within those venues, the poem calls for those singers and dancers to “Come out” and join the rebellion, bringing the singing and dancing along as expressions for justice. In this joining of rebellion and music, Henderson channels black music, soul specifically, in what Larry Neal calls black music’s capacity to achieve a “sense of the collective ritual…directed at the destruction of useless, dead ideas,” in ways that poems, prior to the movement, could not (Neal “And Shine Swam On,” 655). Thus, through a poetic perspective on the actual destruction of the 1964 Harlem riot, “Keep on Pushing” provides a lyricism to give words, rhythm, and “soul” to the destructive chaos of this rebellion.

Rolland Snellings’ “The Song of Fire” uses the form of a religious sermon to paint a scene of the liberation of people of color from white Western Imperialism. Its
dedication to “Africa, Asia, Latin & Afro-America—the Wretched of the Earth,” at once announces his vision of solidarity between the nonwhite people of the world and then emphasizes what it seems he imagines as their shared or similar conditions of oppression, echoing both Wretched of the Earth author Frantz Fanon and the “fire prophet” Malcolm X (Snellings 325). The speaker of the poem, in a tone similar to a preacher, implores his audience to “Save your tears! Save your anguished cries!,” for the salvation of “Buddha,” “Shango,” and “Allah,” is coming with the revolution of the people against their oppressors: “Free-dom! Free-dom!: here comes the Rising Sun!/ [….] my twenty-million, tortured, chosen children—/ your day will come!” (325). He continues by encouraging the “wretched of the earth” that “BLOOD” will absolve them of their collective agony:

BLOOD will wash your pain away!
(Fire!)
Bright red flames! Burnt, charred death,
grinning skulls,
rolling eyes, and mad-mad
cries to mute Madonnas!
(Fire!)
will scorch the “Lonely Crowd” with Death’s embrace
like Mushroom Suns…in mutant Hiroshima!
(Fire!)
will vindicate the blues; sanctify the earth;
resurrect the mangled Jesus from…the Nordic
lynch-tree!
(Fire!)
will cauterize the Racist Plague! (326)

Even as presented on the page, Snellings’ poem channels a black sermon tradition with textual call-and response. As the audience/congregation is called to shout “Fire!” in conjunction with the speaker, the speaker gives them the vision/prophecy of their actions, the end results of the liberating “blood” they are called to shed for their freedom. But, again, as the speaker continues, this symbolizes the need for the oppressed to turn from the “useless, dead ideas” of the ruling majority and create anew within and among
themselves (specifically within and among the black “twenty million tortured, chosen children” in the United States): “to start anew—the Old must fade away, / or burn….or crumble in the savage wind,” (326). In order to “vindicate the blues”—something that Dutchman’s Clay argues would be possible if Bessie Smith had only killed for her freedom instead of sang—this poem charges that a new song is necessary, and new actions to accompany them, for the liberation of black people.

Perhaps the greatest “new song” of black mental, spiritual, and cultural purging of white hegemony in Black Fire came in the form of Baraka’s poem “Black Art,” which was also published in his third collection of poems, Black Magic, in 1969. Positioned quite literally in the center of the anthology, Baraka’s “Black Art” also illustrates the necessity of violence to the whiteness present in the black imagination in order to gain access to black consciousness, nationhood, and, thusly, full liberation. He begins in this poem, considered a manifesto of the Black Arts Movement, with idea that “Poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step” (Jones “Black Art,” 302). This line personifies poems as physical entities that should seek to feed and nourish their readers or listeners (“teeth” to masticate what is being fed), give them life (as a “tree” is one source of the oxygen we need to breath), and inspire black people to move/disrupt/act (as they would perhaps displace a rather inconvenient assortment of “lemons piled / on a step” in order to move forward or get pass the pile). Baraka’s speaker goes on to demand “‘poems that kill.’ / Assassin poems, Poems that shoot / guns,” which represent an effort to destroy the symbols of oppression and racism that plague African American life, including representatives of the white power structure: cops from Ireland, “dope selling wops” (“wops” a pejorative for persons of Italian
ancestry) “owner-jews,” and “Liberal / Spokesman for the jews” (302). The literary violence that Baraka does to the white and black (“girdlemamma mulatto bitches”, “negroleader(s)”, and “halfwhite politicians”) individuals and groups in this poem is less a symbol of racist rhetoric than it is a call towards self-love and nation-building for African Americans (302). He writes, for instance, in the last movement of the poem:

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 lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness here in the world (303).

This final verse within the poem, as Kimberly Benston has observed, negates the “insurrectionary defiance” of its own message of destruction and violence against whites by softening the language towards the audience and emphasizing love and renewal as the end goal of the ugliness and violence of the purge of the earlier sections of the piece (Benston 196). “Black Art” consequently suggests that until love for the self and love for one another can be achieved across the imagined black nation and even external to this nation, poems must fight the hatred and injustice present in the world and, in the case of African Americans, perpetuated by the white cultural, political, and economic hegemony. Baraka presents a necessary violence in “Black Art” that promulgates a message of black nationhood through the willingness of this group to come together against oppression and racism and towards self-love.

“We scream for life:” Baraka’s Madheart and Symbolic White Death

Whereas Baraka’s “Black Art” offers the manifesto of the necessity and
possibility of self-love with a violent mental purging at its center, his ritual drama in *Black Fire, Madheart*, presents a cautionary tale of violence as a necessity for liberation. A self-proclaimed “morality play,” written in 1966 and first performed in 1967 in San Francisco, it centers the characters Black Man and Black Woman as en route to consciousness, while banishing the presence of the Devil Lady (a character wearing an “elaborately carved white devil mask”) and two other black characters, Black Mother and Black Sister, who are in love with and blindly identify with the Devil Lady and what she represents: a full fixation with a dying whiteness (Jones *Madheart* 574). Although Black Man continually attempts to physically kill the Devil Lady, or implore her to die, she remains vocal (or present) as long as Black Mother and Black Sister acknowledge her desperately, while Black Woman seems to struggle with everything in her midst but her faith in Black Man’s leadership and “love” in submission. Within the drama of this ritual play, Black Man breaks the fourth wall and invites the audience into the action, telling them, in warning:

Let the audience think about themselves and about their lives when they leave this happening. This black world of purest possibility. (*laughs*) All our lives we want to be alive. We scream for life (580).

Black Man kills for his life and the lives of Black Woman as well as Black Mother and Black Sister, in spite of their willingness to die for the “white thing.”

The most potent characters in this drama are Black Mother and Black Sister, as they serve as symbols of black subscription to white cultural hegemony, even if to their detriment. Described as a woman in her fifties, Black Mother, adorned in “business suit, red wig,” and a lunch box with “greens…flavored in knuckles” conveniently placed in her brassiere, is representative of a “dying” generation of complacent black Americans,
and she feels that there is value in white culture and white leadership and chooses to walk through life drunkenly ("tipsy" was one of the character descriptions of Black Mother) (574, 578). After Black Man makes his first attempts at slaying the Devil Lady and beats Black Woman until she submits to him, Black Mother declares, seemingly in prayer to whomever she thought white and powerful was willing to listen: “Tony Bennett, help us please. Beethoven, Peter Gunn…deliver us in our sterling silver headdress…oh please deliver us,” (584). Black Sister, on the other hand is consumed with the beauty she perceives belongs solely to the Devil Lady, and, by extension, to white women. As symbolized by her blonde wig and “mod style,” and her sheer devastation at the overtaking of the Devil Lady by Black Man, Black Sister identifies her self-worth within the grotesque, dying white thing. After Black Man impales the Devil Lady, Black Sister becomes dazed and crazed, as she had fully identified herself in the “beast:” “It’s just…just…that I wanted to be something like her, that’s all,” (577). Black Sister weeps at the death of the Devil Lady, although the thing never acknowledges her presence or that of either Black Mother or Black Woman; at the banishing of the Devil Lady (or when Black Man kicks her into a “pit” offstage), Black Sister feels that she too has been killed. Despite their rejection of Black Woman and Black Man, and their worship of the Devil Lady, Black Man acknowledges them as family and strives to redeem them: “I’ll save them or I’ll kill them. […] They’re my flesh. I’ll do what I can. (looks at [Black Woman]) We’ll both try. All of us, black people,” (587, 588). Through the demonstration of Black Man killing the Devil Lady and the Black Mother and Black Sister mourning her death, Baraka demonstrates on stage what the purging of “the white thing,” the purging of one’s need to be “in love with [one’s] hatred,” as Black Sister reflects, must look like in order
for black people to come to consciousness and join the imagined nation and revolution. Before, and if, the “negroes” of the old guard could be redeemed, the Devil Lady had to be banished before she could corrupt more black hearts and minds.

The Devil Lady seems like an extension of the character The Beast from Baraka’s play *A Black Mass* (1965), which debuted in Newark in 1966. In *A Black Mass*, a religious ritual drama reimagining the Nation of Islam’s creation narrative of Yakub (Jacoub, in the play), the black mad scientist who creates the white race through a process of racial determination (discarding of darker newborns for progressively lighter—until white—infants) (Muhammad 117). According to the NOI creation narrative, the “original man” was black and inhabited Mecca as their center of creation. Yakub, becoming obsessed with the creation of a more perfect race, haphazardly released the white man upon the world, who would inherit from Yakub the knowledge of the “original man” and use that knowledge to enslave and dehumanize the black race. In according to the messenger of the NOI, W. Fard Muhammad, who was considered God in human form by followers, the Nation itself would be the group predestined (because they had found out the truth of the origins of man and were the descendants of “original man”) to liberate the world of white evil and control. In Baraka’s play, then, a reimagined Jacoub is a member of a mass of black magicians, creators of the world, and he, through mystical experimentation, creates The Beast, a wild and grotesque white “thing” that constantly utters “I white” and “Me!,” before entrancing one of the black women who enter the space of the sanctuary inhabited by the black magicians (Jones *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* 17-39). When The Beast and its black female convert, Tilla, overtake the remaining women and the black magicians, including Jacoub, they are unleashed upon the world, in
all of their evil. The Devil Lady in Madheart, as created by Baraka, appears a descendant of the “white thing” created by Jacoub in A Black Mass, and the Black Mother and Black Sister the unfortunate descendants of Tilla, In her advanced state of being, compared to that of The Beast, perhaps, the Devil Lady is better able to vocalize to Black Man and the others her raison d’être, even after Black Man skewers her with spears and arrows and leaves her to die (although she refuses, as long as Black Mother and Black Sister worship her):

DEVIL LADY: Enter the prize. And I am the prize. And I am dead. And all my life is me. Flowing from my vast whole, entire civilizations (Jones Madheart 576-577).

Perhaps for Black Man, too, the Devil Lady was a kind of prize, at least before the encounter depicted in Madheart, which is why he singularly struggles so steadfastly to do away with her. Throughout the first few exchanges between Black Man and Devil Lady, the innuendo of language is largely sexual; even the stage direction that guides Black Man to pierce her with spears or arrows and ultimately impale her as she moans and writhes indicates more than a deadly violence to the Devil Lady.

Perhaps because of the undying power of the Devil Lady, or maybe because he—like the others—is in transition to consciousness, Black Man, in fact, seems uncertain of his actions without the prodding of Black Woman, expressing sympathy for Black Mother and Black Sister even at their most absurd. After Black Woman implores Black Man to “be alive” for and love her, and then teases that he “better get [her] back,” for his best interest, he seemingly turns his violence to her, forcing her to submit to him, “to love…and to man, now, forever,” (580, 583-584). Embracing consciousness and nationhood, which both Black Mother and Black Sister shun, seems to entail black
women’s willing (or unwilling) submission to black men. After she submits, Black Man and Black Woman are joined, but there is no follow-up or critique of this within the play itself; it just is. At the time Madheart was written, Baraka was exploring the black cultural nationalism teachings of Maulana Ron Karenga exploration. Reflecting on what he remembered as the “male chauvinism” of Karenga’s Los Angeles-based US Organization, Baraka writes in his autobiography that his own chauvinism at that time was enhanced by his adulation for the black cultural nationalism model: “The doctrine said that there was no such thing as equality between men and women, ‘they were complementary,’” (Baraka Autobiography of LeRoi Jones 386 ). The calling of Black Woman to submit for a return of her affection for Black Man perhaps echoes Karenga’s influence on Baraka during this time.

The central focus in Madheart on the valor and leadership of Black Man presents a recurrent gender problem in the canon of early Black Arts literature and other artwork. In the course of the play, White Devil Lady is continuously impaled, silenced, and finally banished by Black Man. He literally beats Black Woman into submission, and he writes off Black Mother and Black Sister as conditional members of the future liberated society (as he decides in the closing lines of the play that the option of killing them is not off of the table yet). The antagonist is female as are the targets of her terror—Black Woman, Black Mother, and Black Sister. In the course of this play, there is little space for women (especially black women) to display any inclination towards autonomy, leadership, or ownership of her claim to liberation. It all depends on Black Man. This is a theme that black women writers begin to actively write against as early as the late 1960s but especially into the 1970s, with the rise of black feminist collectives, periodicals, and
anthologies.

Whereas this theme within Madheart undermines the conversation of gender relations within the black liberation, the conversation of gender is present within the remainder of Black Fire Poet Lethonia Gee and Sonia Sanchez, who contributed a dramatic work and poems to the collection, add their insights on the black woman’s reflections on black liberation, and Jean Wheeler Smith’s short story, “That She Would Dance No More,” offers an anecdote, from the purview of the black male protagonist, of why he would want to restrict the expression (dancing) of the black woman he loves. Yet, black women only number seven of the more than seventy contributors invited to be included in the anthology (four more women writers—Alicia Johnson, Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, and Jewel Latimore—were acknowledged as “shd be” contributors to the text) (Baraka and Neal xxi). This is representative of the lopsided inclusion of black women’s narratives within certain circles of the Black Arts Movement, but not indicative of their fuller representations as artists, institution builders, and activists within the larger cultural moment. Chapter Four will explore the work of black women creators and their perspectives on the Black Power era in more detail; it is my hope to provide necessary perspectives, alongside those pieces by black male allies, challenging the sexism and heterosexism of black cultural nationalism. Black Fire, as a product of the earliest creative moments of the Black Arts Movement, stands as one example of the need for black women, especially at the dawn of the 1970s, to begin to define their own terms of creativity and consciousness-raising.
Can You Kill?: *Black Judgement* and the Revolutionary Critique of Nikki Giovanni

Nikki Giovanni was but one black woman poet and critic to emerge during the late 1960s to add to the canon of black revolutionary literature dedicated to dismantling the “white thing” in black imaginations. However, more than inflammatory or grotesque for the sake of reaction, her poems are positioned as introspective and critical of her revolutionary self and especially her black male comrades with regard to gender posturing and sexism. Her 1968 volume, *Black Judgement*, which she self-published and distributed through Detroit’s Broadside Press, is set of her reflections on Black Power, black consciousness, revolutionary violence, gender relations, family, and womanhood, offering a rich perspectives on this cultural moment and, ultimately, cementing her as an early artistic icon of her generation of poets. Giovanni’s take on the symbolic destruction/death of the “white thing” is varied. At times, as in the poem “Of Liberation,” her perspective on black liberation, and the method by which it should be attained, seems facetious, as she pokes fun at not only white hegemony in the United States but also the rhetoric of her colleagues. However, her poems “Poem for Black Boys,” “Reflections on April 4, 1968,” and “My Poem,” assume a more serious tone, reflecting her seriousness about the state of black positionality in the United States and a sincere need for change to come, by force if need be. In each of these poems, the theme of violence, or simply arming, for self-protection and self-affirmation against cultural suppression or actual repression, figures prominently as a necessary step for the liberation of black people from anti-black racism, violence, and governmental censorship.

Where Giovanni's first, self-published book of poems, *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968), works to define blackness and what it means to be a revolutionary in poems like
“Poem (No Name No. 2),” “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” and “Word Poem,” *Black Judgement* provides a running progress report and corrective guide of what black men and women have made of these definitions. To Giovanni, black people needed to come to terms with themselves as she had, considering two primary, related factors - “power and love” - as the means of their survival (Juhasz 132). Once there was an ideological discarding of “negrohood,” the decentering of whiteness (via double-consciousness) for blackness, and a new definition and love of self from within the black community, in addition to more equitable resolutions on gender relations from within the race, there could truly be a Black Power revolution in America in the future.

Giovanni does nearly as much destruction to the pre-conscious black minds in “Of Liberation” as she had done previously in her infamous poem “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro,” in *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. In the latter poem, she asked her black reader, forcefully, “Can you kill?” and challenged her “negro” readers to “kill your nigger mind / and free your black hands to / strangle […] kill WHITE for BLACK” (Giovanni *Collected Poetry* 20). “Of Liberation,” however, takes the discussion of liberation of the black mind and the black body further by offering a blueprint for liberation to the former negroes. First, she challenges her readers, asking:

Dykes of the world are united
Faggots got their thing together
(Everyone is organized)
Black people these are the facts
Where's your power (41)

The offensive epithets, “dykes” and “faggots,” at the beginning of the poem serve more to get the attention of the so-called black revolutionaries than to denounce the organizing accomplishments the Gay Liberation Movement, although such epithets were not
uncommon to especially early creative works of the Black Arts Movement, emphasizing the inherent heterosexism within the larger black liberation movement of the 1960s (41). In the face of all the liberations, she writes, “Honkies rule the world” and black people still had no power (41). Money, which the “negro” sought before, could not solve the issue of black powerlessness; black people had to own themselves: “The most vital commodity in america / Is Black people,” (41). The black mind, she adds, was the last “bastion of white supremacy,” (42). If only they changed their minds, they could change the tide of power in their communities:

Everything comes in steps
Negative step one: get the white out of your hair
Negative step two: get the white out of your mind
Negative step three: get the white out of your parties
Negative step four: get the white step out of your meetings

BLACK STEP ONE:
Get the feeling out (this may be painful—endure)
BLACK STEP TWO:
Outline and implement the program
All honkies and some negroes will have to die
This is unfortunate but necessary (42)

The fact that she emphasizes “Negative steps” prior to black consciousness “steps” takes a poke at the fact that the formula of her revolution is not at all formulaic for many of her counterparts, especially white presence in meetings and social gatherings or white lovers. Many Black Nationalist activists and artists had firm support in white audiences, colleagues and financiers, contrary to the some of the more inflammatory rhetoric of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Outside of the same rhetoric and some of the art of the Black Power era, very few black people were going out and actually killing “all honkies and some negroes” in the name of liberation; in fact, many whites were filing
into the festivals and theaters to observe the black revolution, so their presence (and existence) was profitable for some organizations (including many of the black theaters). Even still, she minimizes whites as inhuman, an untrainable “beast,” as Baraka does in *A Black Mass* with the grotesque white creation of Jacoub. In one of the more serious notes of this instructional poem, however, Giovanni’s speaker emphasizes that black people, they must acquaint themselves with the issues of the Third World in order to gain numbers in their struggle with racial oppression, they must “take responsibility / for Black people,” and they must fight to survive (42). “Survival” – culturally, mentally, and physically – was their only option for success in the liberation movement, because, as Gwendolyn Brooks writes in the introduction of Don L. Lee's *Don't Cry, Scream*: “Black poets do not subscribe to death. When choice is possible, they choose to die only in defense of life, in defense and in honor of life” (Brooks “Introduction,” 12). In order to endure and change their lives for the better, they must facilitate the means of their survival, through both art and action.

Before there was the pursuit of black power, however, there needed to be black love, which needed to be instilled in black youth. In “Poem for Black Boys,” Nikki Giovanni challenges Western outlets of what Fanon theorized as collective catharsis - “a channel ... through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released” – for black youth (Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* 145). Eurocentric cultural outlets, present throughout the colonial and post-colonial world, more often than not portrayed non-white people as the conquered enemies of white victors. Giovanni seeks to reverse this trend with her poem, by asking black boys “Where are your heroes” and suggesting that they play “run-away-slave / or Mau Mau,” games “more in line with your
history” (Giovanni Collected Poetry 45). While the poem is gendered, speaking directly to “black boys,” the message of the poem is larger than its absence of black girls; it calls for the education and preparation of black children for revolutionary struggle, through their education of the past and present struggles of African Americans and other people of color in the world and their preparation in the present for attacking racism openly:

And this poem I give is worth much more
than any nickel bag
or ten cent toy
And you will understand all too soon
That you, my children of battle, are your heroes
You must invent your own games and teach us old ones
how to play (46)

Though she is only twenty-five when writing this poem, Giovanni places the responsibility for black liberation in the hands of black youth, taking the history they learn from their elders and moving into the future prepared for battle.

Her poems “Reflections on April 4, 1968” and “My Poem” take on a more serious tone regarding the themes of countering white violence and suppression with self-protective violence. “Reflections on April 4, 1968,” offers her perspectives on the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. (the title includes the date of his murder). Having traveled to King’s funeral in Atlanta in 1968, she offers the following reaction:

What can I, a poor Black woman, do to destroy america? This is a question, with appropriate variations, being asked in every Black heart. There is one answer—I can kill. There is one compromise—I can protect those who kill. There is one cop-out—I can encourage others to kill. There are no other ways. (49)

King was a symbol of African Americans opting for fuller inclusion in the United States’ social, cultural, and political bodies by nonviolent means, something that many black Americans who subscribed to (or defined) Black Power had disagreed with and had
critiqued as ineffective for the black masses. With the murder of King, Giovanni’s poem argues, “President johnson” was “not making any distinction / between us [black people] and negroes;” nationalists and integrationists alike were fair game for suppression and murder (Giovanni Collected Poems 49). Giovanni’s pain is embedded in the text of this poem, and she holds white American, in the form of President Lyndon B. Johnson, once an ally of Dr. King, responsible for the death of this beloved civil rights activist and organizer. The poem implores: “Let america’s baptism be fire this time. […] God / will not love us unless we share with others our suffering,” (50). The time was ripe, writes Giovanni, for America to answer for her sins against African Americans.

Giovanni centers her own surveillance by the COINTELPRO and the invasion of her privacy by the government (for her “insurrectionist” poetry) in “My Poem,” just as Baraka does in “Three Movements and a Coda.” Despite her observations about an allegedly staged “robbery,” the tapping of her personal phone, the opening of her mail, and the risk divulging her whereabouts to close acquaintances, Giovanni relays the warning to her readers (the target audience can be read as white, or those whites she suspects are surveilling her) that neither she nor any of her peers lead a revolution of black thought and activity alone. Her varied refrain at the end of each stanza in “My Poem” reminds that audience that she cannot and will not carry a revolution by herself, for black liberation is a collective struggle. She writes “if they kill me […] if i hate all black / people […] if i sit here for the rest of my life / it won't stop / the revolution” – it will proceed without her because “the revolution / is in the streets,” (86-87). The events leading up to this poem – the deaths of Malcolm X, Dr. King, the Kennedy brothers, Patrice Lumumba, and others, in addition to continued revolutionary struggles throughout
the Third World – sparked a flame under the revolution, and the removal of any one individual at this point, she writes, will do nothing to stop its progression:

if I never write
another poem
or short story
if I flunk out
of grad school
if my car is reclaimed
and my record player
won't play
and if I never see
a peaceful day
or do a meaningful
black thing
it won't stop
the revolution (87)

The revolution was a collective of black men and women hoping to move the race forward, past self-hate and proscribed inferiority and towards liberation. As demonstrated by the death of Malcolm X and the following rise of the Black Arts and Black Power movements, the attitudes of the larger group – the “Black Flame,” as she alludes to in “Of Liberation” – could only be fueled, never ceased or suppressed, with the absence or silencing of one influential figure (44). Whether or not Giovanni, as a vocalizer and documenter of the liberation struggle, is present in the movement, she felt that it would go on without her by the sheer will of the people.

The introspective nature of Giovanni’s poetry, even as it engaged the theme of white destruction and attempted to shy away—at least tonally—from the direct instruction and revolutionary propaganda that is exemplified in many of the poems (and some plays) in Black Fire, presented a notable shift in the tone of the Black Arts Movement. Giovanni was not, in any case, one of the first artists to focus her poems on the complexities of black inner life while still evaluating the symbolism of whiteness in
the black imagination, but her poetry offers concurrent critiques of the problem of white hegemonic control over black lives and the internal struggles of black nationalism itself, without losing sight of the end goal of liberation of African Americans, if not all Americans, from the social poisons of racism and inequality. Speaking quite frequently within Bullins’s “dialectics of experience,” Giovanni lures her reader in with the extremely personal nature of her verse; you want to imagine that she is always the speaker in her poems, challenging her reader to see the complexities of being African-American, a woman, a revolutionary, and a human through her eyes. This could very well have accounted for her popularity and the demand for her poetry when she debuted in 1968. Even though she self-published *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, through readings and self-promotion, she was able to sell more than 2,000 copies (369). Beyond the rhetoric of revolution, and in addition to the disruption of the symbols of their oppression, black audiences wanted, and the black creators recognized that they needed, a window into their own lives and experiences as represented by the black artists of this period.

“The people in this play are Black:” Bullins’ *The Fabulous Miss Marie* and White Marginalization

In the mid 1960s, playwright and critic Ed Bullins also emerged as an artist seeking to disrupt the prevalence of those white “ghosts of oppression” in African-American literature and performance. In a 1970 interview for the *Chicago Daily Defender* with Rodney Graham, the founder of Chicago’s New Era Theatre, he cited LeRoi Jones (Baraka) as an “early influence on [him] as a playwright,” alongside Robert Macbeth, who founded the New Lafayette Theater in Harlem in 1967 and invited Bullins to join as associate director and resident playwright in 1968 (Graham 16; Sell and Smith...
“Chronology” 317). Reflecting on the emergence of black theatre in the early 1970s, Bullins states, with some enthusiasm:

Black literature has been available for years, all kinds, but the problem has been getting down to the people […] With all of the budding theatrical groups all over the country, we can go right into the community and have literature for the people and involve them in dramatic action. Theatre is becoming a more acceptable cultural activity for black people on the whole and will eventually become a necessary part of our lives, (Graham 16).

Through his oeuvre of (now) more than 100 plays, Bullins sought to make black drama relevant to black audiences. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in plays like How Do You Do (1965), The Electronic Nigger (1965), and Clara’s Old Man (1968), this took the form of showing his audiences the internal workings of black life, using music, black vernacular, dance, and popular cultural references specific to African-American expression within the bodies of his work. The fourth play within Bullins’ “Twentieth Century Cycle,” The Fabulous Miss Marie (1971), continued this tradition in his work and also carries a theme of white marginalization by creating an all-black space and emphasizing, at the end of the introductory stage instructions, that “The people in this play are Black,” (Bullins The Fabulous Miss Marie 7). Unlike the other pieces discussed in this chapter, this play decentralizes and casts out whiteness rather than destroying or disrupting it symbolically. A number of Bullins’ plays, especially prior to The Fabulous Miss Marie, did feature white characters in the forms of neighbors, house guests, authorities (i.e. the Policeman in In The Wine Time), or the white female liberal interlocutor in Malcolm: ’71, or Writing Blackness. However, for the action and intention of The Fabulous Miss Marie’s critique of black middle-class indulgence, it
seems that it was necessary to create a black space in order to situate this dramatic piece and allow the characters to tell their own stories.

In *The Fabulous Miss Marie*, the only expression of whiteness in the play is Marie’s dog, Whitie, whom the actors continue to prod Marie Horton and her husband, Bill, to “keep that damn mutt quiet” or to “let that goddamn dog in,” symbolizing two variations of the critical perspectives on the influence of white cultural hegemony within the consciousness-raising literature during this time. To let Whitie in, according to Marie, would allow literal destruction into her home, which hosts the daily debauchery in which she and her friends and lovers indulge and, in fact, seem trapped, because the dog was “in heat” and would damage the upholstery (Bullins *The Fabulous Miss Marie* 13). To keep her outside meant that the menace of this dog in heat would be kept peripheral to the action of the play, although she remains a present vocalist in the background. This echoes the symbolism of The Beast in Baraka’s *A Black Mass*. If not created in the magicians’ sanctuary/home by Jacoub to answer to his own desires for enhanced knowledge and lasting influence, The Beast would not have been able to wreak havoc on the Black Magicians and the Women, nor the larger body of black humanity. In Bullins’ play, then, keeping Whitie, an actual beast, outside of the space of action—the Horton’s home—was a way to prevent her, too, from wreaking havoc on that black space and the black people celebrating inside and allowing the characters to exchange with one another and share their stories with the audience uninterrupted (except at those points that Whitie is scripted to bark in the background).

The fact that Whitie is even aurally present, however, emphasizes the commitment of many of the characters presented in *The Fabulous Miss Marie* to keeping
up appearances in order to attain or keep middle-class status, including letting the action of the black revolution happen without their own participation. Beyond the façade of the never-ending party at the Horton household, these are real people struggling within their internal lives and with the world outside of the party. In each of the self-introductory, audience-directed monologues of nine of the play’s characters (Gaffney, the black nationalist, and Whitie the “invisible dog”—also a scripted character—do not have extensive monologues of this kind), they are able to reveal their struggles beyond the party, some that remain unknown to the characters about one another through the early action of the play. As the character central to all of the action of the play, Marie Horton, a black woman in her mid-forties, persistently positions herself as the robust and jovial life of her own party, but she struggles with her own need to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. To combat the traumatic origins of her marriage to Bill (an unplanned pregnancy and an abortion that left her barren), she drinks and indulges in being a socialite, an organization (or “race”) woman of the old guard, and extramarital affairs, including one with their houseguest Art, who is twenty years her junior. To keep up appearances, she also worked as a domestic and found Art work with her employer’s husband so that they could collectively bring in “as much as some colored doctors make… ‘Cause it’s a party every day at Miss Marie’s house,” (17). Her pride in being “from the North” is her chosen blockade from the reality of anti-black racism, as she states her monologue, “I ain’t never known anything ’bout no discrimination….I always did have my freedom…Yes sir…Miss Marie will tell you,” (16). However, despite her continued indulgence, she is not unaware of the complexities of the black revolution. When observing the footage of a race riot on her television (included as a stage prop that
silently shows consistently shifting images throughout the play, ranging from pornography to news programming) she tells Steve, a younger black man with whom she replaces Art at the close of the play, that “most of them niggers ain’t nothin’ but cops…tryin to find out what they can get Black people to do…You should know how sneaky white people is…honey. And how they use the Black man against the Black man…Hummp, better than to be that kinda fool,” (63). She reduces Steve’s observation of the “Civil Rights brothers…taking care of business” to a kind of orchestrated drama directed by whites, which, as many of the now-public COINTELPRO files of civil rights workers show, was not a farfetched perspective. Marie Horton is no “unconscious” Negro reveling in ignorance, then, as Gaffney has positioned her and the rest of the party; she just chooses to spend her life that way and enjoy the little freedoms she feels that she has.

Bill Horton also struggles with his reality by indulging in alcohol and extramarital affairs, including one with an unnamed white woman and Marie’s niece Wanda, both of whom are revealed to be pregnant. His affair with the white woman, he tells Marie, was to express his virility and, again, keep up appearances, showing their neighbors that he was capable of having children. Unlike his relationship with Marie, which is more representative of a mutual indulgence and capitalistic partnership, he has beaten the white woman publicly, which he tells the audience he would never do to his wife because “[t]here’s something about hitting a woman that means the end…somethin’ just goes out of the relationship,” (24). The simple act of his cavorting publicly with his white mistress was enough for him to lose his job (his white employer spotted them together), but his beating the woman in public spoke to his desire to be seen as a man, and her pregnancy a symbol of the virility that Marie would not allow him: “I wanted the world to know that I
could have kids…even if she was white,” (29-30). Marie’s concern about the affair was not that he was cheating, but rather how he could have the audacity to show the woman off around their friends and in their common haunts (29). In the action of the play, all is well between them and the party goes on when Bill returns with gifts and a new job at the close of the play, but even he, in his drunkenness, comes to realize the fate of their behavior—middle-class indulgence and selective avoidance of the black revolution—prior to this, in his conversation with Bud, an educator and party attendee:

BUD
The kids act different.

BILL
Different?...Yeah…I guess they do…You know…these young people are confused…they’re lost.

BUD
But things were different when we were kids.
[…]
But these kids…I dunno…maybe it’s the revolution. (53).

Bud continues to Bill that they, all of their friends, are “dying off…a vanishing breed,” being left behind for their resistance to the new program of being, of blackness. But even still, they indulge, exit the scene to drink away the seriousness of the revelation. Whitie continues to be a nuisance in the background, yet they will continue to feed her steaks (the only thing Marie will feed the dog) and indulge her desires. For now, however, the space and the story of Miss Marie and her ill-fated friends, lost in an endless and indulgent holiday party, remains black. Even with Whitie removed from the black space of the party, each of its attendees continued to be influenced by the chaos waiting outside of their party and indulged even more in those hang ups they brought into the space with them.
With his marginalization of “Whitie” as a nuisance at best, although ever-present in the background, Bullins centers the imagined dichotomy between revolutionary-minded “blacks” and complacent “negroes” in *The Fabulous Miss Marie*. In his offstage argument with to Art, Gaffney the symbolic revolutionary seemingly speaks to all of the characters—especially Bill and Marie—when he can be overheard yelling, “You’re decadent…you’re indecent…you’re counterrevolutionary,” (48). Gaffney’s own “hang up” was that, even as he berated the lifestyles of the people at the party, especially Art, he needed their validation as well, going as far as saying to them “I am a Soul Brother, too,” (27). He knew, as Art told him, that the black revolution would need Art and others Gaffney presumed “unconscious” –the black masses—for it to succeed (65). Within his portrayals of Art and Gaffney in the play, the discord between blacks revolutionaries and unconscious negroes as echoed through a great deal of Black Arts poetry and drama is evident, although Bullins does not privilege one state of consciousness over the other.

While many black artists of the 1960s and 1970s attempted to draw a line in the sand with regard to, as poet and critic Haki Madhubuti writes, “is u is or is u ain’t,” there was also a demonstrated need at the heart of the Black Arts Movement and in the work of the larger body of African-American poetry and drama of the moment to unify the people (Madhubuti *Don’t Cry, Scream* 37). Baraka, in photo-poem *In Our Terribleness* (1971) with black photographer Fundi, warns “blacks” and “negroes” alike that, in the eyes of the upholders of anti-black racism and white supremacy, “We niggers together,” (Baraka and Fundi). The freeing of black minds that began with “killing the ghosts of oppression” through the textual presentation and performance of white violence or banishing, then, concurrently and into the 1970s included holding a mirror to African-American lives,
identifying those habits and actions counterproductive to collective liberation. Chapter Three discusses this debate of “black vs. negro” at length and also furthers the discussion of what black creators of this moment determined the process of racial unification to entail.
CHAPTER 3

"FROM IMITATION TO INITIATION": BLACK ARTS POETRY AND DRAMA AND THE MOVEMENT FOR A PRESCRIPTIVE BLACKNESS

niggers are licensed to be killed. change. a negro: something pigs eat.
change. i say change into a realblack righteous aim.

Haki Madhubuti, “a poem to complement other poems”

nigger is a definition of the wholly detached from material consideration a nigger dont have no gold
not even a negro got gold but a negro think he would if he had gold
a nigger is holy [.....]

we niggers together
forever

Amiri Baraka, In Our Terribleness

For the cause of communal unification and psychological (and physical) freedom as the preliminary message to their black audiences, those poets and dramatists creating for and during the Black Arts Movement sought to define for and with these audiences what it meant to be black. As I suggest in my discussion of the dialogue between the characters Art and Gafney in Ed Bullins’ The Fabulous Miss Marie at the close of Chapter Two, such a definition was not clear cut, or static, for that matter. The dialogue, or argument, written between these two young black male characters is meant to present the trouble of assigning authenticity to racial identity, of “blackness,” more than it is the dramatist Bullins himself attempting to promote the position of either man as ideal. Whereas there is cause for the revolutionary-minded Gaffney to attempt to reach his counterparts, if even only for his own means (especially when he attempts to
“authenticate” himself by telling them where he is from), Art is also correct when he states, “Gafney…without me you won’t have a revolution,” as he is representative of a kind of black everyman in transition, aware of the societal ills impacting black people in America but holding on tightly to the possibility of economic mobility and self-advancement, often to the expense of those around him, especially Miss Marie (Bullins *Miss Marie* 65). Therefore, to call Gafney liberated or revolutionary and Art counterrevolutionary for his own positionality ignores the complexities of each character that Bullins presents for his audience. While some of his contemporaries drew this line more readily in their poetry and drama, between unconscious “negroes” (like Art could have symbolized) and liberated “blacks” (as Gafney presented himself to be), many more were interested in these complexities and suggesting that both could be useful in understanding and realizing the road ahead for black liberation.

This chapter aims to highlight both of these angles within the conversations between artists attempting to define what the path to black consciousness entails, what sacrifices need be incurred. For some, the creative (and political) position of “black vs. negro” in a number of Black Arts Movement poems and plays was an attempt to present a prescriptive blackness. In the calls for the destruction of “the white thing” and the destruction of whiteness (as discussed in Chapter Two) and, by relation, the “Negroes” and “Uncle Toms” of the black bourgeoisie who purportedly ally with the enemy, there is a draw toward a newly-informed black consciousness, self-respect, and appreciation of the group’s unique history and survival (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 36; Van Deburg 265, 269). The poetry of Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, K. William Kgositsile, and many others during the late 1960s and early 1970s especially speak to this theme, as
does the play *We Own the Night* by artist/activist Jimmy Garrett. On their surfaces, however, some poems and plays by Black Arts arbiters call for further introspection into the process of liberation by questioning the meaning of the authentication of blackness at the expense of losing the masses of black America in the quest for meaning, as well as the irony of simply reversing symbols and practicing oppression as “liberators.” Some black artists defend that there is space for all beyond “black” self-identification, and, like Sanchez in *The Bronx is Next*, offer satirical depictions of the limitations of “black nationalism,” “blackness,” and the rhetoric and actions of the would-be liberators of black people.

In Baraka’s 1970 photo-poem *In Our Terribleness*, a collaborative work with photography Fundi (Bill Abernathy) and graphic artist Laini (Sylvia Abernathy), he attempts to unify these ideas, inspired by his community organizing work in Newark, New Jersey—his hometown—and the black people in and around the city. While celebrating the spiritual dedication of the Nation of Islam and the cultural nationalism of Kawaida as embraced by a number of Black Power and Black Arts artist-activists, he also includes verse in homage to the images of everyday black men, women, and children and their music, writing their lives into the pages of his poetry, or, perhaps, imagining their lives giving life to his words. In his 1971 review of the book, poet/critic Ron Welburn states that *In Our Terribleness* represented “a new level of commitment and sophistication” within the Black Arts Movement, one that was “an embracement and celebration of the black experience” in full, not just of selected members of the community (Welburn “Reviving soul in Newark, N. J.: *In Our Terribleness,*” BR10). In contrast to the “black vs. negro” dichotomy presented by the black artists’ debates on the
course towards black consciousness, the unification of being, vision, and spirituality seemed the end goal of Baraka’s work in this hybrid photo-poetic piece and, thusly, his larger vision of the movement he had a hand in spearheading.

Is U Is or Is U Ain’t Black?: Steering “Negroes” to Black Consciousness Through Poetry

Many of the early poems of the Black Arts Movement were calls to community consciousness and collective action, lyrical exhibitions that attempted to pulled black readers into the page or black audience members out of their seats and into the streets to facilitate change. In order to become conscious and ultimately changers of their own destinies, many black poets and playwrights argued, they had to be willing to shed the “negro” identity for the black. William Van De Burg describes this process as “Negro to Black Conversion” in his analysis of Black Power politics and culture, A New Day in Babylon. He details this conversion in four steps, as it was exemplified through creative pieces interpreting this theme:

1. The “Negro” was “infused with a thinly disguised self-hatred,” and found the “assimilation-integration paradigm” acceptable.

2. This pre-conscious “Negro” questions the world order; recognizes the extent of brainwashing; hurls into “an obsessive search for an authentic black identity.”

3. In the “Immersion Stage,” the “ex-Negroes” are liberated from whiteness, and whiteness is “negated and shunned.”

4. Finally, the new “blacks” define and internalize blackness, with the aim of modeling the new consciousness for the remainder of the masses (Van Deburg 53-55).
As I suggest in Chapter One, this summation of the theme of “black vs. negro” is embedded in the artists’ and theorists’ reinterpretations of Frantz Fanon for use in their social, cultural, and political contexts in the United States. Van Deburg supports this idea when he suggests that they were inspired by the Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary theorist to create combat literature, and “formulate and establish new definitions, conceptual models, and standards of normative behavior that would be free from the controlling assumptions and values of dominant culture,” (58-59). Taking the breadth of Black Arts fiction, poetry, plays, music, and visual art into consideration, Van Deburg’s suggestions bring together what seem to some critics, like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., disparate and reactionary images, and what others, like Black Arts feminism scholar Cheryl Clarke, limit in scope and theme in their analyses of the movement and the larger era of creativity.

Similar to Van Deburg, Reiland Rabaka contends in his study of black aesthetic, political, and social movements, *Hip Hop’s Inheritance* (2012), that Black Power (and especially Black Arts) advocates took pains in defining and redefining black (and white) realities and identities “[i]n order to challenge and change ‘American cultural hegemony,’” channeling both Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X in facilitating “*psychological liberation* to inspire a  “*protracted process of decolonization and reeducation*” (Rabaka 96). Part of this process, of course, was for the artists to dismantle what they felt African Americans understood about the United States, white Americans, and, most importantly, themselves through consciousness-raising art.

The “black vs negro” theme in Black Arts drama and especially poetry was a central conversation on the artists’ vision of where African Americans and the larger
diaspora were going and how the masses could grow, and perhaps where they should grow, together. Consider the short but substantial piece “SOS” by Amiri Baraka (1965), which led his poetry collection *Black Art* (1969). He simply writes (and repeats): “Calling all black people / Calling all black people, man woman child / Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in” (Baraka “SOS,” 181). The speaker of the poem does not specify why his or her subjects, “all black people, man woman child,” are being called to attention, who the speaker is, or why the subjects’ attention to the speaker is so urgent. What is implied, however, is that there is an urgency on behalf of the speaker towards their audience applying their attention towards this new black poetry, that there is something vital to be revealed if they continued to be invested in what the speaker (or the poet/activist, Baraka) had to tell them. By not revealing the cause of his speaker’s urgency, Baraka plays on the presumed curiosity of his black readers, urging them to want to read on to know more, and also his non-black readers, who could read on to see why an invitation from the poem’s speaker was not extended to them within such poems directly addressed to its black readership. In its brevity, “SOS” captures the essence of black cultural nationalism that Ron Karenga has defined as “functional, collective, and committing” (Karenga 33). Baraka’s “SOS” can be imagined as a communal invitation to “all black people” willing to “come in,” hear about themselves through the new poetry, and, ultimately, commit themselves to positive change for black people in America and the rest of the African Diaspora.

Haki Madhubuti employs a similar technique to Baraka in his “A Poem to Complement Other Poems” (1969). Unlike Baraka’s “SOS,” however, the speaker in Madhubuti’s poem makes his intent clear for his audience. The speaker is attempting to
spur “potential” black people—negroes/”niggers”—to change their affiliations and come to a black consciousness (Madhubuti 45). Madhubuti presents a challenge to his readers by using an imperative and almost sermonic structure in the poem, a style that one New York Times poetry critic called “rapid, jerky, intense speech-rhythm in almost morse shorthand,” emphasizing that the poet did not sell “comfortable sentimentality” in his will to win over his reader/listener (Vendler “Good Black Poems, One By One,” 3). His tone in “a poem to complement other poems” does not explain or request a turn to blackness and nationhood but demands that these personas-in-limbo between blackness and negrohood become black to the benefit of themselves and the larger black community. The speaker demands of his audience of “Negroes”:

change, into a necessary blackself,
change, like a gas meter gets higher.
change, like a blues song talking about a righteous tomorrow
[...]
change: is u is or is u aint. change. now now change. for the better change.
read a change. live a change. read a black poem.
change. be the realpeople (46).

Madhubuti’s poem demands that, in order for his audience to become “realpeople”—black people—they simply had to change their minds and actions toward black community-building and away from Western-inspired individualism (35). His poem goes a bit further than Baraka’s “SOS” in that its repetition of the word “change” and its demand that black people come to know the “realenemy” (i.e. racism, white cultural hegemony, and/or self-hate) are not just techniques used to draw the attention of the reader/listener but instructive measures to be taken towards liberation. In this call to action and consciousness, Madhubuti echoes the words of Malcolm X, who stated in an interview with Harry Ring in January 1965 that African Americans needed to change
their foci and their responses to a racist America in order to achieve results. He responded:

Whenever our people are ready to take any kind of action necessary to get results, they’ll get results. They’ll never get results as long as they play by the ground rules laid down by the power structure downtown. It takes action to get some action, and this is what our people have to realize,” (Malcolm X, “Interview with Harry Ring,” 224).

As Malcolm X had said prior to this interview to black and mixed crowds, a change of consciousness was pivotal to black Americans reaching the point of action for their own liberation. Through his refrain of the word “change” in “a poem to complement other poems,” Madhubuti carries this message to his audience.

Madhubuti’s poem not only serves as a call-to-action/consciousness for his black readers, but also clearly demonstrates a vital segment of the nation-building program advocated by the Black Arts poets: the “Negro-to-Black” conversion. Van Deburg writes that “Negroes”/”Toms” were considered “a major hindrance to black psychological liberation” and had the capacity to lead “Afro-Americans in the opposite direction of peoplehood,” which also harkens Malcolm X’s oratory (Van Deburg 269). Those members of the African-American community identified as “Toms” or “Negroes” were likely members of the middle-class, strivers who sought the luxuries thought to accompany middle-class distinction and formal (white Eurocentric or Americanist) education. Of course, the conversion of negroes to black people, like the concept of black nationhood, is imagined and comprised of the interlinking theories of the period that attempted to reconstruct blackness in the collective African-American imagination. To the poets, the call to consciousness represented by the Negro-to-Black conversion process was an important resource towards the mission of nation-building.
Emily Bernard argues that the urgency of black poets “to weed out the righteous from the fallen, the ‘blacks’ from the ‘Negroes,’ was not really a necessary, recuperative step on the way to group solidarity” but that both groups were “essential to” (author’s emphasis) the ideology of black nation-building (Bernard 257-58). In fact, the positioning of Negroes against blacks was a definitive strategy; without the presence of pre-conscious blacks (Negroes) there would be no foil against which to construct the liberated black man or woman, which is perhaps what Art was inferring to Gafney in *The Fabulous Miss Marie*. Though most of the poets included the entirety of their black/negro audience in the framing of their instructive, often exhortatory, accounts of the state of black people in America and the need for a black nation, the dichotomization of the imagined black community into negroes and blacks presented a scale on which African Americans concerned with the nation-building goal of the Black Power movement could weigh their own consciousness.

Several of the black poets writing in the vein of the “black vs. Negro” debate used speaker-as-convert techniques to draw in their readers. This method, as seen in K. William Kgotsitsile’s “The Awakening,” assumed the speaker as not only a promoter of the new blackness but a person in transition himself. As much as the term is utilized the Black Arts poets, “blackness,” as Benston argues, is an indefinite, fluid state of being that subsumes the cultural, historical and social implications of African-American life in the United States; he writes that “the era’s own bracing lesson” was essentially that “blackness is not an inevitable object, but rather a motivated, constructed, corrosive, and productive process” (Benston 6). Positioning “blackness” as the end goal of true black consciousness, the speaker-as-convert approach to this poetry makes the message of the
poem more relatable, the daunting task of acquiring black consciousness seemingly obtainable, and the audience included in the personal journey of the poems’ speakers and, hopefully, inspired to make a journey towards “blackness” themselves.

Kgositsile’s “The Awakening,” published in *Black Fire*, is a poem detailing the journey of its speaker—who can be assumed to be an South African national like Kgositsile—from a colonized, European-influenced pre-consciousness—a kind of double-consciousness combining the native self and the colonized self—to that of a Pan-African consciousness necessary to his survival and dedication to the cause of global black liberation. The poem’s speaker describes his pre-conscious state as a “prenatal death” in which “Nothing sounded good enough / Unless it had a white background” (Kgositsile 226). A student of social and political thought, the reader can assume, the speaker positions his flirtation with Marx against a self-schooling of a pantheon of Pan-African theorists and activists like Marcus Garvey and other black Marxists like W. E. B. Du Bois, Kwame Nkrumah, and Nelson Mandela that piqued his interest in Black Nationalism. Like many other black poets detailing the journey from pre-consciousness to blackness, he centers Malcolm X as the epitome of black manhood and the “anti-Negro” that black men, specifically, should aspire to:

Amidst sit-ins, kneel-ins, sleep-ins and mass mis-education  
Brother Malcolm’s voice penetrated alienated bloodcells  
Teaching Black manhood in Harlem USA  
Endorsing “Bandung,”  
Retrieving Black balls cowering in glib Uncle Tomism (226).

The elevation of consciousness to which Malcolm X inspires the speaker causes him to “see everything against a Black background […] Breaking the blood-dripping icons of Western congenital / chicanery,” in contrast to his prior acceptance of knowledge against
a “white background” in his journey (227). The poem, as illustrated by the excerpt above, is testimony to the possibility of black psychological liberation from ideas and accepted cultural “norms” positioned against a “white background” and a call to move away from the “mass mis-education” of the previous generations of black people. Kgosi’sle’s positioning of his speaker as a revolutionary-in-transit from a Eurocentric train-of-thought to one that centralizes a constructed universal black experience and support of Third World revolution (“Endorsing ‘Bandung’”) and the reclamation of black manhood is meant to draw the black reader towards the possibility of his (specifically, male) own liberation and the global possibilities that await the newly-liberated black mind.

Speaking directly to the coming-to-consciousness of African-American middle-class “negroes” committed to integration, assimilation, and acceptance by whites, Deanna Harris’ bildungsroman poem “The Saga of Sally Sue,” contributed to the conversations of “Negro to Black Conversion” and the expectations of bourgeois African-American women. The poem, published in the Black Poetry issue of the Negro Digest in 1969, gives a third-person account of the journey of Sally Sue Emerson—“The First Colored secretary of the Urban League / The First Colored to have a desk in an / Exclusive, Equal Opportunity Office”—from what she perceived as her comfortable and dignified position in the American middle class to choosing to be “BLACK!” (Harris 35). As many of the poets wrote of Sally Sue’s type, she was ashamed of her parents’ humble home (although they were proud to show her off); she “begged her way out” of having her white girlfriends as visitors with allusions to bourgeois inconveniences like “The house’s being remodeled,” (35). Sally Sue, and her aspirations to be the “First” and “The Only,” were
the problems of assimilation and the waning Civil Rights Movement that those committed to the Black Power and Black Arts Movement critiqued. The self-concerned nature of her professional and social lives, and her need to be seen in designer clothes and in “the Exquisite Apartments / on Park Ridge Avenue” was the problem, as this performance left little space for her (as the symbol she represents) or any other African Americans individualistically committed to economic and social mobility via assimilation to appreciate her cultural and ancestral heritages and the empowerment of her community, and, thus, the black liberation struggle’s commitment to these things (34).

Former SNCC organizer Jean Wheeler Smith, in her 1967 Redbook article, “How I Learned to Be Black,” speaks from the perspective of one converted about the “well-mannered girl” she once was, one whose family and community in Detroit supported her own aims of economic and social mobility and discouraged her intentions of joining the Civil Rights Movement and the “waste [her] talents” in such an endeavor (Smith 247). In a sense, she was bred to be the fictional Sally Sue Emerson. It was the civil rights struggle that radicalized her vision of her role with her people, but the very failures Smith perceived of the firmly middle-class, assimilationist struggle are what disillusioned her in the end:

We found it was a shallow victory. After the earlier sit-ins, the civil rights movement had had to stop and ask: “What have we gained by winning the right to a cup of coffee downtown?” In the same way, we who had worked for voting rights now had to ask ourselves what we had gained. In both cases the answer was the same: Negroes were in fact not basically better off with this new right than they had been before; they were still poor and without the power to direct their own lives (251).

The silencing and exclusion of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 and the failure of Mississippi-based, SNCC-
assisted poverty programs with which she was involved lead to Smith’s own understanding of the futility of cooperating with a socioeconomic and political system unwilling to empower African Americans. She writes that this understanding further radicalized her to believe in the need for black people to assume their own power over the political, economic, and social aspects of their own communities. In the course of Harris’ narrative of Sally Sue, the poem’s protagonist comes to a similar conclusion of her own.

Through her beau, who was “Very Black” and “a little extreme,” Sally Sue Emerson gained her own window into what he and his “Black radical” friends were facing and how her own involvement was necessary (34). As had many “negroes,” she wrote them off as militants who “would cause trouble in the community,” (34). During a nationalist meeting that her beau “dragged” her to, the group is encountered by police who could not tell “THEM” (the poet’s emphasis and quotation) from her kind of dignified negro type. Despite her “Jack Winters’ pantsuit” and straightened hair, the police would not—and could not—decipher her from the rest of the group, and she was hauled to jail with “All the other niggers!” (35). With this experience, she was radicalized:

After ONE night in the jail
With one friendly policeman after the other,
Sally Sue Emerson was no longer
The Only Colored
in the office
in the Park Ridge apartments:
Sally became—to the disappointment of her parents
the Urban League
and friends (?)
BLACK! (35)

Although Harris ends Sally Sue’s conversion narrative here, having access to biographical narratives like Smith’s provide one possible end result of this protagonist’s
conversion to “black.” Even if one is raised to be a model of a middle-class American lifestyle or finds their comfort in the tokenism of being the “Only” or the “First” person of color in their social, economic, or political positions, the inevitability of encountering anti-black racism and experiencing systemic oppression was ever looming and, for those willing, ready to inspire one’s radicalization, as in the case of Sally Sue Emerson.

Much of the early poetry of the Black Arts Movement draws the proverbial “line in the sand” that poems as the aforementioned by Madhubuti, Kgotsitsile, and Harris portray. To choose to be “black” meant that one was committed to the empowerment of black communities across the United States economically, politically, and culturally; however, to remain a “negro” and pushing back against the black liberation struggle (by action or inaction) meant, to those committed to the former identity, was to be relegated to the will and whim of white cultural, political, and economic hegemony. The instructive message of Madhubuti, the perceivably autobiographical verse of Kgotsitsile, and the narrative poem of Harris each deliver a clear message to their readers: To be black is to be in sync with the vision of a liberated future for people of African descent, but to remain “negro” limits the capacities and vision of not only one’s self but the race as a whole.

**Rebuking the ‘Old Spirituality’ and Restructuring the New: Jimmy Garrett’s*We Own the Night* and Sonia Sanchez’s*The Bronx is Next***

Black Arts drama committed to this message of psychological and spiritual purging of “Negro” tendencies was able to present more nuanced conversations on what it meant for one to transition to consciousness, or to move in ideology and being from negro to black. As I discuss in Chapter Two, Amiri Baraka’s*Madheart* with some dark
humor presents but one example of the display of this scenario. Black Man and Black Woman represent the symbols of blackness-in-transition, albeit, and the necessity (according to the playwright) of their roles in the liberation of black people, whereas Mother and Sister are portrayed as “negro” women desperately clinging to whiteness as their access to meaning, beauty, and power. Baraka suggests that Black Man opts to save Mother and Sister for the sake of them possibly becoming conscious, and, as Bullins suggests through Gafney in The Fabulous Miss Marie, such foils as Mother and Sister are needed to define a black revolution. However, playwright Jimmy Garrett presents another solution in his dramatic piece We Own the Night, published in Black Fire Through his characters, Garrett suggests that the only way for black men (specifically) to overcome the divide between blacks and negroes was to be willing to kill for the revolution, especially those negroes willing to stand in the way of black freedom. However, Sonia Sanchez’s short drama The Bronx is Next (1970) criticizes the targeting of “negroes” for elimination/death in the name of black liberation and the exclusion and demonization of black women. Further, she critiques the reversing the symbols of oppression for use against white Americans within the setting of a predominantly black male-led revolution. Held together, these plays present a point and counterpoint to this theme of “black vs. negro” and how, as Sanchez demonstrates, the black revolutionaries should exhibit caution lest they become the oppressors of even their own, damaging their own cause of liberation.

In his one-act “Play of Blackness,” Garrett assumes a mood of “death and dying” (directed stage props include a dead black youth and a dead white policeman) as the crux of We Own the Night (Garrett 527-528). To the black male characters in this play, in
order for the revolution to continue—and despite the fates of those presented as heroes of the rebellion centered in the action of this play—death was necessary and inevitable. Unlike Black Man in Baraka’s Madheart, however, the protagonist, Johnny, and his comrades see even the negroes as worthy sacrifices for the sake of liberation, and he ultimately turns his violence-for-liberation onto his own mother. Johnny is mortally wounded throughout the action of the play, through a prior shootout with local police, while other unnamed characters violently coerce a doctor to help him. They were involved in a shootout with local police, and they retreat to an alley (the setting of the play) to tend to Johnny. Johnny is intent on Lil’T, a fellow black rebel, keeping his mother away because “Ain’t no…women here…,” and, to be certain of her “negrohood,” “She thinks too much of the white man,” (529). Winning the battle against the suppression of white policing in his community meant winning Mother and her understanding, from Johnny’s perspective, but women like her were “Too strong,” and indelibly committed to upholding white hegemonic control (529-530). When Mother is introduced, she is presented by Garrett as domineering, pioused (at least in presentation), and committed to the good she perceives in white power structures. To the younger revolutionary black men, she is seen as a liability, although the character Billy Joe fetches her because he believes Johnny is dying and his mother should be present. To defend his positionality as a leader of a black revolution to his mother, Johnny says to her: “Black people don’t want to kill. We want to live. But we have to kill first. We have to kill in order to win,” (538).

In Garrett’s presentation of Mother, she is symbolic of the “Old Spirituality” inherent to “Negro” sensibility, or, as Larry Neal writes, Mother “is involved in the old
constructs,” in which “manliness is equated with white morality”; therefore, anything Johnny and his team of rebels would or could do to disrupt that “morality” was certainly the work of heathens and hateful men, per her summation (Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” 38). Instead of supporting his determination to fight, as Johnny surmised would happen, Mother instead accosts him for “cussin’ and stealin’,” and being a willful criminal, whereas white men “know what’s right and what ain’t […]  You ought to be actin’ like the white man stead of tryin’ to kill him,” (Garrett 537). When Johnny, in what the viewer/reader can assume are his final moments of life, chooses to end the life of his mother, we are supposed to understand that he has done this for the sake of the revolution and that both of their deaths are both justifiable and righteous. This is especially considerable when one holds Malcolm X’s suggestions about how to deal with “Uncle Tom” negroes in his 1963 speech “Message to the Grassroots,” beside Neal’s brief critique of Garrett’s work in “The Black Arts Movement.”

Before the audience at the Northern Negro Leadership Conference in Detroit, Malcolm X delivered one of his final speeches of his affiliation with the Nation of Islam, before being silenced by the organization’s leader, Elijah Muhammad (Breitman 3). This speech, one of X’s most celebrated and cited, is perhaps where Garrett, Neal, and others first encountered the language with which to address what they perceived was the issue with African Americans supposedly committed to upholding systems of white cultural, social, political, and economic hegemony and, by extension, rejecting their black selves and the revolution. Addressing the need to purge themselves of this old line of thought and of the “turn-the-other-cheek revolution” emblematic of the Civil Rights Movement, Malcolm X tells this anecdote about the Chinese Revolution:
They threw the British out, along with the Uncle Tom Chinese. Yes, they did. They set a good example. […] When I was in prison, I read an article in Life magazine showing a little Chinese girl, nine years old; her father was on his hands and knees and she was pulling the trigger because he was an Uncle Tom Chinaman. When they had the revolution over there, they took a whole generation of Uncle Toms and just wiped them out. And within ten years that little girl became a full-grown woman. No more Toms in China. And today it’s one of the toughest, roughest, most feared countries on this earth—by the white man. Because there are no Uncle Toms over there (Malcolm X “Message to the Grassroots,” 8).

This is a bold but limiting summation of the events in China during this nation’s revolutionary period, but he uses this anecdote to indicate the need for a turning away from the old guard of stunted leadership. Further, even as X continues on to present his famous “field negro” vs. “house negro” analogy (the former representative of the black masses, the latter indicative of those few African-American men and women assimilated into and, therefore, used by white power structures to maintain the white hegemony in the United States), he does not in any form advocate for the destruction or death of the “Uncle Toms” he lists in his speech, including the “Big Six” leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. However, his intention—at this juncture of his own ideology, at least—seems to be to raise awareness of the ways in which some African Americans were used as pawns of the system of racial oppression in the United States and how he felt, and thought he knew, that these leaders did not have the best intentions of the masses in mind in promoting their faith in white leadership.

Echoing this sentiment in his analysis of Garrett’s play, Larry Neal does not solely position black leadership at the helm of placing barriers in the way of black revolution of the mind, body, and spirit, but the symbol of the black mother and her “Old Spirituality,” citing Du Bois’s discussion of the “Faith of the Fathers” in The Souls of Black Folk (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 38). Johnny’s mother, per Neal, is but a
“female Uncle Tom who berates the Brothers and their cause,” because she does not understand the revolution, their belief in the need for bloodshed to cement the change that they seeking, even if it is their own or the blood of their mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters (38). Garrett, writes Neal, sees such a vast generational gap in ideology and action between mother and son as “unbridgeable” (38). On the issue of differences in ideology among African-American men and women living in an oppressive system, he goes even further to say that “the [black] woman’s aspirations and values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man,” which he notes as the reason that Johnny’s father, not present in the action of the play, is symbolic of “but a shell” of a man, having his masculinity stripped by both Mother and systemic anti-black racism (38).

This rationale of restrictive black mothering was not limited to some members of black artist and activist circles, however; social scientists and other researchers also attempted to verify this claim. Of black mothers, African-American psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs wrote in 1968 that it was her “lot in life to suppress masculine assertiveness in her sons,” if only to save his life, prepare him for “his subordinate place in the world,” (Grier and Cobbs 62-63). Whereas Price and Cobbs rather lightly rebuke the idea of black matriarchy as inherent in the black American family structure without systemic racism, they and Neal and Garrett seem intent on centering it as the major limitation of black men’s development and autonomy, and it is this limitation that Johnny is destroying when he kills his mother at the end of *We Own the Night*. He is not only killing the symbol of his—and his father’s—own suppression, but a person symbolic of the intraracial problems of carrying an effective black revolution. This consideration gives Johnny’s proclamation at the start of the play, “Ain’t no…women here…,” in
warning his comrades to keep his mother away, that much more weight. Inherent in Garrett’s script, not only is the “Old Spirituality” unwelcome in the black revolution, but it was also to be—and remain—a male space, one that facilitates the restoration of masculinity to black men.

Neal ascribes to Garrett’s play the symbol of the “New Spirituality” in the poetry and drama of the Black Arts Movement, by 1968 extended beyond the Harlem base of the Black Arts Repertory Theater School and into programs, workshops, organizations, publishers, and schools across the United States. This “New Spirituality” dealt with the black artist, and more broadly the African-American, “seeing the world from the concise point-of-view of the colonialized:”

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 colonialized native, the oppressed must, of necessity, subscribe to a separate morality. One that will liberate him and his people (Neal “The Black Arts Movement,” 39).

The “New Spirituality” that Johnny and his comrades aspire to in Garrett’s We Own the Night leave no space for the lived realities and worldviews of the old guard of “negroes,” represented in human form by his father and especially Mother. In this quest to liberate black minds and bodies and, by extension, restore black manhood in a racist America, however, the damnation of black mothers as inhibitors of black masculinity and the painting of the revolution as exclusively male in Garrett’s play inhibits the larger vision of full liberation and the very real contributions of black women to liberation struggles in the United States prior to the Black Power era and contemporary to this dramatic piece. It is this theme, of many, that Sonia Sanchez grapples with in The Bronx is Next, as she satirically restructures the setting of a black urban rebellion and broadens the context of
the moment with the addition of other voices, minor and major, to critique the rhetoric of black male-centered revolution that Garrett centers in *We Own the Night*. The dialogues between the black male rebels and Old Sister and Black Bitch, respectively, restructure the ways that the viewer/reader might engage the idea of a movement for black masculine restoration and, thus, black liberation.

The appearance of Old Sister is very brief in the action of *The Bronx is Next*, but her presence is pivotal in Sanchez’s reimagining of the black male revolution. Through Old Sister, Sanchez demonstrates the capacity of young would-be “black” revolutionaries to dismiss the importance of valuing their elders and the experiences that they carry with them. Charles, one of the young black male rebels who plan to burn down a block of tenements in Harlem, instructs the black residents of the building at the center of the drama to grab their essential items and leave their homes. Old Sister, however, has too much to bring, items she feels reflects her own history and story:

I know what you says is true. But you see them things is me. I brought them up with me from Birmingham 40 years ago. I always keeps them right here with me. I jest can’t do without them (Sanchez *The Bronx Is Next*, 78).

The dialogue between Old Sister and Charles never suggests what these items are, but we can assume from her desire to keep them that, to her, they are heirlooms, valuables passed down or kept by her that held the history of her experiences migrating from Birmingham to Harlem in the 1920s. Charles patronizes the Old Sister by implying he understands and instructing her to stay with her things, which she—not understanding the cost and danger of staying in the tenement targeted for burning—thanks him for, stating “Thank the lord there is young men like you who still care about the old people,” (78). Through his dialogue with Roland, another rebel, we learn Charles is not concerned about
Old Sister or those like her; to Roland’s protest about the fate of the older woman, Charles replies, “There ain’t no time for nothing ‘cept what we came to do,” (39). Perhaps this short addition to the action of The Bronx is Next was Sanchez’s way of critiquing her contemporaries dismissal of earlier efforts celebrate and contribute to black arts and aesthetics, specifically during the Harlem Renaissance, which critics like Larry Neal had essentially dismissed as a failure for its capacity to reach the black masses or create lasting institutions (Neal “Black Arts Movement,” 39). The setting and the story that Old Sister briefly provides are no coincidence, with this in consideration.

Similar to Johnny in Garrett’s We Own the Night, the young black men leading this rebellion in Harlem see the generational gap as “unbridgeable,” to reiterate Neal’s interpretation; like the tenement, Old Mother is thereby disposable, alongside her memorabilia and her old-time faith. Like Sanchez and other black artists of this moment argue, however, there is or could be value in the lessons of the elders, even with regard to their faith and ideological differences. In Nathaniel Smith’s poem “Autumn Revolutionary” (1969), the speaker of the poem is “an old man/ wrinkled and dried,” but tells his younger listener not to deny his sacrifice, history, or work towards the progress of black people, within the inheritance of the younger generation denying him:

Don’t deny me
I’m your history too
When you speak of Nat Turner
Speak of me too […]
You’re my future
My only hope
come down
And see me sometime
Maybe I could teach
You *something*
About guns (44).
When countering these attitudes about the futility of engaging, consulting, or including older generations of African Americans in the black revolution, Smith illustrates through his poem’s elderly speaker that the revolution is much older than the man’s listener has given it credit. Before them, even if he did not have the “guerilla theater” of the Black Power movement, he was there trying to defend his body and family, trying to create a legacy for black youth. This, too, is what Old Sister carries with her, and cannot carry alone, when she encounters the young rebels Charles and Roland outside of their Harlem tenement at the beginning of The Bronx is Next. Her legacy—“them things”—are theirs as well, but, blinded by their vision for their black revolution, they cannot separate her from other symbols, like the dilapidated tenement, that they feel inhibit black progress and black power.

Unlike Old Mother, Black Bitch has a longer presence in Sanchez’s play, with the same cause of critiquing the exclusivity of rhetoric, action, and ideology apparent in some black masculinity-centered manifestations of Black Power. She is summoned because White Cop, who has been harangued by the rebels for hanging around the tenement and being part of the structural problems in their community, has admitted to having a financially-lucrative sexual relationship with her. For this, she is slapped around by the rebel Larry for resisting and brought to court in front of the others outside of the building. What Sanchez illustrates through the dialogue between Black Bitch and the others is the impact of sexism, racism, and classism on this woman’s body. She stands “defiantly” in her disheveled “red dish wig” before the small group of men (including White Cop), and, between being harangued for being “another black matriarch” and
beaten by the black men and watched silently by White Cop, she explains that her life is not up for explanation and that their actions impede the cause of their self-righteousness:

Yeah, I know what I am. […] But all you revolutionists or nationalists or whatever you call yourselves—do you know where you at? I am a black woman and I’ve had black men who could not love me or my black boys—where you gonna find black women to love you when all this is over—when you need them? As for me I said no black man would ever touch me again (Sanchez *The Bronx Is Next*, 82).

Due to the brevity of the play, we do not get much of a backstory for Black Bitch or any of the other characters. We know, from her engagement with the others, that she is a mother of two boys, whom she supports through prostitution. We know also that she has a sexual relationship with White Cop out of utility and not desire. We learn that, regardless of what the measure of the stories she refuses to share is, the young black male revolutionaries are unwilling to hear her without hurling their misgivings or their bodies at her. As Boston-based organizer Gwenna Cummings calls her reader to imagine in her 1967 essay, “Black Women—Often Discussed but Never Understood,” the intricacies of being black and a woman in America—as she addresses to her male audience—are beyond the treatment given them within popular narratives. She writes:

…how would you react if you were part of a family which included a prostitute with her pimp; a high school girl with a baby; a potential college student with nowhere to go; a factory worker endlessly searching for something better, and a clerical assistant who is always available? Where would you get the motivational spur necessary for a more enticing existence? I’ve asked all of you to choose one role for yourselves—if you dare. Each one of us in this drama sees his world differently. Would you believe that you as a Black Woman, in order to fulfill any real objectives in this country, will have to combine at least three of these worlds before you find yourself, the self that can feel comfortable, confident, and unafraid?] (Cummings 283).

Within this context of questions and potential lived experiences to which Cummings is speaking reality, one can imagine the larger complexities of the existence of Black Bitch,
with the parcel of her story we are given by Sanchez. The black men who call her to question, however, disregard her experiences, as they do Old Mother, and malign her as part of the problems impeding black liberation, because they label her a matriarch and because she admits to using her sexuality to support her small family. Thus, they relegate her to the damnation of the tenement to be burned along with Old Mother and, eventually, White Cop.

With all of their interactions taken into a fuller context, it is difficult to not to see Charles, Roland, and the other young black revolutionaries in *The Bronx Is Next* as but a different form of an oppressive system, in their willingness to discard lives, stories, and legacies for their exclusive revolution. As Black Bitch asks her black male interrogators and maligners, with these aims and actions against her and other community members, where were they going? Where would they find black women to love them, when the smoke has cleared, if this was their shared perspective and course towards freedom of body, spirit, and mind? The aim of a black revolution and a drawing of the masses to consciousness, as Sanchez aptly demonstrates through the characters Old Sister and Black Bitch, is not in the destruction of those pivotal in building the culture, community, and history of your community, regardless of what their perceived shortcomings or baggage are. Their experiences were part of the larger tapestry of what came to define African-American culture and history; would-be black revolutionaries, as Sanchez implies, would be remiss to dismiss them simply because their lived experiences did not fit the “New Spirituality” adopted by those “liberators” of the black masses. A more effective revolution needed a more compassionate and inclusive platform than the simple restoration of black masculinity and the performance of black machismo. This is not what
it seems that Neal meant when detailing the characteristics and implications of the “New Spirituality” introduced by the Black Arts Movement, but Sanchez’s satirical drama speaks to the fallacies that it could incur without the conscious aim to heal intraracial divisiveness by those claiming to represent the righteous aim of black liberation.

“we niggers together / forever:” Communal Restoration in Image and Verse in Baraka and Fundi’s *In Our Terribleness*

In spite of the divisiveness seemingly embodied by some of the poems and plays of the Black Arts Movement, these black artists thought of themselves as working towards the end goal of the best route towards black liberation. For some, this meant the restoration of black masculinity from a system of anti-black racism that had stifled them economically, politically, spiritually, and physically. To counter this, other black artists (especially black women artists) called upon their peers to consider the implications of ignoring or rejecting pre-existing intraracial issues or those that might accompany privileging a youthful, heterosexual black male revolution over the empowerment of the entirety of black America. In much of the work written in what scholar William J. Harris labels his “Black Nationalist Period” between 1965 and 1974, Amiri Baraka is often on the former end of this debate, centralizing the elevation and transition of the “The holy holy black man…The warrior,” to consciousness in his poems and plays (Harris “Introduction,” xxiv-xxv; Baraka, “Foreword” xxiii-xxiv). *In Our Terribleness* (1970), a powerful collage of Baraka’s poetry and the photography of Fundi (Bill Abernathy, with graphic design done by Abernathy’s wife, Sylvia/Laini) does not deviate from this central focus, however it does attempt a reconciliation between the black masses and the conscious-minded (most frequently in address to black men) by speaking directly to their shared cultures, spiritualities, styles, histories, and music. The book thrusts upon its
reader a call to imagine a liberated future while celebrating a glorified past and their transitional present. As Welburn notes in his book review, *In Our Terribleness* is a project that communicates “almost exclusively with blacks,” with the ambition of including them—wherever they are in their walk and whether they are black or negro—in its pages, through the photographer and poet’s encounters with the people of Newark. Fundamentally, this project functions a celebration of black culture and expression of past, present, and future, from which an imagined generation of liberated black people, with whom the prophet/speaker of the verse—the high priest “brother jones”—converse, looking back on the history of their forebears, from the kingdoms of ancient Africa through the artists’ present. The text is without numeration or distinct chapters, but the pieces between the movements of the long photo-poem are labeled with eleven titles reminiscent of a religious meeting program, like “Revelation,” “Order of Service,” and “Prayer for Saving,” symbolically calling its reader to church.

The speaker’s tone is that of a preacher sharing a prophecy from the liberated “black magicians” of the future (2188) and translating the stories of the photographed black men, women, and children, the “terrible” people of present, who lay the foundation for their becoming. Per Baraka’s incorporation of the motifs of the Nation of Islam and Kawaida Philosophy throughout the verse (and Fundi throughout the images), the original men are black, and the gods and religious icons, too, are black: “African African African / African Black Jesus / Black Ham…/ Black Moses / Black Egypt,” (Baraka and Fundi). The teachers are John Coltrane, Maulana Karenga, Elijah Muhammad, James Brown, the Impressions, Claude McKay, the Martha Reeves and the Vandellas, and Duke Ellington; “brother jones” is but the prophet relaying this message to his contemporaries until, as he
refrains throughout the text, “the contact is broken…..” (Baraka and Fundi). As a celebration of black American people, black history, black cultural creators, black spirituality, and black music, Baraka and Fundi seek to unify African Americans, as opposed to drawing a firm distinction between who is (or would be) black and who is negro, by presenting—and not representing—them within the book. As Baraka emphasizes to his readers within the first pages of the long poem, “Ask Me What I Am,” “we niggers together / forever,” in the eyes of white America, so the process of healing, redefinition, and unification need start within black America, between blacks and so-called negroes.

The verse that Baraka “preaches,” the images that Fundi provides, and the graphic layout of the text and artwork that Laini presents to the reader functions as a performative text that—through language and image—the creators assume will attract and speak to the realities and the imaginations of their black audience. Even the title page of the book features a full mirrored page to include the reader within the collection of images to accompany the verse. This is intended to be their story specifically, and those prophecies sung in text by Baraka their stepping stones toward consciousness and celebration of who they are. Of this physical inclusion of the reader in Baraka and Fundi’s work, Margo Crawford writes that “The move away from representation to an imagined transparent, unmediated relation to “blackness,” signaled by the very presence of the full-page mirror at the beginning of In Our Terribleness, is a move to self-representation,” (Crawford Dilution Anxiety and the Black Phallus 73). The images range from crowds of young “bloods” smiling defiantly in the fashion of the late 1960s and an older black woman waiting with a solemn patience outside of what seems to be her home to the hopeful yet
simple portrait of a young black boy, Kevin, holding one small, clenched fist in a “Black Power” salute and a toy in the other. These images are meant to celebrate what and whom the artists define is “terrible” about African-Americans, what it means to be black, allowing the photos to define the people and, ultimately, provide the context for the verse. Around two images of young black boys and leading to the space around Kevin’s image in the final lines of the poem “Order of Service,” Baraka writes:

Pray that we are not part of the Western Empire, in soul.
We know we are not.
In Our Terribleness
We know exactly
Who We Are.

They had us in a cage.
To hold back our rage. Our eyes smiled
Anyway
You shd been there man
like you shda been eatin sun
(just
dont get in the way,
man

All these are in the hipness shown. The triumph of our way.
All these are together. Dont ever fuck with me. An emblem of breath. Can you dig a fist, so beautiful?? (Baraka and Fundi)

This “terribleness,” or the “badness,” that Baraka writes of inhabits the very existence of black Americans, and it is what (he feels) separates them from the culture of the West:

Our terribleness is our survival as beautiful beings, any where.
Who can dig that? Any where, even flying through space like we all doing, even faced with the iceman, the abominable snowman,
the beast for whom there is no answer, but change in fire light and heat for the world

To be bad is one level
But to be terrible, is to be badder dan nat (Baraka and Fundi)
The “beast for who there is no answer,” to echo Baraka’s play *A Black Mass*, is the deadly presence of Neal’s “white thing” in the collective history and trauma of African Americans. The systemic oppression they faced courtesy of anti-black racism and white cultural and economic hegemony was meant to deter their resilience and progress and relegate them to death, as Baraka illustrates in *A Black Mass*. However, their defiance against the rejection of their bodies and histories (shining defiantly in the eyes of some of the photographic subjects, per his words), their will to “Survive and Defend” their lives and their culture, and their will to love through it all to build “the family unit”—“Man woman child”—is what, to Baraka, makes them “terrible” (Baraka and Fundi). Candid and posed, this defiance and will to endure were perhaps what Fundi meant to capture in his subjects and, further, what Baraka wanted to illustrate through his verse. This was the black America they saw and the images and stories they felt this audience needed to see and celebrate.

Beyond celebration of who they were and would become, Baraka’s verse calls for the defense of the culture, the teachers, and the nation of African Americans in the poem “Prayer for Saving.” The phrase “Survive and Defend” echoes as a chant as the speaker calls upon his black audience (or congregation) to persist through their present oppressions and protect the culture that is their own inheritance and will be their legacy:

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Defend the space you live upon
Defend your family and your way of feeling
about the world. Defend The Impressions
and Muhammad Ali
Defend Ray Robinson and the Songhay Empires
Defend the Pyramids and Huey Newton in the same breath the same
people faced with the same disasters in the physical world, the emergence of naked apes on horseback from out the icebox zones
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the squares with paper ears and wooden steps against whom we must defend
inspite of whom we must survive (Baraka and Fundi)

“Prayer for Saving,” in its 115 lines, beckons its audience to acknowledge and protect those things most valuable to sustaining black culture, ranging from the streets on which they live and congregate to the artists, athletes, and historical leaders who they have celebrated (or should celebrate). This acknowledgement is what would draw them to black consciousness: “Consciousness is what we need. It is all that will bring us back to ourselves,” (Baraka and Fundi). Acknowledgement was but the first step, with organization as the next, as Laini centers Fundi’s image of a line of Fruit of Islam officers immediately after Baraka’s call to consciousness and preceding his instruction for black people to organize towards the “together revelation of humanhood,” (Baraka and Fundi). The pantheon of black artists, sportsmen, and activists are the new heroes of the “terrible” black men and women, “Not Ralph Bunche,” he writes, or Roy Wilkins, the prominent civil rights organizer whom Baraka (on an otherwise blank page) identifies as “a dumb slave,” (Baraka and Fundi). Within this poem is the only place where a clear distinction is drawn between black people and representatives of Neal’s “Old Spirituality.” The dichotomy of “black vs. negro” is not evident in the collection? aside from this poem, with Baraka writing, after his condemnation Wilkins, “The future rulers are black,” and not representative of the older guard of “negro” leadership. In its effort to bring the reader to the center of the call to “Survive and Defend” African-American culture, there is also a call to let go of those things that were and are harmful to their achieving “humanhood.”

In Our Terribleness also celebrates black women and black elders, specifically, in its duration, but it does so in address to young black men, the “Bloods!” and the
“Brothers,” the forebears of the “Magic People” who (Baraka imagines) are to reclaim the greatness and the cultural legacies of the priests and the “bad bad bad ass niggers” who comprise Baraka’s own generation (Baraka and Fundi). In conjunction with Fundi’s beautiful image of a crowd of NOI musliminahs (black Islamic women) in white hijabs and gowns with a small black boy at the center, Baraka notes this to be the “pure image of the black woman” per the value system that Elijah Muhammad constructed from “Negritude and Islam to defend and develop black people,” (Baraka and Fundi). He continues, in address to the “Brothers:”

So our sisters floating in to us faces in the soft blankness of spotlessness. They are our mothers and sisters and wives that we pledge to protect and love. The sisters. What we to them and they to us, will be the definition of our nation to be.

The children must be taught by us.
The wives must be taught by us.
Ourselves must be taught by us. This is the way to love as a nation of strength (Baraka and Fundi).

To echo the sentiments of Gwenna Cummings, this continuation of speaking of or about black women without the consideration of their full contributions (or their capacity to contribute) seemingly erases them from the action of the movement towards consciousness. Young black women are waiting to be given something from black men, just as the “old sisters” are waiting with their “endless patience” for the young men to act and reclaim black culture, black space, and the black nation (Baraka and Fundi). However, the history of the larger Black Power and Black Arts Movements and the breadth of work that black women artists, activists, and critics leave behind tells another story of their agency within this quest for the liberation of black people.
Black women poets and playwrights like Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Alice Childress adamantly spoke to the experiences of black women in America but especially within the context of this revolutionary moment. Despite critiques that applying sometimes overtly feminist or non-heteronormative perspectives to the body of Black Power literature was “counter-revolutionary,” they challenged their male counterparts to consider the fuller implications of a male-centered revolution for black freedom and “humanhood.” To challenge assumptions of who would be included in the revolution, and perhaps whether “negroes” were worthy of inclusion in the conversations for black freedom with their perceived willingness to hold firm to the status quo, was not enough in the larger matter of inspiring and facilitating consciousness and action in the African-American audiences who subscribed to the literature and live performances mentioned earlier in this project. Like the larger body of black people in America, the voices on display needed to be multifaceted and move beyond re-envisioning who whites were, who blacks could become (and who was not black) in order to draw the masses into the conversation. Many artists, but especially black women, were able to push the boundaries of blackness (and maleness) through their poetry and drama, reifying the larger mission of black liberation while also putting their stories and concerns at the center.
CHAPTER 4

“DO NOT MISTAKE MY FLESH FOR THE ENEMY”: BLACK POETS AND DRAMATISTS COMPLICATING THE LIMITATIONS OF BLACK NATIONALIST IDENTITY

When you impale me
upon your lances of narrow blackness
before you hear my heart speak
mourn your own borrowed blood
your own borrowed visions
singing through a foreign tongue.
Do not mistake my flesh
for the enemy
Do not write my name in the dust
before the shrine of the god of smallpox
for we are all children of Eshu
god of chance and the unpredictable
and we each wear many changes
inside of our skin.

--Audre Lorde, “Between Ourselves” (1976)

Between the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School in 1965 and the Broadway premiere of Ntozake Shange’s hybrid dramatic poem, or “choreopoem,” for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf in 1976, the creative and critical conversation on the representation of who black people were and who they would become gained increasing momentum in the literary and performative works of black American artists. As I note in the introductory chapter of this project, those black male and female writers publicly affiliated with the Black Arts Movement early on (or, as early as the founding of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School in 1965) subscribed to the largely male-centered and heteronormative ideologies that accompanied black nationalist thought of the period. Likewise, as demonstrated in Jimmy Garrett’s play We Own the Night and Amiri Baraka’s Madheart (and as critiqued in Ed Bullins’ The Fabulous Miss Marie, Sonia Sanchez’s The Bronx is Next, and by the speaker of
Nathaniel Smith’s poem, “Autumn Revolutionary”), the impetus of the black liberation movement for many of the black creators of this period was supposed to rest with young black men and their ambitions to liberate the whole of the imagined nation. As I note at the close of Chapter Three, although Baraka does extend his vision for a liberated black future beyond the implications of white (and black) anti-black racism, white cultural hegemony, and the destruction of the “white thing” as he turns inward to honor black people, black history, black spirituality, and black culture in his photopoem project In Our Terribleness (1970), the target audience is still expected to be young black men—“the bloods”—responsible for the liberation of the women, the elders, and the children.

The calls to “black people” and the “black community,” for many readers, listeners, and viewers often called attention to the issues and realities of black men and male-centered experiences specifically (Christian 76). When Baraka presents the opening words of Black Fire in 1968, he indicates the very creation of a new black nation by introducing the anthology’s readers to the black poets, playwrights, critics, theorists, and other authors within as “the founding Fathers and Mothers, of our nation,” (Baraka “Foreword,” xxiii). Even with the acknowledgement of black women as contributors—as “Mothers”—the collection is still described as the “black man’s comfort and guide,” with its central goal being the elevation and restoration of Baraka’s imagined “holy holy black man,” (xxiii). The introspections of black women writers—Julia Fields, Carol Freeman, Lethonia Gee, Odaro, Sonia Sanchez, Barbara Simmons, and Jean Wheeler Smith—are poignant contributions to the anthology, but these black women’s perspectives are a small fraction (seven of more than seventy contributors) of the overall voice of the proposed new nation. Within both black political and creative circles during the Black Power era,
the lack of elevation of black women’s voices particularly—and not necessarily their exclusion—was but one catalyst behind the upsurge of black feminist artistic, critical, and political activity during the late 1960s and into the 1970s. As the plethora surviving anthologies, albums, news clippings and news reels indicate of the Black Arts and Black Power movements, the inclusion of black women and definitely black queer artists during the movements of 1960s and 1970s was not the predominate issue; their silence, or silencing, was. Silencing one (or many) in inclusion is not the equivalent of acceptance, by any means.

This chapter presents a critical literary analysis of the artistic production of black artists and critics who were not often included within the ideological and aesthetic folds of the Black Power and Black Arts movements but used their works to challenge the critical perspectives of their counterparts. For the most part, the artists who were most vocal were black feminist and lesbian artist-activists, whose works were often considered "counter-revolutionary" to the goal of restoring black masculinity by the arbiters of the Black Arts Movement, and often some black women from within the Black Arts fold, like Giovanni, Sanchez and Toni Cade Bambara. Many black female (and male) artists challenged this notion of male-centered and often homophobic art being the route to the restoration of black critical consciousness and challenged their peers to think critically about how they might be engaging in the oppression of others within the imagined black nation along the lines of gender and sexuality.

To support the above argument, I briefly examine the roots and context of Toni Cade Bambara's multi-genre anthology The Black Woman (1970) to set and establish the main critical counterpoint of gender and sexual politics to the consciousness-raising
efforts of the Black Arts Movement. *The Black Woman* was a literary work that I think proved invaluable to the promotion of black women’s perspectives during the Black Arts and Black Power movements and proved influential to later black feminist/Womanist anthologies. To extend this conversation, I also discuss poetry by black women poets Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and Mari Evans—each active in or influential to Black Arts creative circles—to demonstrate how these counterpoints were presented artistically and within those platforms shared with black male artists and critics. In a similar vein, Alice Childress's play *Wine in the Wilderness* presents conversations on gender, beauty, class, and education in an attempt to question notions of black—and feminine—"authenticity" and who gets to determine whom or what can be “revolutionary.” Finally, a close reading of selected poetry and theory of Audre Lorde demonstrates this Lorde’s own attempts to not only engage the rhetoric of black nationalism as a mode of raising consciousness but she also challenges her contemporaries to consider the obstacles faced by those who did not fit the gender and sexual molds imposed by the movement. The poetic works of Lorde that I engage are selections from her Broadside Press chap book *New York Head Shop and Museum* (1974), which contained her most explicit critiques of the contradictions of black nationalism and, because of the auspices under which they were published, were readily accessible to the same black audiences who would have been reading and purchasing the works of other Black Arts poets. Through my analysis of these works and related criticism and scholarship, I argue that, in order to challenge those criteria within the Black Arts Movement's version of critical consciousness that seemingly exclude some from participation in the imagined black nation, some black poets and playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s brought their own versions of critical
consciousness-raising efforts to their fellow artists and the larger black community in order to begin the dialogue of reaching for a fuller humanity for black people in America, laying aside male-centered, heterosexist, and often generationally-divisive politics of black nationalism.

**The Black Woman and the Case for Black Arts/Black Power Feminism**

The Black Power and Black Arts movements presented African Americans with a broad forum for discussions and presentations of politics, cultural expression and human rights that, before the 1960s, had not been available to a large body of African American scholars, artists and activists. During its nascent years, the Black Arts Movement, though its ideology and performances encompassed a plethora of manifestations and competing theories, held one concept central to its platform: restoration of black masculinity (Smethurst *The Black Arts Movement* 87). The early discussions of the movement that focused on the constructive ways to strengthen black nationhood and presence either promoted the black woman as “matriarchal villain or a step stool baby-maker,” (Lynch “Introduction”).

The former idea of the black woman as matriarch was illustrated by the U. S. Department of Labor’s 1965 study *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, prepared by assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. The study, informed by research on black communities in Harlem, posits that black women as household heads—along with the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow laws—limited black men from their natural roles as protectors and providers (United States Department of Labor). This examination of the black family, though refuted by many black men, gave male Black Power scholars and artists the momentum to push forth new ways of viewing and
performing black masculinity, which typically cast black women in the latter role presented above—child bearers and rearers for the revolution. By 1970, however, the tone of black women’s scholarly and artistic literature would change to include highlighted discussions of the threefold oppression of African-American women, in the forms of racism, sexism and classism. Much of this analysis and activism would come in literary form through journals, poetry collections, novels, and the rise of anthologies on Black Power and cultural nationalism in the late 1960s. Toni Cade Bambara’s anthology, *The Black Woman*, published in 1970, was a foundational Black Power feminist text that not only challenges the myth of black matriarchy purported by Moynihan and others, but also calls to task the presence of black masculine essentialism within the varying sectors of Black Power and Black Arts movement and racism and present within the women’s liberation movement as they affect black women as participants in either or all of these movements.

As Margo Crawford notes in her examination of Bambara’s anthology, for a critical starting point in one’s understanding of the drive towards Black Power masculinism and, thus, the rise in black women’s literary feminism after 1970, one must first turn to the infamous Moynihan report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, to view how the government essentially places the blame on the deterioration of the larger African-American working-class family on “black matriarchy.” In the report, she posits, the ideas of “the emasculated black man and the castrating black matriarch” were naturalized (Crawford “Must Revolution Be a Family Affair?,” 190). While the report presents some very real issues that affected the success of the African-American population that Moynihan studies in comparison to the national progress of other racial
groups (predominantly, white Americans were used as his control group), his positioning of black female household heads against the powerlessness of a multitude of working-class black men is more harmful than helpful to discussions of black nation-building central to the larger Black Power Movement. In addition to perpetuating dichotomies of white progress versus black progress and middle-class versus lower-class success, Moynihan postulates a troubling war between black men and black women for power within the confines of the African-American family by positioning the “black matriarch” as a villain and the “black patriarch” as a disempowered victim of racism and social castration. Secretary Moynihan outlines these concepts and what he deduces are their impacts exhaustively in the fourth chapter of *The Negro Family*, suggesting that the corruption of the traditional, male-led family structure ultimately impacts the success of black children, especially young men.

While many black male scholars, artists and activists did not completely subscribe to, and often refuted, Moynihan’s case against black matriarchy, this report gave them impetus to reassert black masculinity and male dominance within the black community as essential to the cause of black liberation. Scholarly works like William Grier and Price Cobbs’ psychological study *Black Rage* and the writings, sound clips of male Black Power activists like Eldridge Cleaver and Ron Karenga centered masculinity as the central liberating component of the black liberation movement in America. While these black men, and many others, did not completely ignore the issues that black women faced from factors internal and external to the black community, they made clear that the central focus of Black Power rhetoric, performance and cultural expression would be
centered on the black man as liberator and warrior of his community and, more important, leader of his home.

As I discuss in Chapter Three in my analysis of Jimmy Garrett’s *We Own the Night*, Grier and Cobbs’ *Black Rage* (1968), considered one of texts that “energized the Black Power movement,” was a psychological study of, as they purport, “the desperation of the black man’s life in America” (Crawford “Must Revolution Be a Family Affair?,” 188; Price and Cobbs). The target audience of the psychologists is made evident from the book’s brief statement of dedication, which reads “To our intrepid black brothers: KEEP ON KEEPING ON!” Though black women are mentioned in all of the chapters and the authors attempt to engage an intersectional study of race and class oppression and their effects on black people, Grier and Cobbs do not give a serious treatment to the case of black women, nor do they recognize their distinct problems within and outside of the black community. In the section of the study entitled “Achieving Womanhood,” the authors examine the plight of black women to fit themselves, often unsuccessfully, into the mold of womanhood created by white Western culture. While they make many relevant points about the difficulty of this measure for black women and the resulting psychological trauma, Grier and Cobbs limit their examination of black women here to a merely cosmetic, gendered, sexualized and heteronormative study. They conclude that the failure of the black woman was that she was not white and sought whiteness as beauty, and, as a result of this failure, she could not achieve enough self-value to contribute meaningfully and sexually to her black male counterpart. Even still, they praise the black woman’s ability to become her family’s breadwinner and serve as the “salvation” of her family, and discredit Moynihan’s observations as “simplistic half-
truths” (Price and Cobbs 54, 83). This role, and being accessible and responsible to her male counterpart, are the only ones highlighted for her. The black woman is reduced to her roles as mother figure and sexual being. On the other hand, the following chapter in the study, “Acquiring Manhood,” gives serious historical and sociopolitical attention to black men’s inability to own or express masculinity for their limited access to capitalistic gain and their “psychological emasculation” since enslavement. For all of their disconcert with the Moynihan report, they support the conclusion Moynihan makes for placing black men at the helm of the affairs of the black family and, by proxy, black women.

The scholarly recommendations of Grier and Cobbs for the undoing of black emasculation and the marginal treatment of black women in the text are mild next to the theories set forth by some male Black Power arbiters representing the most renown black nationalist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s—The Black Panther Party and the US Organization—and black male artists like Garrett and Baraka in the early years of the Black Arts Movement. Many of the black nationalist organizations to emerge out of the 1960s credited much of their ideology to those ideologies endorsed by the Nation of Islam (NOI). The NOI held firm to the notion of “woman’s true nature” of weakness and the responsibility of the man to “respect his woman” at all times and control her in order to insure that he is respected (Griffin 218). Farah Jasmine Griffin observes in her article on Malcolm X’s shifting relationship with women’s liberation and his views on women’s submission towards his death that, after his hajj, his views became more all-encompassing of the black woman’s struggle for full liberation, but many of his successors held firm to the example of pre-Mecca Malcolm X and the tenets of the NOI (226). The US Organization, founded and led by Ron Karenga, echoed the call for black
female submissiveness in the name of black liberation: “The role of a woman is to inspire her man, educate their children, and participate in social development…We say male supremacy is based on three things: tradition, acceptance, and reason. Equality is false; it’s the devil’s concept” (Matthews 272). Black women were not singularly called upon to be submissive to black men, or “prone” as Stokely Carmichael would famously quip, but they were called on to be “sexual revolutionaries,” rewarding black men with sex for their work “in the struggle” and using their bodies as vessels to produce more bodies for the black liberation front. Eldridge Cleaver, Minister of Information of the Black Panther Party, referred to this feminine duty of black women infamously as “pussy power,” as a method of “political praxis” to spur black men to revolutionary action (281). In any case, between the psychological studies of Grier and Cobbs and the political rhetoric of groups like US and the Black Panthers, the black woman’s cause was never her own. There was always an obligation to first serve the cause of the emasculated black man.

The debates about gender roles and the assumption of black male authority and black female submission moved black women within and on the margins of the Black Arts and Black Power movements to respond, though indirectly at first. Black women, moving on the waves of Black Power ideology and the nascent second-wave of the national women’s liberation movement, sought a space to have their voices heard and their issues recognized instead of being spoken for. Robin D. G. Kelley writes that within the “gender-neutral conception of the black community,” the liberation of black people as a whole (meaning black men) would result in the liberation of black women. “Oppressions of sex and gender,” he continues, “went unacknowledged or were considered the secondary residue of racial capitalism that would eventually wither away,”
Black women with access to outlets of political and cultural expression during the Black Power Movement, before the rise of what Kelley calls “radical black feminism,” used a variety of avenues, from poems to podiums to express their frustrations with the myth of black matriarchy and the prevalence of black macho in popular Black Power rhetoric, clearing a path for texts like *The Black Woman*.

By the late 1960s within the political sphere of the Black Power Movement, such headliners as Kathleen Cleaver, Erika Huggins, and Elaine Brown graced the public stage as representatives of the Black Panther Party, with many other black women workers and activists being counted in the organization’s nationwide rank-and-file. Among the myriad poets, playwrights, and artists acting as “chief transmitters of blackness” in the Black Arts Movement, black women artists like Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni gave voice to issues of racial and quite often gender oppression from within the movement, while poets Audre Lorde and June Jordan acted as both supporters of the war against anti-black racism and critics of the sexism and homophobia of the movement and supporters of the war against racism from the margins (Clarke 13). As Stephen Ward contends, this activity and black female presence are not only testament to black women’s activity in the Black Power Movement, but also serve as evidence that the form of black feminism emerging in the late 1960s “is a component of the Black Power Movement’s ideological legacy” and that black feminism and Black Power are not “inherently antagonistic,” but drew meaning from one another and were part of the same politics of black liberation (Ward 120). Informed by threefold by the Black Arts, Black Power and the women’s liberation movements, but definitely preceding and informing these movements as well (especially within the roots of such conversations and
interventions within the Black Left by black women writers, artists, activists, and organizers), black radical feminism gave rise not only to black women’s activity within existing organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party, but also gave black women the impetus to create autonomous black feminist organizations. Such collectives created a space of activism and collaboration for black women and enabled them to form the relationships that produced anthologies like *The Black Woman*.

According to Ward, the publication of *The Black Woman* announced the impact of the new black feminist politics emerging out of the Black Power Movement (132). The preparation of the book, however, initiated the connection between Bambara’s anthology and the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA), a forum that was formerly a subcommittee of the NYC SNCC chapter that was created for African-American women and eventually included other women of color. He writes that, as TWWA chair Frances Beal sought more information on Bambara’s work with the anthology in 1969, Bambara was very familiar with the work of the TWWA (then, the Black Women’s Liberation Committee) and invited Beal to submit a piece that would address itself to “the Struggle…the Black Woman…the Movement…the Revolution” (Smethurst, “Retraining the Heartworks” 208). The TWWA’s first chairwoman, Gwen Patton, also submitted her essay, “Black People and the Victorian Ethos,” to Bambara for the anthology. Other than the women from the TWWA, a host of other contributors, ranging from renowned musicians and poets to novice college-aged activists and writers, were included and attempted to capture a diverse sampling of black women’s experiences in America, as Bambara notes:

This opening statement, a manifesto of sorts, is an attempt by Bambara to make the book an all-encompassing statement reflective of the multifaceted and diverse experiences of black women in America. As black male politicos, artists, and activists called for, they could be “mother,” “wife,” “lover,” and support to black men, but their roles could not and should not be limited to this. The roster of known black artists, activists and scholars include Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Bambara, Abbey Lincoln (whose essay, “Who Will Revere the Black Woman?,” was presented at a BART/S panel discussion in 1965), Paule Marshall, Alice Walker, and Shirley Williams. In any case, The Black Woman, with its emphasis on collecting the statements of black women speaking to themselves and black men (as well as white women and men) as allies and oppressors, was part of a larger “consciousness-raising” movement by black women throughout the United States for attention to their issues aside from masculinist Black Power and white-centered second-wave feminism (Crawford “Must Revolution Be a Family Affair?,” 192). The mission of The Black Woman was not to separate or faction black women’s activism in 1970 as separate from the larger Black Power movement but to add their voices as distinct from but just as important to the cause for black liberation as black male voices. By seeking liberation from racism, classism, and sexism, these black feminists—as demonstrated by the contributors to this anthology—sought to liberate black people from
white hegemony and from their own distorted conceptions of themselves. For its dedication to the liberation of both black women and black men, texts like *The Black Woman* provided space for dialogue on gender politics and oppression within black nationalist circles and also gave instruction on what total liberation would look like for black people outside of a masculinist gaze.

The emergence of black feminist/nationalist art within this political moment historically reaches beyond the presentation of the “Moynihan report,” the advancement of black masculinity in the post-Civil Rights era, and the publication of *The Black Woman*. Prior to this generation of younger contributors, black women activists and organizers like Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Amy Jacques Garvey, Claudia Jones, and Shirley Graham Du Bois had been making the case for women’s voices in early black liberation struggles for civil rights and equal opportunity. Black women artists like Frances E. W. Harper, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Katherine Dunham, Gwendolyn Brooks, Alice Childress, and Lorraine Hansberry had centered black women’s interests and experiences in their creations, their critical works, and some of their activism, without attaching the label of feminism to their black woman-centered work, or, in fact being “de facto feminists,” (Horne 22). For instance, Brooks, a black female poet who came to national fame during the 1950s and, furthermore, inspired and mentored younger writers of the BAM like the poets/publishers Haki Madhubuti and Carolyn Rodgers in Chicago, very publicly states in a 1971 interview with the *Chicago Daily Defender* that “women’s lib is not for black women,” at least “for the time being,” suggesting that black women needed to align more so with black men “in these tempestuous days,” (UPI, “Integration doesn’t move her”). Whereas
her tone in this article seems to support the more prevalent theme of black male-centered liberation and ideals of black nationalism promoted through the late 1960s and she quite directly rejects black women’s participation in the women’s liberation movement, her oeuvre of telling black women’s stories in her earliest poems in *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) or *Annie Allen* (1949), the vignettes of the novella *Maud Martha* (1953) or even the post-BAM poems like “To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals” (1980) and her course of mentorship of younger black female poets and critics exemplify her own “de facto” feminism to some extent. Her reluctance to connect herself or endorse younger black women’s involvement in women’s liberation struggles was perhaps akin to the criticisms that Bambara, Beal, and others disclosed about this predominantly white and middle-class feminist struggle in *The Black Woman* just one year before Brooks’ interview.

The difference between earlier generations of black women artists and activists and those of the 1960s and 1970s was perhaps that, as black men and black women were conjointly creating new public platforms for the cause of consciousness-raising, self-love, and restoration of the black community, the black women also saw this platform as an important means by which to address and publicize their concerns with sexism (and, furthermore, heterosexism) within their own communities. This addendum by the “sisters in the struggle” was not meant to subvert or disjoint conversations of black liberation but to add to them and to prompt further conversation on what liberation that was inclusive of anti-sexism could entail for their movement. From within the most known circles of artists within the Black Arts Movement, women poets like Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and Mari Evans stood out as active critics and participants in
conversations on black liberation as well as those necessary perspectives on black womanhood within this often male-centered conversation.

“Look on me and be renewed:” Black Women Writers on Revolutionary Black Womanhood

The Black Arts Movement, writes James Smethurst, is often thought to have promoted an “extremely misogynist and homophobic masculinism” (Smethurst *The Black Arts Movement* 84). As Don L. Lee explains in a 1971 essay, black poets looked “upon themselves as black men or black women first,” emphasizing a commitment first to nation and then to gender (Lee “Toward a Definition,” 247). Such ideology is definitely apparent in the some of the poems written by black women in the anthologies *Black Fire* and the Black Arts/West-produced *Watts Poets* (1968). The half-measure poem “By Glistening, Dancing Seas,” by Lethonia Gee centers a black woman waiting on and worried for her black man in the former anthology, whereas Elaine Brown’s lyric poems “Very Black Man” and “The Meeting” celebrate the connectedness and codependence (for leadership) that the black women in her poems feel for their men in the latter (Gee 221; Brown “Very Black Man,” 53; Brown “The Meeting,” 54). Many black women poets, especially through the late 1960s and early 1970s, began to reevaluate the ways they perceived gender and even sexuality in response to the dictates of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. This assertion of black woman-constructed, community-centered ideologies was meant, like the poems and theories of the Black Arts arbiters, to contribute to the movement’s nation-building process, providing space for discussions for issues of gender and sexuality that expanded the era’s understanding of blackness in America.
The poems “Seduction,” by Nikki Giovanni, “The Last M. F.,” by Carolyn Rodgers, and “I Am A Black Woman,” by Mari Evans simultaneously explore and pronounce the ideas of black nationalism but necessarily center celebrations of black women’s autonomy and resilience. Whereas the speakers of Giovanni’s and Rodgers’ poems present these ideas with the satirical tone of their respective verse, Evans poem is a kind of manifesto suggesting the capacity for black womanhood, in its varied forms, to be renewing for both black men and black women when embraced, respected, and revered. Furthermore, the play *Wine in the Wilderness* by Alice Childress adds a very crucial component to the conversation of black nationalist rhetoric, the roles and expectations of “revolutionary” black women, and the power of self and community for black women through the unlikely heroine Tomorrow Marie “Tommy” Fields. Tommy is a symbolic combination of the assertive and self-aware speakers in Giovanni’s “Seduction” and Rodgers’ “The Last M. F.,” while she is also reflective of the wisdom and enduring strength that Evans credits to her “…Black Woman.” Collectively, as critical additions to the conversation of black women’s roles in the building of the black nation and towards black liberation of mind and body, the works of Giovanni, Rodgers, Evans, and Childress facilitate necessary, woman-centered discussions on sexuality, gender, and personhood towards a more inclusive effort to raise black consciousness.

Giovanni’s “Seduction” (1968), is an example of how Black Arts poets challenged the black masculinity-centered and heteronormative elements of black nationhood presented by some of their male counterparts. In this poem, Giovanni satirizes the sexual politics of the era, having her speaker, a black woman (“Nikki”), imagine her own assertive sexual pursuit of a “revolutionary” partner, so intent on
“rap(ping) on about ‘The revolution…” that they do not notice that the speaker has removed her own clothes and their own (Giovanni, *Collected Poetry*, 35). Through the action of the short poem, Giovanni juxtaposes the actions of the speaker with the dialogue of her paramour; the speaker’s imagined sensual acts are complete statements, whereas her lover’s statements are broken into ellipses as they prattle on about “The revolution…[…] the situation,” and their concerns about the needs and limitations of the black liberation struggle (35). In the end, upon noticing their state of undress, the startled lover can only comment on their own nudity and hers, asking “Nikki, / isn’t this counterrevolutionary…?,” playing off of the accepted rhetoric of black gender roles under the Black Power Movement and perhaps the centralized restoration of black masculinity apparent in some Black Arts poetry as being counter to the presentation of a sexually-assertive black woman (35). Giovanni, in demonstrating her female speaker as sexually-assertive as opposed to submissive or suppliant to her black man, turns such notions on their head. On the other hand, a more nuanced reading of “Nikki’s” act as “counterrevolutionary” could also indicate sexuality more than gender. The gender of the lover is never revealed, as Nikki touches them, removes their dashiki and pants, and all but ignores their ponderings on black revolution. Women are also black revolutionaries, and they also love and have sex with other women (and they also wear pants, shorts, and dashikis, for that matter). The act of same sex-love, as I will discuss later in this chapter, was also considered “counterrevolutionary” in some circles of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. If the omission of the gender of Nikki’s lover in the poem is intentional, perhaps this omission is meant to cause her reader to question the imagined
boundaries of both gender and sexuality within this revolutionary period, rather than simply assuming heteronormativity.

In the same vein of satirizing the respectability politics enforced upon black women, Chicago poet Carolyn Rodgers’ “The Last M. F.” (1973) also challenges gender norms within black nationalist circles. The beginning line of “they say,” already announces that the speaker is addressing the expectations of others in the lines to come, especially as she is expected to retire her use of the term “muthafucka,” (Rodgers “The Last M. F.,” 397). Of course, the speaker uses the term gratuitously to challenge the expectation that she embraces “the New Black Womanhood,” and the aim for a “softer self” with all the deliberate speed. However, what is left unstated is who “they is,” even though it could be inferred that “they” who police the speaker’s language (i.e. the use of “M.F.”) are black men:

…they say,
that respect is hard won by a woman
who throws a word like muthafucka around
and so they say because we love you
throw that word away, Black Woman …(397)

Tongue-in-cheek, the poem’s speaker returns, with the refrain of “i say,” that this term (“M. F.”) is reserved for those that earn the title, like “pigs and hunks and negroes who try to divide and / destroy our moves toward liberation,” (397). Furthermore, the speaker quips that the measure of her softness should only be determined by “my man,” who would testify to her being “soft in the right places at the right times,” and that the matter should not be up for community discussion with respect to her autonomy as a liberated woman. However, because she is a revolutionary black woman, “a new dawn woman,” she compromises on her usage of the word, but not before getting out at least six more
“muthafuckas” in protest (397). Even in her conceding to the needs of the “movement” and “New Black Womanhood,” Rodgers’ speaker goes down swinging, in defense of who she is and her right to self-expression. It is this spirit of black women’s willingness to counter black nationalist respectability politics—those that called for a more forthright black masculinity and a more subdued black femininity, per the aforementioned advice of the NOI, US Organization, Moynihan, and Price and Cobbs—with their cases for continued self-expression and freedom that began to shape a course of more black woman-centered art, expression, and activism through the early 1970s and into the 1980s.

Mari Evans’ poem “I Am A Black Woman” was an exemplar piece in terms of this shift in black women writer’s expressions of self and community, not unlike the introspectiveness of Nikki Giovanni’s “A Woman Poem,” or Sonia Sanchez’s “a poem at 30.” Although the self-same title was used for her 1970 poetry collection, the poem and a photograph of the poet—who had been actively writing at least a decade ahead of her younger counterparts—also adorn the cover of the 1969 Annual Poetry Issue of Negro Digest. In a 1972 interview with the Chicago Daily Defender, Evans says of the spirit behind the poem was based on her belief that “there are marvelous differences…between men and women and I am committed to the belief that the black woman is the most magnificent and complex woman of all. It is the essence of that difference between men and women, and between black women and all other women that I have tried to isolate and capture…” (Anthony “Poet’s statement: I am a black woman,” 12). Evans envisioned this poem, as well as the collection of poems I Am A Black Woman, as owned collectively by black women and not as solely a personal statement (12).
“I Am A Black Woman” centers black women in her shared history with black men, a persistent and enduring character in the history of the black nation. The black woman speaker of the poem, who is self-described as mystic or even immortal for her sojourn through history in the course of the poem, suggests that her song is written “in a minor key,” emphasizing that the black woman’s story has often been marginalized or even minimized to a “humming in the night,” despite her continued presence, participation, and loss in both national and racial liberation struggles (Evans 11). The second stanza of the poem emphasizes the black woman’s witness to the loss of black men, in defense of his humanity against slavery and anti-black racism (“I saw my mate leap screaming to the sea”) or his manhood within the United States through his service to the nation as she recalls the tragedies of war experienced by black men—and witnessed by the black woman—in Italy, Vietnam, and Korea (11). Through the torment of the ages, the black woman reveals that she still “seeks the softness in my warrior’s beard,” through the hardening events of his quests for humanity and manhood; she persists, regardless, for herself and for him.

As the “impervious” and “indestructible” black woman mystic, the speaker beckons the reader to “be renewed” upon bearing witness to her endurance and strength. She, unlike the speakers in Gee’s and Brown’s aforementioned poems, does not indicate the source of her strength as being the presence of black men, but notes that her own strength has the capacity to carry them both. Evans statement in this poem, especially as an older black woman writer of the post-civil rights movement, is an empowering testament to the history of black women who had worked, survived, and supported black men in various capacities—mother, lover, sister—throughout history. The roles of black
women and their survival, the poem implies, cannot be limited to the strength of or centralization of black men because black women are often the survivors of the tragedies of racism, capitalism, and nationalism, standing “strong / beyond all definition still / defying place / and time / and circumstance,” (12). The recognition of the endurance of black women and the acknowledgement of the struggles of black men do not run in conflict of one another in Evans’ poem. “I Am a Black Woman” simultaneously keeps the black woman as a central figure in the course of African-American history while acknowledging their interconnectedness with the well-beings (and struggles) of black men.

Like Evans, playwright and author Alice Childress also contributes a necessary perspective on black womanhood and the new attitudes on black masculinity and femininity to come of the younger generation of black artists and activists. Her 1969 play, *Wine in the Wilderness*, centers on the exchanges intergenerational and inter-class exchanges between a group of black people living moving in and out of a one-room flat in Harlem during the 1964 riots. At the center of these exchanges is a 30-year-old working-class black woman named Tommy, who bridges the divide between the “everyday folk” like building resident Oldtimer and the would-be black revolutionaries Cynthia, Sonny-Man, and Bill. Through the action of the play, Tommy accomplishes this symbolic bridge between past and present and the real and the ideal by firmly centering herself in her present and proudly (sometimes defiantly) maintaining her sense of self and personal history, in spite of her revolutionary counterparts.

By reaching back to the nascent years of the Black Power and Black Arts movements to center the chronological setting of her play (which she witnessed as an
older black artist who began writing in the late 1940s), Childress presents the possibility of what could have been then if the would-be black revolutionaries considered the value of everyday people, recognizing their elders, and—especially for younger black men—not idealizing a certain kind of “black womanhood” while dehumanizing others. This latter point calls to question the images of black womanhood that would be promoted by Baraka in *In Our Terribleness* or poems like Haki Madhubuti’s “a poem for negro intellectuals” or “blackwoman” (1969), through which the black male poets ultimately center black women’s capacity for “together”-ness on the state of black men and, in some cases, his leadership (Madhubuti *Don’t Cry, Scream*, 54). The autonomy of mind, body, and expression that Childress grants Tommy, like the women central to the aforementioned poems by Giovanni and Rodgers, exemplifies what real freedom could and should look like, particularly for black women, as a foil to those symbols that the other character—male and female—place on a pedestal as a new incarnation of “black femininity.”

Tommy comes upon the Harlem flat by the circumstance of a young black painter, Bill Jameson, seeking a third image of black womanhood to complete his triptych (a series of three paintings completing one work). The series, which he has named “Wine in the Wilderness,” is supposed to depict the progression and regression of black womanhood as he, and we could imagine other black revolution-minded men and women like him, sees it. Beginning with a small black girl dressed simply in her Sunday’s best, the centerpiece of the triptych is perhaps where the one of the playwright’s strongest critique lay. The woman at the center of the series is an imagined modern black woman “draped in startling colors of African material...a golden head-dress” and maintaining a
cold disposition cloaked by her mahogany skin (Childress 471). This, Bill discloses to his neighbor Oldtimer, was the artist’s ideal black woman, his “wine in the wilderness,” his “Abyssinian maiden” and “perfect Black womanhood,” (471). This painted woman, however, even though Cynthia herself tries to come close to mimicking the idea of her (which the reader discovers through dialogue), is not a realistic depiction of the multifaceted nature(s) and experiences of black women; it is but a limiting idealization of black womanhood according to one man who is set to promote the image, by public display, as ideal.

The reason why Tommy is recruited as a model for Bill’s series is because she is perceived by Sonny-Man and Cynthia to be the antithesis of the ideal, “new” black womanhood. Before meeting Tommy, Bill tells Oldtimer that he is seeking the “messed-up chick,” someone he imagines as “underneath the grassroots” and a product of racism, classism, poverty, and poor education—a lost cause in his own vision of black womanhood (471). Upon meeting her, she fits his mold as the imagined “lost woman,” and he and the others pander to her to make her comfortable in the flat and with the modeling gig. This is not without her noticing the denigration of her character, based on her appearance, her speech, and Bill, Sonny-Man, and Cynthia perceive she is. The only one to see and appreciate her self-awareness and authentic personality almost immediately was Oldtimer, who is twice the age of the young black men and women in the flat and treated as a caricature of old-time “negrohood” and the building alcoholic rather than as a respected neighbor. Prior to Tommy’s inquiring, they do not even know his given name (Edmond Lorenzo Matthews). More than just Oldtimer’s name and humanity, Tommy reveals more to them about the inaccuracies about their idealized
notions of blackness, especially black womanhood, through her conversations with Cynthia and Bill.

From “put together” sister to “messed-up” sister, Cynthia, in recruiting Tommy for the modeling job, finds herself perpetuating some of the stifling qualities of black masculinism in her address of Tommy’s character. When Tommy asks Cynthia “What’s wrong with me?” with regard to attracting Bill, she responds very forthrightly that she’s “too brash,” too independent, too hard, and too much of a matriarch to attract a black man like Bill (478). Tommy, in all of her brashness, returns to Cynthia her thoughts on the idea of being softer and more dependent:

CYTHIA. [...] We do for ourselves too much.

TOMMY. If I don’t, who’s gonna do for me?

CYTHIA. You have to let the Black man have his manhood again. You have to give it back, Tommy.

TOMMY. I didn’t take it from him, how I’m gonna give it back? [...] (478)

For every call that Cynthia makes for Tommy to “soften up” while the men are absent, Tommy answers with statements on her reality: No man has looked out for her, nor has she expected him to, let alone her own father. Through her self-sufficiency and assertiveness, however, Tommy can admit to her loneliness, which causes Cynthia to soften towards her, to finally see her humanity. When the men return (without the food Tommy requests), Cynthia even gets in Bill’s face and calls the triptych “exploitation,” having seen Tommy for whom she is and beyond the stereotype she symbolizes for the larger group (479). Cynthia’s realization of Tommy’s personhood does not cause her to stop the process of the painting and Tommy’s exploitation (which continues to implicate
her in Tommy’s exploitation), but Cynthia, like Oldtimer, can see humanity behind the façade of the “messed-up chick.”

Tommy’s exchanges with Bill are, of course, more telling because of their two-fold connections as artist and subject and as lovers by the end of the play. Like the black men in the aforementioned poems by Giovanni and Rodgers, Bill attempts to police her “unrighteous” language, intellect, and femininity. Largely considering Tommy his ideal “messed-up,” lower-than-low, artistic subject—and a black woman not representative of his “wine in the wilderness”—he initially refuses to either see her humanity or value her voice. With extended conversations, the shedding of her “costume,” and the recognition of her self-awareness (in spite of him, her attraction to him, or his masculinity), he too begins to see her.

When Tommy begins reflecting on her personal losses during the riot—the loss of her home to “revolutionary” arson and all but few of her personal possessions (which explains her disheveled wig and homely appearance upon meeting Sonny-Man and Cynthia at the bar and the other two men later)—she suddenly states “Niggers, niggers….niggers,…I’m sick-a niggers, ain’t you? […] Lemmie tell you what the niggers done…” (474). Bill interjects that she should not use that word when talking about their people and suggests that she try “Afro-Americans,” dismissing her frustration and her right to expression. Correcting herself, she then states that the “Afro-Americans” burned down her home, destroyed her possessions, and disrupted her livelihood, disclosing the darker realities and decentering the idealism of what Sonny-Man had previously called “the people’s revolution,” (470). Bill himself condemns the looting (for which he derides Oldtimer), but they collectively fail to see the detriment that this “revolution” causes the
masses in their community for their own self-righteousness. When she speaks of her loss to the rioting, he can still only focus on the triptych and his own ambitions as a black artist.

Because of his tunnel vision with regard to Tommy as subject and not as human or autonomous black woman, he also dismisses her intelligence and how deeply rooted she might be in her own history, beyond his extensive textbook knowledge. As Tommy is browsing his collections of art and books before they begin the painting, Bill continuously quizzes her about historical figures like John Brown and Elijah Lovejoy, without taking into account her own knowledge of African-American (and anti-racism) history and dismissing her questions by saying “go to the library…ask somebody,” and additionally:

BILL. Aw, baby, why torment yourself? Trouble with our women,…they all wanta be great brains. Leave somethin’ for a man to do. (481).

Thinking, researching, and teaching, it seems he is implying, is black men’s work, but because he perceives her as “a lost cause,” he declines the opportunity to share more information with her, even though she questions him. However, the circumstance of Tommy hearing him describe his painting of the ideal black woman and thinking it is her he is describing to the art dealer causes her to drop her homely façade (wig and leftover clothes), her personal guard, and disclose herself to him. She is steeped in African-American tradition, from attending a school named after John Brown (in addendum to his mostly superficial story of the abolitionist) to understanding her own family’s history with southern slavery and the Elks, Prince Hall Masons, and the African Methodist Episcopal church (484-485). Not only is he dumbfounded by the beauty that rested beyond her wig and clothing—and the loss of his original, homely muse— but he is also
lost in his own new knowledge of black history through a woman he had considered “lost.”

Bill’s original intentions are disclosed only after they have made love, or, as he says, they “save each other,” which moves the action of the play into perhaps what is Childress’ strongest critique of both black masculinity and black nationalism in the play (486). When she is taking care of a drunk and sleepless Oldtimer the next morning, he discloses the meaning behind the triptych, including the painting of the ideal woman and the blank canvas on which her “messed-up” image was supposed to be painted (487). It is with this revelation, and the appearance of Sonny-Man and Cynthia, that she begins to read every single one of them for filth. She curses them for their throwing the words “Afro-American,” “brother,” and “sister” around and not having any real love or respect for the masses of black men and women like her and like Oldtimer (489-490). Bill still attempts to police her language when she calls him and all the rest of them “niggers,” saying that she’s wrong to think of them all that way. Yet, when he reads his dictionary definition of the word “nigger,” he reads to the Tommy and the rest of the party that this is but a generalizing term that white American racists had assigned to the whole of them. Tommy shares then, “When they say ‘nigger,’ just dry-long-so, they mean educated you and uneducated me. They hate you and call you ‘nigger,’ I called you ‘nigger’ but I love you,” (490). With this, she changes Bill, what he perceives as ideal black womanhood on the canvas and what and whom he knows to be black womanhood right before his eyes. Instead of portraying the progression and regression (Tommy) of black womanhood, he decides to capture them all—Oldtimer the Survivor; Sonny Man and Cynthia, the modern
striving black man and woman; and Tomorrow Marie at the center, the portrait of their collective history in the present—in his painting (491).

With his new muse(s) and his new understanding of whom Tommy is and why she is, Childress gives the reader (and viewer) of her play a critical scope through which to view themselves through Bill’s own ideological transition. To her contemporaries, Childress challenged many of the promoted black nationalist attitudes on black women and their roles, the perceived roles and elevation of black men as central to black liberation ideology, and the detachment from the masses that she emphasizes through the exchanges of Bill, Sonny-Man, and Cynthia with Oldtimer and especially Tommy. Tommy did not need the validation of her self-absorbed counterparts in that Harlem flat as much as they needed hers in order to validate their revolutionary work to the black masses, Childress demonstrates. *Wine in the Wilderness* stands out as a dramatic work equally dedicated to displaying the experiences of black women at the start of the Black Power-era (through both Tommy and Cynthia) and how they separately negotiate space and experience in the black community and offering a critical look at the whole of the movement as a black artist from an older generation.

It was vital for black women writers like Bambara, Giovanni, Rodgers, Evans, and Childress to address the specific concerns of black women during this revolutionary period. Black men also attempted to address the needs of black women in their essays and art, but this attention to black women often still centered men as thinkers, saviors, and warriors to the cause for the liberation of the whole and, as the above-mentioned statements by Karenga and others reveal, rejected or just slightly considered the existence of sexism within their ideologies and organizations. As Margo Crawford suggests in the
essay “The Black Arts Phallus,” both the needed statements of black men and black women on revolutionary manhood and womanhood, respectively, complicates the possibilities of their messages of intersectional struggle with racism, gender, classism, and especially sexism achieving middle ground. Both feel “castrated”—the black men, like the artist Bill, by anti-black racism and “black matriarchy,” and black women by that same anti-black racism and misogyny (Crawford *Dilution Anxiety and the Black Phallus*, 70). She continues:

> It is not simply the fact that the male-dominated discourse [of the Black Arts and Black Power movements] could not recognize both race and gender. The most pernicious act was the lapse, by many Black Power male leaders and writers, into a normative gender script (entrenched ideas of the sheer difference between men and women) as a means to fight against the gender confusion that has emerged from and aided the oppression of African Americans (70).

This “lapse” that Crawford indicates was one part of what the black women writers of this era were responding to, like women (including Childress, Evans, and Brooks) from the generation prior. The Black women writers speaking up and modeling what black revolutionary *femme* voices could mean for the whole of the black community and for fuller liberation set the standard for black feminist and queer writers, critics, and activists in the coming decade. Prominent among this number of political and literary foremothers examining the intersections of the experiences of those “in the margins” was “black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet warrior” Audre Lorde.

**Redefinition of Human Liberation in the Poetry of Audre Lorde**

As activist and artist, Audre Lorde is emblematic of the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s. She lived her experience as a black feminist lesbian artist very publicly through her poetry, fiction, essays, and oratory. It is through her poetry, first, however,
that she begins her embrace of her intersecting identities and how, in a moment like the Black Power era, it was important to advocate for both self and community in order to contribute effectively to movements against oppression of any kind, especially within the concurrent liberation movements with which she was identified. Prejudices within the Black Power and Black Arts, women’s liberation, and gay and lesbian liberation movements often prevented sincere and intentional collaborations between them and black women, who sometimes found themselves on the margins of one group or another. White feminists could prove intolerant or ignorant of black and other minority women, and they could also be dismissive of lesbian issues (She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry). The Black Power and Black Arts ideologies, as I note above, often embraced sexist and heterosexist principles as a revolutionary tactic to rebuild the black family and, thusly, the black community, shunning any divisive measures (like feminism and homosexuality) that were “counter-revolutionary.” The gay and lesbian liberation movement often displayed moments of racial prejudice and biases against women’s rights (De Veaux 56). These groups held similar but often conflicting ideas of what it meant to be human and liberated in America, which created rifts within them.

One common thread between each of these movements is the participation of black women, each seeking to free themselves and their communities. Lorde, like sister poets Toni Cade Bambara and June Jordan, was one of this number: Black women artists and activists looking for a place to be somebody. Lorde was a proud black woman, candidly feminist in her politics, and, by the mid-1970s, publicly same-sex loving. Like Bambara writes in the Introduction of The Black Woman, Lorde (who was included in the anthology) also saw in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s the need for a “turning
away from the larger society a turning toward each other” (Bambara 7). With all the movements and the challenges they posed for black women who were or sought to be involved, the “turning toward each other” seemed necessary within their own ranks in order to ensure their survival, as Lorde quips in the closing line of her poem “Who Said It Was Simple,” through “all these liberations,” (Lorde Collected Poems 92).

Audre Lorde is slow to come into the canon of black liberation literature being created in the 1960s, but she was no stranger to the concepts black history and race pride. As a young adult born and raised in Harlem, she studied with the formidable scholar of African Studies John Henrik Clarke, who admired and encouraged her poetry, at weekly Harlem Writers Guild meetings (De Veaux 39). Her biographer, Alexis De Veaux, also credits the poet's father's self-identification as a “race man” as a factor that gave her a "heightened social conscience" (45). However, in her first published poetry collection, The First Cities (1968), Lorde explores the theme of blackness but once, and with some ambiguity, in her poem “Coal.” Beginning with the lines “I / Is the total black, being spoken / From the earth's inside,” the poem can initially be read as alluding to the popular language or writing styles of her fellow black poets of the period (Collected Poems 6). The middle stanza of the poem refers to the opening up of and the self-constraint of one's words, which could refer to the poet's own battle with her sexuality at the time that this piece was written. However, at the end of “Coal,” she jumps back into the theme of blackness: “I am black because I come from the earth's inside / Take my word for jewel in your open light” (6). Much of her work in this collection was very introspective, as opposed to addressing the black community's needs and collective consciousness. Adding to the black nationalist theme of “Coal,” when Lorde amended the poem for the 1976
collection of the same name, she capitalized the word “Black,” emphasizing the importance and meaning of the word itself as used in the piece (163).

When her third and fourth collections, *From a Land Where Other People Live* and *New York Head Shop and Museum*, were published by Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in 1973 and 1974, respectively, Lorde begins writing poetry that addresses black readers directly. As an artist who some scholars (including Lorde, herself) perceive as an “outsider” to the larger framework of Black Arts poetry, Lorde maintains a fluidity in her themes in which she can move between supporting and being candidly critical of the problematic aspects of the Black Arts Movement. In her poem “For Each of You,” she warns them to “Be who you are and will be / learn to cherish / that boisterous Black Angel that drives you,” and continues by warning the most zealous of the young brothers and sisters not to “pretend to convenient beliefs / even when they are righteous / you will never be able to defend your city / while shouting” (59-60). After her warnings of some of the problematic aspects of black power rhetoric and activity, she ends by reminding her black audience to:

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Speak proudly to your children[...] 
tell them 
you are the offspring of slaves 
and your mother was 
a princess 
in darkness. (60)
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In many of her Broadside poems, it was important to Lorde that she addressed black women, with the hope of instilling a consciousness in them of their beauty, their needs and their issues outside of the BAM's general focus on the mental and spiritual welfare of the black man.
As James Smethurst posits in his historical study of the literature of the period, the idea of constructing a neo-African artistic aesthetic was in response to the assumed culture that was lost when enslaved Africans were brought to the Western World. With this cultural stripping, he argues, there was “a loss of [black] masculinity – a familiar trope of African-American nationalism reaching back into the nineteenth century” (Smethurst The Black Arts Movement 87). At this point in her literary career especially, Lorde became more vocal about the struggles of black women in her poems and more critical of black men perpetuating sexism within the Black Arts and Black Power movements.

While it is true that the Black Arts Movement had a “fairly normative view” of gender roles when compared to the happenings in the larger society, black male writers held a noticeable hegemony on what was being produced for the masses to read. A large body of the literature was from the perspective of the black male, whom Calvin Hernton writes had named themselves the “sole interpreters of the black experience” (Hernton 139). The 1970s presented a new opportunity for black women writers, on the eve of the resurgence of the women's liberation movement, to create a critical voice, questioning their roles and the importance of their needs within black liberation circles. Lorde's most critical poem about the treatment of revolutionary black women was “Hard Love Rock #II,” from New York Head Shop and Museum. Black women, as many black feminist writers observed in the 1970s, struggled “together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism” (Combahee River Collective 275). In this poem, Lorde warns black men that by oppressing women they are only digging them “a different coloured grave,” as black women are “being screwed twice / at the same time / from on top [by whites] / as well as / from my side [by black men]” (Lorde Collected
Poems 125). The movement for black empowerment, she felt, was larger than the uplift of the black man alone and that “one oppression does not justify another” in the quest for black liberation (Lorde Sister Outsider 63).

Between confronting sexism in the black liberation movement and racism in the women's liberation movement with her poetry, Lorde faced personal and public battles with her own homosexuality. Though being aware of her own sexual preference in her adolescence, she did not openly admit to being a lesbian until the 1970s. Her sexuality affected her more as a black writer during the Black Power era than it impacted her role as a feminist writer. From 1968 to 1976, Lorde faced restrictions on the publication of some of her more explicitly erotic pieces and even self-edited a number of explicit pieces, only to change the text to be reflect her homosexuality in later works.

To Lorde's family, her circle of friends and acquaintances, and her husband – who was white and gay – her homosexuality was no secret. As she was trying to espouse the black literary community the late 1960s and 1970s, she determined it that was better to keep sexual orientation discreet, because, as De Veaux notes, involvement as participant or supporter in the gay and lesbian liberation movement, like involvement in the women's liberation movement, was seen as “divisive” and counterrevolutionary in black nationalist circles (De Veaux 130). The “Black Lesbian,” Ann Shockley writes in “The Black Lesbian in American Literature,” was considered a “threat” to black manhood (Shockley 84). Lorde noted this concern within the black literary community and, accordingly, remained silent about her own sexuality.

This perspective—homosexuals being perceived as a threat to the restoration of black manhood and, simply by proxy, black womanhood and black families—was almost
definitely the case for black gay black men. Not at all representative of the whole but definitely present in the seminal *Black Fire* anthology are statements inferring the homophobic attitudes of some of the black male artists, especially towards gay black men (or whomever they designate the sexual orientation or one of its pejoratives). In Reginald Lockett’s “DIE BLACK PERVERT” and Amiri Baraka’s “Black Art,” for instance, such black male homosexuality is equated to one’s capacity to privilege or maintain middle-class “negrohood.” Lockett writes in his poem about a “negro” who brags about his European tour to study classical music, and condemns him as “sissified” and an all-caps “FAGGOT,” (Lockett 354-355). The words “sissified,” “FAGGOT,” and “PERVERT” in the poems title do less to emphasize why Lockett’s speaker has such a visceral reaction to his subject’s middle-class aspirations than it does to set apart homosexuality as perverted, even as allegory. In “Black Art,” Baraka uses a similar metaphor to condemn black integrationists and symbolic figures of white supremacy by effeminizing them (Baraka “Black Art,” 302).

While symbolic, perhaps the more direct attacks, alleged and actual, on writer, critic, and educator James Baldwin, who was openly gay, speak more to some black nationalists’ attitudes towards homosexuality. Baldwin, whom Baraka considered a brother and mentor and many young black writers considered an inspiration, was attacked by Eldridge Cleaver because of his homosexuality in the latter’s renowned book of essays, *Soul on Ice* (1968), and he was allegedly called a “cocksucker”—as an insult—by fellow black male writer Ishmael Reed (Hemphill xlvi). According to the late black gay poet, essayist, and activist Essex Hemphill, Black Panther Party Chairman and founder Huey Newton was perhaps the only “remotely sympathetic” black male
revolutionary leader sympathetic to both the women’s and gay and lesbian liberation struggles. Newton writes to “Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters” in 1970: “We should be willing to discuss the insecurities that many people have about homosexuality. When I say, “insecurities” I mean the fear that there is some kind of threat to our manhood. I can understand this fear...[B]ut homosexuals are not enemies of the people,” (xlvii). Newton even suggested that “a homosexual could be the most revolutionary,” of all social change workers (xlvii). Few arbiters of Black Power, Black Arts, or black nationalism generally were vocal about homosexuality before 1970, if at all, and they welcomed Baldwin, Lorde, June Jordan, and other openly-homosexual artists and activists into the fold. But, again, silencing in inclusion is not the equivalent of acceptance, by any means, and, as the example of Lorde’s initial challenge in publishing “Love Poem” through Broadside Press demonstrates, neither is protection.

Lorde's “Love Poem,” from New York Head Shop and Museum (1974), was one of her most famous and most controversial poems in her oeuvre. The poem candidly describes sexual intimacy between the poem’s speaker—a woman—and female partner:

And I knew when I entered her I was
high wind in her forests hollow
fingers whispering sound
honey flowed
from the split cup
impaled on a lance of tongues (Collected Poems 127)

The poem had been written two years prior to the publication of New York Head Shop and Museum for her previous collection, From A Land Where Other People Live (1973), but noting that the poem was overtly homosexual, Broadside Press publisher Dudley Randall discouraged publication of the poem, allegedly “to protect her” (Boyd 248). As Julius E. Thompson notes in his study on Randall and Broadside Press, though they
supported women's and black liberation in practice and publication, black gay liberation and the works of gay writers were not “a priority issue” at the press and the discussion of gay and lesbian lifestyles were “taboo subjects in most areas of public life of black America [...] Randall and Broadside remained conservative on the issue” (Thompson 129-131). Lorde would recall after the fact that, though Randall never approved her “being a Lesbian,” he eventually did publish her work and support it, especially with the coaxing of fellow Broadside poet Gwendolyn Brooks (131). To preempt speculation and harassment from colleagues and students in her Black Studies program at John Jay College, Lorde posted the poem up on the English department bulletin board when it was published in Ms. magazine in 1974, as a “self-protective” measure (De Veaux 139). The poems “Blackstudies” and “Between Ourselves” are introspective pieces in which Lorde reflects on her personal feelings on being open about her sexuality and her expectations of reactions or the actual reactions of others, in particular her black colleagues. “Blackstudies,” the poem that closes New York Head Shop and Museum, gives a lyrical portrait of Lorde's state-of-mind at the moment she posted “Love Poem” at John Jay:

In a room on the 17th floor my spirit is choosing
I am afraid of speaking
the truth
[...] outside my door they are waiting
with questions that feel like judgements (sic)
when they are unanswered (Collected Poems 153).

Lying or simply remaining silent about what was already surmised by her students and colleagues was not an option for her. At this point, tired of moving “awkward and ladylike,” she was ready to freely admit that she had “loved other / tall young women deep into their colour” with no regrets but having not embraced her full self sooner (156, 154). The repercussions of honesty were not far from her mind, which is evident as she
writes: “It is the time when the bearer of hard news / is destroyed for the message / when it is heard” (155). She confronts the rejection she faced from some members of the black community after coming out in her poem “Between Ourselves,” from her 1976 collection of the same name (223-225). She begins this poem with a contrast of her reassurance when spotting a black face in a room to the uneasiness she begins to feel after she comes out as lesbian:

Once when I walked into a room
my eyes would seek out the one or two black faces
for contact or reassurance or a sign
I was not alone
now walking into rooms full of black faces
that would destroy me for any difference
where shall my eyes look?
Once it was easy know
who were my people. (223)

She critiques the “narrow blackness” of her counterparts for judging her, shunning her on the basis of her sexual preference and explains that though she is homosexual, she is still of the same flesh and wrought by the same struggles as her black brothers and sisters:

Do not mistake my flesh
for the enemy
[...] for we are all the children of Eshu
god of chance and the unpredictable
and we each wear many changes
inside of our skin (225).

In “Between Ourselves,” even though the reader can sense Lorde's fear and expectations of betrayal from her counterparts based on her sexual preference, her personal growth can also be sensed in this poem. The publication of “Love Poem” sparked in Lorde the urge to progressively break all of her silences with regard to her identities and her humanity and without fear of judgment.
Eventually, she came to the realization that she had to “learn to hold on to all the parts” of herself that made her the person and poet that she was, “in spite of the pressure to express only one to the exclusion of all others” (*Sister Outsider* 143). She would never just be a black poet or a black lesbian or a black woman or a black feminist to the exclusion of every other part of herself and she sought to make everything that she was, a “black, lesbian, feminist, mother, poet warrior,” a part of her own humanity, encouraging others to follow suit (De Veaux xiv). Once she became more forthright about her sexuality, she became a spokesperson, and even an icon, for the gay and lesbian liberation movement and encouraged gays and lesbians, especially those of African descent, to break their silences and create a voice for themselves in the movement for human liberation.

In coming into her own humanity, embracing everything she was and would come to be, Lorde, reflecting in her essay “Learning from the 60s,” discovered that there was “no simple monolithic solution to racism, to sexism, to homophobia. There is only the conscious focusing within each of my days to move against them, wherever I come up against these particular manifestations of the same disease” (*Sister Outsider* 137). These “major systems of oppression,” as the Combahee River Collective argues, were “interlocking”, and there was no room in the revolution for arguing for one cause and ignoring all other oppressions inflicting American society (Combahee River Collective). What’s more is that, through the 1970s, plethora black women—feminists, nationalists, lesbians, and sometimes all of the above—came together or went forth individually writing their truths into existence spearheading and continuing what Reiland Rabaka describes as a Black Feminist Arts movement through the late 1970s and 1980s. The
black gay men who, like Hemphill, found their voices scarce in the Black Power era (and almost every era prior), used Lorde and other black lesbian writers as inspirations to begin their artistic, political, and intellectual collectivism in the mid-1980s (Hemphill xxxiii-xxxiv, lii-liii). Whether she transcended the categories of being “of” the black, women's or gay liberation movements or whether she simply remained peripheral to each and acted as participant/observer, Audre Lorde, as the complicated black nationalist, feminist, and lesbian poet that she was, saw that, in all bouts for the liberation of marginalized groups—especially those she belonged to personally—the totality one’s liberation, and raising the collective conscious of the masses to be more inclusive, was more important than securing freedom for only one part of the self.

The recognition of the diverse experiences of African Americans—male or female, young or old, gay or straight—was what many black artists of the Black Power era strived for, whether or not they were affiliated with the Black Arts organization, publications, and creative circles. This decade of creativity, community engagement and education, and self- and community-awareness galvanized black creators all over the United States to issue art, essays, and performances that spoke to the needs of their people. As this chapter discusses, black women who answered this calling saw a need to address the issues specific to their intersecting oppressions of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism, not simply for the benefit of black women but with the foresight of likewise enlightening black men with their shared perspectives. In spite of (or perhaps because of) misogyny, homophobia, and resentment directed at them, black women as artists and activists of the 1960s and 1970s “love[d] regardless,” demonstrating a revamped (not at all new) form self and community love and a stubborn persistence in
their goal to teach others—especially their black male counterparts—to love regardless
(Walker “Womanist,” xi). Before a collective, direct affront could be taken on anti-black
racism, classism, and other oppressions directly impacting the whole of black America,
the in-house laundry of sexism, heterosexism, and other intraracial conflicts needed
airing out, “between [them]selves,” for the empowerment of the whole.
CONCLUSION

"MY SPIRIT IS TOO ANCIENT TO UNDERSTAND THE SEPARATION OF SOUL & GENDER":
NTOZAKE SHANGE'S FOR COLORED GIRLS... AND THE AESTHETIC LEGACIES OF THE BLACK POWER ERA

...bein’ alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical Dilemma/ I haven’t conquered yet / do you see the point
My spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of Soul & gender…

--Ntozake Shange, “no more love poems #4” (1975)

I was born on the tongue of the prophets. i was here before the profit. I never thought the money would ever stop it.
spirit verses spit. Baraka versus nonsense.

--Jessica Care Moore, “mic check, 1-2” (2015)

As the Black Power and Black Arts movements waned during the middle years of the 1970s, its influence was already evident. Since its publishing in 1968, Black Fire had spawned a number of like anthologies through the first half of the 1970s, each reflecting the Black Arts offerings of their contributors regionally, organizationally, or across artistic and ideological circles. Concurrent to the publication of Black Fire, From the Ashes (1967) and its more nationalist follow-up, Watts Poets (1968), were the products of the artists of the Watts Writers Workshop (some of whom were solicited by Baraka and Neal for Black Fire) (Widener 112-113). Within poetry texts alone, some of these anthologies included Dudley Randall and Margaret Burroughs’ For Malcolm (1969), June Jordan’s Soulscript (1970), and Woodie King, Jr.’s Black Spirits (1972). Ed Bullins and Woodie King Jr. and Ron Milner compiled drama anthologies reflecting the moods
and missions of black dramatists during this era, and literary critic Addison Gayle Jr. attempted to bring aesthetic positions representative of this generation and those of generations past together in *The Black Aesthetic* (1971). With respect to the fuller scope of *Black Fire* and its influence, however, the only anthology to have attempted to capture (and indeed surpassed) the fullness of artistic and ideological scope was Bambara’s *The Black Woman* (1970), even within its privileging of women contributors. This list does not even account for the number of individual and collaborative publications by black creators distributed through major and independent publishers, literary journals, or news organs. Within themselves, and with the hope of reaching broader black audiences, black literary contributors to this creative and political moment had no shortage of perspectives, lessons, or conversations to present in the name of consciousness-raising for black liberation, just as prior generations of black writers had attempted. As Sonia Sanchez notes in her Foreword to Def Poetry Jam’s *Bum Rush the Page* (2001), a multi-generational and multi-cultural celebration of spoken-word poetry, “Each generation brings something new to this thing called craft […] What we did when we looked at Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, we went back into their herstory and history and pulled back from Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Dudley Randall, and Robert Hayden, that whole group. We pulled from them the craft of writing, the discipline of writing and the history and herstory of our people,” (Sanchez “Foreword,” xv).

Just as this influence of collaborative, consciousness-raising art was not lost on other African-American writers, whether they were young nationalists themselves or older Leftists critical of the politics of the period, this influence had reached mainstream distributors of poetry and drama as well. Just as the poets Nikki Giovanni and Audre
Lorde found broad success and popularity with major publishers after being published by Broadside Press, some black dramatists moved from churches and community centers and “off-off Broadway” to the “Great White Way.” In a 1975 article on increasing black presence on Broadway (as actors, producers, and directors), the editors at the *New York Amsterdam News* gave the piece a title that described this presence and thusly the increase of black audiences as an invasion on Broadway. As the article itself focuses on the increasing popularity of the Gilbert Moses-directed *The Wiz*, a musical retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* with original soul music and an all-black cast, critic James P. Murray writes that white audiences and critics were not as open to the idea of black reimaginings of “American” shows or even ethnocentric storylines with all-black casts (Murray D10). However, Broadway showrunners also saw the profitability of black shows with black (and some white) audiences, just as they had noticed in network television and with the advent of “Blaxploitation” films in the late 1960s. Notwithstanding the growing appeal of their stories to white investors, producers, publishers, and spectators, black writers—poets and dramatists alike—continued the Du Boisian tradition adopted just a decade earlier of writing to, for, and about black people. If they were working away from black community theaters and on Broadway, they fought to bring the people near, or into, the seats in Broadway’s venues by centering their productions on black experiences. When it reached “the Great White Way,” Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* was born into this quagmire of black artists negotiating the realities of blackness as a growing commodity in the mainstream and trying still to liberate minds with their art.
“& poem is my thank-you:” Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls…as Tribute to the Black Arts and Black Expressive Tradition*

In concluding this dissertation, it would be remiss of me not engage Shange’s work as a tribute to the oeuvre of black critical-consciousness raising literature that preceded *for colored girls* in the decade of Black Arts and Black Power productivity and as a bridge to understanding contemporary efforts of black creators to raise consciousness. Similar to the black artists of the prior decade, her “choreopoem” presents an overt “turning inward” from the perspectives of black women, without the physical presence of white Americans or men. The “colored girls” – Lady in Brown, Lady in Yellow, Lady in Purple, Lady in Red, Lady in Green, Lady in Blue, and Lady in Orange—are the revolutionaries in this piece, front and center, and they take racism, poverty, colorism, sexism, and sexual and domestic assault to task through the course of the performance. Whereas the black women in this choreopoem are speaking directly to the audience, and very often to one another, the act of them reaching their respective “rainbows” (liberation) together by the end of the performance is supposed to both educate, invigorate, and validate the viewer, or, as one incarcerated black woman notes after a viewing a performance of the play at the Women’s House of Detention at Riker’s Island in 1977, “she said things I wanted to but couldn’t” (Lewis, “Rikers Inmates Touched by ‘For Colored Girls’…”). Cheryl Clarke, who labels the choreopoem a work of “black feminist communalism” in her study *After Mecca*, states that *for colored girls* both positioned “Black Arts literacies,” through her adoption their experimentation with language, verse, and performance and “opened a large field of work for black feminist critical projects” that would come through the 1980s (Clarke 120). Shange’s *for colored girls* is a transitional piece that connects the legacies of black critical consciousness-
raising established by the artists of the 1960s and 1970s to the varieties practiced within contemporary African-American creative productions, like music, film, and theater. Her approaches to a process of intersectional critical consciousness-raising in *for colored girls* build on and even transcend the vision of her forebears.

Shange’s *for colored girls* was workshopped as a multilingual, multiethnic, “Third World” women’s testimony to girlhood, womanhood, personhood, and sisterhood. Finalized as twenty poems in conversation with one another—multiple voices on one accord accompanied by music and movement—she came to define *for colored girls* as a *choreopoem* (Shange xiv). As the reader/viewer is taken through each woman’s testimony, a fullness of womanhood emerges that reflects the liberation of selfhood through sexuality, self-awareness, and sisterhood. Furthermore, the choreopoem details the pain that race, class, and gender oppressions cast on the experiences of the “colored girls” and the healing capacities of music, movement, and community. As the choreopoem was developed during performances at Bay Area and East Village (NY) bars and, later, off-Broadway through 1974, Shange notes that different pieces throughout the choreopoem were developed, added, and removed by her and the four other women performers until they debuted on Broadway at the Booth Theater in 1976 with production by Woodie King Jr. and Joe Papp and direction by Oz Scott (Shange xv; Hatch and Shine 364).

From the artists of the Black Power era, Shange’s *for colored girls* inherited three things. Firstly, the interlocution between the “ladies” and with their audience emphasizes the power of collective sharing and healing as a means to come to one’s consciousness. It is not the presence of a central plot or action that were meant to “awaken” the
choreopoem’s audience, but the acts of testifying and exchanges of experiences that were meant to demonstrate the power of communalism. For instance, the exchanges between Lady in Red, Lady in Purple, and Lady in Blue in the piece “latent rapists’” emphasizes this need to vocalize trauma in community order to honestly process it (Shange 17-21). As the women go back and forth with the verse of the poem discussing the self-blame and shaming involved in cases of rape and the stigma of the “stranger” that protects the offenders closest to the assaulted, they lead the audience in processing how women (not only black women) are made to embody this trauma without appropriate outlets. A similar process of “conversation” is employed in “no more love poems #4,” when all seven women take a stand on the “metaphysical dilemma” of black women surviving on “intimacy & tomorrow” with the common phrases: “My love is too delicate […] too beautiful […] too sanctified […] too magic […] too saturday nite […] too complicated […] too music to have thrown back on my face” (45-46). This acknowledging of self and voice is evident in earlier works from the Black Power era by black women writers like Carolyn Rodgers, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez, and earlier black women artists Alice Childress and Mari Evans, as I note in Chapter Four. The “colored girls” are as much Mari Evans’ “impervious” and “indestructible” “…Black Woman” as they are the world-weary but self-aware Tomorrow Marie in Alice Childress’s Wine in the Wilderness. The testimonies of the seven ladies of the rainbow bring the conversation of black women’s places in black communities and in the United States full circle.

Secondly, Shange inherits the vision that creative expression (especially through music) saves us from devastation and desperation in the face of our trauma. Frequently between the pieces in for colored girls, the women are singing or dancing, always
together. The dancing evokes memories for Lady in Blue of her explorations in multiethnic (African American and Puerto Rican) culture in the South Bronx and appreciating the art and culture of people of color in “now I love somebody more than” (11-13). Shange writes in tribute to jazz artists and Black Arts arbiters of the 1960s:

when i discovered archie shepp & subtle blues
doncha know i wore out the magic of juju
heroically resistin being possessed […]
to stare ata real ‘artiste’
& every word outta imamu’s mouth waz gospel
& if jesus cdnt play a horn like shepp
waznt no need for colored folks to bear no cross at all

& poem is my thank-you for music
& i love you more than poem (12-13)

Black music, as many African-American creators in the Black Arts Movement insisted, was both the inheritance and spiritual guide of black people in America and throughout the diaspora. Almost in answer to Rolland Snellings’ (Askia Touré) call to “vindicate the blues” in his Black Fire contribution “The Song of Fire,” which I discuss in Chapter Two, Shange cites the work of her predecessors, including the jazz of Archie Shepp and words of “imamu” Amiri Baraka, as vindicating for her black sense of self (Snellings 326). Black music and black verse were both liberators of spirit and ways to process the trauma of oppression. This also gives further insight into why Clay in Baraka’s Dutchman discloses to Lula that if he did not have his verse and if Bessie Smith did not have her blues, neither would have an outlet through which to vindicate themselves. Black creativity and expression but especially music, Shange suggests as did her predecessors, was necessary to one’s survival and one’s revival, as the “colored girls” exemplify between segments.
Not unlike her foremothers and sisters among the black literary greats, her work was misinterpreted and discredited by white and black male critics alike. *New York Times* drama critic Mel Gussow unjustly simplified the choreopoem as a chronicle of “The black woman’s burden,” in his white- and male-centered attempt to justify the article to the *Times*’ predominantly white and male readership with the Rudyard Kipling quip (Gussow, “Broadway Enjoying Black Talent Boom,” 55). One black male drama critic gave a scathing review of Shange’s choreopoem, calling it “a narrow and single dimensional view of both Black men and women” in which black men are consistently “insensitive and callous” and the women are perpetually victims (Rodgers, “Black Men View “For Colored Girls,”” D11). With an unbiased view, instead of seeing “the black woman’s burden” on parade, one sees the process of her unloading her burdens, working through them within herself and within community, and reaching her “rainbow” with the possibility of getting by. Furthermore, with the explicit absence of men and maleness in the action of the choreopoem, there is no need to seek their validation within Shange’s words. They are “called out” and sometimes cursed, but not without any Lady of the rainbow acknowledging their own capacities to identify themselves with men as opposed to themselves with themselves. The latter point—self-awareness—is the message of each Lady’s testimony. With this self-awareness achieved, they can be present for their communities and break the chains that bind them sexually, racially, or otherwise. In the pinnacle piece of *for colored girls*, “a nite with beau willie brown,” Shange captures both the vulnerability of Crystal (Lady in Red) as a survivor of abuse and Beau Willie as a Vietnam veteran who lives with post-traumatic stress disorder and finds himself in the trenches again at home in the face of racism and classism, which he takes out on Crystal
and his children. The multifaceted characterizations Shange allows the women speakers in their testimonies, when they feature men, are meant to centralize black women’s narratives and not necessarily to silence or suppress black men, much like the early works of the Black Arts theater that included minor white characters, or perhaps a dog named “Whitie” in Bullins’ example, but did not centralize the action or narrative on the experiences or perspectives of those white characters.

So, intertwined with her messages specifically attuned to black women, Shange channels intergenerational lessons on black expression from her literary forebears. In the Lady in Brown’s childhood discovery of her “first blk man,” Haitian Revolution leader Toussaint L’Ouverture – and “blk” as opposed to “a negro like my mama say” – we can trace the echoes of black nationalism across generations from black writers during the antebellum period seeing L’Ouverture and revolutionary Haiti as representative of the possibilities of black freedom. In this poem, we also see Lady in Brown adopting the Black Arts arbiters’ critique of the value of a system of American integration that still forces black people to live within the Du Boisian “Veil” and still maintains white hegemony (Shange 26-27). More, the calls of Lady in Yellow and Lady in Brown to “dance to keep from cryin …dance to keep from dyin,” in “i’m a poet who” are reminiscent of Langston Hughes’ “laughing to keep from crying,” reminding the reader/viewer that, even in sorrow, joy and expression are both release from trauma (15). Shange’s choreopoem is a revival, in tribute to black women but also in honor of black culture. She invites the audience in, with the hope that they see themselves in her words, her stories, and—on stage—in the inflections, expressions, and movements of the Ladies of the rainbow.
Contemporary Inheritances and My Future Research

As black artists have built on the legacies of Shange and those black poets and dramatists of the Black Power era who preceded her, we see how the lessons of these black men and women, dedicated to liberating the minds and bodies of black people, have survived beyond the 1970s. Building on the critical consciousness-raising theories of Du Bois, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon, the black poets and dramatists whom I discuss in this project contributed their own aesthetic works, theories, and institutions throughout the Black Power era. With these efforts, they each imagined that their contributions would liberate black minds and black bodies from American racism and spur them towards self-determination and self-respect. This was not done without the work of debating amongst themselves which road towards consciousness would be most conducive to the whole of black America. Black men had in fact been unjustly treated physically, economically, socially, and politically and had just cause to call on their communities to support them in their reclamation of manhood. Black women, with the same cause of the degradation spurred by life within the “Veil,” not only took up the mantle of affirming the humanity and identity of black men and themselves, but also challenged their black male comrades to check their own male privilege to encourage more effective collaboration in consciousness-raising. Differences in gender experiences, generational ideologies, sexual orientation, and political affiliations did not disrupt this conversation between the artists but enriched its tapestry and left a record of the diversity within their revolution on which future generations could build.
In his 1984 autobiography, Baraka was reflectively critical of the legacy of the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School and the larger movement of black creators through the late 1960s. Of their efforts, he writes:

We were young people just out of adolescence flexing our muscles, hero-worshipping. Trying to actually fly. We loved each other and fought for each other. We learned to love black people from close up again, and we laughed a lot as well as cried and cursed. We needed each other then, in the worst way, at that time of transition. [...] There were the terrorists of our own movement, not just the state, but the sick. But something was raised. And at the same time, the seeds of even worse mistakes were made. There’s no doubt in my mind that the Black Arts Theater will be remembered even in its brief throw against the dead. Its tiny light in shadows. The victory was in the struggle the unity of raising ourselves, our history and tradition. That is simple national consciousness, where the victims focus on the requirements of their liberation. Where a people come to see themselves in contrast to their oppressors, and their lives and laws. Where they climb back into the stream of history (Baraka The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones 458).

The black poets and playwrights creating in this period, whether they were aligned with the Black Arts Movement or writing alongside this generation, were a people in transition. They were not a static army of Fanonian “colonized intellectuals” whose “combat literature” would eradicate white cultural and political hegemony once and for all. They were—like young black artists and activists today moving, creating, and “hashtagging” their way towards a better tomorrow—people still going through their changes while trying to make some sense of their conditions and trying to inspire others to do the same. Furthermore, being a people in transition prompted these creators to reach back for answers about, on the one hand, what they perceived as failures of their predecessors in carrying their own politics to the present, and, on the other, what they saw as weapons from the past conducive to the cause of the freedom of black people. They were in transition, just like their black audiences, acting as guides along the way.
Ntozake Shange saw them, her predecessors, for who they were and what they contributed in her celebration of black expression and black women in *for colored girls*. Younger generations of black literature anthologists, especially those centering oral traditions like spoken-word and hip hop, continually reach back to surviving members of the Black Power generation in tribute to their influence in their texts or they include them in the writings. In 1992, Kevin Powell and Ras Baraka (son of Amiri and Amina Baraka) reach back in tribute to their “ancestors” and forebears at the start of their “anthology of young black writers” of poetry and fiction, *In the Tradition*:

Our voices are nothing new. Our hollers and screams will not go away. We are the echoes of the Harlem Renaissance—Zora Neale, Langston, Countee, Nella, Claude, et. al. We are the Black Arts Movement—Amiri, Sonia, Jayne, Haki, Askia, Audre, Mari, Henry, et. al. We are those poems and those stories. Like our ancestors, we got it goin’ on and ain’t goin’ out like suckers (Powell and Baraka “Introduction” xiv).

By recognizing the fluidity “in the tradition” that they are working within—literary, political, or otherwise—Powell and Baraka and their contributors acknowledge their inheritance of the mission of consciousness-raising art and its capacity to inspire, enlighten, and empower black people. Also, in addition to having Sonia Sanchez contribute the Foreword to *Bum Rush the Page*, the Def Poetry Jam franchise featured readings of new and old poems by Sanchez, Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, and other black poets of the previous generation, which introduced younger consumers of performance poetry to their work and allowed a closeness of exchange and mentorship between the revolutionary black writers of the 1960s and 1970s and those spoken-word and hip-hop poets (or MCs, regarding the latter) coming to the center in the 1990s and early 2000s.
With regard to black poetry and lyricism, performance, and consciousness-raising art, in future research, I would like to narrow my focus on the conversations and debates between the black poets of the Black Power era on citizenship—or those poems that analyze belonging, acceptance, and barriers to *full* citizenship in the United States. I would move this analysis chronologically through the earliest hip hop lyrics about “dispossession” during the Reagan Administration and move through the period of black poetic and rap lyricism immediately following the 9/11 tragedy in 2001. As a witness to hip hop culture’s reactions to 9/11 as a teen, I was curious how the second generation of hip hop artists chose to (or were told to) include American flags and overt references to both nativism and patriotism in their products. This was a far cry from the assertions of N. W. A., Public Enemy, 2Pac, Da Lynch Mob, and many rap acts just a decade prior. It would benefit my project more to be able to extend this conversation into the mid-2010s, considering the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005-6 and the rise of the social media-spawned Black Lives Matter movement, and this movement’s impact on the ways younger lyricists are engaging the ideas of citizenship and patriotism today. It would be wise to take heed of what Baraka acknowledges in his reflection on the Black Arts Movement in this extended approach to my interest, however. As I mention before, he writes that his generation of artists, theorists, and critics were a people in transition themselves, in conversation with themselves and with their audiences. It might be premature to add Black Lives Matter within an extended analysis just yet, but the art that has been inspired by this movement, including works by the rappers J. Cole and Kendrick Lamar and singer Beyoncé, would speak to the ideations of black artists on the barriers to full citizenship beyond 9/11. Critical consciousness-raising takes on a different form, and
power, when broader audiences can access the messages that are meant to be coded for specific (read: black) spectatorship. I look forward to unpacking this tradition and taking on its comparatively different manifestations in the age of social media and commercialized black cultural expression.
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