

# The Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic: Where Do We Go From Here?

by

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The Black Arts Movement’s creative artists, scholars, and activists have come a long way from reading poetry in bars and performing plays in parks. Much change has occurred in American politics and culture since the publication of what I see as the credo of the Black Arts Movement—Larry Neal’s essay “The Black Arts Movement,” published in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, with essential commentary by Amiri Baraka, Stanley Crouch, Charles Fuller, and Jayne Cortez. This essay provides a perspective on the current status of and obstacles to the Black Arts Movement. Larry Neal’s article functions here as fulcrum for a 21<sup>st</sup> century position toward the Black Arts Movement and reaffirms the need for an enhanced emphasis for a morally flexible set of guidelines that counter the elitism and hypocrisy that continue to dominate academic, literary, and publishing arenas. Neal’s first paragraph nicely and precisely identifies the essential goals of the Black Arts Movement as it was conceived:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of black America. In order to perform the task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (62)

Since the Black Aesthetic falls literarily, culturally, and spiritually under the umbrella of the political Black Arts Movement, I use the two terms interchangeably in this essay. The America in which Neal writes this statement in 1968 is and is not the same America of the twenty-first century. We no longer have the potency and commitment of a Black Power movement. And for those Black scholars wedded to an academic Eurocentric aesthetic, the spiritual is alienated from the aesthetic. We have reasons to ask, "Who makes up Black America?" For the most part those scholars educated in the Eurocentric academy have not re-ordered the cultural and epistemological limitations of the Western aesthetic. Perhaps, grassroots Blacks have a separate symbolism, mythology, and iconology. Yet, our most visible representatives of the Black intelligentsia or educated aestheticians are male tools of the hegemony or establishment, emerging as rabble-rousers who are revered as they manipulate audiences, avoiding honest answers to racist questions. At the height of the Black Arts Movement, I was ending my first year of college. In 1979, the University of Maryland hired at least five Blacks who were recent Ph.D.'s (I was among them) in the College of Arts and Sciences alone. Blacks, hired in the academy around the country, particularly on the East Coast, represented the potential for the future of the Black Aesthetic in the academy. However, at this point neither I nor, perhaps, my Black colleagues new to Maryland had read anything by Larry Neal and others of the Black Arts Movement. Thus we had not been trained for the need for a communal connection for our training as scholars.

Neal cites Etheridge Knight who says that the Black writer is accountable only to Black people and that we must destroy the White ways of looking at the world (64). So much has politically influenced American culture since the heyday of the Black Arts Movement that we have no possibility for a singly-focused African-American culture much like what George Schuyler describes in *Black No More*. Zora Neale Hurston's was ridiculed for her view regarding the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate the schools. She was "criticized because she thought it implied the inferiority of black teachers, black students, and black schools in the South. . . [she resented] any suggestion that whites were superior and that blacks could learn better if they went to school with [Whites]" (Walker 19), Hurston shares an attitude toward Black creativity and ingenuity with Larry Neal and the leading artists of the Black Arts Movement.

Currently, influenced by their class status (privileges), the education of their parents, their movement through slightly integrated universities and their proximity to White innovative representatives of Generation X and Millennials, some Black scholars now address what they refer to as a new Black Aesthetic, bragging of their class privilege and unflinchingly ignoring any commitment to a grassroots culture. These children of Civil Rights workers and Black nationalists reflect Hurston's position that integration would induce alienation from Black folk cultural identity. A synonym for the New Black Aesthetic without discernable differences is the Post-Soul Aesthetic, whose practitioners challenge stable cultural practices regarding what is traditionally seen as Black and White. In other words, Black and White become unstable categories; the Post-Soul aestheticians explore or explode the traditional boundaries of what is meant by Black and what is defined as White. In other words, racial identity is as fluid as sexual and gender identity. Among the more recent publications that interrogate this concept of indeterminacy, only known in the academy, is Trey Ellis's essay, "The New Black Aesthetic," found in his *Platitudes* and in the *African-American Review*, Volume 41, No. 4, Winter 2007.

This position toward Black identity immediately reminds me of two things: Houston Baker's collection of poetry *No Matter Where You Travel You Still Be Black* and Beverly Daniel Tatum's *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*. I would like to alter Baker's title to "No Matter How Intelligent We Be, No Matter How Educated We Be, No Matter the Lightness of Our Skin, We Still Be Black," remembering the deaths of many Black men and women at the hands of police and keeping the Rise of the Trump Nation in mind. While we all, perhaps, agree that Black identity should lie in the eyes of the beholder, Black experiences, regardless of class and educational training, reveal that Blackness is a dangerous signification in the eyes of the perceiver. The perceiver has always seen Blackness as inferior, but with the increased education of Blacks and the high profile of a select few, such as a Black president; high-profile Black public intellectuals and media personalities; frequently appearing commercials, featuring Black and White lovers; and the increase in biracial children; the idea that Blacks can psychically and physically escape the social, political, educational constrictions of racism (not race) emerges as experientially dubious. Not only do we have the wisdom and documentation of Ishmael Reed's *Black Obama and the Jim Crow Media: The Return of the Nigger Breakers* (a text that traces the media's racist representation of Barack Obama's candidacy for president), but we also have had eight experientially previous years of political backlashes and current pushbacks on President Obama's recommendations regarding the forward movement of America's role in international and national affairs. Finding myself in the student cafeteria at Temple University, I discovered an area highly populated by Black students. Perhaps, these students would have a more visceral understanding of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* and Gloria J. Browne-Marshall's *Race, Law, and American Society 1607 to the Present*, and we can surmise that they either participate in or are empathetic to the Black Lives Matter movement.

These texts highlight the clause “The personal is political,” first used by second-wave feminists. Regardless of its origin and original application, it highlights how our experiences—biography, education, gender, sexuality—influence the lens through which we view our mission in the world and question whether we have a mission at all. Despite impressive scholarly texts such as James Smethurst’s *Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s: the black arts movement*, John H. Bracey Jr., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst’s *SOS—Call all Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford’s edition of *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, the very informative and well-overdue documentary on Sonia Sanchez’s life and works, and the institutionalization of a scattered number of Black Studies (Pan-African, Diasporic, African-American) Programs or Departments, the academy has never supported the essential mission of the Black Arts Movement. If the educational, spiritual, and intellectual beliefs and practices of the Black Arts Movement as stated by Neal at the beginning of this essay are going to sustain themselves and impact Black communal lives as was the intention, we Blacks in the academy must maintain some commitment to the Black aesthetic inside the academy, and far more importantly, at the same time, extend its practices/activities outside the academy. Carter G. Woodson in *The Miseducation of the Negro* has warned us of the dangers of the academy, which demands acquiescence to Western ideology and epistemology.

While it is true that we have experienced cultural, literary, political and economic evolutions since the introduction of new theoretical paradigms to the academy, while post-colonial theorists have made use of these paradigms in ways that strengthen the collectivity of the “Other” rather than their internecine individuality, the New Black Aesthetic or Post-Soul Aesthetic reflects Carter G. Woodson’s admonition of the dangers of institutionalization. He warns:

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand her or go yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one of his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.

History shows that it does not matter who is in power . . . those who have not learned to do for themselves and have to depend solely on others never obtain any more rights or privileges in the end than they had in the beginning. (xiii)

Far removed from Woodson’s position is Bertram D. Ashe in an article that appears in a special issue of *African American Review* (Vol. 41, No. 4) dedicated exclusively to the New Black Aesthetic/Post Black Aesthetic/Post Soul Aesthetic, “If there is one idea that appears to define the post-soul aesthetic, [it is the questioning of identity . . .].

A hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of black identity marks the work of many post soul artists” (614). The despair of hiding in deconstruction, the despair, and the individuality characteristic of post-structuralism emerges as a computer virus that has affected the self-perception, ideology, and epistemology of the educated elite. In a chapter titled “Structuralism, Deconstruction, and Post-Modernism,” Norman F. Cantor sums up my perspective:

One of the disturbing and important phenomena in the history of the American university in the twentieth century has been the neglect of indigenous intellectual advances in favor of the later borrowing of ideas—with modest amendments, substantially the same ideas—from Europe. We have allowed academic colonialism and a suffocating Anglophilism and especially in recent years Francophilism to lobotomize memory of highly creative trends among American humanists and behavioral scientists which were replaced by wholesale importations of disciplinary innovations from Europe. (396)

My purpose here is not to imply that theory has no place in the academy. In fact, the academy may be the only appropriate place for theorizing as highlighted by the definition of the Academy: “a school for advanced education founded by Plato; the philosophical doctrines associated with Plato’s academy” (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*). At the foundation of the Academy, theory is intellectually challenging, stimulating, and satisfying; yet its institutionalization requires that we give attention to how our education affects our self-perception, our self-determination, our actions, and our attitude toward others. It is obvious that the New Black Aesthetic is an outcome of the 1954 decision to integrate the school system. What is not as obvious is the effect of the theory police. Regardless of the major, most Ph.D.’s graduating with degrees in the liberal arts know that theorizing gives them an edge in the job market, particularly in Ivy League and elite institutions where the theory police incarcerates difference at the same time that it hypocritically proselytizes diversity, but not communal commitment. What is clear is that any theoretical construct that uses language to talk about language, whose language remains within the confines of what is referred to as the text, that proposes language as a linguistic event or a mere performance, filled with jargon that appeals to an elite group of intellectuals who are comfortable only within the walls of the academy does not “signify” or represent a humanitarian positionality that underlies Justice Thurgood Marshall’s and Dr. Martin Luther King’s fight for educational equality.

I offer two examples, one experiential, and the other a nationally acclaimed documentary film, not discussed in any academic circles in which I have participated, describing the failure of higher education and the K-12 school system to address appropriately the educational equality bequeathed us by Thurgood Marshall and Dr. King. In April of 2017, I attempted to fulfill a promise by addressing the power of language to a group of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in one of Philadelphia’s public schools.

My goal was to play Stephen Marley's rap titled *Revelation: The Root of Life*, thinking that the rap would entertain the students whom I would later engage in a conversation about the meaning of the rap/song and how it related to their lives. Because the students immediately began to run around the room, gather in groups and talk, ignoring the teachers who were trying to get them to sit and listen, I decided to ask a staff member to find Sonia Sanchez's performing her poem "Middle Passage" on *YouTube*. Directly to my left were a group of five young women, huddled together with one lying in another's lap. When I asked the girl in the lap why she was lying down she sat up immediately, evidencing that she knew her behavior inappropriate. As Sanchez channeled the pain and words of slaves on a ship, the young women began to laugh as Sanchez chanted. Completely not understanding Sanchez's purpose, one of the girls up front asked me if Sanchez were pregnant. As I tried to explain the conditions on the slave ship, it became increasingly clear that the students had no knowledge of this history. More disturbingly, the young women humored me with very irrelevant questions as the other students, primarily male, continued to romp around the room. At no point was the staff or I successful in getting the students' attention.

These students exemplify the conditions in the public school system that Geoffrey Canada addresses in the second example—the documentary film *Waiting for Superman*. Canada, now well known, became president of the Educational Center of the Rheedlen School in 1990 and renamed it the Harlem Children's Zone. The school offered tutoring, recreational programs, and community outreach. The documentary tracks the academic conditions of urban high schools in the Bronx, Harlem, Houston, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. Though not exclusively so, the students in these schools were predominantly Black and no strangers to poverty, crime, and troubled families. Explaining that reading scores and math scores in public schools have "flat lined" since 1971, Canada added that the most eye-opening data presented is that states spend \$33,000 per year to house an inmate and \$8,300 on a single student in the public school system. These figures evidence that \$132,000 is spent on an inmate in four years and that \$107,900 "educates" a single student in the k-12 system in 13 years, the time it would take a student to graduate from high-school. Referred to as drop-out factories, these schools evidence the high "achievement gap between rich and poor children." The males, particularly, move from B grades to D grades between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades before they drop out.

Many students who graduate from these "drop-out schools," according to the documentary, require remediation in math and reading when they enter college. Their math skills are ranked last among students in developed countries. Observation reveals that most, if not all, of the proponents of the New Black Aesthetic and the Post-Black Aesthetic do not teach in public universities, which most Black and Latino students attend who do not excel on standardized tests and where some of the students need remediation.

Carter G. Woodson would be quick to recognize why some Blacks prefer to teach in elite institutions and that they and other oppressed minorities with goals of achieving tenure and promotion as well as other positions have little choice except to adopt the language and ideas of Western intellectuals like Saussure, Foucault, Fish, Derrida, Cixous, Lyotard, Delleuze, Bakhtin, Freud (fraud), Lacan, and Butler (whose predecessors or nemeses are Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Husserl, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hegel, and others). Zora Neale Hurston understood that the 1954 Supreme Court decision would demand that one “interpretive community” lose its folk wisdom and spiritual manifestations and be exploited, smothered and eventually subsumed to the point of annihilation by another “interpretive community.” The Western aesthetic embodied in the ideas of the intellectuals above does not move language to praxis as do the practitioners of the Black Arts Movement.

Yet, we Blacks and our allies in the academy have avenues to pursue, one inside the academy and the other outside the academy. We have an impressive number of Black women writers-scholars—some of whom are in the academy and others easily identified whose works I use to echo Carolyn Rodgers: “The essence of the Black Aesthetic is not dead; it is not resting. It has evolved with diasporic representation from the calls sounded by Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Carolyn Rodgers, Sterling Plumpp, Askia Touré, Eugene Redmond, Mari Evans, Toni Cade Bambara, Ed Bullins, Haki Madhubuti, Addison Gayle, Stephen Henderson, and Neal as well as a volume of poets, collected in Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. While the academy proselytizes diversity, we have a host of diasporic women creative writers-scholars who are quietly responding to the voices of the Black Aesthetic, such as Omi Oshun (Joni Jones), Valorie Thomas, Alexis De Veaux, Tina McElroy Ansa, Patricia Lessane-Williams, Diane McKinney-Whetstone, M. Jacqui Alexander, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Ana-Maurine Lara, Samiya Bashir, and La Vinia Delois Jennings whose texts maintain Hurston’s and Woodson’s connection to folk culture and innovatively “proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology,” rooted in African spirituality and philosophy. An exploration of the texts of any one of these writers and critics individually or collectively reveals, in varying ways, highly spiritual, linguistically visionary, and emic challenges to the constrictions of nationalism and the afflictions of homophobia, sexism, and outdated perceptions of gender identity, rifely descriptive of the Black Arts Movement. We need to see more of the texts from the writers above in our curricula in “Plato’s Academy.”

It is essential to remember that an integral relationship exists between the Black Aesthetic and the institutionalization of Black Studies in the academy. In *Black Studies as Human Studies: Critical Essays and Interviews* (2005), I asked the three key faculty--Sonia Sanchez, Amira Baraka, and Askia Touré--to comment on their vision for the future of Black Studies. Baraka explained, “You will never be able to do what you need under somebody else’s agency (141).

He wanted to see a “stable national political organization” (140). He added that we did not need conferences and that we need political organizations (140). Askia Touré expressed the need for Black community institutions, explaining that he “would like to see the scholars of academia come to the institute for key research . . . so that African Studies at least has a dual base, in case it is outlawed in academia” (151). With an idea not that far removed from Baraka’s and Touré’s, Sanchez responds, “. . . in order for Black Studies to last. . . you do need a federation of African-American Studies, which would involve students and scholars, from different perspectives, not a loaded one. Okay, from different perspectives, who would in many ways support each other. When there are disagreements and problems, they will mediate. And they will allow for differences to occur. That’s important” (160).

It does not take much effort to glean from these comments that the Black Aesthetic professors for the first Black Studies Program understood from the start that the academy would not receive warmly a non-western theoretical intellectual perspective or a community-based academic focus. As a result, neither Black Studies nor the Black Aesthetic (and its umbrella, the Black Arts Movement) has fulfilled the potential to challenge successfully the Western intellectual epistemological approach nor transform communal self-determination and self-definition.

Without self-determination and self-definition, a sizable number of us Black scholars belong to the African-American Studies Division of the Modern Language Association. At the business meeting well over a decade ago, I attempted to introduce an idea that would initiate communal responsibility inside our division. I stood up in the Black Caucus/African-American Studies Division and suggested that we members of that body adopt a student from a predominately Black university and purchase that student’s books. Because we are a relatively large group, such fees would have been very minimal for us. We do nothing beyond posing for invisible cameras, drinking, and networking to enhance our own career status. This suggestion was the germ of an idea to transform our intellectual work into action inside the academy. As I was speaking, a colleague from an institution other than mine said something such as, “Don’t listen to Joyce. Go on with the meeting.” Here again, I am reminded of Hurston and Woodson as well as the dissolution of the community-based praxis of the Black Aesthetic and Black Studies.

More emphasis on internal academic support in the MLA and for CLA (College Language Association) as well as critical exegesis on the texts of the Black women writers listed earlier represent two of my examples of where we can go from here. We Blacks and our allies in the academy have options that require little effort. In addition to purchasing books for a select number of Black students in a historically Black institution, we could adopt a historically Black university such as Dillard, Lincoln, Cheney or Fisk. We can identify a student or group of Black graduate students and mentor them through the graduate process and provide assistance for their attendance at CLA and MLA.



However, taking our knowledge and skills outside the confines of the academy would more appropriately and successfully address where we scholars can take the Black Arts Movement/the Black Aesthetic from here. Sonia Sanchez, Ishmael Reed, Eugene Redmond, Askia Touré, and Quincy and Margaret Troup give us models to follow.

Sonia Sanchez has set a model for contemporizing the aesthetics and community engagement of the Black Arts Movement. Not only has she deleted the profanity from her poetry, but her work now addresses all humanity, requiring that we ask ourselves what it means to be human. The documentary film on her and her work *BaddDDD, BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez* chronicles the wide range of her community activism and the impact of her work on younger generations of artists. One of the first faculty members for the first Black Studies Program at San Francisco State University, she has been a faculty member at numerous universities across the country and has continued to give speeches and conduct writers' workshops at poetry houses and museums. She adopted the John G. Whitter School in Philadelphia. As poet laureate of Philadelphia, she sponsored a year of "poetry readings, poetry workshops, poetry/musical performances," all open to the community (*Conversations* xxi-xxv).

Now living in Boston, Askia Touré in addition to continuing the publication of his epic poetry, rooted in the mythology and history of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia (Kemit and Kush), conducts poetry and political mentoring workshops with those whom he refers to as "young comrades." Touré began this work long before the creation of the term and movement now called "Black Lives Matter." Having seen the need for leadership among Black youth long before Trayvon Martin's death and the escalated war on young Black males and Black women, Touré focuses his work in community centers and through invitations from youth groups around the city of Boston. Having taught at a university in Atlanta for a very short time and at San Francisco College (now University), he realized that academia was prohibitive to the effectiveness of his goals (Telephone Conversation, August 22, 2017).

It is inarguable that Ishmael Reed and his works are as well known by the academic elite as they are to the current followers of the Black Arts Movement. A prolific, innovative and tricky stylist, Reed plays a leadership role in using some of his publications to address the need for multicultural writers and their perspectives. Two of his publications are *From Totems to Hip-Hop: A Multicultural Anthology of Poetry Across the Americas, 1900-2002* (2003) and *Pow Wow: Charting the Fault Lines in the American Experience—Short Fiction from Then to Now* (2009), co-edited by him and Carla Blank. Both of these texts advance the work of the Black Arts Movement by taking the movement beyond nationalism to multiculturalism. His online journal *Konch Magazine* "sustained by . . . Reed, Tennessee Reed [their] readers, granting independence that those zines with corporate sponsorship lack. Contributors to *Konch* have submitted work that is innovative and serene, but we reserve the right to be rowdy. The Jim Crow Media and literary Scene Have Failed Us" ([ishmaelreedpub.com/](http://ishmaelreedpub.com/)).

Publications have minimal “life cycles” if they are not shared throughout the centuries. Eugene B. Redmond has made an indelible literary milestone by contributing his poems, manuscripts, books, photos, letters, awards, posters, magazines and fliers to Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (SIUE) from which he has retired. The Eugene B. Redmond Collection and Learning Center opened on October 2016 in the Lovejoy Library. Sharing his talents and works with the East St. Louis community, Redmond and the center sponsor open-mic readings, and the Kwansabá Poetry Contest for high-school students as well as events at the Missouri History Museum. He works with a local writing community; the Center sponsors Black Lives Matter panel discussions. In contrast, it is difficult to think of how much of Hurston’s work was destroyed in a fire, leaving us with many questions about her life and her thoughts about her future work, particularly in her later years.

A final and, perhaps, the most productive communal extension of the kind of work that brings the ideology and aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic into the community is Quincy Troupe and Margaret Porter Troupe’s Harlem Salon and Margaret Porter Troupe’s Gloster Arts Project. The Harlem Salon, initiated in 2004, “provides a forum (as well as a support system) for contemporary writers, performers, and visual artists, primarily artists of color” in the Troupes’ home in Harlem. At the Harlem Arts Salon, visitors can meet poets, writers, musicians, and other creative thinkers who are among the most celebrated, distinguished, and renowned cultural icons living and working today and find a community of like-minded lovers of literature and art” (<http://harlemartsalon>). Because the Troupes’ home is the site of the Salon, it is wise that admission is by invitation only. Having attended two of these events, I am aware that guests who are not slated to speak are allowed as long as they are invited by a guest speaker and sign up as the website requires. Most strikingly important is Margaret Porter Troupe’s founding of the Gloster Arts Project, a non-profit arts and education and residency program in rural Mississippi. Each summer selected youth meet in workshops conducted by writers like Terry McMillan and artists like Danny Glover to expose these youth who have tremendously underfunded school systems to “arts, culture, and history.” Though submerged in the text on the website, the following idea would make a credo for the program: “We also believe that education is the best weapon in the fight against poverty. . .” ( <http://glosterartsproject.org>).

Clearly, we literary scholars and writers have a long legacy of elders who have sacrificed families, lives, and, in too many cases, the distinguished recognition they deserve. The perspective I take in this presentation does not denigrate integration; it does strongly suggest that integration has not served Blacks well. It has come at a tremendous price. My goal is to provide evidence regarding how we need to regroup and rethink how to use our knowledge and skills far less selfishly and continue the work of the Black Aesthetic by challenging racism, sexism, transphobia, and homophobia through outreach programs that will prepare students to understand what Sonia Sanchez intends to convey when she channels slaves on a slave ship through her chants.

We still have not answered Sonia Sanchez's question:  
who's gonna make all  
that beautiful blk/rhetoric  
mean something. (1-3)

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