

Black Feminism, The Ancestors Speak, and the Women of the Black Arts Movement

by

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Abstract

Kim McMillon discusses Black Feminism and the Black Arts Movement. She argues that the history and survival of the Black woman have depended on a central narrative described as ancestralness; whereby, the ancestral tools of poetry, art, music, and community allow the Black woman to discover her inner mecca beyond white privilege and colonization. In this paper, McMillon contends that this ancestralness negates the African-American women as "other" by opening the door to ancestral DNA and an innerness where art and community are privileged through the awareness and power in Blackness. This same knowledge allows the women of the Black Arts Movement to move beyond the liminal space prescribed to the African-American woman. It is through the African-American woman's ancestralness that this invisibility is removed and the Black woman finds liberation.

A priestess dressed in white grabbed and held me in New Orleans' Congo Square. The Black Arts Movement Conference at Dillard University had ended. It was the evening of September 11, 2016, and as the organizer of that conference, I still had bills to pay. The priestess rocked me back and forth and in a voice that spoke of Black bodies long gone said, "The ancestors are pleased." She held me tight as tears mingled with dreams unrealized. "Don't worry about the money. It is a distraction. You will be repaid a thousand fold." I had not been held like that in forever. It was a holding of a soul space by a woman who did not know me as more than an acquaintance but was demanding an audience with my soul: soul-to-soul communications in a place long ago where slaves danced in freedom worship every Sunday. How appropriate that I was here on Sunday asking for my soul's freedom. The voices of the ancestors spoke through Nana Sula, and I listened.

This type of healing connection to the ancestors is discussed in Toni Morrison's essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation;" she speaks of "...the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people, very down-to-earth, even shrewd people. However, within that practicality, we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things.... And some of those things were "discredited knowledge..." (61). The knowledge that Morrison speaks of is an awareness of spirit, of the ancestors, of a need to communicate beyond that which is seen. The ancestors were speaking through Nana Sula. Just as W.E.B. Dubois speaks of double-consciousness, Black women must speak of spirit-consciousness, that connection to the ancestors that is always pulling Black bodies, particularly Black women, between two worlds as they negotiate a universe filled with racialized minefields.

These minefields can take the form of racialized symbols that cause the mind to travel to dark and desperate places where home, culture, and Black bodies are not safe. The festering legacy of chains is one of those symbols. Africans stolen from their homeland, crowded ships with bodies piled, the auction block, and mass incarceration are all linked by chains. Shackled from one generation to the next, raped Black bodies birthing babies, sharecropped to extinction, mass migration, servants, redlining, gerrymandering, and the invisible chain that stretches as far back as 1619 and the first enslaved Africans touching American soil speaks to the history of Blacks in America.

This invisible chain is the guide to Black women in America. However, it is in the 1960s and 1970s that the chain similar to the term "Black" is redefined with the words, art, music, dance and literature, written by Black women, telling their stories, their sorrow songs through art that shouts: "Black Power," and cries in the night wrapping Black bodies in blankets tinged with anguish and rocked by hope. Their voices are submerged but whispering, "Art is freedom. Follow me." This invisible chain forever connects us to our ancestors allowing the Black woman to rebirth our history and stand in its power. It is in that history that those Hidden Voices, the women of the Black Arts Movement emerge.

These Hidden Voices are examined through the lens of Black Feminism with a narrative of resistance through art. What does it mean to be a Black woman in America, and how does the experience of Black womanhood from slavery to present time define the African-American woman? This essay examines the link between the enslavement of the African female and the dominant society's placement of the Black woman in the role of "other," thereby ensuring the usurpation of her physical body and voice. I argue that the Black female artist has reclaimed the essence of Black womanhood and empowered the entire Black race through the art, poetry, theatre and prose of the women of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). My research focuses on the art and lives of Amina Baraka, the wife of the late Amiri Baraka; Black Panthers Charlotte "Mama C" O'Neal and Judy Juanita; and Civil Rights icon and photographer Dr. Doris Derby. I research hidden voices that have not been privileged, voices in communities, families, and academia. My work examines their survival and renegotiation of space through the filter of slavery, the Black Liberation Movement, the Feminist Movement, sexuality, trauma, and resistance. How did these women walk a tightrope in a highly politicized cultural environment, and how did this affect their work as well as their survival? What or who influenced the creation of their art, which will be discussed in terms of the political act of being an African-American woman and the use of space, art, and culture as a form of resistance?

This resistance is nurtured through Black Feminism with a central narrative described as ancestralness; whereby, the ancestral tools of poetry, art, music, and community allow the Black woman to discover her inner mecca beyond white privilege and colonization. This ancestralness negates the African-American women as "other" by opening the door to ancestral DNA and an innerness where art and community are privileged through an awareness and power in Blackness. Charlotte "Mama C" O'Neal clarifies this term with Kenyan hip-hop artist Kamau Ngigi, who maintains that, "Wahenga could be ancestralness" as described in the Kiswahili language of the Swahili people. "In the dictionary they describe it as an elder who sits on a native council, but Wahenga, according to the people, are long gone ancestors." I use this African term as a means of recognizing the African Americans' African roots. These "long gone ancestors" are still embedded in our being, in our Blackness.

In order to document the Hidden Voices of the Black Arts Movement, I walk with my ancestors and those of the Black Arts Movement so that I am granted permission and knowledge to tell their stories with the hope that my words bring justice to the long gone and present-day women of the Black Arts Movement. Their stories, their lives, are written in the earth, hidden and in plain sight for all that thirst for the knowledge enfolded in the hearts and minds of Blackness. That rich Blackness that carries the ancestral voices of ancient African culture is intertwined in the DNA of Black America. It is a giant that when awakened is all encompassing with knowledge of the survival of Black Americans. As a race, we could not have survived the Middle Passage, Slavery, Jim Crow Laws, and mass incarceration without that DNA.

This DNA is centered in the Black womb that has been problematized to the point that the image of the Black woman negates her existence; whereby, she endures in a liminal space, crowded by images of Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Welfare Queen, and the angry Black woman that borders on psychotic in its depiction of rage and violence. Who is the African American woman? My research illustrates how the Black female is recreating her image based on her historical past beyond colonization. Using the images and writings of African American women past and present, the ancestors guide me in the telling of the hidden stories, opening doors that have been closed, marked with the worn threads of life. The magic behind these doors has been left unclaimed, until now. The writings of Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Gwendolyn Brooks, Wanda Coleman, Mari Evans, Jayne Cortez, and others connect to the present-day oracles Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, bell hooks, Angela Davis and others as we enter the ancestral circle of female voices that have risen above the fray, and the Hidden Voices, joined by a nurturing thread weaving the history and lives of these women into the tapestry of the Black Arts Movement.

In the telling of these stories, scholars like Melissa V. Harris-Perry testify to life in America for the African American woman. In her acclaimed book *Sister Citizen*, Harris Perry speaks to life in America for the Black woman as living in a “Crooked Room.” Harris-Perry maintains that “...[B]lack women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion.” She insists that “...To understand why black women’s public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room” (29).

Harris-Perry’s vision of the crooked room in which African American women stand speaks to the negative imagery placed on Black bodies. For hundreds of years, the Black woman has been told that her color, her body, and her very being were not her own, or lacked worth. My work seeks to tear down that crooked room through the power of the art and words of the BAM women creating Black Female Wholeness. Just as the burden of slavery was overwhelming, the burden of privileged views of what is Blackness carries the weight of a lack of authenticity brought about by belief systems whose roots reflect an absence of substance. My research shows how the Black woman goes beyond this limited placement by the dominant society and those adhering to its narrative. I would argue that this ancestralness negates the “crooked room” by opening to ancestral DNA and an innerness where art and community are favored through an awareness and power in Blackness.

This power has been monitored by men who claim to have the authority to decide who was a part of the Black Arts Movement. The Movement has been framed by historical figures like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Ed Bullins, Thomas Dent, and Kalamu ya Salaam while relegating women to the back of the literary bus. However, bus drivers and riders change, making room for new voices that refuse to be marginalized by gender politics.

Patricia Hill Collins, author of *Black Feminist Thought* asserts that the suppression of the Black female is shaped by "...three interdependent dimensions...the exploitation of Black women's labor.... the political dimension of oppression, and the controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era..." (6-7). I would argue that this suppression of the Black female has its origins in fear, fear that is contained in the ideology of the need to suppress that which is ultimately power unrealized as the Black woman is cloaked in gendered as well as racial invisibility. The Black woman has been marginalized to the point that she is viewed from stereotypical images so that her truth and existence is mitigated.

Imagine a space much like the auction blocks of 18th and 19th century America. In that setting, Black women are caught in that gendered and racialized gaze that says, "You are the problem," and their lives immediately change. They are wary of what they say in public and of laws that can and have been enforced to limit their rights. They are aware that by going outside of their communities they will often be judged by the color of their skin. This is what Harris-Perry describes as the "crooked room," and that room has its origins in the auction blocks, places where a Black women's body was abused and shackled, where she was without voice and agency. In this crooked room, because of her DNA, which houses the horrors of slavery and all that it entailed, she experiences Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome as described by Dr. Joy DeGruy-Leary in her groundbreaking book, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*. Dr. DeGruy-Leary describes P.T.S.S. as:

...a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today. Added to the condition is a belief (real or imagined) that the benefits of society in which they live are not accessible to them. This, then, is Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. (121)

The Black female has dealt with P.T.S.S. and its effects since the beginnings of slavery. While race is now viewed as a construct, it continues to be tied to negative perceptions about women and men of African ancestry. Slavery in the United States has ended, but the results of enslavement linger. It is easy to dismiss the claim that slavery, something that happened over two-hundred years ago, would no longer have an effect on Black bodies, but in Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, she likens slavery to the loss of a limb, and yet the "traces of memory" that function as a phantom limb hold that record of slavery. Hartman observes the need to recognize that loss as a way of "redressing the breach introduced by slavery." She states that it is the "working through of the past" that allows those of African heritage to redress the pain and sorrow of the Middle Passage (73-74).

This inherited pain, while long gone, is still part of American history with little done by the dominant race to address the impact of slavery. It can be likened to a wound that has not been cleaned and continues to fester. African Americans have used literature to write about, discuss, and clean these invisible wounds, to heal that which is unseen. Water hoses, jail cells, sharecropping, and beatings speak of a legacy that has yet to be healed. Fanie Lou Hamer and countless others laid their bodies down so that our lives were made easier. The writings of Cherise A. Pollard, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Childress, and women extending themselves beyond the boundaries placed by race have opened, bandaged and dressed these psychic wounds. However, what is not spoken is that these wounds are not just carried by women and men of African ancestry. When such pain is inflicted upon a people, the entire planet is affected.

The title of my dissertation is *Hidden Voices* because parts of the United States are still not safe for Black Bodies, and many voices demanding an end to oppression still remain hidden. Women and men of Black ancestry have moved through a society that has often proved alien. Worse still, Black women have remained in the shadows when necessary for their survival. During the Black Arts Movement, Black women rose in protest and are again rising with organizations like Black Lives Matter to denounce a racialized United States. Although their art and literature was created during the Black Arts Movement, the power of their art has only strengthened as people of color look to their rich past for answers. The women of the Black Arts Movement have created and are still creating art that emancipates.

As a playwright, teacher and an artist, I see a clear need for discussions on race. In my classroom, the pedagogy connecting racial issues and the Black Arts Movement was vital. From 2013 until Spring 2017, I taught Theatre and Social Responsibility at the University of California, Merced using the plays and poetry of the men and women of the Black Arts Movement. I discovered that the writings of Ed Bullins, Marvin X, Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Mari Evans, Martin Luther King, Jr., Margaret Walker, Ishmael Reed, Ben Caldwell, Malcom X, Carolyn Rodgers, Alice Childress, Judy Juanita, Avotcja and more could be used to help students develop their empathy muscle. Students of all races performed plays and poetry before live audiences and then discussed how the words and views of these artists affected them. It is very clear that the BAM writers did not intend for their work to be used in this manner. It is also evident that these writings are helpful in healing racism. It is harder to speak in racist terms when you have performed as a Black man jailed for no reason other than skin color or as a Black woman reacting to Jim Crow Laws. In E. Patric Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, he uses a quote from Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. to show the importance of opening the door on a more inclusive worldview: "No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world" (3). Dr. Gates is affirming that as humans, we have the ability to empathize and to create art and literature that enhances our humanity by reaching out and accessing in an internal and external manner that which represents the art and humanity of others.

Grounding Our Ancestralness

While ancestralness does not apply to the Black female over the Black male, it is the double-edged sword of gender and race that moves the African American female to rely on the space of the ancestors. In September 2016, the Dillard University-Harvard Hutchins's Center Black Arts Movement Conference opened with prayer and ancestral worship. New Orleans Black Indians commenced with the prayer chant, *Indian Red*, that has Native American and African roots. Big Chief Clarence A. Dalcour led the tribe of Creole Osceolas Indians. This was followed by an African Ritual Invocation with iconic Louisiana spiritual leaders Luisah Teish, and Nana Sula, and Charlotte "Mama C" O'Neal handling the vocals and Avotcja on percussions. Throughout the room, you could feel the ancestors as Mama C carried a small urn and walked through the audience prayerfully shouting, "Call out the names of your ancestors. Say their names! Say their names!" People called out family members, Black icons, and whispered names too personal to shout. This Wahenga, the communion with spirits, nurtured the bodies and souls of all those present.

This connection to spirit, the worshipping of the ancestors, allows the African-American woman to represent the heart of the planet. While this might appear to be hyperbole, let us look at the facts as they pertain to the historiography of the African American female. The DNA of the Black woman has been etched with the history of enslavement, the use of her body for breeding, her breasts to feed the master's children, the rape of her body for the pleasure of others, the hiring out of herself to feed her family, and the educating of herself and her children so that they might have more. All of these acts represent the ability to love when oppression is at every door. That love has been tested with the historical selling of her children into slavery and the building of prisons to enslave members of her family. And yet, the African-American woman has remained the part of the human anatomy that allows for the survival of all, the heart. The African-American woman stands as a bridge repairing racial trauma through the heart. Former slave and Black feminist Anna Julia Cooper speaks of the Black female as a necessary voice in the healing of past trauma. In her essay, "Womanhood A Vital Element," Anna Julia Cooper argues that "Only the Black Woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (644).

This message of the Black female as the gatekeeper, opening the door, not just to Black womanhood, but to full personhood for all represents the core of my research. The focal point of the Black woman as gatekeeper results from the perception of the African-American woman as "other," and as such, when she walks through the door, there is no one left to enter. What is not understood is that as the gatekeeper, the Black woman is the healing connection that offers community and the building of structures that unite African American culture and family. This pattern of community is at the heart of contemporary Black feminism(s).

It is with that heart that community is created, gathering Black voices in bookstores, homes, community centers, churches, and neighborhoods. In her book, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker writes about this phenomenon. Her description of her work as "womanist prose" speaks to the heart of ancestralness and community. Walker describes the term womanist as "A Black feminist or feminist of color...Appreciates and prefers women's culture women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (11). Similar to ancestralness, there is a fluidity in the term. Womanist is not limited to one description. Its holistic approach to Black womanhood encompasses the complexity of Black female bodies that celebrate the Black male as much as their own solitude and female companionship. Similarly Wahenga speaks to the ancestors, but also the voices of the ancestors speaking with and through Black women and men. The words are used as open doorways to promote a healing of African bodies nurtured through community.

Through the Black Arts Movement, African Americans created community that was predicated on the belief that "Black is Beautiful." It was through community theatres and settings that this new expression of blackness was propagated. Blacks were creating the "full flowering" of their images that went beyond the dominant society's depiction of blackness. Minstrelsy turned upside-down in the 1960s. Plays like *Dutchman* by Amiri Baraka were done in black and white face as representative of how African Americans were still seen from projected images of blackness created by the dominant culture. African-Americans were now creating art in their own image and for their own people. Through the Black Arts Movement, African-Americans en-mass realized that they were part of the African Diaspora. Lines of communication opened between African-Americans and those of African descent throughout the world. This was visible in the theatre of African-Americans that touched on the interconnectedness of those of African ancestry. From Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* to Amiri Baraka's *Slave Mother Africa* shaped the existence of Black Americans. The community of those of African descent was larger and more diverse as it became apparent that their African roots were infinite. These lines of communication connecting Africa with the United States are represented in the work and art of Black Panther Charlotte "Mama C" O'Neal. Mama C has dedicated her life and her art towards making a difference through her commitment to Unity and her African homeland in Tanzania, a cultural oasis for national and international students wishing to learn more on African traditions, cultural history, art and literature.

A Fluid Vision of the Black Arts Movement

There is a need to explore the roots of the Black Arts Movement as it pertains to the Black female. In Kalamu ya Salaam's essay "Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement," he asserts that "The Black Arts movement... coalesced in 1965 and broke apart around 1975/1976. In March 1965 following the 21 February assassination of Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) moved from Manhattan's Lower East Side, uptown to Harlem, an exodus considered the symbolic birth of the Black Arts movement." While this narrative history appears etched in stone, a feminist approach might view the Black Arts Movement as having begun with "... Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway and to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award" (Wilkerson 441). Why would this moment qualify as a possible beginning of the Black Arts Movement? *A Raisin in the Sun* presented new images of Blackness that upheld the tenets of "Black is Beautiful" in its accurate depiction and celebration of African and African-American culture. Margaret Wilkerson points out that "The time was ripe for a play that could somehow bridge the gap between Blacks and Whites in the U.S. while communicating the urgency and necessity of the civil rights struggle" (444). Lorraine Hansberry created a play that spoke to a changing America, one where African Americans were demanding equality now. Amina Baraka also takes issue with the narrative that the Black Arts Movement began with Amiri Baraka's exodus from Manhattan's Lower East Side and is vocal about her belief that the movement began in the late 1950s with the Grandassa Models, Abbey Lincoln, and the Brath brothers. Civil Rights icon Dr. Doris Derby also speaks to differing views on the beginnings of the Black Arts Movement, asserting:

I am part of the link of the Harlem Renaissance Artists moving into the Black Arts Movement, and to me it is a continuum, and it's north, and south influencing each other. But it's also the Civil Rights Movement, and prior to the Civil Rights, it is the fight for African liberation. So for me it was like continuing from the Harlem Renaissance. I was a part of that. I was very young but I was involved in it. I was in high school when I was in the Harlem Writers' Guild.

Dr. Derby's words are a testament to the work of African-American artists linked by history and culture from one generation to the next. While history will probably always note the Black Arts Movement as starting with Amiri Baraka in 1965, I would argue that there is a fluidity to the Movement. Similar to Dr. Derby's assertion, it is a continuum of the art of Black America. The Black Arts Movement is a personal and creative artistic record by Black Americans celebrating the Black Aesthetic. Our voices are based on our beliefs about our history. The words and art of Black men and women are not limited to a movement or point in time; they are the eternal movement of art that speaks to the Black experience and our African roots.

As African Americans, we have a history of turning to Africa when seeking an understanding of who we are as a people. The Black Arts Movement is deeply rooted in African tradition and culture and influenced by the art of Africa. The term “Wahenga” speaks not just to the long gone ancestors, but also to our awareness that they are still here, and we are guided by the ancestors. Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise,” addresses this awareness. “Out of the huts of history’s shame/I rise/Up from a past that’s rooted in pain/I rise/I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide/Welling and swelling I bear in the tide./Leaving behind nights of terror and fear/I rise/Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear/I rise/Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave/I am the dream and the hope of the slave./I rise/I rise/I rise” (29-43).

In the poem, “Still I Rise,” Maya Angelou has outlined Black Feminism--Its risings, forever seeking a grounded space in the wombs, in the bodies, and the minds of Black females. The ancestors are rooted in our beings, bringing the gifts of an unbreakable spirit that soars, no matter the circumstances. This definition of Black Feminism has its roots in Blackness itself, dark and deep, so deep that it is often not apparent. The words, “Out of the huts of history’s shame/I rise,” speak to one of the most problematic issues of the African American, the shame and stain of slavery, which still affects the Black race.

In my interview with Dr. Derby, she speaks of the vital work done by herself and others determined to fight against a society that sought to suppress the African American through denying them the right to vote and violence perpetrated by those that viewed Blacks as less than. The feminism espoused by Maya Angelou may not be the feminism of the Women’s Movement, but it is the feminism of Black women determined to move past a history that does not acknowledge the power of Black womanhood.

In *De Facto Feminism: Essays Straight Outta Oakland*, Former Black Panther Judy Juanita speaks of Black Feminism in the starkest terminology. “Black women can’t fake feminism, hide it or disappear into marriage. They do not do it for a season, dodge it, or veil it in a career. They cannot be faux feminists insulated by class privilege. De facto feminists stand between peace and every day in Detroit, Oakland, Harlem, Miami, Chicago, St. Louis, Dallas, the White House...--the Gaza Strips of the US ---without glorification...” (146-147). What is profound about these words is that they hold a space of Blackness that every Black mother embraces when her sons and daughters leave the safety of home. They hold that space of peace, that space of blessings in the hope of their safe return. This rethinking of Black Feminism goes to the heart, it nurtures and uplifts family and community. This is the Black Feminism that does not require the Black women to do anything but just be. You do not have to look towards others for your truth; Black Feminism is like the jewels of Black Africa, it is carried in the heart, forever enshrined with our Wahenga, our ancestors. When we journey home, we throw out the jewels so that they may touch our Black Sisters and Brothers as we walk the path home.

Additionally, my research speaks to the rethinking of Black feminism by moving past old paradigms of what it means to be a feminist. Amina Baraka is a feminist by virtue of being born into a Black body that fought to have a voice. In my conversations with literary icon Ishmael Reed on the Black Arts Movement, he describes Amina Baraka as the late Amiri Baraka's anchor. However, her work was often overshadowed by Baraka's iconic status. In an interview with Amina Baraka, she states that Charlie Parker's *Confirmation* is her favorite piece of music. Amina told Amiri that she wanted to do an anthology and name it *Confirmation*. That is how *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women* was created. Amina did the work because it was her baby, and yet both their names are listed as the editors. Amina said she knew it needed his name to be published. However, the anthology includes Toni Morrison, Sonia Sanchez, Abbey Lincoln, Maya Angelou, Jayne Cortez, Alice Walker and so many other profoundly brilliant Black women. I do not believe it needed Amiri's name to be published. However, I do believe his celebrity was important to the book's publication at that time.

Perhaps it is the need of the human race to document its existence with words and yet realize that these very words are incomplete when defining our humanity through the limited concepts of race and gender. However, this research validates the existence of the African-American female as she continually redefines herself. The difference is the women of the Black Arts Movement represent scholarship that can be found in communities throughout the United States, created by women artists and writers whose voices have not been celebrated in the same manner as their male counterparts. By saying their names, articulating the importance of their work, we are giving voice to Black sisters whose art and literature define the power and promise of the Black Arts Movement.

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