

## The Black Arts Movement and Black Aesthetics

The title poem of Sonia Sanchez's 1969 debut collection, *Home Coming*, like other oft-cited poems by her Black Arts Movement (BAM) contemporaries, stages a confrontation between two world views. One is implicitly "white," picked up in "college," and brought with the speaker in a "tourist"-style visit to the neighborhood in which she grew up, where it leads her to look unfeelingly upon "all / the niggers killing / themselves with" illegal drugs (Sanchez 1978, 3). The other world view, explicitly "black," is constructed as mature, authentic, and wise (rather than educated), giving voice to the true homecoming:

now woman  
i have returned  
leaving behind me  
all those hide and  
seek faces peeling  
with freudian dreams.  
this is for real.  
black  
niggers  
my beauty.

(Sanchez 1978, 3)

Rejecting the world view urged on her by her college education and "the newspapers," which is deemed unreliable and disconnected from reality, the speaker is now equipped to revise her view of her neighbors. She repeats the racial epithet deployed dismissively in the poem's opening, but this time lovingly envelopes it within lines that value who and what she sees, visually and conceptually aligning "black" with "my beauty" – the "my" claiming not only her own "blackness," but also theirs, and them.

What Sanchez and some of her contemporaries theorized in poetry, Addison Gayle theorized in prose. In his 1971 essay, "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," Gayle counters the "expected

opposition to the concept of a 'Black Aesthetic'" with a telling recitation of the history of "the white aesthetic" (Gayle 1994, 207). Beginning with Platonic philosophy and running through the English literary tradition, Gayle traces the idealization of the color white as symbolizing purity, goodness, and beauty and the demonization of the color black as taint, evil, and ugliness, across centuries of European thought. His point – neither strictly racial nor unconnected to the racial politics of his era – focuses on the realm of culture, which cannot be understood, in the context of circum-atlantic modernity, without reference to race. In the wake of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report, which studied the mid-sixties urban riots, one could not act on the flawed assumption that there was a single America with "a common cultural heredity," he argues (*ibid.*). Recognition of the cultural specificity of aesthetic standards was for Gayle a crucial first step in relieving African American writers from the burden of external (and internalized) aesthetic criteria that consistently degraded the experiences and subjectivity of black people. The cultural nationalist mantra "Black is beautiful" was a starting point, in Gayle's analysis, for the long, hard work of developing a criticism – an aesthetics – that, taking black culture as the primary frame of reference, could do justice to African American artistry.

This mid-twentieth-century moment was not the first time that the relationship of race and culture to the evaluation of work by black U.S. artists had been interrogated. W. E. B. Du Bois's 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art" proposed that the use of art as "positive propaganda" in the struggle of "black folk" to gain recognition of their full humanity and citizenship rights was a necessary counter to the racist propaganda found in much white American art (Du Bois 1986, 1000). The "black public," he asserted, "must come to the place where the work of art when it appears is reviewed and acclaimed by our own free and unfettered judgment," which required them to "make [them]selves free of mind, proud of body and just of soul" (Du Bois 1986, 1001–2). His words resonated with Langston Hughes's own 1926 essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in which Hughes defended his generation's intent to dance to the beat of their own "tom-tom" as part of their right as artists to fully utilize their cultural inheritance ("Negro Artist").

From the vantage point of the mid-1960s, these New Negro Renaissance-era declarations appeared inefficacious, if they were remembered at all. After three decades during which barely a handful of African American writers were recognized by the American literary establishment (primarily Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Ralph Ellison), the time was ripe for establishing their own "Black Aesthetic" standards.<sup>1</sup> Not only did literary-critical conditions call for it; the racial politics and

the socioeconomic situation of African Americans demanded it. The Civil Rights Movement's successes and failures had enabled the wide dissemination of a new political program: Black Power. Notwithstanding rhetorical and visual cues to the contrary, Black Power was less about separatism than independence and self-determination, less about destruction and violence than immediate and dramatic sociopolitical change. Black Power politics spoke to African Americans, particularly younger ones, who had grown up outside the South in unprecedented numbers and were impatient with the slow gains made through nonviolent protest, judicial campaigns, and legislative lobbying. Civil Rights organizations that had employed these relatively conservative strategies, sometimes with notable success, were being compared negatively to organizations with more radical, less conciliatory politics, such as the Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and the Stokely Carmichael-led Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), by then an exclusively black group. The riots that punctured the years following Malcolm X's assassination, flaming up in cities from Newark to Detroit to Los Angeles, manifested evolving attitudes and energies that Black Power politics sought to guide into liberatory channels (Collins and Crawford 2006, 1-8).

Where Black Power offered a political program, Black Arts – “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” (Neal 1994, 184) – engaged the political stakes of the cultural arena. Among the earliest, most powerful and influential of the voices calling for a Black Aesthetic were poets LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal. Part of Jones/Baraka's power stemmed from his visibility; he had already made a name for himself among a cross-section of variously counterculture poets (Beat, New York School, Black Mountain, and surrealist). Living in Greenwich Village, Jones voraciously read and created poetry, publishing such associates as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Diane di Prima, A. B. Spellman, Frank O'Hara, Barbara Guest, Ted Joans, Phillip Lamantia, Charles Olson, and Ed Dorn.<sup>2</sup> His first play, *Dutchman*, produced off-Broadway in early 1964, had earned him an Obie Award and the approval of the critical establishment. Thus, his decision to act on his growing disillusionment with American society by cutting ties with white bohemia and relocating to Harlem – not instigated but cemented by Malcolm X's assassination – reverberated widely. The Black Arts Repertory Theater and School (BARTS), which he founded upon his arrival uptown, was a vibrant, culturally significant institution; although short-lived, it has had a long afterlife.

In this new context, Jones/Baraka worked to make the aesthetics announced in his prose and his poetry a lived practice. Calling for a “Revolutionary Theatre,” he invoked an aesthetic that “should force change” – indeed,

“should be change” (Jones 1966, 210). This art “should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness – but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments” (Jones 1966, 211). Jones conceived of an art that, informed by Wittgenstein's insight that “ethics and aesthetics are one,” would value the real: “We will talk about the world, and the preciseness with which we are able to summon the world will be our art” (Jones 1966, 212). His unforgettable poem “Black Art” opens with such a summoning – “Poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step. Or black ladies dying / of men leaving nickel hearts / beating them down” (Baraka 1995, 142) – which renders even abstractions, like nurture or heartbreak, in concrete, organic terms. “Black Art,” in other words, would provide African Americans with what Neal called “a new synthesis; a new sense of literature as a *living* reality” connected to their own experiences (Neal 2007, 654).

Neal, a poet more widely known as a theorist, looked to black speech and music as models for poetry seeking to embody a Black Aesthetic. In “And Shine Swam On,” the essay that closes the signal anthology *Black Fire* that he and Jones/Baraka coedited, Neal held up “the cadences of Malcolm's speeches” and the “James Brown scream” as that which the black poet should learn from and emulate (Neal 2007, 653). Only by refusing to approach themselves by way of “Western culture” would African Americans be able to write without the internal “tension” Du Bois identified as “double-consciousness,” he argued (Neal 2007, 647, 640). The search for elements of black culture that were arguably less mediated by Eurocentric values led to the emphasis on oral and aural expression – cultural forms that could have best survived the rupture of the Middle Passage and conditions of enslavement. BAM poets thus frequently repudiated standard modes of capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and syntax in favor of typography and orthography meant to represent a *written* vernacular speech and other sonic forms of black culture. Profanity and other provocative or shocking “street” language regularly peppered BAM poetry, to signal racial “authenticity” and commitment to BAM ideology. BAM poets often used such diction to critique the racism and classism of American society and to call for radical change. We see these goals in Nikki Giovanni's oft-cited poem “The True Import of Present Dialogue, Black vs. Negro,” in which she notes that “they sent us to kill / Japan and Africa,” then asks: “Can you kill a white man / Can you kill the nigger / in you” (Giovanni 1970, 20). Giovanni's spare, unadorned style relies primarily on repetition, rhythm, and the unapologetic use of brusque language for its energy.

But these same investments, in various hands, produced a range of results. One could not confuse Don L. Lee's (Haki Madhubuti's) sharp-tongued

incorporation of "the dozens" with Mari Evans's witty or melancholic sketches of black life, or want to conflate Giovanni's direct invocation of armed resistance in the poem mentioned earlier with the spiraling odes penned by Askia Touré (Roland Snellings), even if Touré's work emphasized the value and significance of black culture inherently and as a foundation for radical (potentially militant) sociopolitical change. BAM poets used everything from historical knowledge to stylistic excess, as in Henry Dumas's "mosaic harlem," a potentially blasphemous riff on the coexistence of Islam and Christianity:

what news from James' bastard bible?  
al-Mahdi kneels in the mosque,  
Melchizedek, Moses, Marcus, Muhammad, Malcolm!  
marshaling words, mobilizing swords  
the message is mixed and masticated with Martin  
the good news of the gospel is crossing a crescent  
(Baraka and Neal 2007, 346)

Pushing alliteration to the limit, Dumas sonically replicates Harlem's blend of respect for the political and religious leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. The Movement's embrace of various kinds of poetic innovation intended to signal and promote sociopolitical change aligns it with other twentieth-century artistic avant-gardes, from Dada to surrealism to the Beats.<sup>3</sup>

New York and the Northeast have been central in BAM scholarship, but to fully grasp the Movement's national scope, we must account for other regional hotspots, as James Smethurst's work has demonstrated. The Midwest (particularly Chicago and Detroit) was a significant site of BAM activity, not least because of the influential and long-lived cultural institutions based there, including the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) and the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AFRICOBRA), both collectives of writers and visual artists; the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM); and such crucial publishing operations as Dudley Randall's Broadside Press, Madhubuti's Third World Press, Naomi Long Madgett's Lotus Press, and the Hoyt Fuller-edited periodical *Negro Digest* (later *Black World*). These black institutions had a major impact on the shape of the Movement and the careers of individual poets (Rambsy 2011). Broadside Press, for example, brought out Sanchez's first books; succeeded Harper & Row as Brooks's publisher after she embraced the Movement and its call for racial solidarity; and published one of the Movement's most visible anthologies, the elegiac *For Malcolm*. The consistent engagement of Broadside Press and *Negro Digest/Black World*,

for example, with "veteran" poets as well as the writers who came of age in the Movement, fostered more encompassing black aesthetics than those featured in the rather personality-driven BAM of the Northeast (Rambsy 2011, 94–100; Smethurst 2005, 100–1). This intergenerational mix was also reflected in the close relationship young Chicago poets like Carolyn Rodgers, Johari Amini, and Madhubuti had with Brooks. That she, a nationally recognized Pulitzer Prize winner, would experience a cultural rebirth at the 1967 Fisk Writers Conference, walk away from her influential white publisher, and fore swear her formal wizardry in search of the compelling energy she admired in the lines of Jones/Baraka and even younger poets just starting their careers was a powerful testament to the Movement.

The West Coast and South had their own regional imperatives. The Movement in California was shaped by the relatively recent establishment of significant black communities; alliances with Chicano, Latino, and Asian American anti-racist movements under a "Third World" or "people of color" heading; and sometimes violent intraracial disputes between the Oakland-based Black Panther Party and the Los Angeles-based Us Organization. Artistically, California poets absorbed important surrealist influences from Bob Kaufman and such jazz musicians as Ornette Coleman and Eric Dolphy, all of whom started or ended their careers on the West Coast. Although Jayne Cortez spent most of her career based in the Northeast (and Ghana), she began writing and performing in the BAM of Los Angeles. Before heading to New York in 1967, she helped found the Studio Watts and Watts Repertory Theatre collectives, where early collaborations with jazz musicians fostered her signature mode of surrealist yet biting social criticism, frequently performed with her jazz band, The Firespitters (Smethurst 2005, 298–9). BAM artists in the South reckoned with that region's historical significance for African Americans without the disdain sometimes shown by those who had never or no longer lived there. Also important to black aesthetics in the South was the deep-rootedness of local cultures, especially the unique New Orleans culture that Tom Dent (of the Umbra poets) and Kalamu ya Salaam (Val Ferdinand) drew upon. The HBCUs, so prevalent in the South, played a key role in disseminating new black aesthetic possibilities, hiring Movement-affiliated or BAM-era poets as visiting or permanent faculty (Smethurst 2005, 336).

These regional divergences further evidence the Movement's range. Close attention to the writing of even the BAM's most central figures demonstrates that while there was some consensus among these poets and theorists about the potential for poetry and other arts to advance the Black Power struggle, there was no particular agreement about *how* that potential might be realized or what other roles African American poetry might play. Some BAM-era

artists and thinkers advocated a highly prescriptive Black Aesthetic, insisting that African American poets “should” create “black” poems – a demand for a black nationalist political commitment that ironically contradicted the concomitant contention that this Black Aesthetic was “natural” to African American poets. This prescriptive, racially essentialist aspect of the BAM – along with its sexism, homophobia, and most militant, invective-filled articulations of black nationalist ideology – stood for over three decades as the prevailing characterization of the Movement. The past 5–10 years, however, have seen a critical reassessment, in which scholars are beginning to redress and complicate the reductive understanding of the Movement that has dominated the criticism since its heyday.<sup>4</sup> Building on a significant, once underutilized line of prior scholarship,<sup>5</sup> these recent studies have challenged and reevaluated the established thinking about BAM periodization; its geographical scope; the extent to which racial essentialism, sexism, and homophobia over-determined its politics and discredited its artistic production; and the rigidity and reach of a prescriptive conceptualization of the Black Aesthetic.

This new scholarship – and the earlier work it amplifies – is of signal importance to our understanding of African American poetry. As I have argued elsewhere, the impact of a narrow and prescriptive Black Aesthetic has been both overstated and underestimated. The powerful articulation of aesthetics as culturally specific (rather than universal) values, the insights into why oral and aural cultural production have been vital to understandings of African American culture, and the recognition of the inextricability of politics and art: these elements of BAM-era theories of the Black Aesthetic have continued to influence and guide African American literary theory and criticism to the present moment. This influence has to some degree affected all scholars of African American literature trained in the wake of the Movement’s ascendancy – even those who have repudiated or distanced themselves from the Movement’s critical and creative work (whether on formal, political, or intellectual grounds) – and thus informs their scholarship on literature produced *before and after* the 1960s (Shockley 2011, 8–9). Some of the impact of this influence has impoverished the African American literary tradition, as it has led to the marginalization of authors and works that do not conform to or fit easily within the narrower Black Aesthetic boundaries (Mullen 2012a, 79–80; Mullen 2012b, 173). But while a prescriptive Black Aesthetic has sometimes weighed heavily on late-twentieth-century African American scholars and poets, there is an increasingly lively discussion – carried out in the criticism, theory, and creative writing – of the idea that, rather than a singular Black Aesthetic, there have been many various *black aesthetics*.<sup>6</sup>

The remainder of this essay will engage some of the implications of an expansive approach to black aesthetics for thinking about African American poetry just before, during, and since the BAM, into the twenty-first century. To begin with, it brings into clearer focus the poets and collectives Lorenzo Thomas has called the “Roots of the Black Arts Movement.” Early to mid-1960s New York saw the experimentation of the Umbra Workshop and their journal; Thomas himself, David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Calvin Hernton, Snellings/Touré, N.H. Pritchard, Tom Dent, and Steve Cannon, among others, met regularly to debate poetics and share work (Thomas 2000, 119–20). Their innovations, including explorations of “Black English,” adventurous typography, recourse to black musical traditions for rhythmic and lyrical cues, and the incorporation of political critique, anticipated and directly fed the BAM’s innovative aesthetics: half of the poets just named contributed work to *Black Fire*, for instance (Thomas 2000, 120–9; Nielsen 1997, 13–14). Also noteworthy was the assemblage of poets associated with *The Liberator* magazine, including Neal. Poetry by members of these groups, which tended to be more abstract and less readily paraphrased, extends the range of work in *Black Fire* and troubles the notion that BAM commitments to Black Art’s “accessibility” constrained poets to produce uniformly “easy” work.

Some critics have charged BAM poetry with a sameness of style and rhetoric that eliminates the need to read widely or deeply in the work of that period, but this charge relies on the exclusion of work by Thomas, Henderson, and others with similar aesthetic concerns from the literary history of the 1960s and ‘70s. Similarly marginalized are BAM-era poetry’s African, diasporic, and multiethnic voices. An only recently studied but quite active participant in the Movement was Keorapetse “Willie” Kgositsile, a member of South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) who was in exile in the United States from 1962 to 1975. His poetry in that period drew on not only the cultures and politics of his native land but also his experiences as a member of a revolutionary organization with a military wing. Kgositsile’s contributions to *Black Fire* include “Ivory Masks in Orbit,” which connects African American culture to Africa via Nina Simone’s piano playing (“moves / over 300 mississippi’s” that “rock the village / gate with future memory”) (Baraka and Neal 2007, 224). His “Towards a Walk in the Sun,” by contrast, references armed revolution with an energy perhaps derived from his country’s proximity to ongoing African independence movements – “WHEN THE MOMENT HATCHES IN TIME’S WOMB THERE WILL BE NO ART TALK. THE ONLY POEM YOU WILL HEAR WILL BE THE SPEARPOINT PIVOTED IN THE PUNCTURED MARROW OF THE VILLAIN” – his plosive *p*’s piercing the fearful ear (Baraka and Neal 2007, 229). Diasporic influences within BAM

aesthetics are also reflected in the anthology's inclusion of Puerto Rican/Nuyorican poet Victor Hernández Cruz. His poem "white powder!", also in *Black Fire*, indicts the "gringos & their grey men" for filling the "project[s]" with mind-numbing drugs, endorses the call for "black power" with its playful title, and implicitly acknowledges that a common African ancestry makes U.S. blacks and Puerto Ricans "brothers" (Baraka and Neal 2007, 437). And, as previously noted, West Coast demographics meant that black aesthetics there shaped and were shaped by Asian American and Chicano politics and cultural production (Smethurst 2005, 285–90).

This more expansive conception of black aesthetics diminishes the appeal and potency of drawing a bright line between the most visible Movement participants – those actively placing their poetry in the service of black nationalist politics – and other African American poets writing during this era. We need to better account for the Movement's influence on poets who were not BAM-affiliated but nonetheless seriously engaged with the *aesthetic possibilities* the Movement engendered.<sup>7</sup> Rejecting the dichotomy of full embrace or total repudiation of the Movement, we find in the middle ground such poets as Audre Lorde, Ishmael Reed, Jay Wright, Lucille Clifton, Etheridge Knight, Ed Roberson, Michael Harper, Clarence Major, and June Jordan. While these poets may have been uncommitted or even sharply opposed to black nationalist politics, their interest in the cultures, histories, or lived experiences of Africans and African-descended people has drawn all of them, at times, to wrangle productively with questions of black aesthetics. Certainly rifts developed between Movement poets and particular writers who vehemently disavowed the more programmatic aspects of its ideology (*the Black Aesthetic*, so to speak) – Robert Hayden famously drew a line in the sand against giving primacy to his black identity over his identity as a poet, for instance – and I would not downplay the undeniable pressure many African American poets have felt, then and since, to produce "recognizably black" writing (Nielsen 2001, 539). But to create a rigid separation between these poets' work and that of their BAM counterparts would be to reify black nationalist politics as the only recognizable anti-racist politics and to perpetuate the notion of a Black Aesthetic in the face of the wide variety of ways in which poets explore matters of race and "blackness."

With a view toward a broad range of black aesthetics, we do not find Jay Wright's appearance in *Black Fire* incongruous. The mode in which his early career poem "The End of Ethnic Dream" evokes "[Albert] Ayler's screams" and "African chant[s]" intersected neatly with Baraka's and Neal's editorial commitment to present "a surging new sound," "a tone, your own" (Baraka and Neal 2007, 365, 653, xxiv). By not expecting black aesthetics to manifest predictably as black vernacular language and depictions of an African

American social real, we make space for Wright's continuing engagement with black aesthetics in later poetry treating African cultures (such as Dogon cosmology). Similarly, we remember that Audre Lorde, whose political commitment to an intersectional analysis of oppression and identity as an out lesbian placed her at odds with the Movement's black nationalist stance, nonetheless published her second, third, and fourth poetry collections with Broadside Press. This work encompassed the overtly political critique and the celebration of black identity – "Speak proudly to your children / where ever you may find them / tell them / you are the offspring of slaves / and your mother was / a princess / in darkness" (Lorde 1997, 60) – that accorded with other Broadside Press offerings, despite Randall's discomfort with her sexuality (De Veaux 2004, 129–31).

From the 1980s onward, we see an explosion of black aesthetics, the range and complexity of which speaks to the increasingly varied experiences of African-descended people and the constantly changing forms racism takes in the United States. With room only to gesture toward this multiplicity, we might begin by considering the development of a few key poets whose active careers spanned the decades from the late-1960s through the twenty-first century. Poets like Sanchez and Clifton, who began writing in the male-dominated Movement, deepened an always present exploration of womanhood and racially inflected questions of gender as they subsequently absorbed and contributed to a generative period of black (lesbian) feminist thought. Both poets retain BAM-era stylistics, like exclusively lowercase typography and an inclination toward plain diction and vernacular. Yet Sanchez has grown increasingly open about her poetry's feminist and anti-homophobic amendments to black nationalist ideology and her interest in traditional forms (such as haiku, tanka, and rhyme royal). And Clifton trained her eye with greater intensity on the body – black, female, and powerful, but also ill, aging, and vulnerable – as a sign and source of our common humanity, even in its raced and gendered specificity. Baraka's career also diverged from and exceeded the narrower contours of his BAM-era nationalism and writing, in poetry that moved through Marxism toward what is perhaps best described as a fluidly and fiercely anti-capitalist stance. Readings of his and Brooks's oeuvres have been similarly over-determined by attention to their renunciation of their pre-BAM aesthetics. While Brooks did jettison the formalist poetics for which she had become famous, her poetry after the 1960s remained unmistakably her own: elliptical, alliterative, dense, strongly rhythmic, and devoted to depicting the lives of black people. Brooks's and Baraka's aesthetic shifts have been overemphasized; still, the influence of each on later poets tends to differ depending on whether early or later work served as model. Baraka's poetry, of course, was consistent in its search within jazz

and other African American musical forms for sources of exemplary rhythmic and lyrical energy. Jayne Cortez's black aesthetics were similarly dedicated to decrying injustice – economic, racial, gendered – through poems grounded sonically, structurally, and thematically in music that stems from African cultural roots. Her unusual approach to language – increasingly surrealist-informed, drenched in African diaspora cultures, and using repetition to play words like notes – has been influential yet inimitable.

The forces that inspired movement and growth within these poets' individual careers have encouraged younger African American poets to draw their black aesthetics from a widening range of experiences and with decreasing pressure to exhibit loyalty to a single set of aesthetic choices. Those forces include new patterns of (im)migration among people of African descent; broader educational and employment opportunities available to African Americans thanks to the Civil Rights and Black Power movements; steps toward residential desegregation; new or revitalized social movements among women, the LGBTQ community, Chicanos and Latinos more broadly (and later, the backlash against identity politics); Reagan era political losses and the rise of hip hop culture; and the technological advances that have facilitated networking, information sharing, and dissemination of cultural products. With somewhat greater access to powerful cultural institutions and positions, and greater diversity of experience than ever, African American poets are reimagining black aesthetics in rich, complicated, and exciting ways. Again, a few key examples will have to stand in for a small universe of poets and poetics.

Rita Dove, a former Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, rose meteorically to these heights on a poetics of delicate yet icy precision, poems that play language as lightly as a grace note and make free verse seem almost formalist in its careful structure. Generous in its use of the German language and cultural references she absorbed while studying abroad, Dove's poetry quite consciously rejects the Black Aesthetic mode in which she felt she was expected to write. But this determined resistance to racialized expectations for her work, like Hayden's before her, was an expression of her own black aesthetics. For Dove, whose most celebrated book, *Thomas and Beulah*, told the lives of her grandparents in poetry, there was no contradiction between her fine-tuned lines and the Great Migration-content of their working-class lives. Her black aesthetic describes a day laborer's impatient courtship as a "waiting – for what? A / magnolia breeze, someone / to trot out the stars?" (Dove 1993, 146). Uninterested in making political statements, she seeks to let the lives, the images, speak for themselves.

Yusef Komunyakaa, another poet in the small circle of African American Pulitzer Prize winners, creates a language in which to treat his experience and

concerns as a man raised in the overtly racist climate of Bogalusa, Louisiana, and as a Vietnam veteran. His subjects – black manhood, jazz and blues, war and other kinds of conflict – reveal connections between Baraka's black aesthetics and his, although Komunyakaa, like Dove, shies away from direct political critique. Energizing his lines with a gumbo of strong nouns, adjectives, and verbs, he invites our cultural knowledge to inform images of a young boy's quest for muscadines:

A silence  
Coaxed me up into oak branches  
Woodpeckers had weakened.  
But they held there, braced  
By a hundred years of vines  
Strong & thick  
Enough to hang a man.

(Komunyakaa 1993, 14)

We recognize the same taste for alliteration and consonance that appeared in Dumas's poem and that characterizes Brooks's poetry, early and late. Komunyakaa's black aesthetics echoes these earlier poets, as the shadow of lynching looms over the discovery of a cache of sweet fruit.

Harryette Mullen, noted for her poetic innovation, wrote her first book very deeply influenced by the Movement's prescriptive emphasis on "authentic" black vernacular. But finding it ironically unauthentic to write in the "nonstandard" English that her schoolteacher mother forbade in their house, Mullen developed a poetics of subversive wordplay that mixed dazzling and elliptical Brooksonian lines with investigations into the sentence à la Gertrude Stein. In her second book, *Trimmings*, she works through the gendered (and racial) politics of clothing (here, bracelets) in a shower of rhyme and consonance: "Akimbo bimbos, all of a jangle. Tricked out trinkets, aloud galore. Gimcracks, a stack. Bang and a whimper. Two to tangle. It's a jungle" (Mullen 2006, 41). Without saying "bangles," Mullen uses sonically adjacent language to suggest the accessory and its ethnic baggage. Similarly, Kevin Young, an early member of the Dark Room Collective, began his oeuvre with a poetic chronicle of Southern black family life, but has gone on to generate his own brand of poetry that features popular culture references and takes up subjects and contexts as varied as film noir, the blues, Jean-Michel Basquiat's graffiti art, and the historical *Amistad* rebellion. Steeped in African American music from the field holler to hip hop, as well as black film and literature, Young is as irreverent as many of the Movement-era poets in his "post-soul" black aesthetics. In a poem playfully titled "Tune," he jumbles syntax and mixes metaphors to create the spoken equivalent to singing off-key: "In the Africa / of your eyes – my // lost tribe – / I am safari

// this stumbling / shooting off // foolishly. Apologies – / you are no country // Hottentot to trot // you are not” (Young 2003, 42). Young plays the dozens not with a rival, but with himself and the cultures he taps and mingles.

Natasha Trethewey, U.S. Poet Laureate (as of this writing), may be a fitting poet with whom to close a sampling that could extend for many pages. Also a member of the Dark Room Collective, winner of the first Cave Canem Book Prize for her debut collection, *Domestic Work*, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her third book of poetry, *Native Guard*, Trethewey stands at the crossroads of many paths through the contemporary (African) American poetry landscape. She is not unique in this but representative, although her honors certainly distinguish her. Trethewey’s black aesthetics, unlike Dove’s, calls for an overt commitment to social justice, which permeates her work. She gives voice to a specific black experience – that of the biracial child of black and white parents – that was cast as tragedy by the writers of the New Negro Renaissance era and was little heard of during the BAM, when a darker, “purer” blackness was finally being celebrated. Adopting what we might call the “first-person political” voice and a diction that mixes Clifton’s simplicity and Hayden’s lexical flourish, Trethewey calls the nation to task for the politics – historical and present; raced, gendered, and classed – that ripped her parents apart and haunt her even into one of poetry’s most honored offices. Her poem “Miscegenation,” a ghazal, begins: “In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi; / they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi” (Trethewey 2007, 36). The piece recalls the discriminatory laws that constructed her birth as a product of crime and evidence of “sin” and points to the importance ascribed to *place*, in terms of geography and (racial) status. The homecoming Trethewey stages in her poem, like the Sanchez poem about Harlem with which we began, involves the clash of two world views, one implicitly “black,” the other “white.” Almost forty years after Sanchez’s poem was published, another African American poet brings a contemporary black aesthetic to a concern with the way race inscribes a black woman’s relationship to her home. Baraka once called this kind of thing “the changing same” (Baraka 1991, 203).

## NOTES

- 1 Louis Simpson’s assessment, in a 1963 review of Brooks’s *Selected Poems*, suggests the kind of attitudes black writers were up against: “I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware that he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important” (quoted in Kent 1990, 163).
- 2 Jones edited the journal *Yugen* (with his then-wife Hettie Cohen Jones), the affiliated Totem Press, and the literary magazine *The Floating Bear* (with di Prima) during this period.

- 3 For further reading on the BAM as an avant-garde, see Nielsen 1997, Frost 2003, and Yu 2010.
- 4 See works cited in this essay’s bibliography by James Smethurst, Cheryl Clarke, Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, Amy Abugo Ongiri, Howard Rambsy, and Carter Mathes.
- 5 See works cited in this essay’s bibliography by Erica Hunt, Nathaniel Mackey, Fred Moten, Harryette Mullen, Aldon Nielsen, and Lorenzo Thomas.
- 6 For an elaboration of my argument that black aesthetics are not constituted by a specific set of (“black”) themes, tropes, stylistics, or structures but by the racialized subjectivity of African American poets and the whole range of strategies they devise as artists for negotiating the terrain of a white supremacist society, see Shockley 2011.
- 7 As poet Ed Roberson notes: “People forget about how broad and deep the Black Arts Movement went. People were changed. I know I was changed by it, and I didn’t look like the movement at all to some folks.... It felt that I was really being given a whole new layer of places of myself to work from.... The movement began to open up ways to put names to things and feelings that were more accurate, in terms of how deeply and powerfully they were felt” (Roberson 2010, 765). My thanks to Aldon Nielsen for conversations that also illuminated this point for me.

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