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RUNNING OUT OF TIME: RADICALISM, RESISTANCE, AND THE FUTURE OF  
AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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A dissertation submitted to the  
Graduate School-New Brunswick  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of

Cheryl Wall

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

May, 2015

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Running Out of Time: Radicalism, Resistance, and the Future of African American  
Literature

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My dissertation is both a study of black radicalism and implicit bias in twentieth century African American literature, as well as a gesture towards new ways of studying and teaching black radicalism and African American literature in the academy at large.

Historically, African American literature has been unduly cast as being inextricably bound with linear historical periods of racial struggle and progress in America. Using what I define as a black radical criticism, I close-read the work of black experimental writers across eight decades, arguing for the opening of inquiry (where finite determinations have previously been set in place) across traditional boundaries of literary periodization - outside of time - seeking a study of the trajectory of black radical

expression across socio-historical moments (as opposed to continuing to assess African American authorial legacies based on their previous placements within historical literary movements).

Baraka serves as a central figure of inquiry in this project because of his historical positioning between three large literary movements – New Negro, Black Arts, and Black Feminism. Because Baraka has such a large presence inside and outside of the academy, as well as a wealth of documented writing and self-revision, he functions as an easily accessible site of deconstructable radicalism - one providing a clear detailing of difference in the ways in which his legacy has been crafted versus the ways in which Baraka himself has worked to craft. Placing Baraka’s work in conversation with nineteenth and twentieth century theorists, the work of Langston Hughes, Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*, and Renee Gladman’s *The Activist*, I discuss racism and bias, historical memory, modes of self-construction and the ways each are represented and interrogated by these authors. I use those interrogations to further explore the existence of implicit bias within the construction of African American literature canons and the affect those biases have on the teaching, and cultural remembrance, of African American authors.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to first and foremost thank my parents, Talmadge and Rosetta Coley, for raising me as a real life carefree black girl with the privilege of pursuing whatever goals I could dream up in this brain of mine. Without them, I literally would never have become the person I am today.

I would also like to equally thank, in no particular order: Krys Freeman, Ashley Lumpkin, Sabriya Rosemond, Jessica Andrews, Kingston Farady, Valerie Sweeney Prince, Lloren Foster, Guerschmide S. Smith, Toni Cade Bambara, Jamila Butcher, Kai Green, Alice Walker, Richard Yarborough, Nikki Finney, Evie Shockley, Carter Mathes, Cheryl Wall, Brent Edwards, Abena Busia, Lauren Devitt, Samantha Stern-Leaphart, Micah Hobbes, Rudolph Maag, my students, Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski, Jai Jamison, Cheryl Robinson, Tryka D. Tryka, Tasia Milton, Micah Hobbes Frazier, Emily Coyle, Sara Ann Kelly, Brian Pietras, Carrie Coleman Gray, Jannifer Dumas, Everett Dumas, Sr., Melissa Bobe, Courtney Borack, Black Brunch, #BlackLivesMatter, Marne Campbell, Justine Richburgh, Raizes Zindzi Tayo, Corrin Chisimba, The Feminist Wire, Monique Hankerson, Latasha Mitchell, Chani Wilborne, Bakary Diaby, Rutgers University Graduate English entering cohort of 2007, Phedra Deonarine, Hannah Pearl Walcott, Mattie Glenn, Barbara Hart, Richard Gray, Sr., Renecia Gray, Everett Dumas II, Shanika Gray, Clarence Joseph Hart II, Mackenzie Jai Freeman, Krys Freeman, Krys Freeman, Krys Freeman ...

Without you all, I cannot even imagine this project existing.

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
<b>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
When & Why I Enter .....	1
A Necessary Review .....	8
<b>Part I: Toward a Black Radical Criticism.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Amiri Baraka and African American Cognitive Praxis .....</b>	<b>16</b>
The Black Art of Negating Black Art.....	22
Black Radical Tradition is as Black Radical Intelligence Does ... and Says .....	28
Back Back Forth and Forth .....	37
What It Is We're Doing Anyhow .....	46
<b>Part II: Theory in Practice.....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Chapter 2. Machines, Which Aren't Completely Knowable: Amiri Baraka,</b>	
<b>Langston Hughes, and Personal Transformation as Revolutionary Practice .....</b>	<b>57</b>
When a Good Thing Goes Bad, It's Not the End of The World.....	59
It's Just The End of A World .....	64
And You Seen It Too, You Just Can't Call It's Name.....	70
<b>Chapter 3: From Black Arts to Black Feminism: Memory, Chaos and Self-</b>	
<b>Construction in Baraka's <i>The Slave</i> and Bambara's <i>The Salt Eaters</i> .....</b>	<b>86</b>
We Seek Nothing But Ourselves .....	86
See? This is What Will Happen. ....	94
Heavy Like 8 Black Boots .....	98
When You Believe in Things That You Don't Understand.....	102
Ritual : Action :: Theater : Medium.....	107
I Think You're Crazy. Just Like Me.....	126
<b>Part III: A Ways to Freedom.....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Chapter 4. Future Aesthetics in Renee Gladman's <i>The Activist</i>.....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>155</b>

## **LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

“Scottsboro” -- 87

## **Introduction**

I despair at our failure to wrest power from those who have it and abuse it, our reluctance to reclaim our old powers lying dormant with neglect, our hesitancy to create new power in areas where it never before existed and I'm euphatic because everything in our history, our spirit, our daily genius – suggests we do it ...

Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation is the Issue"

The role that criticism plays in making a body of literature recognizable and real hardly needs to be explained here.

Barbara Christian, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism"

## **When & Why I Enter**

Shifting from student to professional academic in African American literature – a field in which so many others have entered before me – I have often felt as if all of my work has already been done. I say that to mean that having studied the breadth of the African American canon, I am aware that there have been a number of critics before me to construct and define African American literature. In doing so, there have been those who have defined in order to become or appease the next group of those to validate, critique, and redefine the tradition. This list continues, as evidenced by my now being responsible for contributing some new statement to the ongoing conversation in this dissertation.



Presently, in 2014<sup>1</sup>, writing in what some have argued to be a “post-racial America<sup>2</sup>,” my detailing the previous tasks of writers and critics feels as though it only serves as proof that the work I might have to do has already been done. And why would it not? When we have read literally thousands of books and essays on topics from Trans-Atlantic slave narratives to what is now referred to as the neo-slave narrative, where mass-marketed plot-driven urban fiction seems to inundate the “African American” shelves at the few brick and mortar bookstores still existing, I find myself in my most self-conscious of moments carrying the heavy burden of this weighted possibility: perhaps, African American literature does not matter anymore. Haunted by the work of those before me, I’ve gone so far as asking myself what it is I think I’m doing anyhow? By this, I mean more literally, “What is my work as a literary academic studying African American Literature?”

Loosely defined, literary criticism (the most concisely termed work of the literary academic) is the study and interpretation of literature, a study often informed by literary theory, the philosophical discussion of literary methods and aspirations. So as academics, we are building and contributing to literary conversations, furthering the field, exploring and expanding thought. This seems simple to understand. At least simple enough so that in my previously mentioned dark moments of academic anxiety, I am able to remind myself that as a scholar of African American literature, it is my job to study – to research, to learn, to investigate, to examine - and interpret African American literature. It is also my job to infuse this study with the discussion—the active action or process of talking in order to reach a decision or to exchange ideas—of literary—concerning the writing, study, or content of literature—methods and goals common to African American literature.

Because I've spent the last eight years of my life at Rutgers University, I'm well aware that, it is also my job to teach literature. Still, despite my understanding of my relationship to the study of African American literature, my uncertainties and anxieties begin to resurface when I ask questions of what everyone else in my field is doing anyhow. It is most extreme when, instead of creating work, I am wondering whether or not I am able to keep up, if I have read everything, if someone is already writing what I am only currently thinking, if the work I am doing matters to anyone else, if the work I am doing only matters to my black colleagues, if my thoughts are ahead of or behind the times, if my tone diminishes my thought. Eventually theories emerge: "If I am studying and tracking the patterns of African American literature, and there is an immeasurable number (or at least it seems that way in my head) of other African American scholars who have done, are doing, and will in the future do the same, has it not all been covered already?" Can the canon really be so dynamic that it has not all been said? From there, I begin to question myself about what African American literature, this apparently insurmountable body of work, is anyhow to need so much study, so much work to be done to understand and validate it? Even more disturbing is that, one who has long prided myself on trusting my gut, thinking for myself, making my own decisions, I hold a significant fear that my process of questioning and accompanying growing list of anxieties come from within my own mind, but not of my own making. My anxieties exist as a result of the circumstances under (and within) which my understanding of and relationship to African American literature has been created.

For the last twelve years of my life, I've been taught to study African American literature as a tradition developed parallel to American literature. From Phillis Wheatley

to William Wells Brown to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to Claude McKay to Ralph Ellison to James Baldwin to Ishmael Reed to Alice Walker to Toni Morrison to Suzan Lori Parks (naming a few and excluding far too many) - whether it be poetry, plays, or narrative non-fiction - I have been well-instructed in African American literature as a tradition built upon various creation narratives. I say creation narratives because African American literature has been so closely tied to the continual writing and rewriting, the creation, of black humanity and identity in America. As such, the teaching of African American literature more often than not, portrays African American literature as a tradition that (even while being current and highly attuned to the socio-political landscape in which it is created) is much more reactive and constructive, than it is proactively resistant and regenerative. As such, like the false sense of history gained when one perceives black and African American history as beginning with the United States, one receives a similar false understanding when a particular text or author is studied as solely associated with a single historical shifting, particularly when it is portrayed as being completely separate from and deconstructive of any movement before or after its creation. This only further portrays each new addition to the African American canon as creating an entirely new moment, separate from and unable to build upon whatever tradition has come before. More simply, it makes for starting from scratch every time, every new movement responsible for laying both bricks and blueprint. Knowing this, it becomes easier to understand how my own anxieties concerning African American literature have developed. Often, it is psychically paralyzing to imagine that I must endeavor to create some entirely new idea concerning African American literature, not only for the sake of its critical tradition, but in order to secure my place in the academy that studies it.

Although my project is concerned with the future of our discipline, for the sake of my own sanity and in honor of the integrity of a long connective African American tradition, rather than considering this dissertation as the creation of novelty, I see it as an insistence on conversation with what has been deemed past.

Making use of all of these anxieties, within my own mind and those found within the tradition, I enter into this conversation with a primary concern: Why does the academy periodize American literature in the ways that it does? Assuming that most people will provide me with a basic answer suggesting that periodization is used in order to make large chunks of literature easy to characterize, absorb, and teach, other questions begin to emerge. For one, why does the history of American literature need to be easily framed and understood when American history itself is not easy to digest? What sorts of master narratives are being preserved by those easy framings? Why? By this, I mean, considering that American literature (meaning white American literature) and African American literature are typically taught separately, and periodized differently (for instance, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Dark Romanticism, Literary Realism, and Modernism as opposed to ante and postbellum literature, slave narratives, New Negro Renaissance, Civil Rights Literature), I also find myself concerned with the ways in which the critical construction of African American literature contributes to its legacy. I am concerned with the ways in which we, as writers and critics, as professional academics, recapitulate misinformed inaccurate understandings of authors and literature, enabling our students to do the same as future scholars. All of these previous ponderings lead me to my most important question: how does the periodization of African American

literature based on homogenous constructions of black literary movements affect the legacies of black writing and black writers?

Using what my project defines as a black radical criticism, I close-read the work of black experimental writers across eight decades, arguing for the opening of inquiry (where finite determinations have previously been set in place) across traditional boundaries of literary periodization. My project, thus, argues for a study of the trajectory of black radical expression within the canons of African American writers across literary moments (as opposed to continuing to assess African American authorial legacies based on their previous permanent placements within historical literary movements).

Amiri Baraka serves as a central figure of inquiry in this project because of his historical positioning between three large literary movements – New Negro, Civil Rights, and Black Feminism. Because Baraka has such a large presence inside and outside of the academy, as well as a wealth of documented writing and self-revision, he functions as an easily accessible site of deconstructable radicalism - one providing a clear detailing of difference in the ways in which his legacy has been crafted versus the ways in which Baraka himself has worked to craft. Placing Baraka's work in conversation with nineteenth and twentieth century theorists, the work of Langston Hughes, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, and Renee Gladman's *The Activist*, I discuss racism, historical memory, modes of self-construction and the ways each are represented and interrogated by these authors. I use those interrogations to further explore the existence of implicit bias within the construction of African American literature as a tradition and the effect those biases have on cultural memory and future building. In these

investigations, my project deconstructs the idea of finality and structure, finding hope for the future in a creative chaos associated with radical engagement.

## A Necessary Review

Using the most banal understanding of language, one can deduce that if American literature is written or literary work produced in the United States and its preceding colonies - its tradition beginning as linked to the broader tradition of English literature (as America began as a set of 13 British colonies) - then African American literature must be the written or literary work produced in the United States and its preceding colonies by Americans of African descent, its tradition also linked to the broader tradition of English literature, as well as pre-and post colonial African and Caribbean literature, and early African, Portuguese, French, Spanish, and Dutch forms of storytelling (as America began as a set of 13 British colonies with black bodies as its largest and most lucrative import in the Transatlantic Slave Trade). It is a wordy concept, but not a difficult one. However, using the most banal understandings of the word American – an American Indian of North America or South America; of, relating to, or characteristic of the United States or its inhabitants; a native or citizen of the United States – one can also deduce that, historically, what has been understood, legally and socially, to be American has often been a difficult concept to understand. I have long made peace with the understanding that, in many ways, African American scholars are only pretending that the terms we use to describe literature actually fit the literature being described.

By definition, African American literature is literature created by African Americans (read African as black Americans because this definition as previously studied does not lend itself to the work of white African immigrants or their descendants) in America. Therefore, the tradition of African American literature should be easily identified as one shaped by African Americans (who have created and are) creating

literary works. As many of us have come to understand African American literature (both inside and outside of the academy), its multiple uses and purposes have varied between being responsible for "... the elevation of the colored people ... [and] the whites" (Chesnutt 32); representing a literature that is "of necessity ... different in all essential points of greatness, true heroism and real Christianity from what [has been called] American Literature" (Matthews 37) ; serving as "... a way out ... the real solution of the color problem" (Du Bois 40); acting as "a sustained vehicle of free and purely artistic expression ... some substitute for propaganda" (Locke 50), ; being " ... representative of all Negroes, i.e. as sociological documents ... [as] idealistic, optimistic traces for race advertisement" (Brown 52) ; standing up as "... a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of 'achievement'" (Wright 83) ; functioning as "... the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice," related "broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood" (Neal 122) ; and destroying the "zero image ... [rejecting] white attempts at portraying black reality" (Gerald 132-133) ; and on and on. Recapitulated here is not an easy definition of a kind of literature presented by a particular group of American people, but rather historical attempts at using the literary to resist and recast the roles created for enslaved Africans and their descendants in the great play of America, most commonly referred to as history. These "uses" show us the reflection of African American desire for simultaneous creation, expansion, destruction, and recreation of literary representation of African American expression over and over and over again. Historically, however, the tradition has been unduly cast as being inextricably bound with, marked and defined by, too specific moments in racial struggle and progress in America.



In February of 2011, Kenneth R. Warren wrote an online article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “Does African-American Literature Exist?” The article opens with high polemic, claiming that “Historically speaking, the collective enterprise we call African-American or black literature is of recent vintage—in fact, it's just a little more than a century old [and] has already come to an end ... a fact we should neither regret nor lament” (“Does” 1). Warren analyzes African American literature as a late-19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century canon localized specifically within the historical and social boundaries of Jim Crow and situates it as a literature used solely for the purpose of combating the boomeranged inequalities of a post-reconstruction nadir. “While one can ... write about African-American literature as an object of study,” Warren argues, “one can no longer write African-American literature, any more than one can currently write Elizabethan literature” (1). A logical flaw reveals itself here for most: Elizabethan literature refers to the English literature produced during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558 - 1603) not Queen Elizabeth herself, whereas African American literature (as we’ve already discovered) refers to literature produced by African Americans. A more sound argument for this could be, perhaps, one is no longer able to write Jim Crow literature. However, Warren defines African American literature proper as literature produced during a period “Punctuated by state constitutional amendments that disenfranchised black Americans throughout much of the South.” He writes, “Legitimated by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1896 with the infamous ‘separate but equal’ ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and stumbling into decline in the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s, Jim Crow and the fight against it gave rise to—and shaped—African-American literary practice as we have come to know it.” Warren defends his theory in length stating,

... [The] society that gave us what we know as African-American literature is a society that black Americans did not want then and certainly don't want now. In consolidating Jim Crow through violence, state statutes, and judicial decisions, Southern states foreclosed on many of the avenues of political and social participation that had opened up for Southern blacks during Reconstruction and had managed to survive various forms of opposition during the two decades after the 1877 Hayes-Tilden compromise effectively ended Radical Reconstruction. It was in response to the rising tide of disfranchisement and segregation that calls for black Americans to produce a distinct literature began to proliferate and to shape black literary practice. (1)

Warren rightly points towards a post-reconstruction period as one in which violence in conjunction with state and judicial statutes and decisions began to undo much of the social justice work established during and prior to the American Civil War. However, despite understanding his own “insistence on this rather constricted historical framework” to be “at the very least counterintuitive and at the most simply wrongheaded” (What 2), Warren’s thinking does not give adequate attention to the fact that Jim Crow was not the first moment in the history of American society in which African Americans felt boomerang effects in regard to civil liberties and rights; nor does it acknowledge that Jim Crow was not the first moment in American history that African Americans did not want; nor the first socio-historical moment in which African American writers recorded this sense of rejection that Warren describes, nor the first moment in which one can identify the shaping of a black literary practice<sup>3</sup>. Nor was it the last. Even ignoring all other

inadequate attentions, what should not be ignored is that Warren's historical construction of African American literature confuses a trend and response to sociocultural responses surrounding African American literature with the initiation and shaping of black literary practice.

As early as Jupiter Hammon's, "An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York"<sup>4</sup>, David Walker's, *Appeal*, and even Jarena Lee's, *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*<sup>5</sup>, African American literature – as in written material such as poetry, novels, and essays, of African Americans (particularly African American works of imagination characterized by excellence of style and expression and by themes of general or enduring African American interest) (*Collins*), as in a body of writings by people identifying as African American (*Online*), as in "things made of letters," as in the "art of written work" – has been engaged with, punctuated by, and often resisting the socio-historical violence, state statutes, and judicial decisions controlling the lives of its writers. Even a brief survey of literary texts written by African American authors between the years of 1750 and the present shows this.

In 1755, Lucy Terry wrote "Bars Fight." What we know of "Bars Fight" is that it is a ballad poem about a Native American attack against two white families in "The Bars" (a colonial term for meadow), in Deerfield, Massachusetts. Was Lucy Terry a black woman producing distinct literature in response to her social circumstances while shaping what we would come to know as black literary practice? Could she have been? Perhaps that answer lies somewhere in the interrogation between what we know and what we imagine.

We know and (despite the penchant for American history to be a clever mix of both fact and fiction) accept as fact that Terry was stolen from Africa and sold into slavery as an infant. We know that she was owned by Ebenezer Wells of Deerfield, Massachusetts and that Wells allowed Terry to be baptized into the Christian faith at about five years of age during the Great Awakening (“Prince” 1). We know that in 1756, Abijah Prince, a free black man, purchased Terry’s freedom and married her (1). We know that in 1764, the Princes settled in Guilford, Vermont, where all six of their children were born (1). We know that their names were Tatnai, Cesar, Drucilla, Durexa, Abijah, Jr and Festus (1). We know that Cesar fought in the Revolutionary War (1). We know that in 1785, when a neighboring white family threatened the Princes, they appealed to the governor and his Council for protection. The Council ordered Guilford's selectmen to defend them (1). We also know that, a persuasive orator, Terry successfully negotiated a land case before the Supreme Court of Vermont in the 1790s (1). She argued against two of the leading lawyers in the state, and won her case against the false land claims of Colonel Eli Bronson. Samuel Chase, the presiding justice of the Court, said that her argument was better than he had heard from any Vermont lawyer (1). Terry also delivered a three-hour address to the board of trustees of Williams College in an attempt to gain admittance for her son Festus when he was denied, even after serving in the Revolutionary War. What we know is that Lucy Terry was a black woman writing and living prior to, during, and after the Revolutionary War (in which her sons fought). What we can imagine (at least what I might imagine writing this in 2013<sup>6</sup>), through an analysis of her, her husband’s, and her children’s actions, is that Terry held at least a passing interest in the concepts of power and belonging. Even more important than what we can

imagine is what we can discover if we continue asking questions. What happens if we examine Terry's text as a statement about the nature of colonialism and the possibilities of native and slave resistance? What happens if we examine this text as a statement concerning the socio-historical violence so intricately embedded in pre-revolutionary colonial living? "Bars Fight" reads

August 'twas the twenty-fifth,  
Seventeen hundred forty-six;  
The Indians did in ambush lay,  
Some very valiant men to slay,  
The names of whom I'll not leave out.

Before the completion of the first full sentence, Terry's poem, like most historical accounts, presents the reader with both answers and questions. It is made known that on August 25, 1746, "The Indians" (left unnamed and undistinguished by tribal affiliation in the poem, but later identified as Abenaki in historical accounts ("Prince" 1)) set an ambush for a group of "very valiant men" whom they intended to kill and whose names Terry refuses to not allow the reader to remember. Why are the details of this event so important to Terry that she records them in a ballad<sup>7</sup>? What use has Terry for memorializing the murder and kidnapping of white colonists, when in 1946, her own murder as a slave would not have garnered nearly as much attention (if any) by Massachusetts's residents? The poem continues,

Samuel Allen like a hero fout,  
And though he was so brave and bold,  
His face no more shalt we behold  
Eteazer Hawks was killed outright,  
Before he had time to fight, -  
Before he did the Indians see,  
Was shot and killed immediately.  
Oliver Amsden he was slain,  
Which caused his friends much grief and pain.  
Simeon Amsden they found dead,

Not many rods distant from his head.  
 Adonijah Gillett we do hear  
 Did lose his life which was so dear.  
 John Sadler fled across the water,  
 And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.  
 Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,  
 And hopes to save herself by running,  
 And had not her petticoats stopped her,  
 The awful creatures had not caught her,  
 Nor tommy hawked her on the head,  
 And left her on the ground for dead.  
 Young Samuel Allen, Oh lack-a-day!  
 Was taken and carried to Canada.

I am not arguing that rereading Terry's poem definitively answers any of the previously posed questions. Nor does it necessarily blatantly spell out what we, nor Warren, should definitively label as Terry's insistence upon or awareness of involvement in an African American literary tradition. However, rereading "Bars Fight" while paying close attention to the details of Terry's personal life, and even closer attention to the historical account of Eunice Allen, who (according to her own account more than 70 years later) remembered "... as perfectly as ... yesterday," (Williams 1) that she was the only woman present in the haymaking group that day, forces us to ask even more questions. It requires us to interrogate our own understanding of what Kai Green refers to as a "logic of history that substantiates itself through [blindly perpetuated] logics of modernity and objective truth" (34). For instance, how is it that Lucy Terry knows the details of this scene if Eunice Allen was the only woman present? Why was there only one woman present during a hunting outing? Is it because the rest of the women and girl children were at home cooking and cleaning? A rereading forces us (or at least forces me) to question even our basic understanding of how we have come to understand and study a canon as large and historically mature as African American literature. It forces me to

question Warren's because even that logic is all too privileging of how the socio-historical tells and alters the narrative in opposition to how the personal creates and every day alters the socio-historical, in addition to anything produced as its direct result.

I do not cite Warren at length in any effort to engage in further polemic. To be fair, Warren's book, *What Was African American Literature*<sup>8</sup>, does endeavor to at least acknowledge opposing arguments accounting for the influence of the middle passage, chattel slavery, and labor exploitation prior to emancipation<sup>9</sup>, despite its insistence on separating the likes of Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass into what he believes to be most accurately referred to as "Negro" as opposed to African American literature<sup>10</sup>. I bring such a heavy serving of Warren's argument to the table because, although he argues that the general "previous orientation [to the study of African American literature] can no longer provide coherence for a contemporary African Americanist literary project<sup>11</sup>" - an idea many, including myself, can agree with - Warren's claim "that the mere existence of literary texts does not necessarily indicate the existence of a literature," in addition to his use of James Weldon Johnson's introduction to Sterling Brown's *Southern Road*<sup>12</sup> while creating an even more obtuse claim that "... mutatis mutandis, African American literature as a distinct entity would seem to be at an end, and that the turn to diasporic, transatlantic, global, and other frames indicates a dim awareness that the boundary creating this distinctiveness has eroded" (8), is the kind of anachronistic thinking with which my own project wants, needs, to interact and engage.

## **Part I: Toward a Black Radical Criticism**

### **Chapter 1: Amiri Baraka and African American Cognitive Praxis**

Man, sometimes it takes you a long time to sound like yourself.

- Miles Davis

Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.

- Angela Davis

Let there be no love poems written  
until love can exist freely and  
cleanly.

- Amiri Baraka

This chapter began with what seemed to be a simple question posed to me over three years ago on the second day of Brent Edwards’ graduate seminar, “Black Radicalism and the Archive.” “So what are we doing here? This work ... going into the archive ... are we black radicals?” Edwards asked. “Are we now doing the work of black radicals?” As one of four blacks in what seemed to be a room filled with if not white privilege then at least white knowledge gained from predominately white institutions (a rather grand euphemism for white privilege), I remember feeling as though at least one of those questions was fairly easy to answer. However, this question of the work, and whether *we* were doing it, would be one directing the class’ research for the rest of the semester, one directing my own research for the rest of my graduate career.

As a scholar of African American literature, this question registered for me, on at least two levels: the individual and the collective. I had long been attending to the idea of the personal versus political in ways that Carol Hanisch, Shulamith Firestone, Anne Koedt and second wave feminists introduced to scholars and community – in that I had always understood the necessity of contextualizing and valorizing personal issues (such as women’s relationships, roles, and feelings) within political action. Still, this idea of



the individual and his or her development had never been immediately relevant to the work of reading and critically analyzing texts as I had grown accustomed to doing in the academy. I had spent the last seven years of my life reading published texts, reading critical works about those texts, contextualizing those works within their historical moments, and sometimes but not always, opening up potential conversations of intertextuality across these historical boundaries. Most often, this was a practice of asking a finite set of questions: “What does this text say?” “How does it say it?” “When was it written?” “To what particular collective historical and sociopolitical moments is it responding?” If the text was not overtly political, I’d been taught to ask different sorts of questions meaning much the same thing, “How is this text different from other texts written during this time?” “What do we make of this text’s refusal to engage with the political?” Yet, this class was one in which, according to Edwards, we would theorize “... particular contours of radical knowledge production among African diasporic intellectuals in the twentieth century.” We would

... read key works of African, Caribbean, and African American cultural and political movements, with particular attention to the relations between politics and poesis, and the ways that the exigencies of anticolonialism, civil rights, and Pan-Africanism ... provoked methodological innovation in interdisciplinary work.

“[Focusing] especially on the implications of black radicalism for theories of the archive,” the class required students to present original archival research in our work - this requirement given in addition to the study of published works by W.E.B. Du Bois, Hubert Harrison, C.L.R. James, Langston Hughes, Angela Davis, Sylvia Wynter, Cedric Robinson, David Scott, Robert Hill, Nikhil Pal Singh, Stuart Hall, Mahmood Mamdani, Achille Mbembe, Joy James, and more. It is necessary to detail the work of this class

because, for the first time in my experience of black literature (particularly African American literature), I was encountering a method of study that engaged published works, engaged specific political/social/cultural movements, and in addition, focused on the multiple articulations of the multiple relationships between individual politics and poesis. I was encountering a method of study that privileged the creative cognitive process of black radical thought and resulting individual praxis - a method that privileged the process of making, as opposed to the fixed artifact of, a collective representation of black knowledge, art, and literature. I do not say this to imply that no critic or scholar of African American literature had approached the tradition in this way before. I mention it because when considering, prior to my taking Edwards' seminar and still presently, how we as scholars disperse black knowledge, how we teach African American thought to future scholars, traditional methods of the study of African American literature suggest that this knowledge usually be bound by time and almost always linked with collective racial struggle and progress in America.

For those who would assume my previous study experience to be solely indicative of the educational process at my institutions of choice, I submit that even perusing the undergraduate and graduate 2014 course selections of top ranking English programs in the United States ("English"), what one finds (when one finds African American literature courses being offered at all) is a brief listing of courses titled "American Literature, 1855 to 1900" ("Announcement"), "African American Literature from the Beginnings to the Harlem Renaissance" ("Spring"), "The Harlem Renaissance" ("Undergraduate"), "African American Literature" - a course for which the preliminary syllabus works its way from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American*

*Slave* (1845) to Harriet Jacobs, to Harriet Beecher Stowe, to Joel Chandler Harris, to Charles Chesnutt, to James Weldon Johnson, moves through a few canonical writers of the New Negro Movement (Harlem Renaissance), to Gwendolyn Brooks, then Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and spends the last class covering August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1990) (Springarn 1) - and so on. This sort of study is fine enough for giving a topical understanding of who was writing what when in African American literature. But what of the question of why? What of a more informed question of how African American authors came to be engaging with the ideas and the texts which then informed their writing and self-presentation? How does one explain the motivations for the makings of African American literature (as something more than mere mass responses to historical racism) without endeavoring to more accurately understand individual authorial intent, and more importantly, the process of individual authorial cognition? These are great questions. Some will be easier to answer than others.

Knowing that recuperating the unspoken, unpublished thoughts of every African American individual author stands as an almost impossible feat, and believing that tracing the innumerable webs of epistemologies woven throughout the collective tradition to stand as an equally impossible feat, this chapter does not suggest that some sort of decontextualized understanding of all individual African American authors is necessary for studying the African American tradition. It does, however, urge scholars to take seriously the doors that are closed upon the efficacy of an author's canon when focusing on a periodized study of literature linked to racial politics. It presents Amiri Baraka, his published thoughts, works, and unpublished archives as a more full view of a self-aware and referential, highly (self)critical author, whose archival practice and subjective

development serves as central examples of the core understandings of black radical cognitive praxis and nonlinear progress (and hope for future innovation in African American literature) with which my larger project engages. This chapter also allows Baraka to serve as an example of an author whose legacy becomes much more useful when disentangled from the original racial politics and struggle within which their most pronounced literary identities were constructed.

## The Black Art of Negating Black Art

Creating a critique similar to that of the previously mentioned method of periodizing literature (based on expression of racial politics), Baraka speaks to the rejection of working-class black radical praxis in Charles Henry Rowell's *Angles of Ascent, A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. "This is a bizarre collection," Baraka begins ("Post-Racial" 1). Moving immediately to a discussion of Rowell's use of the term 'literary,' Baraka argues Rowell's aim of the anthology as "...rendering the Black Arts Movement as old school, backward, fundamentally artless." As proof, Baraka quotes the "blurb from the publisher W.W. Norton" stating *Angles*

is not just another poetry anthology. It is a gathering of poems that demonstrate what happens when writers in a marginalized community collectively turn from dedicating their writing to political, social, and economic struggles, and instead devote themselves, as artists, to the art of their poems and to the ideas they embody. These poets bear witness to the interior landscape of their own individual selves or examine the private or personal worlds of invented personae and therefore, of human beings living in our modern and postmodern worlds. (qtd. in "Post Racial")

Baraka responds to this in a fashion most familiar with his work would expect.

My God, what imbecilic garbage! You mean, forget the actual world, have nothing to do with the real world and real people ... invent it all! You can see how that would be some far-right instruction for a "marginalized community," especially one with the history of the Afro-American people: We don't want to hear all that stuff ... make up a pleasanter group of beings with pleasanter, more literary lives than yourselves and then we will perhaps consider it art. (1)

Technically, Baraka is included in *Angles*, making him (one might assume) included in this collective of artists Norton defines as bearing "witness to the interior landscape of their own individual selves..." Understandably, the notion of poets revealing themselves individually is not necessarily one that, alone, provokes Baraka; nor is the notion of poets

devoting themselves to the art of their poems. What seems particularly disturbing is Rowell's construction of small periodized sections or canons that erroneously separate key poets from the "'Black Arts Movement,' 'the Black Aesthetic poets,' 'the Black Power Movement' ... like ... menacing political institutions" in order to extend what Baraka deems a "Robert Hayden canonization" – a canon in which artists are first considered by their occupation as artist, then by their race and politics. Furthermore, what seems to incite Baraka is the implication that "a [present] marginalized community collectively [turning] from dedicating their writing to political, social, and economic struggles, and instead [devoting] themselves, as artists, to the art of their poems" is somehow more representative of individuals bearing witness to their interior and personal experience in "our modern and postmodern worlds" than were previously marginalized communities before them.

Baraka explains what he believes to be the beginning of Rowell's canonical constructions with a brief reach into the past.

Back in 1966 I was invited to Fisk University, where Hayden and Rowell taught. I had been invited by Nikki Giovanni, who was still a student at Fisk. Gwen Brooks was there. Hayden and I got into it when he said he was first an artist and then he was black. I challenged that with the newly-emerging ideas that we had raised at the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in Harlem in 1965, just after Malcolm X's assassination. We said the art we wanted to create should be identifiably, culturally black – like Duke Ellington's or Billie Holiday's. We wanted it to be a mass art, not hidden away on university campuses. We wanted an art that could function in the ghettos where we lived. And we wanted an art that would help liberate black people. I remember that was a really hot debate, and probably helped put an ideological chip on Rowell's shoulder.

This ideological chip Baraka describes is what he believes to be Rowell's motive for anthologizing a section of poets called "Precursors" - identified by "Modernists, 1940s to 1960s" (*Angles* 9) - including "Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, and Melvin B.

Tolson” but excluding “Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Margaret Walker ... major poets of the period after the Harlem Renaissance” (“Post-Racial”). In illuminating Rowell’s separation of (poetry detailing the experience of) what Baraka deems “the Black majority ... who have felt the direct torture and pain of national oppression” (“Post-Racial”) from what Rita Dove has described as the “gamut of middle class experience, in a comfy house with picket fences and rose bushes on a tree-lined street” (“Interview” 715), Baraka describes the work of poets excluded as Angles precursors saying, “Brooks’s most penetrating works illuminate Black life and the ‘hood.’ Langston, most people know, is the major voice of that period and what we mean when we talk about Afro-American poetry” (“Post-Racial”). Baraka’s detailing Brooks’ work as an illumination of black life and the hood, combined with a general understanding of Langston Hughes’ work as representing “the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and ... the majority” (Hughes 1), makes clear that Baraka condemns Rowell’s decentralizing of collective black experience often associated with the black working-class. Still, it is not the representation of a white-collar elite that Baraka takes qualms with, but rather, the anthologized construction of this university-educated elite to devalue and draw an artificial end to the trajectory and impact of the Black Arts Movement.

In commentary refocusing the reader on the intentions of function and liberation power for BAM art (as previously mentioned in his Fisk University anecdote), Baraka revisits the transitional nature of BAM stating

... the Black Arts Movement was focusing on, transforming the lives of the Black majority! We wanted to aid in the liberation of the Afro-American people with our art, with our poetry. But the deeper we got into the reality of this task, the more overtly political we became.

The lynching of Emmett Till, Rosa Parks’s resistance, Dr. King and the

Montgomery Bus Boycott (the peoples' resistance), the bombing of Dr. King's home in Montgomery. The sit-ins, etc., the Civil Rights Movement. The emergence of Robert F. Williams ... Malcolm X ... The rise and murder of Patrice Lumumba, the African Liberation Movement. ... Belgium, Rockefeller ... Maya Angelou, Louise Meriwether, Rosa Guy, Abbey Lincoln (all great artists), running up into the UN to defy Ralph Bunche. The March on Washington, the bombing of 16th St. Baptist Church and the murder of four little girls. JFK's assassination, Watts, Malcolm's assassination, Dr. King's assassination, rebellions across America!

All those major events we lived through. If we responded to them as conscious Black intellectuals, we had to try to become soldiers ourselves. That is why we wrote the way we did, because we wanted to.

Baraka's identification of focus on action, then life experience, choice, and desire is useful for understanding Baraka's main criticism of Rowell's anthology as a work dismissing the legacy and historical agency of the Black Arts Movement. In creating an anthology of mostly academic African American poets, organizing it as Part 1: PRECURSORS, organized into sections "Modernists, 1940s to 1960s," "1960's and beyond" (including subsections "The Black Arts Movement," and "Outside the Black Arts Movement"), and Part 2: HEIRS, organized into sections "First Wave, Post 1960's," "Second Wave, Post 1960's," and "Third Wave, Post 1960's," Rowell labels BAM and its presentation of the "Black Aesthetic" as "confining," (Angles I), excludes a number of writers (central to the movement's height) whose careers and politics extend outside of the movement, and ironically dislocates (despite later stating that "younger poets also have the advantage of learning from the Black Arts Movement and ... efforts, direct and indirect that their predecessors have made for and against it" (lii)) the bulk of the work presented in the anthology from the legacy of BAM claiming that "Like their predecessors who came immediately after the Black Arts Movement ... [rejecting] its ... concept of the Black Aesthetic] ... contemporary African American poets, while



recognizing the achievements of all of their ancestors, early and recent, write toward future memory and create a poetry that further extends the reaches of African American poetry in forms and ideas” (l-li). Rowell also quotes Yusef Komunyakaa and Rita Dove as examples of poets expressing the desire for a “poetry that would speak to and for the whole person” (xliv). Understanding this, it becomes clear that what Baraka takes issue with is not necessarily the hope for individual poetic representation or academic African American poetry, but rather the dismissal of a great deal of poetic work in addition to multiple moments of doublespeak intended to disavow a continuing contemporary legacy of the Black Arts Movement. “A sharp class distinction has arisen,” Baraka writes, “producing a mini-class of Blacks who benefited most by the civil rights and Black Liberation movements, thinking and acting as if our historic struggle has been won so that they can become as arrogant and ignorant as the worst examples of white America” (“Post-Racial”). He continues,

It is obvious, as well, looking through this book, that it has been little touched by the last twenty years of Afro-American life, since it shows little evidence of the appearance of spoken word and rap. E.G. Bailey, Jessica Care Moore, Ras Baraka, Ewure X. Osayande, Zayid Muhammad, Taalam Acey, Rasim Allah, Black Thought, Daniel Beatty, Saul Williams, and Staceyann Chin are all missing. This “new American poetry” is mostly dull as a stick.

Baraka adds to this questioning Rowell’s discussion of his anthologized poets as working “without the fetters of narrow political and social demands that have nothing to do with the production of artistic texts” (xlvii). He asks, “... the struggle for humanity [as] a fetter ... to whom” (“Post-Racial”)? “This is poppycock at its poppiest and cockiest,” he insists. “Why is the struggle for equal rights and self-determination narrow? To whom? Racists? You think Fred Douglass was not one of the greatest artists of the nineteenth

century because he kept demanding an end to slavery? Bah, Humbug!” Here, it becomes discernable that both Baraka and Rowell, in their own ways, are both engaged in a conversation about subjective poetic presentation of the African American as individual; yet, it seems that what Baraka would want Rowell and others to understand is that addressing a period such as BAM based on the legacy of its social politics, without necessarily attempting to understand the motive and individual transformations of its authors, undermines not only the movement, but also the position of its associated writers as creative black intellectuals and prime contributors to its various articulations. What Rowell presents as the desire for and contemporary expression of African American poets unencumbered by racial politics is merely one strand of African American poetic tradition. This one strand, even if, at times, varying from a number of poets writing during or prior to BAM, does not undo the collective work or legacy of BAM, nor should it shroud the literary choices made by individual poets who – writing in specific moments of American history that felt like a national attack on black personhood, writing in moments in which personal liberation as a black individual was a necessary yet unavailable privilege, writing as “conscious black intellectuals” – were also desirous of expressing the experience of their political growth and using poetry to express their attempts at “becoming soldiers ourselves.”

## **Black Radical Tradition is as Black Radical Intelligence Does ... and Says**

All those major events we lived through. If we responded to them as conscious Black intellectuals, we had to try to become soldiers ourselves. That is why we wrote the way we did, because we wanted to.

-- Amiri Baraka

When Amiri Baraka speaks to the idea of responding as conscious (awake, aware of and responding to one's surroundings) Black intellectuals who, in their art, tried to become soldiers, he articulates what he believes to be critical parts of the collective black radical praxis of the Black Arts Movement: experience, thought, and action. He is rearticulating a sentiment similar to one previously voiced in a July 22, 1967 press conference ("... in the wake of civil disturbance in Newark" *Leroi* 123) when he stated,

We also charge that so-called allegations of "outside force" are just racist propaganda. The white man has never been able to understand that black people can think for themselves. So that even now, faced with the murders of our children and our women, they still think that we have to be egged on by outside agitators. You understand this? We declare now that it is a lie ... (123)

Although Baraka went on to cite "the inability of the city government to feel, as human beings, the plight of the majority of the people" in Newark as cause of "this violence ... this rebellion," his language locates agency and choice within the black citizens of Newark in opposition to what the government would have liked to downplay as a reaction. Calling this violence a rebellion, makes it (similar to how Baraka understands the work of BAM's political art) a concerted effort by many to change the government and leadership. Calling it a rebellion makes it more than just an agitated response, but rather, a use of violence in open opposition; it makes it a refusal to obey: conscious resistance, conscious black radicalism.

Before moving forward, a return to the beginning of this chapter - the latter part of Edwards' line of questioning ("Are we now doing the work of black radicals?") is necessary in order to establish the definition and work of the "black radical" in the scope of Baraka's legacy as well as this project's engagement with African American literature. Without detailing an extensive Webster's definition, in an American cultural context, it is often safe to resign oneself to the more common connotation of black as African American. Being more inclusive for the purposes of locating Baraka's cognitive praxis within a more cosmopolitan tradition of radical thinkers, in this chapter, black will mean non-whites of African descent, often with a lineage linked to racialized-slavery and subjugation. Radical will be defined as an adjective meaning "of or going to the root or origin; fundamental; thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms; favoring drastic political, economic, or social reforms; forming a basis or foundation; [and] existing inherently in a thing or person." As a noun, radical will refer to "a person who holds or follows strong convictions or extreme principles. A radical is an extremist; a person who advocates fundamental political, economic, and social reforms by direct and often uncompromising methods." In reference to botany (in the case that now, as so often before, the social and political are discounted in preference of the scientific), the word means "of or arising from the root or the base of the stem." Because the brilliance of nomenclature and language is that at any moment definitions can be refined and words redefined, for the specific purposes of this paper, we will combine and simplify. Black radical: a person, non-white, of African descent whose ancestry is more often than not associated with racialized-slavery and subjugation; a place or site of knowledge, a storehouse for the not-so-safe-keeping and

revision of history and its addendums; a thing arising from the root or substructure, in the constant struggle to create firm foundation while working towards social, political, economic, and artistic reform. This definition of the black radical as an individual site of knowledge in relation to social, political, economic, and – particularly in the discussion of Baraka and African American literary tradition – artistic reform is necessary for being able to detangle the work (the makings and contributions) of an individual author from the legacy (the teachings, and tellings, and understandings) of an individual author and his or her work as it has been constructed (both inside and outside of the academy) within a linear tradition. It is also necessary for being able to assess an author as an ever-developing intellectual, expressing for an audience his or her (process of) thinking. Doing so allows for a more pronounced vision of an authentic individual artist trajectory as opposed to (and in conjunction with and addition to) an externally constructed narrative over-determined by ideas of homogenous racial politics. In the case of Baraka, for instance, it allows us to more critically analyze an understood construction of Baraka as both simultaneous creator and product of the Black Arts Movement, while understanding that, despite all of our literary education in the academy, it is most often our own personal biases that create stark disconnects between critical practice and Baraka's work.

This desire to understand the work of Baraka's contributions as a black radical in relationship to the development of the African American literary tradition is one similar to the work that many scholars are doing in relation to black radicalism as a practice and easily articulated with an understanding of Brent Edwards' "The 'Autonomy' of Black Radicalism." "Autonomy" discusses the priority of Rethinking's project as the filling of

“a gap in our understanding of the politics of black radical activity during the twentieth century” (1). Exploring what he calls a “significant shift in historiographic orientation, Edwards details a new willingness by historians to acknowledge “the sometimes subtle impact of African American radicals on party policy and practice at both the local and national levels.” According to Edwards,

The historiographic shift is not only a departure from party-centered considerations of radicalism; it is also a return: it indicates a renewed attention to the methodologies and strategies embedded within key works within the African diasporic intellectual tradition itself ... (2)

In order to better explain this shifting—this willingness to revise notions depicting black radicalism as simply reactive to Western epistemology and discourse; a willingness to investigate and (re)posit black intellectualism as central to the development of “radical praxis” (3)—Edwards references a 1948 speech given at the Socialist Workers Party convention in which James, in opposition to the pervasive idea of “racism and oppression as subordinate to ... class struggle” argues,

... [N]umber one, that the Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another ...

We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation ... We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights. (qtd. in Edwards 3)

As Edwards rightly acknowledges, James is arguing for the “autonomy” (3) of the ‘Negro Struggle,’ finding this struggle (whether at times influenced by “Marxist ... anticolonial ...

[struggles, or] 'waged under the banner of democratic rights") to be at all times unique from and imperative to the developments of national and international radical regimen. The quest for "autonomy," as articulated by James, is being taken up by scholars in an attempt to reevaluate the study and understanding of black radicalism's development as a direct result of Marxist or white and Western modes of radical engagement. This reevaluation of black radicalism, for example, accepts that "Black Nationalism as a movement was a twentieth-century phenomenon" (Robinson 176) but also rejects the impulse to localize the development, cultivation, and conclusion of black radical thought and practice within the twentieth century. Rather than merely understanding black radical practice in terms of what Cedric J. Robinson refers to in *Black Radicalism* as "the presumed relationship between Black radicalism and the European radical movement," rather than studying black radicalism as a smaller part of a racially and socially varying (yet paradoxically ontologically homogenous) whole, scholars are attempting to study particular transformations and regenerations of black radical thought within the specificities of the primary context within which they were first made available. A more socially and historically accurate understanding and re-articulation of this autonomy is what Edwards' previously mentioned notion of "historiography" seeks to achieve - a project recent black radical scholarship has undertaken in order to "unearth and analyze the 'deep historic roots' of the independent Negro movement." Similarly, a more socially and historically accurate understanding of Amiri Baraka and his contributions to black radical praxis and African American literary tradition is what this chapter seeks to achieve.

Although scholars have long been discussing Baraka's dissociative nature, David

L. Smith's article, "Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts of Black Art," is an example of a text that - framing Baraka in 1986, some twelve years after what many marked as the end of the Black Power movement (and as such the Black Arts) (Joseph 77) and six years after what most deem the beginning of the Black Feminist movement (often giving no real thought to the unnamed in-between) – proves useful in its comprehension of Amiri Baraka as both author and political activist in that it represents, on an individual level, the resistance to shortsightedness presented in Baraka's previously discussed resistance to Rowell's periodization with Angles. Although Smith states that his sole purpose is to "... examine the manifestations of Baraka's political thinking in his poetry," he does not resist criticism of what he believes to be the manifestations of Baraka's "own deliberately incendiary polemics" in his personal and public life. "He has been especially notorious for his biting critiques of liberalism and of white Americans' sexuality," begins Smith. He argues further, Baraka is also known for

... for his strident black nationalism, and over the past decade, for his equally uncompromising Marxist-Leninist views. He has shocked his admirers and detractors alike not only by shifting from bohemian aestheticism to New Left politics to black cultural nationalism to a brand of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thinking, but he has even changed his name as well, from LeRoi Jones to Ameer Barakat to Imamu Amiri Baraka to Amiri Baraka. Some observers have regarded him as confused and unstable, others have hailed him as the apostle of the Black Aesthetic or as the Father of Contemporary Black Poetry. (235)

Smith continues detailing Baraka's break from his middle-class black upbringing, as well as how (assumedly) shifting to more militant forms of Black Nationalism caused Baraka to separate from his first wife because of her Jewish heritage (236). Claiming that if Baraka had remained merely "an avant garde writer-and aesthete- ... he could have continued to cultivate his own idiosyncracies without qualm," Smith argues that it is



Baraka's felt marginality combined with his need to "reconcile his actual practice with his sense of social responsibility... [that] has shaped and sometimes disfigured both his writing and his life." Despite recognizing Baraka's "struggle" for reconciliation as "the most striking and definitive characteristic of Baraka's exceptionally eventful career" (at this point, Smith is only cataloguing some two decades of said "eventful career"), Smith's tone, making itself apparent through the use of words such as "disfigure," suggests that Baraka's becoming "politicized" is something that was detrimental to both his personal and public lives.

... [I]t has limited him as a poet, both by narrowing his range of concerns and by undermining the complexity of perception and association which distinguishes poetry from polemics. Finally, considering that Baraka was a serious student of Hegel, one would expect more of an understanding of dialectical development than his stark either/or attitudes ... suggest. [Baraka] clearly values the product of a developed political consciousness over the process of a developing one. Again, this reductive tendency leads Baraka toward an overly simplified, exclusive political aesthetic which focuses on narrow ideas of experience rather than toward an inclusive aesthetic which captures the full complexity of actual experience. (238)

Smith's inability to reconcile Baraka's writings as a vivid expression of Baraka's personal consciousness and conscience in relation to his known collective historical experience that fuels much of his argument against Baraka's aesthetics.

The problem with Smith's argument (similar to arguments of Baraka critics we will read later in this project) is that it seems to require Baraka to express his relationship between his personal consciousness and the historical collective in a way in which white poets would never be required. It judges Baraka's work for failing to enact Smith's political standard, rather than by the merit of individual works or according to standards of black aesthetics. In attempting to analyze how the shifts in personal and political truth and practice affected Baraka's poetic style (under an assumed homogenous aesthetic

standard) as a totality, Smith valorizes and “values the product of a developed political consciousness over the process of a developing one.” What Smith confuses as concrete and unmoving aesthetics and politics are the dynamic thoughts and beliefs of an ever-maturing human being.

Understanding that “revolutionary movements ‘take forms that are often cultural and religious rather than explicitly political,’” it is easy to understand how Baraka, as a writer and conscious individual living in and through multiple revolutionary moments might express similar degrees of variance, from others and within himself. Previous scholarly work on black radicalism as a movement finds itself continuously oscillating, negotiating a space defined by both “mass insurgency” and “artistic expression” (Edwards 3). This is an oscillation not entirely unfamiliar to Baraka who in addition to his own desire to be “heard from” in the “literary sense” (Leroi xi) - through conscious thought and action as a black male writer and activist living in America - became (as an American citizen) “more overtly political” (“Post-Racial”) (as a American writer) in order to “get away from the faux English academic straitjackets passed down ... by the Anglo-American literary world.” This chapter finds itself negotiating the space between “the displacements and transformations of concepts” and “the microscopic and macroscopic scales” of epistemology (Edwards 4). It oscillates between the understanding of history, historical significance, the black radical, the black radical tradition, and the contributions of both to African American literature. But for what purpose? To what use does one put a “better understanding” of the evolution of a writer’s entire canon or an entire sociopolitical movement or school of radical praxis? How does one even begin to theorize what better understanding defines? In theory, it

allows for the “unearthing” and privileging of some past usefulness in conjunction with the collaboration of both past and present to create or prepare for an undefined future; it drives not only this chapter, but the breadth of my overall project. In practice, this better understanding is one that privileges the validity and usefulness of Baraka’s individual thought within the context of the thought’s immediate origin and within the context of Baraka’s full cognitive development. This better understanding shows, for instance, that although scholars have previously found themselves drawn to the “controversial” nature of Amiri Baraka’s work (Smith 235), often with the attempt to show Baraka’s inconsistency of argument and style, it is these inconsistencies, these discrete expressions and rearticulations that have shaped not only Baraka’s personal politics, but also his writing and contributions to the African American tradition.

## Back Back Forth and Forth

As previously mentioned, in “Black Radicalism and the Archive,” we studied the published and unpublished works of a number of black radical intellectuals. In doing so, we discovered within each writer a consistent practice of thinking - a practice not only focused on the present or future, but also incessantly preoccupied with the past – that created a system of constant self-critique and revision. Through actions such as Hubert Harrison’s daily listing of some six or more books he had either read or reviewed, or CLR James’ detailing of the extensive list of books he had discovered through an essential reading practice that began in childhood (*Beyond*), each author also reveals an acknowledgment that self-education was necessary in order to understand all things outside of and simultaneously within one’s self, particularly when engaged in critiquing a political organization, social structure, or even one’s own thoughts. These authors related an almost universal understanding: an intimate knowledge of all one encounters (whether in solidarity with or opposition to one’s beliefs) is necessary for an intimate encounter of one’s self. Particularly valuable in helping to understand this idea is James’ discussion of the dialectic as articulated in relation to Hegel’s preface to the first edition of the *Science of Logic*.

In reference to the ways in which established systems intake new knowledge, Hegel writes,

Imperceptibly the new ideas became familiar even to their opposers, who appropriated them and-- though persistently slighting and gainsaying the sources and principles of those ideas-- yet had to accept their results, and were unable to evade their influence. The only way opposers could give content and positive value to their negative attitude ... was by giving in their adherence to the new ways of thinking. (qtd. in James 13)

James labels Hegel's description as "... a new way of organizing thought" (13). "Not of thinking," James argues. "But of knowing what you do when you think." Although James is discussing ideas of burgeoning economic systems in relation to what then constituted the Russian economy as well as the labor movement, his words are still helpful when thinking backwards within the context of Baraka's focus on experience, thought, and action and how it has contributed to his own writing practice and the African American poetic tradition. James writes, "Our opponents are stuck in their own roots. They adopt ideas, but they remain stuck in their own 'sources and principles,' ... they use the new ideas solely for argument's sake and to preserve their own position." James uses this line of thinking to argue for the strength of new ideas presented in opposition to the old regime. Here, however, his words also serve as a warning of what happens when unwilling to be self-aware or understand the process of one's own cognitive development. It speaks to an urge similar to what one can recognize in the sometimes-false canons of periodization given to African American literature. It also speaks to what one might imagine as the impetus to create a marked end to BAM while moving forward critiquing and canonizing the literature using politics similar to those that the movement fought against. James articulates that to refuse to understand the source of past ideology, while proposing new, is equally as dangerous as adapting new ideology while refusing to credit the source. He defends this with an explanation of what he calls "Aphorism" (8), stating,

It is impossible completely to understand Marx's *Capital* ... without having thoroughly studied and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*. Consequently, half a century later, none of the Marxists understood Marx.  
(8)

What James explains here is the way in which a lack of understanding, particularly of what has influenced that which one has been influenced by, has the potential to lead to

multiple levels of misunderstanding, including misunderstanding of self. It is necessary to question and comprehend the foundations of one's collectively-held and presented beliefs because to uncritically accept new lines of thinking, to adopt new practices without understanding the source, is, often, a perpetuation of misunderstandings and fabricated divisions. It is not an example of epistemological radicalism (for at this point, the roots of thought are being ignored), but rather, as James points out, a stage in the development of new ideas, a stage necessary to complete a radical process; however, a mean and not an end. This returns us to Smith's previous mentioning of Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectics.

Hegel speaks of the antithesis stage in the development of thought (which based on his article seems to be the stage(s) in Baraka's cognitive development that Smith most takes issue with) saying, "... such a period generally wears an aspect of fanatical hostility towards the prevalent systemization of the older principle" (qtd. in James 14). As has been evident in almost all social, political, or economic grand movements, in the beginning stages of fanaticism, the regime is "... partly fearful of losing itself in the wilderness of particulars while it shuns the labour required for scientific development, and in its need of such a development grasps, at first, at an empty formalism." Because of the great risk this poses, the "... demand for the digestion and development of the material now becomes so much the more pressing." More pressing because, as both James and Hegel suggest, within this critical moment of (re)formation, lies the greatest need for the development of ideas. The fanatical stage is only enough to attract followers and agitate interest. In order to bring about full commitment and full development of ideology detached from "subjective" views, there need be a process of understanding,

ingestion, and constant transformation of thought. There is also a need to make the thought useful for further deliberation, future endeavor; future action.

Although this insistence on the usefulness of past knowledge can be easily generalized under the belief that one should know the history of any “thing” in order to ensure intellectual engagement on fair or equal (both loaded) terms, it is most useful to consider what this usefulness mean specifically within the history of black radical thought. The impacts of black intellectualism and radicalism are usually centralized under seemingly unambiguous titles such as “anti-slavery,” “Reconstruction,” “The Civil Rights,” or “The Black Arts” movements and so on. These are titles that project images of standardization of personal and political goals and movement. These are personal and political goals and movements often associated with particular schools of thought localized within the ideology of deceased (many times murdered) black activists and political leaders. Because of this, it sometimes proves difficult to identify and analyze particular moments of black radical thought while also locating them within an elongated historical trajectory of black radicalism. This is particularly difficult when the previously referenced thoughts and moments conflict with one another while still most accurately residing under the same “unambiguous” title. How can one person make a particular political statement so greatly contrasting from the statement of another who claims to be of the same beliefs? How can two political organizations claim to be working towards the same cause and do so while promoting two separate agendas or varying lines of propaganda? How, within such short periods, can regimes radically change ideology, or leadership, or in the best cases, both? An easy way to come to terms with this is by understanding that what we as scholars, critics, and consumers of knowledge, often

consider to be life-long goals and pledges of ideology (especially within the black radical tradition), whether artistic or political, whether personal or organizational, are just as often ideas and theories prematurely struck down. Sometimes, what have been recorded are ideas still grappling to find themselves within a “wilderness of particulars.” What we are shown, are small evidences of the beginnings of movements, renamed, retheorized, and disguised as either failed or only moderately successful attempts at radicalism. However, this is not necessarily the most useful way of analyzing the developments of movements, nor the individuals creating and participating within them.

As a person develops, so do his or her ideas and beliefs, as do the movements to which they commit themselves. The emphasis on black radicalism in terms of periodization forces one to discuss the thoughts presented within that movement as centralized within what usually varies between five and twenty year periods. Although more often than not shortened by stress or physical manifestations of opposition in forms of violence, the lifespan of the black radical is still not adequately addressed using such small numbers. The previously mentioned periods and titles do not force an emphasis on the development of thought, nor on its specificities, but rather ensure a glossing over of several factors affecting black radical praxis and progress. Most specifically, they elide factors such as opposition in the forms of institutional racism, violence, and economic inequality. One’s thoughts can only be useful to a movement as one has access to, and an ability to focus on, said movement. One’s thoughts can only be viewed as some type of totality, if he or she has time, energy, and resources to see those thoughts through a full trajectory. If one’s mind is in the constant process of reviewing and reformatting, repositioning its thoughts and beliefs in accordance with what one daily encounters, there



is no such thing as a full trajectory. There are only developing trajectories that end.

For a black radical, one can assume that a full trajectory of thought will include, not only ever-developing forms of self-knowledge and personal ideology, but also those forms of opposing systems. The trajectory will include, not only information secured and stored for purposes of freedom, but also that which has been unwillingly digested through fed forms of oppression. Moments in the trajectory will often contradict themselves. This is acceptable. As James contends, "The condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world in their 'self movement', in their spontaneous development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites. Development is the 'struggle' of opposites" (7), and it is this struggle of opposites that leads us back again to Amiri Baraka.

In the introduction to *The Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, Baraka writes, "The first book I published was called "Preface ..." Now some thirty years later, I find myself writing another Preface, now more clearly serving as both "anchor" (as in relay races) to one motion, and as "1st leg" to another, further motion" (xi). Baraka goes on to say that he wants the reader to "give some further description of my own changing and diverse motion, of where I been and why, and how I got to where I was when I next 'appeared' or was heard from." He adds, "In the literary sense, it has always been somewhat difficult to "appear" or be heard from ..." Clear here, is that Baraka identifies the preface and, most likely the almost four hundred page reader that accompanies the preface, as the beginnings of separate sections of his life. However, this section is not a separate moment or period as history would often define it, but rather a separate movement, a separate range or phase of motion with its own unique purpose, though also, somehow,

an extension of a movement before it. Baraka indicates that he means "anchor" and "1st leg" as in "relay races" in an effort to express that with the end of each movement comes the beginning of another, none more or less important, more or less trivial than the others.

In the common runner's relay, there are four runners (or legs) in the race. The first leg is usually the second fastest; the second, the third fastest; the third, the slowest, and the last, the most speedy of them all- the last leg wins the race. Because of this arrangement, the spectator often places the bulk of importance on the last leg, forgetting that without the first three, without the continuous dialectic of backward outreached hand, the yelling of "Stick!," and the frantic forward reach to give some thing to the next leg to allow it to move, to go, to win, that there would be no finished race. In Baraka's race, he reminds us, that this preface as "anchor," as the fastest leg to win the race, is only the first leg to another motion, perhaps, the beginning of another race to be won.

Describing his consistent movement, Baraka writes, "The typology that lists my ideological changes and so forth as 'Beat-Black Nationalist-Communist' has brevity going for it, and there's something to be said for that, but ... it doesn't show the complexities of real life" (xi). In a hypothetical conversation, the poet and activist discusses the way others have viewed the changes in his life.

'You mean that's not accurate?' Dick or Dixie Dugan wd counter.

'Well, yes and no,' I'd drawl, acknowledging with an easy dismissal any mental disclaimer needed to sound so Zennish.

But the truth is that in going toward and away from some name, some identifiable "headline" of one's life, the steps are names too, but we ain't that precise yet. We go from step 1 to step 2 and the crushed breath away from the 'given' remains unknown swallowed by its profile as what makes distance.

If we go back to our understanding of the relay, it enables an easy comprehension of Baraka's words here, a comprehension quite useful in furthering this project.

First, let us broaden our horizon, extend our sights from the relay, to the entire field upon which the relay is taking place. There may be other events going on: hurdles, the high jump, long distance races. When the end of the meet arrives, there will be an announcement of all scores and marks of those who participated. However, what will be focused on is the names of those teams that won each event; that will be tallied, and the focus will move to the name of the team that won the most events, forgetting all that occurred within each particular event, eliding the memory of all the work and movement that took place before and between each particular win, or naming. Now, let us bring our sights back to the relay. Between each leg, despite our projected judgments of their variances, there is work done. Something, that at the end, once the fastest man has won the relay, is, as Baraka suggests, "swallowed," dismissed as "distance." What Baraka wants the preface of the Baraka Reader to remind us of is that "there is real life between 1 and 2," there is real life between each grand announcement, between each win; there is life in the loss. There is real life that occurs between a poem expressing uncertainty and a self-righteous poem believing in its own superiority. There is real life in, during, and after "I am inside someone who hates me" (*Angles* 33) and "For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke / the face of some dumb white man" (35). "There is the life of the speed," Baraka says, "the time it takes, the life there in, in the middle of, the revelation, like perception, rationale and use. To go from any where to any there." As Smith reminds us, Baraka is indeed quite familiar with Hegel, as with C.L.R. James. Perhaps, in 1986, Baraka's works did not express thoughts fully attesting to this. However, placing Baraka's most recent statements in conversation with James and Hegel shows that if familiar with anything, Baraka is most familiar with the dialectic.

Again, returning to Hegel's preface makes us aware of similarity, particularly similarities between Hegel's, James', and Baraka's theories of the epistemological process. James argues "... it is the nature of the content and that alone which lives and stirs in philosophic cognition, while it is the very reflection of the content, which itself originates and determines the nature of philosophy" (qtd. in James 15). He continues,

This is the key to the Hegelian dialectic ... Thought is not an instrument you apply to a content. The content moves, develops, changes and creates new categories of thought, and gives them direction... philosophic cognition is not the study of philosophy. It is ... cognition of any object ... Philosophic cognition of it means not philosophy about it, but a correct cognition of it, a correct grasp of it, in its movement. (15)

Despite the ease of self-evidence within James' statements, they still lend themselves to further lines of difficult questions. For one, what does all of this discussion of epistemology and cognition mean to this chapter or the larger project? What, if anything, has Amiri Baraka and relay races to do with Hegel and James? How is Amiri Baraka's understanding of Hegel, Marx, or James, in addition to a presumptuous scholarly misjudgment, in anyway related to black radicalism or its practice as contribution to BAM and African American literature thereafter? This present need for forward movement in our argument, this attempt to shift, again requires us to move backwards within the text.

### **What It Is We're Doing Anyhow**

So what are we doing here? ... Going into the archive? ... are we black radicals?

- Brent Edwards

As for the Black Power movement's "death," last I heard we have an Afro-American president who has taught the Republicans the value of community organizing TWICE.

- Amiri Baraka

As previously stated, in line with the recent scholarly work referenced by Edwards, this project is interested in the willingness to address black radicalism from a historiographic standpoint as autonomous movement(s). In that interest, it is equally invested in the autonomy of the black intellectuals writing in and about the black radical movement, as well as their specific cognitive developments. I am not interested in providing an assessment of Amiri Baraka's work as an activist and poet in any total sense; nor am I interested in presenting, Amiri Baraka, the "Black Nationalist;" Amiri Baraka, "The Marxist," or "Black Marxist," or "apostle of The Black Aesthetic." What I am invested in showing is that, through an analysis of specific texts as statements of, or testaments to, specific cognitive moments in Baraka's still-forming trajectory as a black radical, one is able to form a better understanding of what seems to be not only Baraka's particular mode of radicalism, but also a belief constituent to Baraka's sense of black radicalism; that being the constant conscious collection of knowledge, always with an effort to cull and refine, making it useful for progression.

Although I can contextualize the findings of Brent Edwards' seminar on black radicalism, it proves a difficult task to present the contents of Baraka's almost three

hundred boxes kept in a basement for approximately four decades, in addition to his published poetry, in addition to his published essays, in addition to his published plays, in addition to the entire workings of the Baraka Reader – all material covered within the semester. However, this difficult task merely serves as something else in which I am not invested. Michel Foucault best describes my intentions when voicing a shifting in historical analysis, one not completely removed from the multiple shiftings I've discussed up until this point. My "... attention has been turned ... away from vast unities like 'periods' or 'centuries' to the phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" (4). I,

Beneath the great continuities of thought, beneath [what we create or describe as] solid homogenous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality ... beneath the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline, or theoretical activity ... [am] now trying to detect the incidence of interruptions. Interruptions whose status and nature vary considerably.  
(4)

I am concerned with "the epistemological acts and thresholds [first] described by Bachelard," concerned with the suspension of "... the continuous accumulation of knowledge[, interruptions of] slow development ... [and the attempt to] direct historical analysis away from the search for silent beginnings ... towards the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects" (4). I am concerned with "... the displacement and transformations of concepts." The idea that "... the history of a concept is not wholly and entirely that of its progressive refinement, its continuously increasing rationality, its abstraction gradient, but that of its various fields of constitution and validity, that of its successive rules of use, that of the many theoretical contexts in which it is developed and matured." Most importantly, I'm concerned with "... the microscopic and macroscopic scales of the history of the sciences, in which events and their consequences are not arranged in the same way." Foucault, in an explanation of G. Canguilhem's models of

analysis, argues, "... a discovery, the development of a method, the achievements, and the failures, of a particular scientist, do not have the same incidence, and cannot be described in the same way" on the microscopic and macroscopic levels. In an analysis of one's science, or work, within varying registers, "Recurrent redistributions" or continuous reallocations of validity and consequence, "reveal several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies, for one and the same science, as its present undergoes change: thus historical descriptions are necessarily ordered by the present state of knowledge, they increase with every transformation and never cease, in turn, to break with themselves ..." (4-5).

What Foucault concludes as "the most radical discontinuities" is most important to my work. For most important, to the shifting in this specific historical analysis, "are the breaks effected by a work of theoretical transformation 'which establishes a science by detaching it from the ideology of its past and by revealing this past as ideological'" (5). This, precisely, is the work I'm doing. I am invested in separating Baraka's work from the, often self-claimed, at other moments given, totalizing labels of association. I want to understand Baraka, want to "get a better grasp" of him within his movement, in order to use him as a single specific example of a particular movement (though often recurring) within black radicalism and again the African American literary tradition. There is an investment in showing that if, at times, Black radicalism can oscillate between "Marxist ... anticolonial ... [or] 'waged under the banner of democratic rights,'" then Baraka as black radical can oscillate between being "Beat-Black Nationalist-Marxist," between feelings of confusion, fear, and even superiority, as can the African American literary tradition, all while maintaining their strength as valid autonomous forces. In fact, these oscillations,

whatever form they may take, are necessary for the continuous developments of movement on both levels because they are necessary moments of self-revelation and catalysts for change. As such, there is very little potential available in holding the black radical, or any author for that matter, to all of his or her previous discourse. There is also very little potential in forsaking the autonomy of any literary movement by defining it solely by the writings of what has been established and accepted as radically black.

Despite my claim of investment in separating Baraka from totalizing labels, I must acknowledge that I have already established his close association with the beginnings of The Black Arts Movement. Still, there is very little potential available in holding the black radical hostage to all of his or her previous discourse. There is also very little potential in forsaking the autonomy of the movement of black radicalism by defining it solely by the writings of what has been established and accepted as radically black. Despite the highly self-critical nature of the work produced during the Black Arts Movement, the reason many discuss BAM as a totality that has already happened—one that we define by a particular set of aesthetics, no longer applicable to today's work by Black artists—is because of the refusal to expand the notion of the Black Arts Movement beyond a particular time period, the refusal to reexamine the artistic statements (and their validity) from the past forward. What seems easier, though arguably less fruitful, is to ignore the present life within the distance between that last naming and the one for which the world patiently waits. Having established the necessity to allow gaps and ruptures in the development of one's thinking, as well as the maturity of particular ideas as validated within specific contexts, it is my hope to apply this knowledge to an accumulation of statements concerning the epistemological process in order to again move us forward.



Foucault's chapter in the *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, "Rarity, Exteriority, and Accumulation" helps to define the process. In it, Foucault writes, "Generally speaking, the analysis of discourse operates between the twin poles of totality and plethora" (118). In regards to discussing any multitude of texts as a totality, Foucault argues, "One [only] shows how the different texts with which one is dealing refer to one another, organize themselves into a single figure, converge with institutions and practices, and carry meanings that may be common to a whole period. Each element considered is taken as the expression of the totality to which it belongs and whose limits it exceeds." This particular type of study is what CLR James was arguing against in his previously mentioned Socialist Workers Party speech. This is what Baraka warns us all against in his critique of Rowell's *Ascent*. This is what my project urges against when, on a microcosmic level, studying Baraka's canon, and on a macrocosmic level, when endeavoring to understand how Baraka or The Black Arts movement contributes to the African American literary tradition as a whole.

James recognized that, yes, the movement for black liberation and equality as he experienced it was, indeed, a radical movement, perhaps similar in some ways to Marxism, perhaps similar in others to a number of other movements. What the black liberation movement was not, was a movement to be subsumed as a brief utterance in the historical text of a quest for class equality, or democracy, or any other movement it touched or was touched by. Likewise, I argue that each of the internal dissociations within what is labeled as black radicalism, within what is labeled as BAM, within what is labeled as the African American literature, should not be looked on as a breaking away from, or failure, but rather a screaming of "Stick!", a hand-off in the relay to some

imminent and still undefined freedom. For the study of African American literature is not a question of what Foucault describes in another chapter as, “rediscovering what might legitimize an assertion...” It should be an exercise in finding and “freeing the conditions of emergence of statements, the law of their coexistence with others, the specific form of their mode of being, the principles according to which they survive [and] become transformed...” Similar to the way that Foucault's words can be applied on the macro level of radicalism and African American literature, they ring true within the micro level of our studies of Baraka's archive.

Scholars have criticized Baraka for his constant fluctuations of thought. The criticism is not necessarily aimed at Baraka for becoming political, but rather, aimed at the ways in which his wavering political agendas have affected his poetic works. As with Smith's work, the criticism is more or less concerned with the ways in which Baraka has lived up to or failed some artistic standard, whether it be of Black Arts, Contemporary Poetry, Realism, the list could continue. However, there are reasons (dismissing the most obvious that Baraka's texts show a continuous quest to break away from external standards of aesthetics) why these lines of criticism are flawed. The critic who attempts to label Baraka's work in regards to any particular aesthetic as a totality, runs the risk of substituting "for the diversity of the things said a sort of great, uniform text, which has never before been articulated, and which reveals for the first time what [he or she believes Baraka to have] ‘really meant’ not only in [his] words and texts ... discourses and their writings, but also in the institutions, practices, techniques, and objects, that [he] produced" (Foucault 118). However, I am not interested in exploring the silences of what Baraka did not say, hoping to create some new meaning of what it means to be black or

radical or Amiri Baraka. That particular line of thinking finds it difficult to mediate between a poem like Baraka's "SOS," saying, "Calling Black People / Calling all black people. man woman child / Wherever you are, calling you urgent, come in..." and Baraka's "Black Art" calling for

... live  
 Words of the hip world live flesh &  
 coursing blood. Hearts Brains  
 Souls splintering fire. We want poems  
 like fists beating niggers out of Jocks  
 or dagger poems in the slimy bellies  
 of the owner-jews. Black poems to  
 smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches  
 whose brains are red jelly stuck  
 between 'lizbeth taylor's toes. Stinking  
 Whores! We want "poems that kill.  
 Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
 guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
 and take their weapons leaving them dead  
 with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff  
 poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite  
 politicians ... (Baraka Reader 219)

That particular line of thinking attempts to calm the contradictions while reading between the silences to suggest some general meaning within Baraka's work as part of the Black Arts movement. That line of thinking faces Baraka's canon and black radical praxis and attempts to theorize it within an overarching trajectory of established thought, unable to make peace with the expressed uncertainty in addition to the anger in addition to the joy in addition to the sadness in addition to the nationalism in addition to the Marxism in addition to the Blackness in addition to the love in addition to the hate in addition to its own need to label the work as one thing encapsulating or disputing all the others.

I accept the contradictions. I accept that sometimes "The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it" (169). I accept that, to

Baraka, it is necessary to call forth all of one's people one day, if only to call forth a poem to destroy them the next (or vice versa). Beginning again from the root is often necessary, useful for transformation. My thinking views the Baraka archive as "a domain of positivity, of pure materiality" (Scott vi). It sees each published work simultaneously as a statement and a movement, an anchor and a first leg. My thinking accepts Baraka's disdain for all the "pitifully intelligent citizens / I've forced myself to love" in addition to his realization that "What I thought was love / in me, I found a thousand instances of fear..." in addition to Baraka's arrogance in the unpublished, "VOX POP," in addition to his hope for evolution in "Explorer AD (?) 1965" in addition to "... imagine the infinite, imagine where / we must travel / to get beyond the pettiness of movement" ("Explorer"), in addition to "I am uncertain of the world / ... There are older times / than this, / from which to draw," in addition to "... we were right, / to change, and changing became the things we never knew / existed" ("Progress Report"), in addition to "... there are so many [God's], and I am responsible / to them all" ("Craziology"), in addition to "I wish the stars were like they are. I wish I was / like I am" ("Unknown"), in addition to the hundreds of boxes of material (pictures, letters, poems, manuscripts, emails, etc) that validate the movements, that show Baraka becoming like Baraka and unlike Baraka and defining periods of Baraka as periods of ideology versus objective cognition or personal philosophical developments. My thinking accepts the overwhelming nature of Baraka's material archive and places it in conversation with a few specific voices represented in what might be envisioned as Baraka's archive of consciousness, of radical theory, of individual radical thought.

Still, important to my larger project, is the understanding that even without these

“other” voices to contextualize Baraka’s canon, he has and continues to articulate a clear understanding of his individual development, his growth work as a black radical, and his contributions to the African American literary tradition. In the intro to his reader, Baraka tells us,

My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what. (xiv)

He told us again.

You have a responsibility to reject the future. But you can’t do that unless you know the past<sup>13</sup>.

And again.

You’ll find those things too ... imitations of yourself that you didn’t find that interesting.

And again.

You’ll never catch up with yourself.

And again.

... the nationalism is not sufficient.

And again.

... being black is not sufficient.

I accept this. I understand the need for the individual black radical to continuously rethink and rearticulate his or her personal/political stance in connection with a larger collective struggle, and accept Baraka’s archive as a personal attempt to “... reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive” (Cook 1) of American historical experience. It is this reinvention of historical experience, this continuous cycle of expansion and revision,

that allows me to analyze Baraka's published and unpublished statements (in addition to the archived materials documenting his time as a black radical) while simultaneously confirming the need to study Baraka, not merely as a literary figure noted for fathering what has been labeled as the Black Arts Movement," but a human being, running alongside, within, and outside of, what most have noted as "his time," always already expanding the depth and breadth and lasting effects of the movement as he continues to expand himself.

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#### Chapter 1 Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This section of the dissertation was edited and submitted with the rest of my writing in entirety in March 2015.

<sup>2</sup> This idea of the United States as theoretically devoid of racial preference, discrimination, and prejudice was popularized after the first election of President Barack Obama in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> This, especially considering the great deal of scholarship and primary texts demonstrating the creation and existence of African American literature prior to the American Civil War, in addition to the canon's "reworked rhetorical practices, myths, folklore, and traditions deriving from the African continent" (*What* 1).

<sup>4</sup> Hammon draws upon strong Christian motifs and themes in order to highlight the need for "the young negroes" to be free (1). He encourages his Negro audience to maintain their high moral standards because being slaves on Earth had already secured their place in heaven. He writes, notably, "If we should ever get to Heaven, we shall find nobody to reproach us for being black, or for being slaves."

<sup>5</sup> Lee's text represents the psychological effects of living under oppressive rule long before "race-based" texts. In addition, Lee challenges living within the traditional roles expected of her as both African American and woman in a pre-emancipation society.

<sup>6</sup> See endnote 1.

<sup>7</sup> A ballad is a poetic form usually composed to accompany dance and most often used as a method of transferring and perpetuating oral history.

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<sup>8</sup> Warren, Kenneth W. *What Was African American Literature?*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012. Print.

<sup>9</sup> *What* 2-3.

<sup>10</sup> *What* 3-4.

<sup>11</sup> *What* 6.

<sup>12</sup> Johnson writes that “The record of the Negro’s efforts in literature goes back a long way, covering a period of more than a century and a half, but it is only within the past ten years that America as a whole has been made consciously aware of the is Negro as an artist. It only within that brief time that Negro writers have ceased to be regarded as isolated cases of exceptional, perhaps accidental ability, and gained group recognition. It is only within these few years that the arbiters of American letters have begun to assay the work of these writers by the general literary standards and accord it such appraisal as it might merit.” It was only sixty-nine years prior that blacks in America were freed from slavery. Even Warren admits that Johnson’s approximations (even if denying the writing prior to the Emancipation Proclamation and American Civil War as relevant) of American introduction to the Negro as an artist seems a tad short-sighted considering writers such as Francis E. W. Harper, Julia Collins, Frederick Douglass, Charles Chesnutt, Booker T. Washington, Pauline Hopkins, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, and others had produced varying forms of well-praised literature more than 10 years prior to publication of *Southern Roads*.

<sup>13</sup> This statement, and all following Baraka quotes from Baraka’s visit to “Black Radicalism and the Archive” on the campus of Columbia University on April 15, 2009.

## Part II: Theory in Practice

### Chapter 2. Machines, Which Aren't Completely Knowable: Amiri Baraka, Langston Hughes, and Personal Transformation as Revolutionary Practice

Everything now has been before and will be again in this new way, in a changed form, in a timeless time.

-- Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*

The artifact, because it assumes one form, is only that particular quality or idea. It is, in this sense, after the fact, and is only important because it remarks on the source.

The academician, the asthete, are like deists whose specific corruption of mysticism is to worship things, thinking that they are God (thought, the process) too. But art is not capable of thought. Just as things are not capable of God ...

- Amiri Baraka, "hunting is not that head on the wall"

Baraka told us

You have a responsibility to reject the future. But you can't do that unless you know the past.

And again.

You'll find those things too ... imitations of yourself that you didn't find that interesting.

And again.

You'll never catch up with yourself.

And again.

... the nationalism is not sufficient.



And again.

... being black is not sufficient.

Accepting these phrases from Amiri Baraka as his own personal truth, this chapter serves to reiterate the ways in which Baraka – in both life and writing – made clear the necessity of valuing African American cognitive practice as an integral piece of black radical practice. It also serves to further illuminate the ways in which using a black radical criticism to assess Baraka's writing, allows a more objective understanding of his legacy and impact – both inside and outside the Black Arts movement. After arguing for the broadening of the scope with which we study Baraka's legacy as an individual within collective movements, I create a system of intertextuality between Langston Hughes and Baraka, expanding my already established notion of black radical criticism. This chapter, makes practice of black radical criticism, pushing against the idea of each artistic statement as concrete and understandable artifact. Through close-reading of Hughes' and Baraka's texts across the time periods with which each are most commonly associated, I argue for a valuing of creative process and cognitive trajectory, further highlighting the developing radicalism of each author.

## When a Good Thing Goes Bad, It's Not the End of The World

I sing and I play the flute for myself.

For no man except me understands my language.

As little as they understand the nightingale

Do the people understand what my song says.

– Peire Cardenal

Immediately following Amiri Baraka's death, mainstream media released more than a few contradictory declarations about him as poet, scholar, and revolutionary. These contradictions were not only present across media headlines, but also within specific articles, themselves. On January 9, 2014, the *New York Times* published a confirmation of Baraka's death with the headline, "Amiri Baraka, Polarizing Poet and Playwright, Dies at 79." In the article, Margalit Fox writes,

Amiri Baraka, a poet and playwright of pulsating rage, whose long illumination of the black experience in America was called incandescent in some quarters and incendiary in others, died on Thursday in Newark. He was 79.

His son, Ras Baraka, a member of the Newark Municipal Council, confirmed his death, at Beth Israel Medical Center. He did not specify a cause but said that Mr. Baraka had been hospitalized since Dec. 21. (Fox 1)

Fox goes on to say,

Mr. Baraka was famous as one of the major forces in the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and '70s ... He was described variously as an indomitable champion of the disenfranchised, particularly in the racially charged political landscape of Newark, where he lived most of his life, or as a gadfly whose finest hour had come and gone by the end of the 1960s.

Fox continues with language oscillating between profound respect and simultaneous disdain while detailing Baraka's "alternating embraces and repudiations," the

“elimination of his post as New Jersey’s poet Laureate” after anti-Semitic allegations, and a host of other labelings of Baraka as “misogynist, homophobic, racist, isolationist and dangerous militant.” Inherent in Fox’s article is an almost adamant refusal to situate Baraka’s legacy in either a positive or negative light. Instead, Fox glosses the surface of Baraka’s career with an understandable, but questionable, iridescence. Getting to (maybe) the most accurate portion of this article, Fox writes,

But [Baraka’s] champions and detractors agreed that at his finest he was a powerful voice on the printed page, a riveting orator in person and an enduring presence on the international literary scene whom — whether one loved or hated him — it was seldom possible to ignore.

I say most accurate, meaning, yes, Baraka was “a powerful voice ... a riveting orator ... an enduring presence ... seldom possible to ignore.” Still, this is an article that suggests Baraka’s finest hour as having “come and gone by the end of the 1960’s;” an article that later quotes Stanley Crouch labeling (in 2002) Baraka’s work as “an incoherent mix of racism, anti-semitism, homophobia, black nationalism, anarchy and ad hominem attacks relying on comic book and horror film characters and images that he has used over and over;” an article that finally decides “There was no firm consensus on Mr. Baraka’s literary merit, and the mercurial nature of his work [guarantees] ... that there can never be.” Reading this article, what becomes as impossible to ignore as Baraka himself, is the uncomfortable and inescapable feeling that literary and social critics assessing Baraka’s work prefer the easy way out; they prefer the path of both resisting and escaping the work of Baraka by continuously renaming it and him and their appearances as racist, or misogynist, or anti-Semitic, or both confusing and confused. It seems they much prefer the previous, as opposed to endeavoring to acknowledge, validate, and understand what Baraka would insist is his “...own changing and diverse motion, of where [he] been and

why”(Leroi xi). It seems this way because, as Toni Morrison has stated so clearly (on multiple occasions), “The function of racism is dysfunction ...” (Crowder 1) and

... distraction. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language, so you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn’t shaped properly, so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says you have no art, so you dredge that up. Somebody says you have no kingdoms, so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary. There will always be one more thing. (Portland)

Fox’s and Morrison’s words, together, suggest that this preferred way of discussing Baraka – this method of presenting Baraka’s work as past tense, repetitive, changing, and as such, confusing; this method of presenting Baraka as a detrimentally dynamic figure in opposition to a neat, linear, easy to digest notion of progress – is inherently racist. In fact, reading much of the criticism of Baraka, one might deduce that scholars have found it easier to look to the discontinuities in his work as signs of failure rather than functions of growth or expansion. Another option might be to approach Baraka’s work with (what, to me, at least, is) a basic understanding that someone committing their entire life to struggling against mass oppression – in particular, the illogical and ever developing and perplexing system of institutionalized racism in America – might feasibly change a statement, or their minds, and as such themselves, at any given moment. However, a critical public has yielded little to no room for acceptance of nuance or growth in Baraka’s personal or professional life. For African American writers, such fluctuations in craft and identity are not easily accepted phenomenon for white literary and social critics, many of whom would prefer to assume black writing, culture, and identity as homogenous, stagnant entities.

Still, it is important to note that other scholars have sought to explain the “... aesthetic, philosophical, and political juxtapositions” within Baraka’s work while simultaneously resisting “a narrative ... that argues ... Baraka’s political commitment reduces the complexity of his aesthetic production” (Glick 109). I consider this reduction and distraction to be a result of certain critics refusing to do something parallel to what Charles Bernstein terms as “close listening” (Bernstein 3-26). According to Bernstein, “Close listenings may contradict ‘readings’ of poems that are based exclusively on the printed text and that ignore the poet’s own performances, the “total” sound of the work, and the relation of sound to semantics.” According to Bernstein,

“close listenings” call for a non-Euclidean (or complex) prosody for the many poems for which traditional prosody does not apply. ... Particularly helpful for “close listening” is Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*, especially his conception of how the cued frame through which a situation (or work) is viewed necessarily poem’s content or form typically involves putting the audiotext as well as the typography – the sound and look – of the poem, into the disattend track. Indeed, the drift of much literary criticism of the two decades has been away from the auditory and performative aspects of the poem, partly because of the prevalent notion that the sound structure of language is relatively arbitrary. Such elements as the visual appearance of the text or the sound of the work in performance may be extralexical but they are not extrasemantic. When textual elements that are conventionally framed out as nonsemantic are acknowledged as significant, the result is a proliferation of possible frames of interpretation. (4)

I am interested in expanding Bernstein’s idea of close listening to better explain this project’s push toward valorizing African American cognitive trajectory. In a method similar to Bernstein’s intentional reorientation of the discussion of theatre, audience and text – a reorientation towards a close listening that includes, not just readings of experimental poetry, but also performances by the authors themselves - I am interested in reorienting the reader to Baraka’s work. Bernstein discusses Baraka’s poetry by posing

the question, “What’s the relation of Baraka’s performance – or of any poem performed by its author – to the original text” (8)? He answers his own question explaining,

One goal I have ... is to overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem – that is, the written document – is primary and that the recitation or performance of a poem by the poet is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the “poem itself.” In the conventional view, recitation has something of the status of interpretation – it provides a possible gloss of the immutable original. ... (8)

Bernstein continues,

I would add the poet’s own performance of the work in a poetry reading, or readings, to the list of variants that together, plurally, constitute and reconstitute the work. This, then, is clearly not to say that all performances of a poem have equal authority. An actor’s rendition, like a type designer’s “original” setting of a classic, will not have the same kind of authority as a poet’s own reading or the first printing of the work. But the performance of the poet, just as the visualization of the poem in its initial printings, forever marks the poem’s entry into the world; and not only its meaning, its existence. (8-9)

In a similar sense, it is my intention to overthrow the common presumption that the text of a poem – that is, the written document – is primary and that the recitation, performance, revision, and theorizing of a poem is secondary and fundamentally inconsequential to the “poem itself.” This then, is clearly not to say that all theories of a poem have equal authority. A professional critic’s theory, like a type designer’s “original” setting of a classic, will not have the same kind of authority as a poet’s own theorization of the work. The intention and theory of the poet, just as the visualization of the poem in its initial printings, forever marks the poem’s entry into the world; and not only its meaning, a great deal of its existence. It is also my intention to overthrow the presumption that critical reception of a canon is primary and authorial discussion and theorization inconsequential to the canon itself. Indeed, there exists a place for all.

### **It's Just The End of A World**

And she's the reason it happened, but she's overreacting

And it's all because she don't want things to change

-- Drake, "Doing It Wrong," (featuring Stevie Wonder)

In an effort to more closely listen, to engage with Baraka in a manner that allows someone to walk away from a posthumous discussion of his work with more to say than, "I guess Baraka is good or bad based on how you look at him," I immediately published a piece titled, "Because Someday Someone Should Ask, 'Do You Remember Where You Were When Amiri Baraka Died?'" In it, I argue that most of our ability to process and comprehend new information depends much more on where we are in our own personal and intellectual development—how prepared we are to recognize and accept new information, as opposed to how said information is presented to us. I argue and believe the same of our scholarly ability to assess Baraka<sup>1</sup>. I go on to explain that as a "... black feminist woman that often has to legitimize or rearticulate my own personal truths for someone else's convenience, I find myself struggling to speak for someone who has already spoken his truth so clearly." I continue,

As someone who's made changes in my own naming, as a woman who will later have to deal with the emotional, psychical, and political implications of taking or not taking the surname of my partner, and as an academic who studies the differences between the ways in which we name ourselves and the ways that we are named by others, I understand how labels often eclipse the work we've done to don them.

Finally, I remind readers that Baraka has spoken to this long before I thought to (as I've already established in chapter one) saying,

My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this longish confrontation.

Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain exactly why I was saying both how and for what. (Qtd. in Kholi 1)

As any eager graduate student might, upon publishing this article, I immediately reached out to my dissertation committee members to show them that all of my engagement with Baraka was finally turning into something, feeling useful even.

On January 17, 2014 at 1 PM, I emailed Cheryl Wall, Evie Shockley, and Carter Mathes (Shockley 1). The email read, “<http://thefeministwire.com/2014/01/amiri-baraka-died/> -- i wrote this the day of his passing, they made edits because they published it today. Just sharing.” Although they all responded in their own encouraging ways, Shockley’s response was one that encapsulated not only all of my own personal feelings about Baraka’s work, but also an accurate summation of, what one might assume to be Baraka’s own feelings about his legacy. She wrote,

Thanks for this. I still haven't found my way to words worth writing down, though I hope to at some point. Reading yours helps.

Peace,  
Evie

To this, I replied,

True Evie.  
Honestly, when I found out, I just kind of bawled for awhile. The words came as more of an angry response from so many articles talking about him in ways that just ... I guess ... felt wrong.

with <3,  
carrie.

Evie replied,

They were wrong.  
We don't need to paint him as a saint to confirm that.

ees



I finished,

This. Makes so much sense.

with <3,  
carrie.

And it did. It made sense because Baraka had spent most of his career resisting the unnecessary distractions of racism in order to “present, perhaps arbitrarily, varied paradigms of this essentially Afro-American art” (qtd. in *Angles* 30). It made sense because Shockley’s acknowledgement of the fact that it is no one’s job to prove to anyone – particularly those who refuse to understand Baraka – Baraka’s works as a poet, young or old, makes sense.

It is easy to feign confusion at Baraka’s changing politics; however, in 1978, he clarified the bulk of that saying that he was, “... from the first poem ... concerned with national oppression – what it did to me mentally, spiritually, what it turned people into, what one’s reaction to national oppression was ...” (Benston 303). He went on to say, “Being black has certainly remained a constant, but my ability to explain the sources and the origins of national oppression has deepened” (303-304). Even when criticizing his own work for too often “celebrating the subjective and idealistic” (305), Baraka has been clear that there has been “... a line of development ... from lower to a higher stage of awareness ... certain things ... that echo early concerns, and certain things that have been transformed altogether, that have changed into their opposites” (303). In 2003, when shedding light on his personal transformation, he shared with Kalamu Ya Salaam,

Even as a little boy I always felt that I ain’t ya’ll, ‘cause if I was ya’ll, I wouldn’t be going through these changes I’m going through. I wouldn’t have to be this black outsider. If I was in the shit with ya’ll I wouldn’t have to be me, so since I am me, fuck ya’ll in terms of that. I will

determine what I do. If I want to write plays, poetry, essays, and anything else, I'm going to do that. My view was that I'm not restricted by ya'll because I'm not with ya'll. Ya'll have told us that: We ain't ya'll; therefore why should we be restricted by ya'll? I had that sense real young. (Salaam 215)

Certainly, Baraka could have stated this in a more palatable manner for some. He could have clarified using words less open to accusations of antagonism. However, this would not have made his statement any more or less true. If one chooses to disengage with Baraka at this point, because of their own reception to his truth, they also miss his larger, more intricate explanation of his position as an ever-developing writer seeking to be published in a world controlled by white thought.

**Salaam:** The period when academics love to lionize Leroi Jones was a period in which text, or paper, had a prominence that it doesn't have in your life at the moment.

**Baraka:** That's true. Plus we're performing all the time with music, so, yeah, that does it.

**Salaam:** So then people who talk about the diminished quality of your work are speaking strictly from a textual perspective. But, first of all, you're not fixated on the work for the page, and secondly there's a whole other aesthetic: The work on the page could never be the fullness of what you want to do now in terms of what you hear with music and what you hear in your interaction with a live audience.

**Baraka:** Yeah, that's true, but first of all it's ideological. The people don't like the work because it's talking about shit they don't want me to talk about. That's before anything else. Secondly, what you're saying is true. The kind of trends are working in the arts today are so counter to truth and beauty. ... You know, academics are reactionary. I'm saying that fundamentally it's ideological. These people do not like your attention to the things you want to write about. Secondly, that might be true about text, but that's secondary. ... At the root you're dealing with a whole backward, reactionary school of thought. The ordering of American literature, of Western literature, is basically the most savagely racist kind of thing you can imagine. (215-216)

This, too, Baraka could have stated differently. Like Rainer Maria Rilke, another poet believing in the necessity of self-validation and subjective fulfillment, Baraka could have validated his own unpopular changes saying of criticism,

such things are either partisan opinions, which have become petrified and meaningless, hardened and empty of life, or else they are just clever word-games in which one view wins today, and tomorrow the opposite view. Works of art are of an infinite solitude, and no means of approach is so useless as criticism ... Always trust yourself and your own feeling as opposed to augmentations, discussions, or introductions of that sort ...” (Rilke 22-23)

Baraka, could have stated this – perhaps, if he had been born and raised a Bohemian-Austrian turned novelist and poet; perhaps if he had been able to spend his time studying literature, art history, and philosophy in Prague and Munich, only eventually to fall deeply in love with Lou Andreas-Salomé, thereby learning the inner most teachings of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis – if he lived Rilke’s life. However, and not unfortunately, Baraka lived the life of an American black boy who, (in addition to the familial difficulties of home some might argue Rilke contended with, also) inherited a larger national conflict of home, or the lack there of in America. The point here is not to over-argue some point that one writer’s life is different from – certainly not more or less difficult than – another’s but, rather, to emphasize that in comparison to the criticism of texts written by white-American or white-European or any version of non-black/brown authors (whose race is assumedly without thought omitted from discussion or study, thereby allowing their work to be classified as involving, for instance, “deeply existential themes ... [positioning] them as ... transitional figure[s] between the traditional and the modernist writers” (“Rainer”<sup>2</sup>) as opposed to having their “... more popular work ... written in the Negro dialect ... associated with the antebellum South ... [to be later]

noted as one of the first African Americans to cross the ‘color line’ by writing a work only about white society” and eventually labeled “a true singer of the people — white or black” (Wagner 105)), as critics, we must interrogate the criticism of African American authors whose texts cannot escape the burden of, not race, but white racist assumptions of black literature, people, and the social political movements with which they have been associated.

Despite Shockley’s advice, still I find myself engaged in the task of defending Baraka, of providing evidence to some unnamed audience. The redeeming quality of this task being, my revisiting Baraka not to prove to anyone his magnitude as a writer, but rather to argue that we as scholars are just now in the beginning stages of our ability to understand his impact, and likewise, the impact of other African American writers who we have only studied based on limited provisions of literary criticism inextricably linked to a specific racialized historical moment. In acknowledging this, I am able to use Baraka’s magnitude and forward thinking as but one example of the possibilities a black radical criticism lends to the study of literature. I am also able to explore the possibilities of expanding Baraka’s impact and legacy backward and forward, restoring a connection between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, the Black Arts Movement and Black Feminism.

### **And You Seen It Too, You Just Can't Call It's Name<sup>3</sup>**

And if what is near you is far away, then your vastness is already among the stars, and is very great; be happy about your growth, in which of course, you can't take anyone with you, and be gentle with those who stay behind; be confident and calm in front of them and don't torment them with your doubts and don't frighten them with your faith or joy, which they wouldn't be able to comprehend.

-- Rainer Maria Rilke

As previously stated, associating Baraka's personal and professional fluctuations with some sort of decline in talent, ability, or understanding is a misunderstanding too easily perpetuated both within and outside of the academy. A black radical approach suggests that in order to develop a more pronounced vision of Baraka's canon and individual trajectory as an individual site of knowledge in relation to social, political, economic, and artistic reform (and for the sake of this chapter, a vision free from the weight of potentially racist or unnecessarily flat criticism), it is necessary to detangle Baraka's work (the makings and contributions) from Baraka's legacy (the teachings, and tellings, and understandings) as it has been constructed (both inside and outside of the academy) within a linear tradition. Understanding this, Shockley's previous comments begin to make even more sense, particularly because Baraka – in his work, in his continuous self-reflection, has already said it himself. In *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*, Baraka writes,

So Digging means to present, perhaps arbitrarily, varied paradigms of this essentially Afro-American art. The common predicate, myself, the Digger. One who gets down with the down, always looking above to see what is

going out, and so check Digitaria, as the Dogon say, necessary if you are to dig the farthest star, Serious<sup>4</sup>.

Here, Baraka represents the act of digging as more than the colloquial connotation of liking or finding inspiration in a thing. Digging also means to present (if “arbitrarily,” then, assumedly, however Baraka chooses and without much outside concern) the many styles of African American art (particularly writing in Baraka’s case). Baraka presents himself as both the subject (as in “the digger,” the one doing) and the common predicate (as in the action, the thing being done, as in “The digger dug the well”). What we see here is Baraka detailing, again, a practice consisting of simultaneous critical self-reflection. Baraka is the “One who gets down, with the down, always looking above” aware of what is being presented (which is not necessarily him or his work). As the worker and the work, he is relationship; a collapsing of a dichotomy not easily understood. Still, according to Baraka’s description here, it is possible to understand him. If one wants to do so, he has only to look to “Serious” or Sirius, the brightest star. More clearly, one would not necessarily look to Baraka’s person for understanding, but rather, to what is near him. One would look to see what shines brighter, what multiplies as a result of his working - look to his impact.

Not one to romanticize Baraka’s literary history as one that is wholly original and exclusive to him, I would be remiss to continue on without clarifying that Baraka is not the only black intellectual whose legacy has been crafted in a manner that minimizes his or her literary trajectory, highlighting just those works illuminating the movement critics would have him or her represent. For instance, most scholars are familiar with Langston Hughes as one of the seminal figures of Harlem Renaissance poetry. In *American Negro Poetry*, Arna Bontemps, described Hughes’ works as being “marked by an ease of

expression and a naturalness of feeling ... almost as if they had never been composed at all” (Bontemps xvii). Bontemp continues saying, “Hughes’ art can be likened to that of Jelly Roll Morton<sup>5</sup> and other creators of Jazz. His sources are street music. His language is Harlamese. In his way, he too is an American original.” Similarly to Baraka, Hughes was noted as “differing from his predecessors among black poets ... in that he addressed his poetry to the people, specifically black people” (Gibson 59). Unfortunately, much of the message of Langston Hughes’ “poetry to the people” is obscured, as educational institutions often dismiss the bulk of Hughes’ work created in the 1930’s<sup>6</sup>, a pivotal transition point in Hughes’ career.

Through discussion of the Harlem Renaissance, students receive poetry from Hughes featuring the wise lament of substantiated black personhood, or often, the commitment to (if not struggle, then at least) survival as black (often urban dwelling) people in the United States. For instance, in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” originally published in the *Crisis* in 1921, Hughes presents a speaker reminiscing on a distant history of black peoples. He creates a parallel between the existence of nature and man (assumedly black man) saying, “I’ve known rivers: / I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins” (Selected 4). Although these rivers may be older than humans, the parallel is drawn when the speaker declares, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers,” then draws from romanticized themes of ancient African history (a sort of regenerative push toward black origin, a move quite familiar to later Hughes work as well as other Harlem Renaissance texts) revealing similarities between the depths of the history of the land and black people.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
 went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

Here, the speaker becomes an everyblackman, complicating the dichotomy of slavery and freedom. He traces his history from bathing freely in the Euphrates to building his own home near the Congo (which lulled him peacefully to sleep) to looking upon the Nile while viewing a product of an even earlier part of his history, ancient Egyptian pyramids. The speaker has also been to America; the reference, immediately signaling a stark contrast to the freedom experienced in his presentation of ancient Africa.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln  
 went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy  
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

This movement from the freedom of Africa (which cannot be mentioned without the lingering memory of slavery and the strategic siphoning of resources through colonization) to the Mississippi, Abraham Lincoln, and New Orleans - a city excluded from Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation issued in 1863, as it was Union-occupied territory<sup>7</sup> - complicates any sort of clear separation of say, African colonization from armed rule in the US, or emancipation in theory versus freedom in practice. The references highlight further, a history of blackness as integral to the foundations and economies of both Africa (at least Egypt) and America. Furthermore, the reader is left sitting with the speaker's own uneasiness as the poem ends with another firm affirmation of the parallel continuity between nature and the black man,

I've known rivers:  
 Ancient dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.



The speaker, casually aligning the Euphrates, Nile, and Mississippi with names and concepts that draw thousands of years of history into the poem, reminds the reader of something similar to the major argument of this project: one can never quite know – certainly not in passing or in meeting at an arbitrarily marked historical moment - the depths of what one is encountering without a more full vision of its history. In delivering this reminder, the speaker further aligns himself with these rivers, dusky, not just with mud, but the dark history of black bodies past and present. This way of alluding to black suffering without making a firm indictment of white power is common to other well-known Harlem Renaissance poems by Hughes.

In “Mother to Son” (1922) (Poetry 14), the speaker addresses her son saying,

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.

But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on ...

Hughes' use of dialect suggests that a black mother is speaking to her black son. She informs him of the difficulties of her life using a tack and splinter-filled, worn staircase as metaphor for personal tribulations. Despite these difficulties – the maneuvering of “landin's” and “corners ... in the dark” – she reminds her son that she has kept going - “I've still climbin” – and that one day he will have to find the willpower to do so as well. In “Harlem”<sup>8</sup> (Ferguson 915), an eleven-line poem written in 1951 (some thirty years after the traditional chronology of the Harlem Renaissance), the speaker ponders, “What happens to a dream deferred?” After running through several possibilities – the speaker

questions whether said dream might “dry up like a raisin in the sun,” “fester like a sore,” “run,” rot, “crust,” or “sugar” – eventually settling on the final possibility, “Or does it explode?” Similar to “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the poem’s proper noun reference quickly bring years of history into a rather short query. The poem’s title, “Harlem,” as the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance, tows with it the weight and expectation of an “awakening that brought novelists, painters, sculptors, dancers, dramatists, and scholars of many kinds to the notice of a nation that had nearly forgotten about the gifts of the Negro people” (Bontemps xv). In all three poems – “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Mother to Son,” and “Harlem” – the speakers reveal small glimpses of black, and more specifically, black American history. However, aside from the direct mention of Abraham Lincoln, there is no direct naming or criticism of why these speakers have souls as deep as dusky rivers, or lives comparable to ragged staircases, or festering or exploding dreams. A student completely unfamiliar with the history of the United States, taught only these famous poems by Langston Hughes, walks away from this lesson with what understanding? Does he or she believe Hughes to be a dialect poet? Do they, perhaps (believing Hughes to be a perpetuated standard of Harlem Renaissance writing), then fault Hughes and similar writers for “the ‘Harlem Renaissance’[s] ... failure to produce vital, original, effective, or ‘modern’ art in the manner, presumably, of ... Anglo-American ... creative endeavors” (Baker xiii)? Again, similarly to Baraka’s relationship to the BAM, less important, here, is the “delusory set of evaluative criteria<sup>9</sup>” (xv) used to name, place, and keep Langston Hughes at the center of the Harlem Renaissance. Much more important and generative is the potential black radicalism revealed when considering a more full scope of his canon.

Hughes' black radical legacy is further illuminated when inclusive of his work expanding upon and deviating from those poems inclusive of traditional Harlem Renaissance themes and style. In 1932, Langston Hughes wrote *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play in Verse*.<sup>10</sup> The book was published by The Golden Stair Press of New York. In it, was a poem entitled, "Scottsboro."

The poem reads:

8 BLACK BOYS IN A SOUTHERN JAIL.  
WORLD, TURN PALE!

8 black boys and one white lie.  
Is it much to die?

Is it much to die when immortal feet  
March with you down Time's street,  
When beyond steel bars sound the deathless drums  
Like a mighty heart beat as They come?

Who comes?  
Christ,  
Who fought alone.  
John Brown.  
That mad mob  
That tore the Bastille down  
Stone by stone.  
Moses.  
Jeanne d' Arc.  
Dessalines.  
Nat Turner.  
Fighters for the free.  
Lenin with the flag blood red.  
(Not dead! Not dead!  
None of those is dead.)  
Gandhi.  
Sandino.  
Evangelista, too,  
To walk with you—

8 BLACK BOYS IN A SOUTHERN JAIL.  
WORLD, TURN PALE!

Also published in *Scottsboro Limited* was a poem entitled, “Christ in Alabama.” This poem reads,

Christ is a nigger,  
Beaten and black:  
Oh, bare your back!

Mary is His mother:  
Mammy of the South,  
Silence your mouth.

God is his father:  
White Master above  
Grant Him your love.

Most holy bastard  
Of the bleeding mouth,  
Nigger Christ  
On the cross  
Of the South. (Panther 37)

Even without a comprehensive close-reading of this poem, it is clear that, similar to Hughes’ previously discussed poetry, he is still working with proper nouns, using the act of naming to call multiple histories into each particular poem. However, the real difference in “Scottsboro” (although, yes, the poem is different in that Hughes uses slightly more concrete language in naming the cause for “8 BLACK BOYS IN A SOUTHERN JAIL;” the cause being “one white lie,”) is that Hughes allows his speaker to conjure up multiple histories – some happening concurrently, others consecutively – through a multicultural, gender variant (Joan of Arc being the one woman named) roll call of individuals who had not thought it too “much to die” in fights against oppressions such as slavery, monarchy, military regime, patriarchy, and more. This difference is heightened in “Christ in Alabama,” when – as opposed to an immortal guardian as in “Scottsboro” – Christ is explicitly named to create a metaphor between his own

persecution and that of black people in the United States. “Christ is a Nigger. / ... Nigger Christ / On the Cross / of the South.” Although it is important to note *Scottsboro Limited* as an important text explicitly naming the oppression and injustice towards blacks in America, it is even more important to note that it is not the only publication in which Hughes’ printed poetry provides black people with a sense of agency, justice, or retribution.

*The Panther and the Lash*, Hughes’ last collection of poems published posthumously, contains one hundred and one pages of witty, politically charged, revolutionary poetry, critiquing oppression in the United States (particularly in the South) while expressing black agency and resistance. It would be all too perfect to assume that Hughes, toward the end of his life, completely changed his writing style and theme, explaining the subversive nature of the poems included in *Panther* as opposed to his more celebrated Harlem Renaissance poems. This would create a linear, chronological sense of logic explaining why, as the seminal figure of the Harlem Renaissance, the academy tends to focus on teaching Hughes’ jazz poetry, particularly Hughes’ poetry using Negro dialect to express a gaze toward the Negro working class – people Hughes himself described in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” as “the low-down folks, the so-called common element ... the majority” (45). However, a linear, chronological change in style and theme is not what Hughes’ canon produced. It is easy to see that from the original three Hughes poems discussed here, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921), “Mother to Son” (1922), and “Harlem” (1951), written some thirty years after “Negro” and “Mother” and almost 20 years after *Scottsboro Limited*. However, *Panther* further confirms this a-chronological shifting (based on Hughes’ individual life experience and

intellectual trajectory as an artist) by reprinting 26 poems from Hughes' previous collections published in 1932, 1947, 1949, 1951, 1958, and 1961, as well as eighteen poems previously included in publications such as *American Dialog*, *Black Orpheus*, *Crisis*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Negro Digest*, and *The Nation* from 1934 to 1966. These few facts alone, work to extend Hughes' legacy backward into late Reconstruction's hope of the Negro preparing "himself for social recognition and equality; [using] literature to open the way for him to get it" (Chesnutt 33), through and past the New Negro Movement's goals of the "growing recognition of Negro artists" (Du Bois 40) and "the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty, of the preservation of beauty, of the realization of beauty" (41), far into Civil Rights Movement literature's goals of critically engaging with social and political inequities affecting black citizens in America and abroad.

Pushing further at Hughes' last collection, it becomes evident that *Panther* renames Hughes' 1951 "Harlem" as "Dream Deferred." The collection also renames "Puzzled," from Hughes' 1949 *One-Way Ticket*, as "Harlem," presenting a much more clear vision of black experience inside a city and nation that has long forgotten its promise to black citizens. Hughes' 1967 "Harlem," articulates the buried hopes and dreams of the city and its namesake renaissance, answering clearly its previous interrogation of deferred dreams. The poem reads:

Here on the edge of hell  
 Stands Harlem—  
 Remembering the old lies,  
 The old kicks in the back,  
 The old "be patient"  
 They told us before.  
 Sure, we remember.  
 Now when the man at the corner store

Says sugar's gone up another two cents,  
 And bread one,  
 And there's a new tax on cigarettes—  
 We remember the job we never had,  
 Never could get,  
 And can't have now  
 Because we're colored.

So we stand here  
 On the edge of hell  
 In Harlem  
 And look out on the world  
 And wonder  
 What we're gonna do  
 In the face of what  
 We remember. (4)

This version of Harlem reveals a rather specific set of disappointments, not necessarily caused solely by dreams passively deferred as in the 1951 version, but a direct result of “old lies” leading to economic inequalities, specifically equal access to food and jobs. The poem also clearly states the only reason for this inequity as being “Because we’re colored.” In doing this -- although specifically referencing the hopes and dreams of an urban space blacks moved to seeking a promised freedom -- Hughes’ “Harlem” of 1967 becomes an almost universal symbol of every space in America where black people face racial subjugation and oppression. “Harlem” in 1967, could have easily been titled “Florida,” or “Ferguson” in 2014.

*Panther* also includes a poem entitled, “Militant.”

Let all who will  
 Eat quietly the bread of shame.  
 I cannot,  
 Without complaining loud and long,  
 Tasting its bitterness in my throat,  
 And feeling to my very soul  
 It's wrong.  
 For honest work  
 You proffer me poor pay,

For honest dreams  
 Your spit is in my face,  
 And so my fist is clenched  
 Today—  
 To strike your face.

Important here, is not whether one knows that the poem's speaker is describing the state of being militant or the mindset of Hughes as a militant, but rather that in this 1967 poem, the necessary course of action after having endured poverty and unjust treatment (assumedly for all people because Hughes does not necessarily label race here, but rather proletariat values), is violent resistance. Does this poem, like others discussed in this section expand our vision of Hughes as a Harlem Renaissance writer? Yes. Does this 1957 poem completely separate itself from the Harlem Renaissance's desires to demonstrate "intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art" (Johnson 9), and "contribute to larger endeavors to change perceptions of African Americans" (Carroll 58)? Does it escape "the promise and warrant of a new leadership" extending from the shifting of a "Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook" as "the life of the Negro community" in a "new dynamic phase" shifted from "countryside to city" (Locke 2)? Not necessarily. Sitting with those answers, does this vision of Hughes' work, this extension of Hughes as a changing, ever-expanding intellectual, provide us with an idea of what one might expect to emerge from writers (and not solely black American writers) witnessing and experiencing hundreds of years of oppression within the United States while living under the false promise of liberty, justice, and freedom for all? Yes is a likely answer. If not that, then this more radical understanding of Hughes' work and legacy, at least allows literary scholars to extend Hughes legacy to meet that of Civil Rights and the BAM, and give us reason to explore



other writers that have been canonized in the same way, questioning the legacy construction of individual black writers as well as the movements to which they are (and have previously been) attached.

For instance, in returning to *Angles of Ascent*, we find the section of part one marked “1960’s and Beyond” separated by two distinctions: THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT and OUTSIDE THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT (Ascent ix – xiii). In order of placement within the text, THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT begins with Amiri Baraka, featuring “Black Art,” “In Memory of Radio,” “An Agony. As Now.,” “A Poem for Black Hearts,” and “AM/TRAK.” It then moves to Mari Evans’ “I am a Black Woman,” Nikki Giovanni’s “Nikki-Rosa” and “Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why),” Bobb Hamilton’s “Poem to a Nigger Cop.” It then places David Henderson, Calvin C. Hernton, Haki Madhubuti, Larry Neal, Carolyn Rodgers, Sonia Sanchez, A.B. Spellman, and finally ends with Edward S. Spriggs. The section, OUTSIDE THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT begins with Gerald Barrax, then moves to Lucille Clifton, Jayne Cortez, Michael S. Harper, June Jordan, Bob Kaufman, Etheridge Knight, Audre Lorde, Clarence Major, Colleen J. McElroy, Ishmael Reed, Ed Roberson, Ntozake Shange, Primus St. John, Lorenzo Thomas, Alice Walker, Sherley Anne Williams, and Al Young. Making queries of this categorization, one might ask why Lucille Clifton, who published 3 full collections of poetry between 1969 and 1974, is considered as being outside the Black Arts Movement when she has stated, “The Black Aesthetic. I am a black person; everything I write is a black thing” (“An Interview” 66) - when she has stated, “the Black Arts Movement ... allowed there to be a gate through which I could come” (67)? One might also wonder why Sonia Sanchez, whose last published work was

in 2010, is not mentioned in the anthology after THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT?

My project, without attempting to provide specific answers to these questions, is invested in illuminating the necessity of these questions when moving forward. It is invested in upturning and investigating the personal biases deeply embedded within our critical work.

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## Chapter 2 Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>. I make this argument based on my own experience studying literature as an undergraduate at a private, historically black university and a public, predominately white university. Rarely have I found myself being asked to engage with white writers based on the difficulty of their texts or the unexpected or unacceptable changes within their personal lives. When studying “classic” American literature, I’ve never been presented with facts of these writers’ personal lives as reasons for why we might need to question their aesthetics or the legacy their literature has left behind. No one has ever asked me to consider whether Kurt Vonnegut’s mother’s suicide or his working in public relations for General Electric, or his frequent writing of short stories, takes away from the efficacy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I’m not familiar with many looking to the discontinuity between Herman Melville’s Revolutionary War “hero” grandfathers and his own early life changes as reasons for why his writing might not be considered to have a “transforming power comparable to Shakespeare’s” (Williams 231). Although one can hardly teach Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* without acknowledging the blatant racism presented within the texts, I’ve never personally had these instances explained as more than an acknowledgement of the times, often discussing the use of the word “nigger” as a linguistic function of changing temporality and social landscape.

<sup>2</sup>. I cite Wikipedia here because, though not usually accepted as an adequate source for academic writing, because it is a source generated through the use of communal public knowledge, it is useful to my argument in so far as it demonstrates public opinion of authors, assumedly based on what they have learned from these authors as students or professional academic researchers.

<sup>3</sup>. The Roots, “The Town” featuring Amiri Baraka

<sup>4</sup>. The Dogon are an ethnic group living in the central plateau region of the country of Mali, in Western Africa, south of the Niger bend, near the city of Bandiagara, in the Mopti region. They are reported to possess advanced astronomical knowledge, in that their star system “with no instruments at their disposal [, tracked] the movements and certain characteristics of virtually invisible stars,” revealing precise knowledge of cosmological facts only known by the development of modern astronomy. The Dogon believe that the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, has two companion stars: pō tolo (the Digitaria star), and ɛmmę ya tolo, (the female Sorghum star). Sirius, in the Dogon system, formed one of the foci for the orbit of a tiny star, the companionate Digitaria star. *When Digitaria is closest to Sirius, that star brightens: when*

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*it is farthest from Sirius, it gives off a twinkling effect that suggests several stars to the observer.*

<sup>5</sup>. Ferdinand Joseph LaMothe was born on October 20, 1890 in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was known professionally as Jelly Roll Morton. Famous for hits such as, “King Porter Stomp,” “Wolverine Blues,” and “Black Bottom Stomp,” Morton was praised as an American ragtime and early jazz pianist, composer, and band leader until the 1930’s when “... Morton drifted into obscurity. He settled in Washington, DC, where he managed a jazz club and also played intermittently. In 1938, the folklorist Alan Lomax, later Morton’s biographer, recorded him in an extensive series of interviews held at the Library of Congress (issued on disc in 1948 and reissued in 1957)” (“NPR” 1).

<sup>6</sup>. See appendix.

<sup>7</sup>. New Orleans was the largest city in the South during the American Civil War. At the “outbreak” (Kendall 241), the “sugar crop amounted to 458,000 hogsheads, and there were twice that number of barrels of molasses; the sale of which brought into the State \$25,000,000 to be divided among 1,300 planters. The cotton crop aggregated 600,000 bales, valued at \$30,000,000. These, with rice, represented the exportable products of the State; most of them were handled through New Orleans. The fraction of its business represented by the imports, exports, and domestic receipts were valued at a total of \$324,000,000.<sup>16</sup> The price of real estate rose to unprecedented figures as a result of the great prosperity of the city. In 1861 there were eleven banks, with an aggregate capital of \$20,251,000; only four of them survived the next ten years.” In 1840, New Orleans held the nation’s largest slave-market. During the antebellum years, over 600,000 slaves were taken into the slave trade, generating an ancillary economy valued at 13.5 percent of the price per person, bringing in tens of billions of dollars worth of revenue (Johnson 2-6). The commercial importance of New Orleans to the United States marked it as a target for occupation by the Union Army. The city was captured by Civil War Captain, David G. Farragut, on April 28, 1862, and remained under the control of the federal troops through the end of Reconstruction in 1877 (“Fall” 1). Officially, New Orleans’ constitution ended slavery in 1864. Still, the repeated history turned mythology confirms that although slaves were emancipated in 1863, slaves in Galveston Texas did not learn of their freedom until Juneteenth, June 19, 1865. I have not found any information confirming the exact day Louisiana slaves learned they were free or were released from slave labor.

<sup>8</sup>. Later published under the title “Dream Deferred” in *The Panther & The Lash* (1967).

<sup>9</sup>. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker ponders “who, precisely, had consigned the Harlem Renaissance to the domain of “failure” and how we, as Afro-American scholars ... could tolerate this consignment” (xv). He describes “some delusory set of evaluative criteria” believing “the principal delusion [to] be the assumption that there is no *distinctive* set of ... standards and criteria to invoke where African American history and culture are concerned.” He goes on to suggest that people acting under this assumption “who might render the judgment of failure would begin with

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notions of *objects* to be gained, *projects* to be accomplished, and *processes* to be mastered that stand in direct opposition to” Afro-American history. Baker explains this further saying, “Melding personal and cultural-expressive concerns, I would suggest that judgments on Afro-American ‘modernity’ and the ‘Harlem Renaissance’ that begin with notions of British, Anglo-American, and Irish ‘modernism’ as ‘successful’ objects, projects, and processes to be emulated by Afro-Americans are misguided. It seems to me that Africans and Afro-Americans—through conscious and unconscious designs of various Western ‘modernisms’—have little in common with Joycean and Eliotic projects. Further it seems to me that the very *histories* that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism, especially the *discursive* history of such modernism” (xv – xvi).

<sup>10</sup>. Hughes wrote this text as a response to the famous “Scottsboro Boys” trial judging “an alleged gang rape of two white girls by nine black teenagers on the Southern Railroad freight run from Chattanooga to Memphis on March 25, 1931” (Linder 1). According to Douglas O. Linder, No crime in American history-- let alone a crime that never occurred-- produced as many trials, convictions, reversals, and retrials as did an alleged gang rape of two white girls by nine black teenagers on a Southern Railroad freight run on March 25, 1931. Over the course of the two decades that followed, the struggle for justice of the "Scottsboro Boys," as the black teens were called, made celebrities out of anonymities, launched and ended careers, wasted lives, produced heroes, opened southern juries to blacks, exacerbated sectional strife, and divided America's political left.”

### **Chapter 3: From Black Arts to Black Feminism: Memory, Chaos and Self-Construction in Baraka's *The Slave* and Bambara's *The Salt Eaters***

If you're going to hold someone down you're going to have to hold on by the other end of the chain. You are confined by your own repression.

- Toni Morrison

#### **We Seek Nothing But Ourselves**

The task of the literary critic, as we have previously discussed, is to both survey and purvey. Generally speaking, critics are to carefully examine, record, and appraise created literature, while simultaneously creating the culture of the academy with their findings. This is easily understandable considering that the act of reading secondary texts is actually the bulk of any critic's professional career. As academics we are taught to read a work, then read what everyone else has said about the work (to include what everyone said about what people had to say about the work, as well as any outside paradigms or schools of thought within which we might be able to fit the initial primary texts). In most cases, there are those who write the texts, and then there are the critics - those who write texts about the texts, determining their place in history. That being made clear, I am reminded of something I learned before ever entering a Ph.D. program, something I hope I never forget. Valerie Sweeney Prince, my undergraduate advisor, taught a classroom full of Hampton University senior thesis students (all African American) that when bringing critical thought to primary texts, "It's not that any of us [scholars] do different work. It's that we all do the same work differently. You can write a paper. I can write a paper. We both bring to it our individual biases." What did Prince

mean by this? The moment any of us decide to write - the moment we decide to form an argument - we have decided to show prejudice in favor of or against one thing compared with another, sometimes in a way considered to be unfair.

As literary critics, it would be ideal to suggest that we simply look to texts in order to reveal, objectively, what we have found within them. However, a more accurate understanding of literary criticism is that people, individuals, each with their personal biases, have, for years, done the same work – studying texts to reveal their meaning – differently. All critics bring our lives to our work (whether we admit it or not) – to include what and how we ourselves have been taught. We then, in our texts or classrooms, teach what we know and, hopefully, what we further endeavor to learn. All of us, in doing so, work within and outside of an American literary tradition defining what and who should be read, written about, and taught. We also decide for what reasons these texts should be taught. Understanding these ideas to be large generalizations of the profession, one still cannot help but to consider just how much personal bias enters our separate works of surveying and purveying. I cannot help but ponder what Ashraf Rushdy details when discussing the difference between Freud, Wordsworth, and recollection (“Rememory” 300). “Somewhere between Wordsworth and Freud, between extremes of the relationship of forgetting to memory” (300), Rushdy writes, “lies another understanding of how adult recollection faithfully reflects or neurotically constructs childhood activity.” Recapitulating both thinkers’ belief that childhood experience determines adult life, Rushdy explains, “For both thinkers, what made childhood consequential for adulthood was that it existed only as an anamnesis, only as a ‘recollection.’” He continues saying, “The difference between the two thinkers lies in

what recollection means, whether a genuine act of self-presencing (however possible), or a neurotic act of displacement and reconstruction.” Ignoring, for a moment, the fact that any segment of American academic critics writing between 1755 and the present could have for any number of reasons had drastically differing childhoods, I would like to focus on what that segment would have had in common. Both their childhoods and adult lives, whether they chose to be conscious of it or not, has been plagued by both national and international discussions of humanity and personhood, particularly in regard to black peoples. At any point in their career, whether choosing to work with African American authors and texts or not, they have been reading, writing, learning, and teaching within social, political, judicial, educational, and economic systems plagued by racial prejudice; systems plagued by the constant writing and rewriting of a narrative naming (both overtly and covertly) white America and its practices as right and human and black and brown peoples as all things other, namely wrong and subhuman. At any point in their lives, this pool of literary critics has had to consider, at least once, whether they were better than or equal to another human being, not just because of merit or values (those things, too, questionable), but simply because of the color of their skin. This basic prevailing anxiety - that white human beings are in some manner better than human beings of color (particularly black human beings) has touched every sector of life, including American literature and literary criticism. As such, one can easily question whether acts of literary criticism (whether being completed by blacks or whites) are themselves “... genuine acts of self-presencing (however possible), or a neurotic act of displacement and reconstruction.” More plainly, one easily questions whether we are at all times making objective observations of text, theme, tone, characters, etcetera, or whether we are –

pending a constant attention to and awareness of race and how it frames us in our immediate societies – engaged in perpetually neurotic acts of constructing and deconstructing ourselves and others in both conscious and subconscious negotiations of power. One might begin a full inquiry into this question beginning with Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” and work forward. However, it is not necessarily each point of racism documented in literature that this chapter is concerned with but, rather, the lingering effects of institutionalized racism and its impact on the African American literary tradition.

Of course, I am not the first person to make query of how racism impacts the canonization of black authors, nor am I the first person to make these queries in relation to Baraka’s canon. In “Anonymous in America,” a somewhat prophetic piece written by Sherley Anne Williams in 1978, Williams facetiously “welcomes Amiri Baraka, aka LeRoi Jones back into the Euro-American avant-garde fold” (435). She does this arguing that “Fifty years from now when the negroes and others take ‘English,’” they’ll read “Leroi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka) was at the cutting edge of mid-twentieth century American literature.” Just thirteen years shy of Williams’ prophecy, it is difficult to believe that even that will be said of Baraka in future literary studies (if, in fact, his work is still being read in English classes outside of graduate studies in thirteen years). I say this, not necessarily believing as Williams did that “the process of cultural cannibalism” will force black authors and “Black Arts and Black Consciousness and Black Liberation” to be “explained away in a footnote like Harlem (a Negro area in New York) in the Norton Anthology of Literature.” Rather, where Williams believes that cultural cannibalism will have used Baraka’s shaking off of “the dry husks of Pound, Williams,



etc.” and his “political conversion to Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought” in order to fold him into a white-washed space of “Western literary radicalism,” I argue that it is exactly what Williams fears will be forgotten—Baraka’s and other African American authors’ “Afro-American experience” (436) and “the literary achievement of ... the radical, the black militant”—that runs the risk of being rerepresented in a manner separating them from, not merely a legacy of Western radicalism, but an accurately portrayed trajectory of black radicalism and revolution as well.

Returning to Rushdy’s discussion of recollection helps me to explain this. Further defining the differences in Wordsworth and Freud’s understanding of memory, Rushdy tells us that Wordsworth believes memory to be “an agency for revival and rehabilitation” (300), whereas for Freud, “... memory is an agency for constructing fantasies ... in order to rid oneself of the residual neuroses of an imagined distress.” Rushdy moves from Wordsworth’s “primal sympathy” (213), to Freud’s “primal scenes” and “primal phantasies,<sup>1</sup>” finally landing on Lukacher’s redefinition of primal scene as “a circumstantial construction that is predicated when there is a need to interpret but at the same time a fundamental concealment or absence of the sort of evidence that could definitively substantiate a particular interpretation” (qtd. in Rushdy 302).

Rushdy continues

The primal scene Lukacher has in mind is not solely the province of the patient’s experience or imagination, but rather the context of the patient-analyst’s fabrications. As he argues earlier in his book, “the primal scene comes to signify an ontologically undecidable intertextual event that is situated in the differential space between historical memory and imaginative construction, between archival verification and interpretive free play” (24).

Plainly, Rushdy's essay makes an exploration of how, when, and why recollection and memory serves in constructing and reclaiming the self. The essay pushes towards Lukacher's redefinition of primal scene in order to move away from the nostalgia of Wordsworth's primal sympathy, and the ultimately "rigorously undecidable" notions of Freud's primal phantasies created through "the joint work of memory and unconscious fantasy" (Lukacher 140-141). For, as Rushdy questions, if the basis of one's memory is deemed fantasy, "Without an original event, without an anticipated destination, what is left to anchor the desires governing human experience? ... Primal scenes ... at least allow the belief in a presence, a self, a subject" (302). For Rushdy, these questions of "desire and despair ... subject and object ... possibility for self-knowledge ... memory and being" matter greatly to her explanation of "recollected being in present activity" in Toni Morrison novels. Even with Lukacher's explanation of the primal scene as a medium space between a verified archive and freeplay, Rushdy eventually rejects Lukacher's definition arguing that

In Lukacher's terms, there is no participant in the primal scene; there is only the verbal construct of the disremembered, optically displaced individual. ... I wish to redefine the primal scene as the critical event (or events) whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary critical event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled. ... I wish to argue that the primal scene ... need only be of such significance that an individual would recollect that episode, and not another, at the crucial moment when driven to re-evaluate her or his life. A primal scene is, then, an opportunity and affective agency for self-discovery through memory and through what Morrison felicitously calls "rememory." (303)

For our discussion, these questions of "desire and despair ... subject and object ... possibility for self-knowledge ... memory and being" in addition to Rushdy's redefinition of the primal scene matter inasmuch as they help us to explore those previous questions

of self-presencing, neuroses, and rememory with African American literature and its criticism. They help us more consciously navigate the multiple planes within which African American writers have struggled, and still find themselves struggling, to find presence and self-construction: with one's immediate self, with one's immediate family and community, and with one's community at large (nationally and internationally).

As a review, the idea of rememory is introduced in Morrison's, *Beloved*, when Sethe is speaking with Denver. "Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay," says Sethe. "... Some things you forget. Other things you never do. ..." (35). Sethe continues telling Denver,

If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (35-36)

As Rushdy explains,

These "rememories" not only exist outside the agent's mind but are available to anyone who enters the sphere of the action: "Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else." ... [T]he idea of rememory, the concept of mental recollection, both anamnesis and construction, that is never only personal but always interpersonal, has been an important theme in all [Morrison's] novels. ... understanding self and past is always a project of community, memory [is] always situated within a context of rememory. (304)

These concepts of interpersonal recollection, communal anamnesis and construction, and what I would like to call subjective collection, do not only occur in Morrison's writing, but in African American writing at large. Although, Morrison does not explicitly name rememory as their functions, she does confirm the importance of interpersonal recollection in African American texts when naming "oral quality ... the participation of

the reader and the chorus ... [and] the presence of an ancestor” as “characteristics or distinctive elements of African American writing” (“Rootedness” 200). “The point of the books,” argues Morrison, “is that it is our job [to keep in touch with the ancestor].” She continues, “... I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. To say, see—this is what will happen” (202).

**See? This is What Will Happen.**

We Were Young  
 And Innocent Then  
 Do You Remember  
 How It All Began  
 It Just Seemed Like Heaven ...

- Michael Jackson, "Remember The Time"

For African American writers and critics, finding presence and self-construction is a constant, interpersonal navigation of memory and rememory, particularly when trying to exist and resist within a system or network of being that largely seeks to exclude you from it. Focusing solely on literature and critics, while returning to Williams' "Anonymous in America," allows us to further analyze the ways in which this particular tension of self-presencing has stretched across the African American literary tradition. In 1978, Williams used "Anonymous," to identify the "major tension in Afro-American poetry" as being

the dialectic between the Euro-American literate tradition - the cultural assumptions as well as the body of texts which are based on those assumptions – and Afro-American oral culture - music, speech and the patterns of living out of which they are created. (436)

Williams continues explaining this, arguing, "This tension is symbolized in the two "dialects" of Afro-American poetry, the one based on standard English, the other on black vernacular speech." She traces "An unbroken line of increasing facility in the handling of standard diction, meters and forms" beginning with "Paul Laurence

Dunbar at the turn of the century;” yet concludes that in their

drive toward technical excellence, Afro-American writers never really confronted the paradox that plain English and its literary traditions are vehicles of cultural domination. Thus, Afro-American writers were always in the position of unconsciously affirming their cultural inferiority even as they protested consciously and often vehemently against economic, political and social oppression. (436)

Although, before and after William’s “Anonymous,” we have seen several African American authors and critics actively resist and make claims against this act of unconscious affirmation—to include Stephen Henderson’s “The Form of Things Unknown” (1973), which identifies the “central problem” (146) as the “printed page,” acknowledging that “early formal Black poetry reflected the concerns of those who were trained [in accordance with white American values] to read and write” (142), and Alice Walker’s “Saving the Life That Is Your Own” (1976), in which she insists that the “absence of models, in literature, as in life . . . is an occupational hazard for the artist” (156), and Audre Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984), in which she speaks against “an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns” (114), and Houston Baker’s “Toward a Critical Prospect for the Future” (1980), in which he insists that “No analyst can understand the black literary text who is not conscious of the semantic levels of black culture” (197), and, of course, Alexis Pate’s “Making Home in the New Millennium: Reflections” (1999), in which he openly acknowledges “A kind of truth” left untouched when black writers find themselves more concerned “with the external demands and consequences of white racism than personal, individual growth” (488)—Williams’ argument is both intriguing and important because she names Amiri Baraka as a sort of literary and political interference into this cycle of anxiety. Williams argues, “If Baraka

were ever haunted by the spectre of technical poetry, it doesn't show up in his work" (436). Williams continues, analyzing "The Dead Lecturer [as] a clear statement of [Baraka's] recognition that mastery of the standard English idiom has a political as well as an aesthetic dimension." She moves through Baraka's "Crow Jane," "A Poem for Willie Best," and "An Agony. As Now.," finding in them "a repudiation of the literary tradition ... and [removal] of ... the mask [serving as] a metaphor for the black situation in this country, and for the black who, steeped in Western culture, comes to hate his own blackness because it is not white" (437). Williams acknowledges that Baraka's own inquiries were "a part of the more comprehensive analysis which gave rise to the black political movements of the sixties." Still, she argues

Baraka's impact on our literature might have gone unnoticed amongst us had it not been for his political activities, his consciously militant actions and his articulation of the philosophical system behind them. ... It may seem redundant to have pointed out the "blackness" of Baraka's work [but] ... the idea of an Afro-American literature is new and the conception of it as literature – not merely a collection of texts – with a history and traditions is even newer. It is therefore tempting – and easier – to treat a writer like Baraka, whose most obvious stylistic antecedents are white and whose early themes were virtually without direct parallel in Afro-American literature, as a maverick scion of the West rather than as Malcolm's brother and DuBois' son. (437-438)

In 1978, just thirty-seven years ago, the concept of African American literature as a tradition and connected canon of writing was still "new" to Williams and other critics. Because of that newness, Williams felt compelled, obligated even, to engage in the work of communal memory and recollection, writing and claiming Baraka as a central part of the African American tradition. Williams did this in hope of avoiding leaving Baraka's canon "misrepresented, distorted, or lost" (Walker 160). Almost forty years later, this work is still necessary. However, an additional weight added to this work is the truth that

African American authors and critics do not live in America alone. We are constantly at risk of walking down any road, or rather, into any institution, and bumping into a misrepresentation or distortion, “into a rememory that belongs to someone else.”

The fabric of African American historical and cultural memory is always in contention with and opposition to an historical master narrative seeking to minimize and fold black memory into its own, or erase it from existence. This is a truth of which Baraka was keenly aware. Williams argues, “If Baraka were ever haunted by the spectre of technical poetry, it doesn’t show up in his work.” However, what does show up in Baraka’s work is his understanding that as writer, activist, human being, he was constantly haunted by the spectre of having not only his presence effaced, but also having his past rewritten or regarded as fantasy, and his future predetermined and often misconstrued. Baraka - “a man / ... loud / on the birth / of his ways, Publicly redefining / each change in [his] soul, as if [he] had predicted / them,” a man “Fascinated and troubled by the fluidity of identity in equal measure” (Epstein 227) - was constantly pondering the question appearing in “The Liar” (the final poem of *The Dead Lecturer*), “When they say, 'It is Roi / who is dead?' I wonder / who will they mean?"



## Heavy Like 8 Black Boots

In “How You Sound,” published in *New American Poetry* in 1959, Baraka states clearly,

MY POETRY is whatever I think I am. (Can I be light and weightless like a sail?? Heavy & clunking like 8 black boots.) I CAN BE ANYTHING I CAN. I make a poetry with what I feel is useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives. What I see, am touched by (CAN HEAR) ... wives jobs, cement yards, where cats pee, all my interminable artifacts ... ALL are poetry, & nothing moves (with any grace) pried apart from all these things. There cannot be closet poetry. Unless the closet be wide as God’s eye.

And all that means is that I must be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem. (LeRoi 16)

At the age of 25, Baraka had already decided that his work, his creative practice, was to be a dynamic reflection of his own being. Prior to the gains of the 1960’s Civil Rights and 1970’s Black Arts movements – in the midst of discrimination, segregation, a number of racial economic inequalities, and against a prevailing narrative of the African American as inferior to whites – Baraka formed and articulated an idea of himself as anything he could will himself to become. His work, as such, he viewed as equally limitless - a reflection of all he could see and experience daily. “How You Sound” announced a commitment to valuing and illuminating the poetry and necessity of even the most basic components of Baraka’s life. This sentiment, the importance of making art from every thing, every day, is made clear in (compelling this project to revisit) one of Baraka’s most infamous pieces, “Black Art.”

Opening with the argument that “Poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step” (Angles 31), “Black Art” serves as an artistic testament to Baraka’s valuing of a poetry of necessity.

We want live  
 words of the hip world live flesh &  
 coursing blood. Hearts Brains  
 Souls splintering fire. We want poems  
 like fists beating niggers out of Jocks  
 or dagger poems in the slimy bellies  
 of the owner-jews. Black poems to  
 smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches  
 whose brains are red jelly stuck  
 between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking  
 Whores! we want "poems that kill."  
 Assassin poems, Poems that shoot  
 guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys  
 and take their weapons leaving them dead  
 with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. (31)

In this excerpt from “Black Art,” the speaker calls forth an illustration of life represented by “interminable artifacts” of the masses. Yes, the tone of the poem represents the anger and frustration expressed by many BAM artists<sup>2</sup>. However, the tone of the poem does not deny representation of, and presencing within, fragments of black life in 1960’s Newark, to include the hearts and brains of people with their “Souls splintering fire” as well as the racism and police violence experienced daily. In its final lines, “Black Art” makes clear its use of all Baraka might have seen or been touched by, with its speaker arguing for a “Poem scream poison gas on beasts in green berets / Clean out the world for virtue and love ...” (32). The speaker declares that until the world is rid of the anger and violence the speaker cites in the earlier portion of “Black Art,” there is no room for poems that do not act to counter these terrorisms.

Let there be no love poems written  
 until love can exist freely and  
 cleanly. Let Black people understand  
 that they are the lovers and the sons  
 of warriors and sons  
 of warriors Are poems & poets &  
 all the loveliness here in the world ... (32)

Here, the speaker contends there shall be no love poems written until love can exist freely for blacks. However, if we place this portion of the poem alongside “How You Sound,” it is more easily understood that there cannot be any love poems written until black life reflects love and black subjectivity and consciousness raises to a level recognizing black people to be lovers and sons of warriors and, as such, poems and poets and “all the loveliness” in the world, or rather, all that is “useful & can be saved out of all the garbage of our lives.” Baraka finally argues for

... a black poem. And a  
Black World.  
Let the world be a Black Poem  
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem  
Silently  
or LOUD

“Black Art” stands as both artistic revision and expression of Baraka’s earlier poetics expressed in “How You Sound.” It also serves as a centering, a collective presencing, in which the speaker not only illustrates a vision of the violence associated with his present circumstance, but also acknowledges a communal desire for freedom from these conditions. Placing stipulations on these desires, the speaker also insists they cannot be achieved until there is a communal rememory, resulting in a more accurate self-presencing, a more accurate vision and understanding of the black self. Looking at “Black Art” alongside “How You Sound,” we see Baraka working out a black radical criticism and resistance that insists on full subjective development as well as a critical engagement with and use of one’s immediate surroundings as necessary for this development. Baraka articulates, here, a sentiment of artistic freedom dependent upon personal freedom. This sentiment is one that lingers in Baraka’s work; evidenced by a 2003 interview with Kalamu Ya Salaam in which Baraka states, “I always allow myself

to be as free as I can within the context of what I think I want to say. I always feel that whatever is in you is probably a little more knowledgeable about you ... You can't be completely unconscious" (215). As shown in chapter two's discussion of Hughes and Baraka, historically, the legacies of Baraka and other African American authors have been constructed, remembered, sometimes in order to serve (sometimes neurotic displacement) narratives of academic and public agenda<sup>3</sup>. It is often these rememories that distort our reading of African American poetics and the individual histories of each author, rememories similar to the ones I bumped into upon Baraka's passing. However, rereading Baraka's work with a black radical critical lens, not only forces us to give attention to Baraka's interior questions of identity construction and development, but also the ways in which his texts were precursors for many of the issues we would see raised in later black feminist texts.

## **When You Believe in Things That You Don't Understand**

So now you're dealing with what happened and with what that happening made you think. Now if you try to talk about what happened and about what that happening made you think without roping one off from the other ... then you are creating another type of form.

- Amiri Baraka, "Amiri Baraka Analyzes How He Writes"

In Barbara Smith's 1977, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Smith attempted a task she felt was "unprecedented, something dangerous," the task of "merely ... writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all" (162). Smith argued, "These things have not been done. Not by white male critics, expectedly. Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists." Smith continues,

I think of the thousands and thousands of books, magazines, and articles which have been devoted ... to the subject of women's writing and I am filled with rage at the fraction of those pages that mention black and other Third World women. I finally do not know how to begin because ... The conditions that coalesce into the impossibilities of this essay have as much to do with politics as with the practice of literature. Any discussion of Afro-American writers can rightfully begin with the fact that for most of the time we have been in this country we have been categorically denied not only literacy, but the most minimal possibility of a decent human life. (162)

Articulating the need for a "viable, autonomous black feminist movement" (163), Smith explains the "role that criticism plays in making a body of literature recognizable" (163), or memorable, saying,

The necessity for nonhostile and perceptive analysis of works written by persons outside the mainstream of white male/cultural rule has been proven by the black cultural resurgence of the 1960s and 1970s and by the

even more recent growth of feminist literary scholarship. For books to be real and remembered they have to be talked about. For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. (163-164)

What Smith argues here is not necessarily different from Stephen Henderson's, Alice Walker's, Houston Baker's, Audre Lorde's, or Alexis Pates' previously quoted insistences that black writing be examined based upon the values of black culture. Smith reminds us of Morrison's desire not to have African American literature "condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms" (200). Like African American literature, Smith would prefer that black women's writings be "dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture" out of which they were written.

Recapitulating what she understands as "the current situation of Black women writers" (164) and reminding the reader that "it is important to remember that the existence of a feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women's studies," Smith further articulates her desire for a black feminist movement from which a black feminist literature might, if not spring forth from, be supported by, long term. In an effort to summarize Smith's reasoning for black feminist criticism and social culture most accurately, here, I continue to allow her to speak for herself. Smith argues,

The fact that a parallel Black feminist movement has been much slower in evolving cannot help but have impact upon the situation of Black women writers and artists and explains in part why ... we have been so ignored. There is no political movement to give power or support to those who want to examine Black women's experience through studying our history, literature, and culture. There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect from those who write or talk about our lives. Finally, there is not a developed body of Black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black

women's art. When Black women's books are dealt with at all, it is usually in the context of Black literature, which largely ignores the implications of sexual politics. When white women look at Black women's works they are of course ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics. A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucial interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean. (164) [my ital.]

Smith's desires for a political movement "to give power or support" to the examination of a black feminist experience is a longing for a relationship between a political and social movement similar to the BAM's emergence as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister" (Neal 122) to the Black Power Movement<sup>4</sup>.

Similar to the BAM's insistence on a "radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic" with black people defining "the world in their own terms" and confronting the "contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in the racist West," Smith's call for a black feminist political theory able to more acutely attend to black women's experience is an insistence on inclusion – more accurately, inclusion on one's own terms. Also similar to the BAM, Smith's call - in addition to the work of the larger BFM - is an insistence on inclusion as a communal act of rememory as well as a communal shaping of the future. Placing Smith's motivations for a BFM and criticism in conversation with Neal's initial desires of BAM literature and the previously mentioned black writers' calls for understanding of black culture in black writing, disrupts the idea of a linear sense of progress within African American literature as well as its academic criticism. Although black writers have continuously sought to shape black writing and criticism against historical narratives of racist white culture and within black culture and literary movements, authors often find themselves bumping into what Morrison describes as

thought pictures or memories, rememories belonging to someone else. As such, we find within African American literature, an ambient black radical criticism, persistently resisting outside definition while repeating and refining its style, themes, inclusions, and ambitions. Therefore, rather than black feminism standing as a complete rejection of and turn from the BAM, what we see in Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, Toni Morrison, and a long list of other women writers (whose work reveals the necessity of detailing “how the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically [affected] ... the lives of black women” (163)), is less of a turn from the black radicalism associated with the BP and BA movements of the 1960’s and 1970’s, and actually a repositioning, a revisioning and necessary rerepresenting and transformation of black power to include all of its constituents.

Both the BP and BF movements sought, not necessarily to create a new type of power, but rather, to value, valorize, and bring public visibility and historical recognition to the lives of black people and black women through the creation of new forms of self-centric politics and stories. For as Toni Cade Bambara writes in her 1984 piece, “Salvation is the Issue,” “Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge” (203), in the academy; “the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We, the hero of the tales. Our lives preserved. How it was: how it be. Passing it along in the relay ...” A discussion of Baraka’s *The Slave* alongside Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters* helps make clear another handoff of black radicalism between the BAM and BFM, one insisting upon self-



actualization – achieved through self-presencing and self-construction – personally, communally, and nationally through both form and content.

### **Ritual : Action :: Theater : Medium**

In Baraka's, *The Slave*, Walker Vessels, a black revolutionary, confronts his former wife, Grace (and Grace's current husband, Easley - both white), under the premise of usurping custody of he and Grace's two daughters. The dialogue between the three essentially opens more questions than it answers, introducing ideas of collective memory, myth, ritual drama, and actualized subjectivity. Walker's monologue in The Prologue functions as opening to a sort of spectator-focused Dionyssian<sup>5</sup> meets African<sup>6</sup> ritual drama, one that sets up a much more wide-ranging argument than even the one my own project makes. Where I seek to explore the existence of personal biases within the construction of African American literature canons and the effect those biases have on the teaching and cultural remembrance of African American authors, Baraka uses *The Slave* to pose larger questions of those biases, beginning with how one first develops the knowledge one holds.

Walker enters The Prologue "dressed as an old field slave, balding, with white hair, and an old ragged vest" (43). He "comes to the center of the stage slowly, and very deliberately, puffing on a pipe ... seemingly uncertain of the reaction [an] audience will give his speech" - his entrance immediately signifying a blurring of chronology. To a reader, this stage direction possibly triggers certain biases, bringing to mind a visual presented many times over in representations of nineteenth century chattel slavery. However, for audience members viewing this play without stage notes, the visual of "an old ragged vest," could easily be representative of a number of figures in society - perhaps a homeless war veteran, or someone who's just been involved in a physical struggle - not necessarily bound within a specific socio-historical moment or time period.

Understanding this, it seems Baraka has little concern for using *The Slave* to mark a distinctly recognizable historical moment and more concern with triggering the audience members' individual memories in regard to recurring black male roles and figures. This is later confirmed as Walker toys with the audience's perception of his age. "I am much older than I look ... or maybe much younger," he says.

Whatever I am or seem to ...  
   [Significant pause.]  
 to you, then let that rest. But figure, still, that you might not be right.  
 Figure still that you might be lying ... to save yourself. Or myself's image,  
 which might set you crawling like a thirsty dog, for the meanest of drying  
 streams. The meanest of ideas. (44)

After Walker reveals to the audience that what they believe of him (or rather what they believe of what they see of him) might be entirely false, he gives a "Gentle, mocking laugh," before further instructing his spectators to "Let that Settle! Ideas. Where they form." Probing further, Walker commands them to also consider "...whose [these ideas] finally seem to be. Yours? The other's? Mine?" Although Walker shares that he has ceased to believe his ideas are actually of his own making (44), he still delivers a personal sense of vulnerability and unease to the audience, adding, "Who's to say, really? Huh? But figure, still, ideas are still in the world. They need judging." Saying this, Walker reminds the audience that it is not just people or things that need judging, but the very ideas they have developed and use to do the judging must be judged as well.

In Walker's continuing effort to challenge what the audience believes they know, he further disturbs their personal perception of appearance and chronology, ending the questioning of his age and appearance stating, "Time's a dead thing really ... and keeps nobody whole" (45). All of this, after Walker's initial opening of the prologue in which he covertly states his beliefs about human beings as the propagators of ideas. "Whatever

the core of our lives,” Walker states, “Whatever the deceit. We live where we are, and seek nothing but ourselves” (43), or what we recognize as reflections of what we already know. He continues delivering the repercussions of these deceptions saying, “We are liars, and we are murderers. We invent death for others. Stop their pulses publicly. Stone possible lovers with heavy worlds we think are ideas ...” With these words, Walker delivers the definitive statement of *The Slave*: that whatever one might hold as their core value – principle, standard, or judgment – is, for another, simultaneously, deceit or falsehood. This dichotomy frequently remains unacknowledged because, according to Walker, humans suffer from “A stupid longing not to know,” believing, repeating, and teaching “whatever thing we feel is too righteous to question, too deeply felt to deny” (44). Walker delivers these statements to the audience, not as revelations, but rather, common truths to be recognized and accepted.

In *The Roots of Ritual*, Brian Wicker writes, “Drama, it might be said, began when seeing was freed from the shackles of believing” (207), as it is believed that dramatic theater evolved from religious ritual drama. Richard Schechner elaborates on this idea, writing, “a theatre audience differs from a congregation in having no ‘we feeling’; it ‘watches’ and ‘appreciates,’ rather than ‘participating’ or ‘believing’ (George 129). Anthony Graham-White elaborates upon the spectator in African ritual drama saying, “Both ritual and drama transport the participants into a world in which actions escape from the logic of everyday experience, and whose rules the participants must accept in advance” (341). Understanding this, one can read Walker’s monologue as an attempt to dislocate the audience’s memory from what they know (or what they think they know and how they know it) and the realm of knowledge that *The Slave* invites them

to enter. As audience members watching a play, they are not obligated to believe everything that they witness on the stage; however, Walker's words are used as an equalizing tool. If the audience is unnerved or critically thinking about their own modes of accessing and developing ideas, they are, perhaps, critically thinking about the familiar (to some) and intimate details of Walker's life as a black revolutionary once the play begins. This invitation to the audience, this welcome to participate in the dismantling of personal knowledge and an active cultural rememory, is present in both *The Slave* and *The Salt Eaters*.

Where *The Slave*'s opening invites its audience to quiet their biases in order to view and appreciate - maybe even better understand - the intricacies of one moment in Walker Vessel's life, *The Salt Eaters* literally requires the reader to suspend their disbelief and enter into several intimate scenes of African American life as ritual. The novel opens in the middle of Velma Henry's healing ritual with Minnie Ransom. "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" The opening line of Bambara's novel, directed at Velma Henry, actually invites the reader into a world of African American magical realism. The reader meets Velma Henry, sitting "stiffly on [a] stool" (3), unable to "glower, suck her teeth, roll her eyes, do any of the Velma-things" as she anticipates (or resists, it is hard to tell in the first few pages of Bambara's novel) healing from Minnie Ransom. If Baraka's opening to *The Slave* serves to jolt the audience's senses, inviting but not necessarily requiring them to think or believe differently, Bambara's opening to *The Salt Eaters* is both invitation and ultimatum. Without Velma's answer and with the reader's implicit agreement (by virtue of his or her continued reading), Bambara ushers the reader into the scene as a fourth layer spectator to Velma's healing

(first being Minnie Ransom, second being Minnie's spectators in the room, third being Minnie's spiritual guide, M'Dear Sophie).

After introducing Velma, with her "Neck, back, hip joints dry, stiff. Face frozen" (3), Bambara introduces her first spectator, Minnie Ransom, "the fabled healer of the district." Minnie watches Velma with

her bright-red flouncy dress drawn in at the waist with two different strips of kenti-cloth, up to her elbows in a minor fortune of gold, brass and silver bangles, the silken fringe of the shawl shimmying at her armpits. Her head, wrapped in some juicy hot-pink gelee, was tucked way back into her neck, eyes peering down her nose at Velma as though old-timey spectacles perched there were slipping down. (3-4)

Using Velma's stiffness in competition with Minnie's shimmying and "glistening bangles ... metallic threads ... dancing fringe" and bee-like humming (4), Bambara pulls readers into the tension of Southwest Community Infirmary without giving them time to decide whether they are completely aware, or believing, of what is happening in the scene at all. Graham-White's work is useful when analyzing Bambara's opening as it reminds us, "The most basic distinction between ritual and drama lies in the belief that a ritual will have consequences beyond itself." He writes,

A ritual is functional; it is expected to produce results in the future. In the case of a dramatic performance, on the other hand, one's expectations stop when it ends. In drama, cause and effect are linked only within the performance; in ritual, the performance is the cause of an effect to take place outside it. Indeed, the ritual is performed to bring about the effect ... (341)

Within the first few pages, the reader is not yet aware of how the effects of the ritual will manifest in *The Salt Eaters*. Still, by the time Minnie addresses Velma for the second time – "I like to caution folks, that's all. ... No sense us wasting each other's time, sweetheart" (4), followed by, "A lot of weight when you're well. Now you just hold that

thought” (5) – the reader gleans that they are participating as spectator to (what Bambara requires them to believe is) a ritual dependent upon not just the suspension of their disbelief, but also that of Velma Henry. Despite Minnie’s healing powers, the effects of the ritual cannot take place without the willingness of Velma to know and carry the weight of what is to come. However, Velma’s ability to participate in and effectively complete the ritual is not just dependent upon her “submitting herself to this ordeal” (7) in a room with Minnie Ransom and a host of “visiting interns, nurses and technicians ... in crisp white jackets” (9). Velma’s healing requires her to make peace with both personal and communal memories in order to achieve self-actualization and eventually rise from the stool, “a burst cocoon” (295).

These concepts of drama and ritual lend themselves to more than just the openings of Walker and Bambara’s texts – particularly as they relate to Graham-White’s discussion of cause and effect. Once the reader is aware that they are entering into a world that challenges the logic of their everyday knowledge and understanding, both Baraka and Bambara immediately challenge, or trouble, the memories and logic of the worlds presented in each separate text as well. This, serving as simultaneous conduit for and deterrent to self-presencing. This is evident almost immediately within *The Slave* as Grace is the first to recognize Walker’s presence in she and Easley’s home. Grace’s initial reactions to Walker are not that of a white woman terrified of an unfamiliar black man, who also happens to be the leader of a war against all white people. Rather, Grace responds in a highly intimate manner representative of a wife annoyed by and dismissive of her husband’s passing whims. Although Walker greets Grace with a simple, “Hey Momma. How are you?” (47), Easley—who entered the room casually discussing “...

black sons of bitches” (46) who he believes need to “at least stop and have their goddamned dinners...”—immediately launches into a condescending verbal attack against Walker, suggesting that Walker’s “noble black brothers are killing what’s left” (49) of the city because they jealously want what Easley (as a white man) has. Grace simultaneously begins to launch her fears and disapproval at Walker, initially asking about safety and Walker’s intentions. Walker replies, “Oh, it’s dangerous as a bitch. But don’t you remember how heroic I am” (48)? Walker then proceeds to defend his “noble black brothers” to Easley.

WALKER. Oh, fuck you  
                   [Hotly]  
 fuck you ... just fuck you, that’s all. Just fuck you!  
                   [Keeps voice stiffly contained, but then it rises sharply]  
 I mean really, just fuck you. Don’t, goddamnit, don’t tell me about any  
 killing of anything. If that’s what’s happening. I mean if this shitty town  
 is being flattened ... let it. It needs it. (49)

Finding Walker’s answer unsatisfying, and annoyed by the heightening tête-à-tête between he and Easley, Grace, “Furious from memory,” announces, “I had enough of your twisted logic in my day ... you remember? I mean like your heroism. The same kind of memory. Or lie. Do you remember which?” Using only a few minutes of brief interaction, Baraka introduces the futility of the conversation between these three characters. The problem is not necessarily that each of them is leading the conversation with present feelings they have about the current resistance and interaction between the three of them, but that these feelings are fueled by emotions and memories from the past as well as lingering biases against one another. We see this when Easley immediately engages in verbal sparring, when Walker immediately rejects Easley (whom Walker later calls an “ignorant vomiting faggot” professor (52)) and his opinion of the resistance



happening in the city, and when both Walker and Grace insist on indignantly asking one another if they remember each other's separate interpretations of the past. What Baraka creates in this scene is a space where present memories bump against one another, with very little hope for reconciliation or use for forward movement.

These conflicts of memory and the inability to create a common and communal self-presencing in the interaction with Grace, Walker, and Easley highlight how this sort of conflict also inhibits or complicates personal self-construction and presencing. In continuing to voice her annoyance with Walker, Grace reveals her true feelings about Walker as a revolutionary and leader. "There are so many bulbs and screams shooting off inside you, Walker," Grace begins.

So many lies you have to pump full of yourself. You're split so many ways ... your feelings are cut up into skinny horrible strips ... like umbrella struts ... holding up whatever bizarre black cloth you're using this performance as your self's image. I don't even think you know who you are anymore. No, I don't think you ever knew. (61)

The audience watches as Grace refuses to engage with Walker in a present moment, privileging her own understanding and intimate knowledge (of Walker) to dismiss and demean his intentions. Rather than listening and engaging with what Walker is willing to communicate with her, rather than engaging with Walker's understanding of himself as a thinking, changing, human being, Grace reacts with what she believes she knows, reframing Walker *to* Walker. As such, she negates Walker's authenticity, reconstructing him as an actor separate from the "bizarre black cloth" and character she believes him to be performing as his "self's image." Walker replies to Grace's narrative stating, "I know what I can use," leading to a back and forth in which Grace scolds Walker once again charging, "It must be a sick task keeping so many lying separate uglinesses together ...

pretending they're something you've made and understand." To this, Walker responds, "What I can use, madam ... what I can use. I move now trying to be certain of that." In this exchange, Baraka allows Walker to speak to an important lesson of survival. In his personal life as a black man, in his life as the leader of a black revolutionary movement, Walker Vessels cannot necessarily be concerned with permanence or what has been; he can not necessarily engage with Grace's memories of his past changes or conflicts of identity. Instead, similar to Baraka's published poetics, Walker expresses a real concern for what he can use for future movement; he is interested in necessity and serviceability. Another contribution to the tension here is that, because of the differences in the biased memories lingering between Grace, Walker, and Easley, what is necessary and serviceable for each, is not only subject to change based on the situation, but also most likely differing from one another at all times.

Baraka forces the audience and reader to make his or her own peace with the contradictions and conflict between *The Slave*'s three characters in that the spectating audience members are given no real clue about whose intentions or memory to trust in Grace and Walker's initial interaction. They are forced to deal with their own questions and intuition. Does the audience trust Grace and Easley? If so, why? Because they are white? Because they are in a committed relationship? Because they are raising children? Do they trust or distrust Walker? Why? Because Grace distrusts Walker? Because Easley seems to hate Walker? Because Walker is black? Because Walker seems angry? Because Walker's character reminds them of black men they have distrusted before in their own lives? Because Walker sees the shifting of ideas and beliefs - what Grace calls performances of self-image - as tools to be used for progress or survival? Can the

audience - after viewing or reading Walker's opening monologue - even trust his or her own beliefs about what they think or feel concerning what they have witnessed so far? These questions of who and what to believe (and for what reasons) – including who (and with what history) gets to determine present narratives - are raised again and again throughout *The Slave*. Baraka, through Walker's constant back and forth with Easley and Grace's consistent disruptive disbelief, creates a play that asks questions, not just of the logistics of black resistance and revolution, but the exigency and practical effects of it as well.

A survey of the rest of *The Slave*'s dialogue reveals Walker's views of the world shifting rapidly between what seem to be existential, nihilistic, and absurdist thoughts, with the logic of ideas such as identity, cause and effect, justification, certainty, and doubt completely disrupted. The conversation moves from Easley antagonizing Walker about his insistence on usefulness ("What is this, the pragmatics of war? ... I thought you meant yourself to be a fantastic idealist? All those speeches and essays and poems ... the rebirth of idealism..." (62)), to Grace demeaning Walker's changing beliefs ("... another attribute, another beautiful quality in the total beautiful structure of the beautiful soul of Walker Vessels, sensitive Negro poet, savior of his people, deliverer of Western idealism ... commander-in-chief of the forces of righteousness ... et cetera, et cetera") and minimalizing Walker's attempt to take the children as dragging them into his personal "scheme for martyrdom and immortality, or whatever" (63). After listening to Grace and Easley's back and forth with one another, Walker finally interrupts:

WALKER.

[Feigning casual matter-of-fact tone]

Mr. Easley, Mrs. Easley, those girls' last name is Vessels. Whatever you

think is all right. I mean I don't care what you think about me or what I'm doing ... the whole mess. But those beautiful girls you have upstairs there are my daughters. They even look like me. I've loved them all their lives. Before this there was too much to do, so I left them with you.

[Gets up, pours another drink]

But now ... things are changed. ... I want them with me.

[Sprawls on couch again]

I want them with me very much. (63)

Here, Walker very clearly tries to dismiss the futile nature of the conversation, refocusing the discussion on his original goals. He affirms his own sense of logic and identity as the father of two girls he created with Grace (two girls who “even look like” him), resisting Grace and Easley's desire to construct an identity for him based on their own biases and beliefs. Grace again refutes Walker's self-construction with,

You're lying. Liar, you don't give a shit abot those children. You're a liar if you say otherwise. You never never cared at all for those children ... you never cared for anything in the world that I know of but what's in there behind your ugly eyes. And God knows what ugliness that is ... though there are thousands of people dead or homeless all over this country who begin to understand a little. And not just white people ... you've killed so many of your own people too. It's a wonder they haven't killed you. (64)

For some, Grace's comments might be easily accepted, as it is true that Walker is the leader of black revolutionaries who are currently engaged in violent resistance. Still, for others – particularly those critically thinking (as Baraka wants them to) about Grace's language, her ideas and construction of Walker become even more troubled. American audience members viewing Walker as a leader of a black militia are most likely forced to at least consider the forces against which Walker might be fighting. In doing this, some of them are most likely forced to consider the very long, very violent, very racist, very oppressive history of white privilege and power in America, thus, making Grace's statements actually sound like reverberations of Walker's own feelings or defenses.

However, Baraka does not allow Walker to speak this truth. He simply allows chaos and contradiction to further unfold, with Walker (despite appearing to be the frenzied character, particularly after resorting to wielding a gun in an attempt to force Easley into silence) frequently trying to interject the voice of reason through revision of memory and de-escalation of heightened drama.

When Grace suggests that Walker hates her, he corrects her; when Grace again accuses Walker of lying, Walker defends himself arguing, “what’s cutting you up” (66) is that “you probably know I’m not lying, and you can’t understand that;” when Grace again begins to incite Easley, claiming that Walker is “lying again ... most times not to be taken seriously ... making ... one of those ritual drama metaphors ... just to hear what’s going on in his head” (70), Walker disrupts this outside construction of his intentions and image, revealing what he believes to be the absurdity of once trying to maintain a relationship with Grace while seeking to actively resist white oppression.

WALKER.

[Laughs, then sobers, but begins to show the effects of the alcohol]  
Oh, Grace, Grace. Now you’re trying to incite your husbean ... which I swear is hardly Christian. I’m really surprised at you. But more so because you completely misunderstand me now ... or maybe I’m not so surprised. I guess you never did know what was going on. That’s why you left. You thought I betrayed you or something. Which really knocked me on my ass, you know? I was preaching hate the white man ... get the white man off our backs ... if necessary, kill the white man for our rights ... whatever the hell that finally came to mean. And don’t, now, for God’s sake start thinking he’s disillusioned, he’s cynical, or any of the rest of these horseshit liberal definitions of the impossibility or romanticism of idealism. But those things I said ... and would say now, pushed you away from me. I couldn’t understand that. (71)

This passage again reinforces the differences of even the simplest ideas between Grace, Walker, and Easley. What seemed necessary and useful (even if changing or fleeting) for Walker as a means of exerting his agency and power, meant potential disempowerment

and death for both Easley and Grace. For Walker, the fact that he and Grace had “been together a long time, before all that happened” (71) meant that Grace might somehow be able to understand (“if any white person in the world could”) the necessity of his ideals.

Walker’s calling out of Grace’s “hardly Christian” actions (a possible allusion to the even more absurd historical Christian rhetoric often lodged in the defense of slavery), and his resistance to having external “liberal definitions” cast on to his identity as a result of his own statements of uncertainty, reveal even more about the idea of ritual drama that Grace previously mentions. It also calls to mind our original discussion of Freud and Wordsworth, as *The Slave*’s audience is most likely in a constant state of wondering whether Grace, Walker, and Easley are engaged in “genuine act[s] of self-presencing ... or a neurotic act[s] of displacement and reconstruction.” Furthermore, in Act II, Walker shoots Easley during a struggle in which Easley tries to ambush and choke Walker. Grace repeatedly screams “You’re an insane man” (80-81), while Walker warns Easley to make “No profound statements” (81). “No horseshit like that,” Walker tells Easley. “No elegance. You just die quietly and stupidly. Like niggers do. Like they are now.” Walker continues, warning Grace, “Tell [Easley] that he can say, ‘I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country<sup>7</sup>.’ Easley, with his dying words, replies, “Ritual drama. Like I said, ritual drama.” If we return to Graham-White’s discussion of ritual versus drama, we remember that he defines ritual as “functional ... expected to produce results in the future.” He distinguishes it from “dramatic performance, on the other hand, [in which] one's expectations stop when [the performance] ends.” “In drama, cause and effect are linked only within the performance; in ritual, the performance is the cause of an effect to take place outside it. Indeed, the ritual is performed to bring about the effect ...”

The repeated collapse of these two terms onto one another, combined with the futile nature of this conversation, Walker's continuous attempts to define himself against and within the memories of Grace and Easley, and Walker's previously mentioned apprehensions concerning his own display of doubt, adjustment, or cynicism, only further add to the absurd nature of this conversation as well as the larger social structure in which the three characters live.

Immediately following Easley's murder, tension, again, begins mounting as Grace repeats to Walker, "You're out of your mind." Walker responds, "Out of my mind is not the point. You ought to know that ... The way things are, being out of your mind is the only thing that qualifies you to stay alive. The only thing. Easley was in his right mind ... That's the reason he's dead" (82). The reader and audience receives this final declaration after Walker's previous declaration that "all of my officers are ignorant motherfuckers who have never read any books in their lives" (67), after his admission that he's "sort've taken [the idea that we might not win] for granted ... as a solved problem ... that the real work would come necessarily after the fighting was done" (68), after his explanation of the "horror" of oppression being "that oppression is not a concept that can be specifically transferable" and that the point of this current black uprising is that whites "have had [their] chance ... now these other folks have theirs" (72-73), after even Easley references the "The kind of insane reality that brought about all the killing" (690 and the "futility of modern society" (73). Together, all of these statements serve to help us understand *The Slave*'s characters as individuals with conflicting identities, pasts, presents, and futures locked within processes oscillating between ritual and drama for the sake of drama. *The Slave* ends with Grace dying under fallen debris caused by an outside

explosion (an explosion that should alert the audience that the back militia has moved into the city as Walker previously suggested they would). Just before she dies, Walker tells Grace that their two daughters are dead, but never answers when she inquires, “How do you know, Walker? How do you know they’re dead” (88). The closing notes of the play read:

[He leaves, stumbling unsteadily through the door. He is now the old man at the beginning of the play. There are more explosions. Another one very close to the house. A sudden aggravated silence, and then there is a child heard crying and screaming as loud as it can. More explosions]

Black

[More explosions, after curtain for some time] (88)

Baraka leaves his audience with no conclusive ending, nor any conclusive understanding of the logic of cause and effect within the play. This, perhaps, was the purpose of Walker’s opening dialogue” to prepare the reader to make peace with confusion, unrest, and a lack of resolution. Walker’s monologue in conjunction with *The Slave*’s continuous creation of discord as opposed to a clean denouement, fixes the reader within what Baraka refers to as the “unspecific imagination” (“hunting” 202). It fixes the reader within a process of thought - “Thinking,” being (at least according to Baraka) “in the most exalted human terms ... God, the force out of which the world issued” (203).

In his 1964 piece, “hunting is not that head on the wall” (written as Leroi Jones), Baraka discusses the creative process saying, “Formal art, that is, artifacts made to cohere to preconceived forms, is almost devoid of ...verb value” (198). He continues,

Usually a man playing Bach is only demonstrating his music lessons; the contemporary sonneteer, his ability to organize intellectual materials. But nothing that already exists is that valuable. ...

Art is like speech ... in that it is at the end, and a shadowy replica, of another operation, thought. And even to name something, is to wait for it in the place you think it will pass. (198-199)



Creating a conclusive resolution would have meant devaluing *The Slave* of “the verb process” (198) and leaving its audience with an artifact to marvel. Instead, Baraka brings the audience into the process – “the most important quality because it can transform and create, and its only form is possibility” - making them necessary spectators and participants. Lending no formal naming to who is worthy of the audience’s trust, what has happened in the past, where this conflict is actually taking place, or why (other than the fact that we know Walker is fighting white oppression) or for what specific end purpose any of this conflict is happening, *The Slave* leaves its audience thinking, making sense of or for a new chaos of ideas, memories, and uncertain future. A similar sense of creative chaos is found in Bambara’s *Salt Eaters*.

Although a number of scholars have taken the time to create in-depth readings of *The Salt Eaters*, my project takes a much more focused approach at reading this text for the purpose of creating extensions between it and Baraka’s poetics, as well as for framing opportunities to further study black feminist writing as an extension of the Black Arts and Black Power movements. In *The Slave*, neither the reader nor viewing audience is privy to the internal thoughts of Walker Vessels. Both receive his performance of identity as third party spectators. In *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara builds upon a third party spectatorship of black male performance and power, adding an omniscient narrator, while combining “fabulism and realism, adapt[ing] a non-mimetic form of representation, reject[ing] linear history ... [and displaying] multiple gendered angles of vision ... [in tandem with] a ‘decentered’ female subject” (“Generating” 36). Where *The Slave* leaves the readers with questions of communal presencing and resistance – how and if it can be achieved, by what means, to what ends – while continuously showing the combination as

an impediment to personal self-construction, *The Salt Eaters* insists on full self-actualization as well as micro and macro level communal presencing as a means to resistance and revolution. *Salt Eaters* is also invested in thought and process, rituals that will assumedly lead to understanding for the reader and healing for Velma Henry. As such, Bambara juxtaposes “representations of personal fragmentation with collective unity, [suggesting] that within wholeness there will always be conflict and contestation” (38).

This conflict, again, is what guides the movement of the text – sometimes forward, sometimes backward, often inward. Although, upon entering the novel, Bambara’s readers have no way of being certain of the exact events that have led Minnie, Velma, or the rest of the community of spectators to the Southwest Community Infirmary, they are rather quickly made aware that there are conflicting expectations of Velma’s actions or self-image present in the room. The omniscient narrator tells us “Velma blinked,” questioning, whether “ole Minnie [was] trying to hypnotize her, mesmerize her” (4). Velma sat on the stool being watched, simultaneously wondering whether “Minnie Ransom, the legendary spinster of Claybourne, Georgia, [was] spinning out a song, drawing her of all people up.” It becomes clear that Velma imagines and understands herself to be a person outside of the reach of Minnie Ransom, assumedly, also outside of the need for and reach of Minnie’s healing powers. Describing Velma as “the swift ... the elusive ... who had never mastered the kicks, punches and defense blocks, but who had down cold the art of being not there when the blow came,” the narrator further reveals that Velma, not necessarily one offensively strong, has learned to use both avoidance and disappearing as a means of strength and survival. Still, the narrator forces

the reader to question the authenticity and development of Velma's beliefs about her self-construction.

She wasn't meant for these scenes, wasn't meant to be sitting up there in the Southwest Community Infirmary with her ass out, in the middle of the day, and strangers cluttering up the treatment room, ogling her in her misery. She wasn't meant for any of it. But then M'Dear Sophie always said, "Find meaning where you're put, Vee." So she exhaled deeply and tried to relax and stick it out and pay attention. (7)

When M'Dear Sophie's voice enters Velma's thoughts, the reader gains a heightened awareness of Velma's constructed identity. In this moment, where Velma wants to choose flight, rejecting this scene in which she feels she does not belong, she uses the memory of the voice of a guiding elder, in order to ground herself and find meaning in her own healing. In this instance, M'Dear Sophie's interruption of Velma's thoughts is a helpful guidance; however, in other moments in the text, Bambara shows this dissonant thought construction to be a hindrance to effective self-presencing.

Later, still sitting on a stool in the infirmary, trying to pull herself fully into the presence of the filled room, Velma hears, "Release, sweetheart. Give it all up. Forgive everyone everything. Free them. Free self" (18). Velma tries to "pry her lids up to see if the woman was actually speaking ... She tried to summon her eyes back, to cut the connection [but] she was seeing more than she wished to remember in that kitchen." In this moment, the reader finds Velma in what Bambara calls "a telepathic vision with her former self, who seemed to be still there in the kitchen reenacting" her suicide attempt.

All Velma could summon now before her eyes were the things of her kitchen, those things she'd sought while hunting for the end. Leaves, grasses, buds dry but alive and still in jars stuffed with cork, alive but inert on the shelf of oak, alive but arrested over the stove next to the matchbox she'd reached toward out of habit, forgetting she did not want the fire, she'd only wanted the gas. Leaning against the stove then as the performer leaned now, looking at the glass jars thinking who-knew-what

then, her mind taken over, thinking now, that in the jars was no air, therefore no sound, for sound waves weren't all that sufficient, needed a material medium to transmit. But light waves need nothing to carry pictures in, to travel in, can go anywhere in the universe with their independent pictures. So there'd be things to see in the jars, were she in there sealed and unavailable to sounds, voices, cries. So she would be light. Would go back to her beginnings in the stars and be star light, over and done with, but the flame traveling wherever it pleased. And the pictures would follow her, haunt her. Be vivid and sharp in a vacuum. To haunt her. Pictures, sounds and bounce were everywhere, no matter what you did or where you went. Sound broke glass. Light could cut through even steel. There was no escaping the calling, the caves, the mud mothers, the others. No escape. (19)

Velma's flashback, or telepathic visit, reveals to the reader that, even then, when making the decision to take her own life, Velma had "been in a stupor, her gaze sliding greasily over the jars on the shelf till she fastened onto the egg timer, a little hour-glass affair (19). Velma is so affected, almost paralyzed, by the voices, opinions, and actions happening around her daily, that it is not until her eyes touch the egg-timer that her present self is aware of what her past self wanted. She thinks, "To be that sealed—sound, taste, air, nothing seeping in. To be unavailable at last, sealed in and the noise of the world ... locked out. ... That was the sight she'd been on the hunt for." To help better understand the weight of this scene, Velma's motivation for suicide, and the connection between Walker and Velma as suicided characters wielding violence as resistance against immediate oppressions, I pause, here, to revisit Artaud's intriguing and similarly violent discussion of Van Gogh.

### **I Think You're Crazy. Just Like Me.**

I remember when, I remember, I remember when I lost my mind

There was something so pleasant about that place.

Even your emotions had an echo

In so much space

- Gnarls Barkley, "Crazy"

In the introduction to "Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society," Antonin Artaud launches a defense of Vincent Van Gogh (and a general attack of society) arguing, "Van Gogh was not mad, but his paintings were wildfire, atomic bombs, whose angle of vision, compared to all the other paintings popular at the time, would have been capable of upsetting the larval community of the Second Empire bourgeoisie ..." (136). He continues,

You can say all you want about the mental health of Van Gogh who, during his lifetime, cooked only one of his hands, and other than that did no more than cut off his left ear,

in a world in which every day they eat vagina cooked in a green sauce or the genitals of a newborn whipped into a rage plucked as it came out of the maternal sex.

And this is not an image, but a fact abundantly and daily repeated and cultivated throughout the world.

And thus, demented as this assertion may seem, present-day life goes on in its old atmosphere of prurience, of anarchy, of disorder, of chronic lunacy, of bourgeois inertia, of psychic anomaly ... of deliberate dishonesty and downright hypocrisy, of a mean contempt for anything that shows breeding, of the claim of an entire order based on the fulfillment of a primitive injustice,

in short, of organized crime. (135)

Artaud's use of the word "only" when discussing Van Gogh's self-violence, suggests that simply living as a human being in opposition to a system that accepts its biases - its chaos and wrongdoing and thinking - as standard, could drive someone to do much more than

boil a hand or cut off an ear. Regardless of whether we believe Artaud's detailing of society's "chronic lunacy" is of little importance. Of greater importance is the way in which he juxtaposes Van Gogh's genius against that which judges or seeks to oppress him – "the yes-men of Thiers, Gambetta, Felix Faure, as well of those of Napoleon III" (136). Artaud writes, "Van Gogh's painting doesn't attack a certain conformity of manners and morals, but the conformity of institutions themselves."

I use Artaud's discussion of Van Gogh because it allows us as critics to suspend our own biases in terms of discussing "race" literature. It allows us to engage in a larger conversation, a thinking process, concerning the ways in which outside forces can (even when supposedly in alignment with or displaying concern for/interest in/recognition of our work) can insert their versions of history, their attempts at self-presencing, or neurotic displacements and misinformed constructions – or we, equally capable, might do the same - suppressing change and radical thought<sup>8</sup>. Artaud's discussion also allows understanding of the ways in which ideas, memories, co-constructed histories, shaping our work, our self-construction, and our possibilities for future. These shapings, as Artaud explains of Van Gogh, as Grace suggests of Walker in *The Slave*, and as is even suggested of Velma in *The Salt Eaters*, often driving those living within these systems of competing ideas and histories to lunacy. Or rather, driving society to label these people as lunatics, what Artaud describes as men "who prefer to go mad, in a social sense of the word, rather than forfeit a certain higher idea of human honor" (137).

For a lunatic is a man that society does not wish to hear but wants to prevent from uttering certain unbearable truths.

That's how society strangled all those it wanted to get rid of ... to protect itself from ... put them in asylums, because they refused to be accomplices to a lofty kind of swill.

But in that case, internment is not the only weapon, and the concerted assemblage of men has other ways of undermining the wills of those it wants to break. (137)

My argument is not so much invested in the extremes of Artaud's argument, but rather these "other ways of undermining" that he mentions. In *The Slave*, Walker states, "The way things are, being out of your mind is the only thing that qualifies you to stay alive. ... Easley was in his right mind ... That's the reason he's dead." In this statement, Walker acknowledges a maddening inverse of logic inherent in racism and society at large. Easley, in his right mind, felt that he had the agency and power to engage in a logical conversation with Walker. However, Walker, supposedly out of his mind, had already entered a state of mania triggered by a lack of sense, logic, and equanimity in his everyday life. Add to this the fact that most of Walker's chaos is actually a repercussion of his skin color, a factor completely uncontrollable by him, and it becomes even more understandable that Walker has decided the only qualifying place to live is outside of his mind, outside of his senses, outside of what he naturally believes to be right and sensible.

Although it is not clear at the moment readers experience Velma visiting her past self in the kitchen, the rest of the novel reveals that by the time she attempts to end her life (well, this particular attempt we are witnessing), Velma is waging both a personal and communal battle against racism, sexism, infidelity, "atomic energy in the hands of capitalists ... power in the hands of the psychically immature, spiritually impoverished and intellectually undisciplined" (133), and a menagerie of possible woes that come with living as a conscious, feminist, black woman activist. Velma, like Walker, is a builder, trying to fight present forces in order to form a future she finds worth living. For, as Artaud argues, "No one has ever written or painted, sculpted, modeled, built, invented,

except to get out of hell” (149). Yet, Velma, like Walker, but without the backing of a strong black feminist movement like the one Smith calls for in “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism” (save, in some sense, her immediate maternal family – a complicated if not personally damaging series of bonds, the Women for Action – which she herself was a part of creating, the Mud Mothers, The Seven Sisters, Jan and Ruby) lives in a world that daily contradicts her truth of experience and attempts at self-presencing. A conversation between Velma and her husband, Obie, over dinner clearly exhibits Velma’s difficulty with maintaining a balance between her lived experience and present engagements in her mind.

Velma, lost within her own story-telling, becomes present at dinner when she hears “Baby, I wish you were as courageous emotionally as you are ...” (21). The text tells us “She missed hearing it somehow. Close as his face was to hers, plainly as he was speaking, attentive as she tried to be, she just couldn’t hear what the hell he was saying.”

He was interrupting her story, breaking right in just as she was about to get to the good part, to tell her to put her fork down and listen. She was seriously considering jabbing his hand with the fork as he reached to grasp her hands, his tie falling into her plate, covering the last two pieces cut from near the bone that she’d been saving to relish after she finished talking. (21)

In this scene, Velma has become lost in her own thoughts, caught up in the details of her story. However, “James Lee Henry, called Obie now” (20), disrupts her narrative with his own understanding, attempting to convince her to release the past memories shaping her present.

“Let me help you, Velma. Whatever it is we ... wherever we’re at now ... I can help you break that bad habit ... learn to let go of the past pain ... like you got me to stop smoking. We could ...”

She heard some of it. He was making an appeal, a reconciliation of some sort, conditions, limits, an agenda, help. Something about



emotional caring or daring or sharing. James Lee could be tiresome in these moods.

...

“Dammit, James. Obie. Let go. I haven’t finished my—”

“Let me finish. What I want to say ...”

The non-conversation being had between these two showcases how their conflicting versions of the past define their present. Obie would like Velma to make peace with and let go of past hurts; however, perhaps, much like in this conversation, there has been very little space for her to heal or express her personal pain, authentically, rather than receiving it reframed from Obie or another loved one. Obie believes Velma to be “up to [her] jaws in ancient shit” (22) with, true, no ability to remain present, let go of past hurts. He reminds her that it’s “got to be costing you something to hang onto old pains ... to keep all them dead moments alive.” Velma defends herself saying, “We’re different people, James. Obie. Somebody shit all over you, you forgive and forget. You start talking about how we’re all damaged and colonialism and the underdeveloped blah blah. That’s why everybody walks all over you ...” Obie defends himself saying, “You’re the only one to ever try to walk all over me, Vee. ... Scared. Anytime you’re not in absolute control, you panic.” He then tries to usher the conversation toward their bond, adding, “Intimacy. Love. Taking a chance when the issue of control just isn’t—” Velma snorts and again retreats from the conversation into her head, barely present when Obie offers the option of creating “a vacuum for good things to rush in” (25). Because Obie is unable to allow a place for Velma’s version of events to play out equally to his own, unable to encourage Velma to find presence within herself rather than a more communal presence within the foundation of their relationship, Velma finds herself drifting off into a pattern

of thought where she is resentfully comparing these “good things” Obie wants with the weight of her own everyday hurts.

Like work and no let up and tears in the night. Like being rolled to the edge of the bed, to extremes, clutching a stingy share of the covers and about to drop over the side, like getting up and walking, bare feet on a cod floor, round to the other side and climbing in and too mad to snuggle for warmth, freeze. Like going to jail and being forgotten, forgotten, or at least deprioritized cause bail was not as pressing as the printer’s bill. Like raising funds and selling some fool to the community with his heart set on running for public office. Like being called in on five-minute notice after all the interesting decisions had been made, called in out of personal loyalty and expected to break her hump pulling off what the men had decided was crucial for the community good. (25)

Bambara allows the reader to experience many of these remembered slights over two hundred plus pages. Through a concentric expansion of time and space, she introduces the reader to Claybourne’s past and interconnected memories, blurring the lines of Velma’s recollections. The entire plot takes place over the short course of Velma’s healing. By the time the reader has watched Velma consistently give the best of herself away to the community, it is understandable that even something as important as a conversation about Obie’s alleged infidelities (232), could send Velma into her head marveling “at how profoundly disturbing ‘simple shit’ can be, an accumulation of fissures in the fabric of what was her sense of things, how things were, what statements meant, how they stood.” As Velma reveals, her life had become a splicing, “A subtle rearrangement of the world. For awhile she had begun to doubt her perception of everything. There were trying enough shifts in her perceptions as it was. She needed all the clarity she could get. And she would have it.”

Baraka’s *Slave* invites its audience into a creative space of thinking, opening up what he believes to be the space of ultimate possibility and change. Bambara’s *Salt*

*Eaters* takes up this same space while much more explicitly positing the real potential of creativity and change, particularly a creative change leading to one's healing as opposed to detriment, within the self. Although, we see Velma consistently trying to retreat within her own psyche to make sense of the wrongs she endures daily (mostly because she exists as a black and woman-bodied human being), the text allows Jan and Ruby to provide macro-level commentary on Velma's emotional and mental state through gossip, telling us, "Velma's predisposed to strife and conflict and crises. It's how she learns, by struggling through ..." (236). Jan goes on to reveal, "Velma's never been the center of her own life before, not really" (240). The reader understands this very early on because even as the text opens with the intent of telling the story of Velma's healing, Velma is decentered in the story of Claybourne, despite her centrality to much of the plot. "I hear you," Jan continues.

It's like what you were saying earlier about wanting to retreat from confusion to your shop just you and the jewelry making. Confined space, everything, under your sure control. Not that you mean it. But ... Velma has worked hard not to hollow out a safe corner—yeh, quotes around the safe—of home, family, marriage and then be less responsive, less engaged. Dodgy business trying to maintain the right balance there, the personal and the public, the club/heart cluster versus spades/diamonds, and a sun and Venus in Aquarius ... it's good she has put herself at center at last. If that's what you meant by 'self-centered.' (243)

In a light-hearted conversation over lunch - one in which Jan and Ruby are actually questioning Velma's sanity - Bambara delivers the weight of *The Salt Eaters*' message concerning healing. Bambara uses Velma's personal healing alongside the stories of the Claybourne citizens in order to insist on each character's ability to "choose to participate" (Alwes 356), first in one's own life, and in doing so, in connection to one's community. As Derek Alwes explains, "For Bambara, identity is not a self-construction arising out of

a virtually open-ended series of options; it is already available through membership in one's community ... the ... choice is whether or not to accept the responsibilities implicit in that membership" (355). In locating choice within a responsibility to self and others (not neglecting one for the other), Bambara provides not only the members of Claybourne with an agency outside of lunacy, but she, again, includes the audience as spectator and participant, reminding the reader of the importance of wielding choice in each unique moment.

When an unexpected downpour comes to Claybourne, leaving "Folks crowding together, sharing edges of chairs with strangers ... spreading tents of newspapers on companions' heads, holding their breath ..." (245), the narrator interrupts the scene to remind readers of the "probable realms beyond the limits of scientific certainty ... The uncharted territory beyond the danger zone of the "safe" dosage" 246). Bambara reinforces the importance of the current moment, the action within it, the decision to be present, writing,

This moment, this light, this place, these strangers. ... This moment, heart jarred and lungs starved, would supply the answers to the latter-day version of "What were you into when they wiped Lumumba out?" Or, "Did you ever go past the Audubon Ballroom after they gunned Malcolm down?" Or, "Where were you when the news came of King? Of Ho? Of Mao? Of Che? Of Fannie Lou? Were you wearing a fro the time they were hounding Angela across country? Did you raise funds for Mozambique, Angola? Were you part of the Movement? In D.C. in '63? Did you help the U.S. pull out of Vietnam, Eritrea, South Africa? Did you wear a Fair Play for Cuba Button? Did you send defense funds for Joanne Little, for Inez Garcia, for Dennis Banks, for Russell Means, for the Wilmington Ten?" (246)

Did you respond to Trayvon's murder? Or Mike Brown? Or Lamia Beard? Did you discuss the terror in Acapulco in 2015? What work were you doing in the academy when they were killing us in the streets? Did you question your own privileges? Your

own submissions of will? Your own judgments? Did you support Black Brunch? Did all of your friends believe #BlackLivesMatter? What work were you doing in the academy when Daniel Handler used watermelon to interrupt a brown girl dreaming? Were you seeing spades, but refusing to call them? One would be asked, “When did it begin for you?”

I use the texts and theorists discussed in this section as a reminder that the future study of African American literature is not a fixed entity decided by our predictions. African American texts show that the future of African American literature is much less dependent upon what we believe it can be based on the past, and much more dependent upon what we, as writers and critics, allow ourselves to make of it. Rather than analyzing each written contribution to African American literature as a complete argument or political statement (even if explicitly articulated as such) only indicative of the socio-historical period in which it was created, it proves more useful to analyze each statement as part of a longer trajectory, that of an ever-developing heterogeneous black consciousness. It proves useful to think about each written piece of African American literature, much as this project has previously encouraged us to think about Baraka and his own writing – as an expression of the totality to which it belongs and also whose limits it exceeds.

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdy provides a full discussion of development of primal scenes and phantasies using Freud’s “Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis” and “Outline of Psychoanalysis.” He also directs readers to Janet Malcolm’s *In the Freud Archives* and Jeffrey Moussaieff Mason’s *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory* in order to form a more full understanding of Freud’s belief that primal phantasies (remembered riffings of actual memories causing hysterical symptoms) occur much more often than primal scenes (actual events). According to Rushdy, Freud is thus implicitly arguing that “memory loses its individual validity as an act of ‘deferred understanding of

the impressions' of an experienced event and becomes instead a mendacious agency of self-denial or self-misconstrual" (301).

<sup>2</sup> "Black Art" originally appeared in "The Liberator" in 1966, less than one year after Malcolm X's assassination in New York City.

### Chapter 3 Endnotes

<sup>3</sup> In the interview with Salaam, Baraka reminisces on "the night that *Dutchman* came out," saying he "went down to the corner to look at all these newspapers" (212). Baraka recalls, "They were saying ... This nigger is crazy, he's using all these bad words; but I could see they were trying to make me famous ... They had some stuff they wanted to run about me, either on a long-term negative or a long-term positive. I said, oh, in other words you're going to make this some kind of discussion."

<sup>4</sup> In "Amiri Baraka, The Congress of African People, and Black Power Politics from the 1961 United Nations Protest to the 1972 Gary Convention," Komozi Woodard details the unique marriage between the Black Power and Black Arts Movements. In detailing the shared cultural politics between the two movements, Woodard includes a discussion of the BAM's reaction when "Huey Newton was arrested in a shooting incident with the police in Oakland" (66). Woodard writes, "the immediate response of the Black Arts Movement was 'Black Arts for Black Panthers.' Alongside Sonia Sanchez, Baraka was in San Francisco to help launch the first black studies program at what was then San Francisco State College. ... While in the Bay Area, Baraka toured Oakland to see the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and Los Angeles to visit the Us Organization."

<sup>5</sup> In "Ritual Drama: Between Mysticism and Magic," David E. R. George discusses Euripides' *The Bacchae*. He reminds us that Euripides' *Bacchae* is "One of the last Greek tragedies and, ironically, the only surviving one which has as its subject the purported ritual origin of Western drama" (127). George argues that *The Bacchae*'s "religious message is ... complicated by the fact that we do not have the ending. ... One suspects that not only late Skeptical revisions but even later Christian editorial assumptions regarding the nature of gods have so contaminated our reading that we cannot and perhaps should not attempt to reconstruct the origins of theatre from the rituals described in this late play."

<sup>6</sup> In Wole Soyinka's, *Myth, Literature and The African World*, Soyinka writes "the difference which we seek to define between European and African drama as one of man's formal representations of experience is not simply a difference of style or form, nor is it confined to drama alone. It is representative of the essential differences between two world-views, a difference between one culture whose very artifacts are evidence of a cohesive understanding of irreducible truths and another, whose creative impulses are directed by period dialectics" (38). Soyinka explains this difference using a metaphor in which "Western-man's world-view" (37) is a "steam-engine which shunts itself between rather closely-spaced suburban stations gathering a "ballast of allegory," "naturalist timber," "synthetic fuel of surrealism," each stop allowing it to gather "yet another holistic world-view ... glimpsed and asserted through psychedelic smoke."

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<sup>7</sup>. These lines are commonly attributed to Nathan Hale (June 6, 1755 – September 22, 1776), a soldier for the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War. Hale was captured and executed by the British when he volunteered as a spy on an intelligence-gathering mission in New York City.

<sup>8</sup> This particular idea is actually generated from an anecdote in Artaud's text in which a psychiatrist subtly demeans his patient's sense of truth. "'You were promised that sum would be paid you. It will be paid. You cannot go on that way persisting in attributing the delay to ill will,'" states the psychiatrist, with no actual knowledge of whether or not ill intent existed. Artaud explains this saying, "So there you have those good-natured psychiatrists' conversations which seem to be perfectly harmless, but they leave the trace of a small black tongue in the heat, the small black anodyne tongue of a poisonous salamander" (148).

### **Part III: A Ways to Freedom**

#### **Chapter 4. Future Aesthetics in Renee Gladman's *The Activist***

The most valuable quality in life is the will to existence, the unconnected zoom, which finally becomes in anyone's hands whatever part of it he would collect. ... Like dipping cups of water from the falls. Which is what the artist does. Fools want to dictate what kind of dipper he uses.

- Amiri Baraka, "hunting is not that head on the wall"

We have already established that when considering the long history of published poetry, especially poetry published and circulated by African Americans within the United States, one cannot help but take into account the external circumstances contributing to a grand narrative (or perhaps many narratives) holding intersections, influxes, and outpourings. The African American literary tradition holds blendings and dispersions of styles and genres; longings both personal and political, all pushing to and pulling from a place of greater artistic expression. Although the urge for heightened aesthetic achievement is not one attributed only to the African American poetic tradition, this chapter, coming after a firm turn inward, is concerned with the highly self-conscious nature of both African American poetry and criticism. This is particularly true of those texts expressing social or political ideas. At all times, the tradition seems aware of the pressures of publishing and demands of political and social approval on artistic creation, in addition to the inability of the English language to comprehensively and effectively express African American experience. Invested in the perpetual transformations of and



conversations concerning a black aesthetic within poetry, deeply believing in the multiple futures awaiting African American literature, I insert Renee Gladman's, *The Activist*, into our ongoing conversation as a site of investigation and example for future creative endeavors within the genre. However, before examining Gladman's text, it is necessary to revisit at least the beginnings of the conversation of a specifically black aesthetic once more.

James Weldon Johnson's anthology, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, first published in 1922, includes a preface discussing what the author believes to be acceptable and unacceptable standards of African American poetry. Johnson argues, "The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced" (9). He continues, "... nothing will do more [for the Negro] ... than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art." "Is there likelihood that the American Negro will be able to do this?" Johnson asks. Is there likelihood that the American Negro, as an artist, more specifically a poet, can prove beyond a doubt his equality of humanness and intellectual aptitude using a creative outlet? Johnson believes the answer to his question is yes. "There is for the good reason that he possesses the innate powers." Still, the author contends, "The colored poet in the United States labors within limitations which he cannot easily pass over. He is always on the defensive or the offensive. The pressure upon him to be propagandic is well nigh irresistible. These conditions are suffocating to the breadth and to real art in poetry" (39)<sup>1</sup>. Rather than an external force, Johnson argues for something much more intrinsic to raise the Negro's art and social status to that of their white peers. Cultivating this would take years of serious work for the Negro poet.

In 1922, Johnson deemed the task of the American Negro poet to be finding a form able to “express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without...” (41). Unimpressed with what he believed to be “unimpassioned” poetry (29) —“pathetic overcompensations of a group inferiority complex ...” (Locke 2), often associated with “the minstrel tradition and the fowling-nets of dialect”— Johnson suggests that the American Negro poet needed a “form ... freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor...” (40); a “form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos ... of the Negro...” In addition, this form was to be “...capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow of the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment” (41-42). What Johnson is arguing as a search for a new form for American Negro poets can actually be understood as two separate tasks: the investigation of language in order to express a more personal and accurate portrayal of American Negro experience, as well the creation of an enhanced artistic outlet in which that language might be used or presented, a form in which African American experience might be expressed rather than represented according to the standards of outsiders<sup>2</sup>.

Alain Locke, in his 1925 essay, “Youth Speaks,” speaks to Johnson’s longings writing of a “...vast spiritual endowment” of “Negro genius”<sup>3</sup> ready to usher in the sure artistic change (1). Locke continues, “... we approach cultural maturity in a phase of art that promises now to be fully representative.” But, one wonders, representative of what? Locke answers this - in an earlier but similar message to that of early Black Arts desires - prophesying a clearly redeeming quality of African American expression to come,

denouncing what he has previously found to be unsuitable as forms of black expression.

He writes,

... we have lately had an art that was stiltedly self-conscious, and racially rhetorical rather than racially expressive. Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro they speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express. They have stopped posing, being nearer to the attainment of poise. (1)

Locke expresses what he believes to be a positive shifting in African American art. He describes an attempt at distancing African American poetry from artistic criteria dictated and exhibited by outside forces such as white critics and poets.

*The Book of American Negro Poetry* and “Youth Speaks,” in addition to a number of other critical texts emerging in the early twentieth century, served to define the task of the American Negro poet while also standing as texts indicative of “not only an earnest for the future, but actual achievement” (Johnson 47). The ideas presented in these texts serve as a cornerstone for the furthering of what can be viewed as the active labeling of an aesthetic impulse<sup>4</sup> within African American poetry. Whether requiring African American poets to voice the emotions and aspirations of black people in America, or to be “direct and instinctive” (Baraka 168), or to “break between the revolutionary black writers and the ‘literary mainstream’” (Fuller 199), or to maintain a “separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” from white writing, or to challenge “normative” aesthetics (“Black” 124), within African American poetry, there constantly exists the task of writing one’s self away from a particular set of rules into another. It is this aesthetic impulse—a movement, or a series of movements, each time manufactured within the very circumstances from which it longs to evolve, a movement across temporalities, beginning much earlier than the jazz and blues poetry of the Harlem Renaissance or New

Negro Movement, and ending far after the political poetry of the Black Arts Movement—that provides the perfect historical and artistic backdrop for an examination of Renee Gladman’s poem, “*The Activist*.” Most important to this backdrop is not necessarily the search for an accurate aesthetic for African American poetry, but rather, the sometimes-weighty obligations that this search has taken on.

Defining a black aesthetic has usually been contingent upon both defining black art and, even when not intended, engaging in social and political debates about the nature of blackness. Because of this, black poets and critics have found themselves standing in as activists and reformers of social justice, their art acting as aqueducts of the same. As has been discussed in this project’s previous chapters, while striving to write under the umbrella of black aesthetics (not solely in terms of black aesthetics as understood within the Black Arts Movement, but in a more general sense, discussing basic characteristics of black artistic expression), many African American artists have been tasked with first, considering the representation of African Americans as a group, before giving attention to personal artistic expression. As such, critics and poets alike have searched within poetry for a genuine way to step outside of these boundaries. There has been (and still is) a search for the expression of racial experience through language that can somehow exceed what is known about race and language and the poem itself. There has been a search for an ability to say something more than how it is “impossible to use ... language to really say anything” (Zurawski 104). There has been a yearning to create art that serves to attest to more than (or not at all) one’s equity of intelligence. Having a general sense of the ongoing conversation surrounding black aesthetics, Gladman’s text, in both form and content, becomes all the more useful for contributing to this conversation.

*The Activist* begins in the middle of what seems to be a political revolution in an unnamed town. The text lacks racial markers or what one might deem as racialized language or dialect, minus the inclusion of a few names which readers might associate with particular ethnic groups (i.e. Monique, Jose). The poem includes, but does not necessarily draw superfluous attention to both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. In this way, Gladman's poem, even before discussing specific aspects of theme or plot, manages to present itself outside of at least a few of the restrictions previously placed on African American poetry. Although written by a black woman, the text is without any firm markers of gender and includes topics previously deemed to be in direct contrast with positive representation of the African American family or romantic relationships in literature (namely, the lesbian relationship between Monique and Stefani). In addition, *The Activist* exists, not outside of, but within and beyond the borders of genre, mixing poetic language with what one might assume to be characteristics of standard narrative.

In "The Person in the World," an essay included in *Biting the Error* (an anthology of writers exploring new narrative), Gladman writes, "Prose (to risk a definition) is the registering of the everyday, the phenomenon of life (of being-in-life) using a kind of heightened language (thus, a heightened consciousness of oneself in language), alongside a materialization of that activity in the form of characters (splinters) and events (narrative)" (47). "Prose moves across genres," Gladman writes, it moves across "practices of thought, cultures, realities, bringing to both the writer's and reader's attention the blurred yet visible borders between them" (47). Although Gladman has encouraged the referencing of *The Activist* as a poem, it is most useful to think of this one hundred and forty-five page project, not in the conventional ways we think of lyric poetry,

but rather, as a poem comprised of prose blurring the lines of nonfiction and fantasy blended with characteristics of a novella (as defined by Gladman)<sup>5</sup>. Gladman's work, without having to announce itself as such, is an African-American poem (by virtue of its author) discussing African American experience (though not solely) through an experimentation with language and form. Because of this, the text also serves as an example of the future work of African American literature, creating another hand off from the work of the Black Arts and Black Feminist movements.

An activist is defined as a proponent or practitioner of activism, or a militant reformer. Activism is defined as the use of direct, often confrontational action, such as a demonstration or strike, in opposition to or support of a cause; a policy of taking direct and often militant action to achieve an end, especially a political or social one; a policy of taking direct and militant action to achieve a political or social goal. *The Activist*, as a poem, intends to "get to the bottom of things ... to suss out the source ... [to explore] the nature of protest" (109) and action. It intends to seek out what lies "... beyond the issues? What makes one go outside and scream?" Without the obligations of maintaining a particular racial or formal aesthetic, Renee Gladman presents a text that not only explores the inside of an activist organization, but also the process of living always in opposition to another, always with doubts and suspicions, even of one's self. In addition to these explorations, Gladman uses *The Activist* to probe the possibilities of expressing such an experience both personally and as part of a group. Rather than attempting to investigate this issue through the standard expository essay or the "strict narrative of fiction" ("Person" 46)<sup>6</sup>, Gladman scrutinizes the internal and external aspects of activism through a series of fractured distortions of memories and characters.

Although *The Activist* is not confessedly a text about black poetic aesthetics, it is a text that understands the act of always justifying. It understands the act of always being in conversation and only half believing either side at anytime, including the self. It understands doubt. Because of this, *The Activist* is useful for furthering a discussion of aesthetic impulse within African American poetry.

“Doubt,” writes Lydia Davis,

uneasiness, dissatisfaction ... with existing forms may result in the formal integration of these doubts by the creation of new forms, forms that in one way or another exceed or surpass our expectations. Whereas repeating old forms implies a lack of desire or compulsion, or a refusal, to entertain doubt or dissatisfaction. (35)

Davis’ explanation allows for easier grappling with the inundation of apprehension presented within *The Activist*. Most useful, is Davis’ discussion of doubt’s implications. Doubt, as a manifestation of displeasure, causes a restructuring, often allowing for particular inclusions or dismissals as attempts to alleviate previous worries or discomfort. According to Davis, constant repetition of old forms, implies a lack of kinetic energy, a refusal to accept one’s disappointment in present circumstances and a lack of connection with the potential and desire for innovation or satisfaction. *The Activist* is a text constantly concerned with and connecting to a sense of dissatisfaction, or the desire for a form of surplus; a form able to encompass “a heightened consciousness of oneself in language.” The text appears to move along at least one plotline that is (instead of furthered as with standard narrative) interrupted with weavings between personal narration of the present, reported narration of the past, and a confusion between the real and fantastic; all seeking to be revealed and verified through language. Gladman argues, “In the field of our thoughts, in thinking of existence (being-existing) in time and space,

we have the most absolute of mirrors: the sentence” (46). If we are to take seriously Gladman’s words, in addition to taking *The Activist* seriously as an investigation of the experience of activism, it is also necessary to take seriously the text’s individual reflections in order to gain a more introspective understanding of the nature of self-actualization and creative change.

Throughout *The Activist* one finds symptoms of uncertainty abounding. The main narrator (assumedly a reporter<sup>7</sup>) begins the text saying, “I dream them here, the activists, who are recurring” (11). He knows they are activists because “the radicals ... are always leaning out the windows, shouting slogans.” What is being revealed to the reader in these opening moments? The sentence, causing the reader to doubt the trustworthiness of the narrator, mirrors the narrator’s own uncertainty. Are the activists recurring in real life? Are they recurring in his dream? Are the people to whom the narrator is referring actually activists, or just assumed to be because they are screaming from windows and shouting slogans? How does one discern? Even after finishing the poem, the reader is still left with dilemmas of the text. However, imperative to the text is not whether the reader knows or understands everything as reality, but rather, whether the reader understands what is at stake within the conditions being expressed. It is important that the reader understands that, often, reality exists beyond a space of expression. Sometimes things are only real because we believe them to be. This understanding is not gained through extensive plot or character development, nor a continuity of space and time, but at the basic level of the statement: the sentence. “Subject phrases, predicates, dependent and independent clauses, adverbs, prepositions, verb tenses, even punctuation- all create intervals (or delays, derailments) of how the person functions in the world” (46),



Gladman argues. These very basic units are indicative of our everyday actions and interactions with our surroundings. If this is true, despite Gladman's significant effort into creating specific fractures of characters, space, and time, one should be able to analyze the poem at the level of decontextualized statements, regardless of order, while still gaining access to the everyday.

And this is our most overt action! It will fail if encumbered by disbelief. I have to get us back on track. (79)

If you can be a person only when you are violating city power, what happens when you must restrain yourself from such violations, when you are hiding? (12)

We stole the map from the Office of Transportation and now I think the feds set us up. If I'm wrong, then all this mutating indicates we've moved into an alternate reality ... But ... I don't know ... perhaps we are as much in the world as we can ever be, and that's the problem. (93)

"This kind of presence makes my people nervous," Sharpe declares to an audience of reporters at a noon press conference. "In a time where we have to face some real live threats, we mustn't get derailed by phantoms." Following this admission, a reporter from the Daily challenged Sharpe on his organization's interpretation of the term "presence," to which Sharpe declined to respond. (23)

From here I watch each group thunder past, but I'm too entrapped by their fervor to make my own decisions. I have scores of opinions though. Unfortunately, they oscillate. (109)

"This is the situation we're facing: a shockingly high number of witnesses claim that the bridge is in perfect form, the President of our nation is convinced that the bridge has been exploded, another group asserts that the bridge has collapsed, not exploded, and a handful of researchers contests that there ever was a bridge ..." (30)

"Monique is saying:

We have to think seriously here ... the signals are always ... scrambled ... we've got to break the barrier ... fuck their system from the inside ... no this ain't the pacifist movement ... we've outlived that occasion ...

While Stefani shouts:

Yeah let's lay 'em all out,

during M.'s ellipses.

Lomarlo considers:

This might not be about eggs and perhaps I'm not supposed to hear. But these are my comrades! They're smiling at me. One has his hand on my shoulder, expecting me to ease into this conversation when I have been struggling to get here, when the worst things have happened to me.

Freddie embraces the newcomer:

So Lomo, what do you think?

I just want to eat. I never care what it is. (36-37)

These are not my memories ... Where are my memories? (39)

"Americans need to understand that silence is sometimes necessary when one is engaged in a psychological war. ... Our top priority is to disable the coagulation of all so-called angry people, be they commuters, activists, what have you." (62)

This is my mind, only I have the right to be here ... (42)

That is not regular language. It's a code and everybody knows it but me. Monique keeps saying, Ha chini chini, and the rest of them nod their heads. It's because I fell asleep ... they're punishing me, knowing I would forget this training. No, not the CPL. Maybe the SFF, but never the CPL. I've just got to relax ... flow into this. (44)

Lay there for hours, not because I was comfortable there. I couldn't remember against whom we were fighting. Lying there I thought, on my back and safe in this tiny room, I want to think about my enemies. It was easy. No one intruded, everything was fine. I concentrated. However, the image never surfaced. That's not true. Several images came to me, but none of them seemed right. I was looking for something truly sinister. I kept saying, This couldn't be the enemy, discarding the idea. (46)

Wait! I lost the relation again. Every time I feel certain that I have devised a way of procuring from my captors, or conversely from my imagination, which world I'm in, the path that I took to get there fails to maintain its shape. The idea that I thought would save me dissipates mercilessly. (72)

While the pitch of the utterance can be vastly characterized as Stefani's pitch, its authenticity is entirely suspect for most of the group. (87)

There is a language that distinguishes this group from the other activists in

the city, a language they fall into when they are together, that they do not know on their own. At times, one or two of them say words that the other three, or just one, does not know, and it causes a breach between them. The words usually are the diaphanous ones.

Harvey Pratt, a 45-year-old attorney, spoke from his car, “They are blaring signs demanding that we stop. But what do they want us to do? We’ve all got kids to feed. Personally, I’m tired of pretending that I don’t see the bridge.” (26)

The map ... it has become everything to us: we cannot control it but neither of us wants to say this. Even I who cannot decipher the map ... know there is something unnerving about it. (93)

Whatever the case, the existence of an auxiliary presence cannot be denied. But how easy it is to become paranoid when you are an activist! ...Someone is always looking at you. (94)

“Instead of a hunger strike ... it’s as though they are issuing a logic one”—but then immediately added that he didn’t know what he meant by that. Confession at this juncture seems unlikely. (49)

What does any reader take away from these statements, even without hints of character, space or time? Most immediately, that “This is absurd ...” (101)<sup>8</sup>. This is understandable. *The Activist* is not intended to present rational understanding. Nor is the text intended to present a neatness of plot or characters fitting within a system of assumed knowledge or expectations of aesthetic criteria regarding either narrative or poetry. Instead, *The Activist* presents itself as an alternate form somehow encompassing both, making certain that (in addition to the necessity of continuously questioning and reassessing, both within the text and one’s self as a reader of the text<sup>9</sup>) what the reader does understand is the fact that activism, like most “Disordered experiences” (Rice 89), cannot always be forced into “already familiar styles of writing.” *The Activist* is an example of a surplus form, capable of integrating while also interrogating insecurity, discomfort, paranoia, longing, obligation, variances of will, silencings of voice, and the

precarious nature of language (especially as they pertain to writing).

As a poem, *The Activist*, defines and maintains its own aesthetic standards. Through the use of integrated, yet, innovative genre and formal qualities, the text explores the nature of activism, while presenting perpetual feeling of surveillance, doubt, and self-consciousness as the very things “... beyond the issues? [Things that make one] go outside and scream?” Although, *The Activist* does not state a direct relationship to the conversation of aesthetics within African American poetry, the text itself serves as an answer to questions concerning poetic aesthetics and open expression. Careful not to argue *The Activist* as a post-racial end to aesthetic movement within African American poetry, I encourage consideration of the task of representing experience, then consideration of how much more difficult that task becomes when forced to render said experience black. I encourage consideration of the task of writing poetry, as Magdalena Zurawski describes it, as “... an existential problem” (106). *The Activist*, through both form and content asks and answers the question Zurawski constructs around the existential task of expressing rather than representing experience. “If I can’t exist as I am in the world,” she asks, “can I exist as I am in my writing?” Zurawski believes the answer to be no. *The Activist* demonstrates the same. “And that, in some way, is also a yes. If you can’t exist completely in the world, you can’t exist completely in writing. You are incomplete, here and there.”

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#### Chapter 4 Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Despite his beliefs in the *potential* of the American Negro, Johnson’s text is clear that what he imagines as truly “*great* (Negro) literature and art” is something that has yet been produced by even the most respected American Negro artists published - Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar being two of the poets mentioned. Johnson makes sure to define this problem of unrealized potential as one distinct to the American

Negro. "If out of the few Negroes who have lived in France there came a Dumas ..." Johnson questions, "... and out of the few Negroes who have lived in England there came a Coleridge-Taylor; and if from ... the only Negro in Russia there sprang that country's national poet, why have not the millions of Negroes in the United States ... produced a Dumas, or a Coleridge-Taylor, or a Pushkin" (21)? The author answers himself contending, "The Negro in the United States is consuming all of his intellectual energy in this grueling race-struggle" (21).

<sup>2</sup> However, in order to reach this more accurate language and/or enhanced artistic outlet, one must first be aware of what the imagery, idioms, or peculiar turns of the Negro brain entail. One might also need to be clear on the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations of all Negroes. One might even need to consult with Johnson as to what he believed to be the range of subjects and scopes of treatment available to be discussed by the Negro. Already, the concept of artistic choices has been expanded far beyond the scope of the personal towards a group identified or accepted standard of achievement, one providing no less pressure than the paradigms originally being escaped. Creating art in this way, the African American poet is not only faced with the assumed internal struggle of perfecting his or her craft to best represent his or her own ideas, but he or she is also faced with the challenge of perfecting his or her craft to best represent the ideas of others, while also meeting what most often seems like an abstract, unattainable, indiscernible measure of intellectual prowess.

<sup>3</sup> Locke's rendition of the Negro's "vast spiritual endowment" differs only slightly from Johnson's description of "innate powers ... the emotional endowment, the originality and artistic conception ... the power of creating that which has universal appeal and influence..."(9).

<sup>4</sup> I have become concerned, within African American poetry, with what Albert Hofstadter in relation to art, has called the "Aesthetic Impulse" (171). Hofstadter describes the aesthetic impulse in two stages: the first being, the taste drive, taken from a use of Kant's idea of taste in *Critique of Judgment*. The taste drive is the urge to fashion objects which would satisfy the judgment of taste as to their rightness or validity as appearances. The second stage is the anti-aesthetic, which, as it sounds, exists and works in opposition to what was exhibited as aesthetic tastes. The critic sees these not as two separate drives, but rather, two stages in strict sequence of one impulse. "They are two stages, in strict sequence, of a single, more basic impulse that not only lies at the root of everything aesthetic, whether positive or negative, but also of the whole of human reality."

<sup>5</sup> On April 10, 2009, John Madera featured a novella recommendation by Renee Gladman. In the blog post, Gladman wrote of the novella saying, "I like the idea that the genre is difficult to grasp, that the form itself changes with every new attempt, and that there is no recognizable canon. For me, right now, today at 4 p.m., I see the novella as a compressed narrative with a singular textual presence, like an extended moment. A gesture, or walk in the city, or question held for a special duration, long enough for micro-happenings to occur along a string of thinking but not so long that any of these events separate and demand their own space of story." In the interview, Gladman also states, "we can't take for granted what the term "novella" means. In fact, to venture into the writing of our own novellas, we have to, in a sense, define what is at stake. What is it

about our subject, or our relation to that subject, our thinking of it, that demands this particular form?" Knowing that a novella is defined as a shortened prose tale containing a moral lesson or satiric quality, these thoughts become useful for thinking through *The Activist*. If Gladman can see any particular genre of writing as constantly being redefined, as she does with prose and the novella, it is understandable that she might also see the *The Activist* as redefining what is considered as poetry and the act of registering specific experience.

<sup>6</sup> Gladman finds fiction to be "too burdened by a system of expectations (e.g., entrenched characters, well-developed storylines, conflicts and resolutions) to allow for the wandering and sometimes stuttering 'I'" Gladman associates with discovery ("Person" 46). "This 'I,'" according to Gladman, "not necessarily autobiographical, is a manifestation of the act of thinking in language, of the difficulties that arise, the fractures that form. This 'I' undermines a tendency of conventional fiction to present a realism that is as faithful as it is complete and confident, a realism that has little use for the materials of its own construction."

<sup>7</sup> The narrator establishes himself as a reporter; however, following the rules of standard narration (rules to which *The Activist* is not necessarily committed), he then establishes himself as an unreliable narrator. He is unreliable, not merely because he is sometimes unaware of whether or not he is dreaming, but also because his press pass is revealed to be a catering pass ("Activist" 111). However, the text is not clear about whether this is a mistake on his part or another absurdity of his daily circumstances.

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking of the term "absurd" in a similar manner to the way one thinks of the formal experimentation in theatre. Therefore, when referencing the term I am alluding to ideas concerning man's actions within a world controlled by an outside force. I am thinking about dismissals of realism and abandoning of rationality because the methods are inefficient for understanding or existing within a character's present circumstances.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Davis writes of incomplete form, "To work deliberately in the form of fragment can be seen as stopping or appearing to stop a work closer, in the process, to what Blanchot would call the origin of writing ... It may be seen as a formal integration, an integration into the form itself, of a question about the process of writing" (35). She continues, "Any interruption, either of our expectations or of the smooth surface of the work itself – by breaking it off, confusing it or leaving it actually unfinished – foregrounds the work as artifact, as object, rather than as invisible purveyor of meaning, emotion, atmosphere. Constant interruption, fragmentation, also keeps returning the reader not only to the real world but to a consciousness of his or her own mind at work." This is helpful for thinking through the work that Gladman is doing within *The Activist*. What she forces the reader to pay attention to is that there seems to be no *real* way of creating a stuttering "I" within a poem without fracturing and piling voices one on top the other. This is also useful for thinking through the work the text as a whole (not in terms of totality, but rather a unit encompassing its fragmented parts) is doing. At each moment in the text, the reader must teach one's self how to read the text. Perhaps the reader must at times remind his or her self that it is a poem by a black woman, or a poem about a revolution, or a poem *about* something. I am interested in the fact that *The Activist* requires the reader to continuously remind his or herself that the text is a "poem"

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at all. In this way, in addition to the focus on the map that is constantly changing, the text draws the reader's attention away from finite details towards a focus on obscurities of form and language.

## Conclusion

My having spent at least half of my graduate career studying radicalism within African American literature (specifically within African American poetry), in conjunction with my personal time spent as an advocate of the existence of black life, leaves me with a persistent belief and investment in the future of African American literature as a tool of social change. Because of this, I find it necessary to study and investigate those authors that have believed the same before me, to study and investigate those texts they have submitted to the African American tradition as examples of that belief. Tracing the potential for what I define as black radical criticism, using that criticism to reread the work of Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Toni Cade Bambara and Renee Gladman, is not for me an attempt at providing definite names, answers, or projections for what the future of African American literature and black radicalism should appear as or look like. Rather, my study of Baraka as a central figure of inquiry is used to reach back and forth in the tradition, asking questions that lead to greater connection rather than distinctions between literary movements. It is my attempt at seeking repetition and revision as guidance for new possibility.

Connecting Hughes' radical legacy to Baraka's allows for the study of connections of black expression and radicalism across what has been commonly studied as the distinctions of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts movements. Connecting the power and purpose of The Black Arts movement to a continued insistence on exploring and valuing the personal and political in the Black Feminist movement allows for the BAM to speak to black feminist texts with "gentler eyes and less sensitive ears" (Shange 12) as Haki Madhubuti to Ntozake Shange when she received the Gwendolyn



Brooks Poetry Prize for Lifetime Achievement. It says, I'm sorry. Grow on. I can see myself in you, now, but before "We didn't know." Inserting Renee Gladman's, *The Activist*, takes up the potential for freedom of self actualization and radical creative change by serving as an experimentation of the theories and readings created in parts one and two of my project.

My mixing discussions of racism, historical memory, and modes of self-construction within African American texts with a larger discussion of the teaching and criticism of African American literature grounds this project with an indictment similar to that found within the texts I have analyzed. Engaging with the chaos of repetitions and revisions found within African American literature, just as black radical writers have insisted upon a commitment to personal engagement, I insist upon the necessity of critics and teachers of African American literature to commit to a present and active engagement, to resist teaching to future generations the same methods of categorizing taught to us. I insist upon the necessity of facing and deconstructing our biases and privileges in order to assess the ways in which we perpetuate inaccurate and misconstrued constructions of African American literature and its creators. In this deconstruction, we allow our discussions of African American writing to follow the patterns of the thought that creates it. In this deconstruction, I insist we grow increasingly comfortable with the resisting, the defensive, the uncomfortable, the challengeable, the chaotic, the unnamed, the unfinished ...

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