Attitudes Toward Tradition

All literature exists in the context of both a public and a private field of language. The writer brings his creative sensibility to bear on the tradition inherited from his literary forebears. Implicit in the writer’s situation is the cumulative effect of that tradition upon the culture of his times. One could claim that the writer is essentially a creation of the books he has read.

Ralph Ellison uses the term “literary ancestors” to describe the writer’s relationship to tradition. In an article published in Dissent (Autumn 1963), editor Irving Howe accused James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison of abdicating the tradition of protest literature exemplified by Richard Wright. Ellison retorted: “But perhaps you [Howe] will understand when I say [Richard Wright] did not influence me. If I point out that while one can do nothing about choosing one’s relatives, one can, as artist, choose one’s ‘ancestors.’ Wright was, in this sense, a ‘relative’; Hemingway, an ‘ancestor.’ Langston Hughes, whose work I knew in grade school and whom I knew before I knew Wright, was a ‘relative’; Eliot, whom I was to meet only many years later, and Malraux and Dostoevski and Faulkner, were ‘ancestors’—if you please or don’t please!”

What we have here is a clash between the private and public aspects of literary performance. As a Marxist, Howe leans toward the idea of literature as basically a public performance, one whose essential function is to bring about a revolution in social consciousness. According to Marxist canon literature must speak to public needs. Thus Howe envisions literature as a political tool to be used as a militant voice of change.

Because the decade of the sixties was so intensely political, a great deal of Afro-American literature leaned decidedly in the direction of public encounter. The writer, then and since, however private his concerns, has been compelled to function in an atmosphere of speech-making—particularly when much of this speech-making concerns his very function as an artist. Thus the black writer finds himself torn between the arena and his study. He may, on the one hand, develop a sense of guilt concerning his
lack of public commitment to the political struggle. Or he may, like Malraux in Man’s Fate, attempt to distill the militant language of struggle and liberation into a self-contained work of art. Whatever his choice, some faction lies in wait to decry his decision; such is the nature of critical debate.

The turbulent arena of political encounter presents the black writer with a highly charged field of expression. (Note, for example, the political speeches in Ralph Ellison’s novel, Invisible Man.) In the sixties, expressive language sprang mainly from the sermonistic style of the black church, and from that of urban street speakers like Harlem’s Ed “Pork Chop” Davis. This style is characterized by the traditional format of call and response. It is also characterized by the modulated repetition of key phrases, images, hyperbole, and biblical allusions.

The sermonistic style is especially associated with leaders like the late Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., whose speeches gesture toward the high forensic. It is a style we readily associate with great moments in history and with patriotic fervor. It is the messianic voice of the social revolutionary who sees himself as projecting into the world a truer vision of human possibilities. Speeches like King’s could arise only at a time of acknowledged social conflict. It is as if the nation is at war. The images employed strongly convey the idea of unity against oppression, while laying the basis for a strategy of moral confrontation.

Although Adam Clayton Powell’s, Malcolm X’s, and H. Rap Brown’s rhetorical styles also derive, in part, from the tradition of the church sermon, we most readily associate their styles with the vernacular language of the black urban communities. When this rhetoric is vitriolic it bears close affinities to the language of the “dozens,” and is highly influenced by jazz rhythms, slang, and jive talk:

...I heard Bobby Kennedy charge, publicity is the Freedom Riders’ cause.
And his finger popped!
His daddy is well-known exploiter, a thief—dig?
And their fingers popped loud!
And all around fingers were popping and gum-chewing white liberals were encouraging youth, white and black, to fill the jails while they paid off their mortgages and Hi-Fi payments.
And their fingers popped too!
I was spinning with Earth and a foul wind was blowing.
Finger pop!...3

The numerous aesthetic and political issues black writers were forced to confront during the sixties were hardly new. Some of them grew out of the historic struggle to obliterate racism in America. Others sprang from the general dilemma of identity which haunts American cultural history. Still others seemed to stem from an overall crisis in modern intellectual thought in Western society, where values are being assaulted by a new generation of youth around the world as it searches for new standards and
ideals. Black literature reflects this search, complete with its uncertainties and ambivalence.

The emergence of a distinctly chauvinistic and increasingly nationalist tendency among the more vociferous of the young black writers of the past decade cannot be summarily dismissed as a historical aberration. Given the highly political character of the sixties, it was inevitable that some kind of literary voice should emerge to address itself, if only obliquely, to the complex of tensions underlying the demands for social equality. At one end of the literary/political spectrum, we have the example of the Christian James Baldwin eloquently defending King's philosophy of love and nonviolence, while at the other extremity stands Malcolm X, the Muslim. Symbolically clustered around Malcolm X are such writers as LeRoi Jones, Eldridge Cleaver, Don L. Lee, and Welton Smith. It is only natural that the more militant writers of the decade should tend toward Malcolm X's rhetorical style. He was a man of the city; and most of these writers had been born or reared in the black communities of the urban North. Since many of them had been forced to cope with the implicit violence of the urban community, they could not countenance the concept of nonviolence. Many of these writers may even have been former members of the warring street gangs of the fifties.

These street gangs were very much like traditional warrior societies. They had definite codes of conduct. Some of them were structured like small nations: there might be a minister of information or a minister of war. They claimed a turf with definite boundaries; and sometimes there were even "treaties" concerning these boundaries. Great stress was put on machismo and the ability to defend oneself against an adversary.

The street gangs brought to black literature a distinct and varied oral tradition. This function is of special importance. We have already alluded to the "dozens" in the context of political and artistic speech. But the "dozens" are just a minor aspect of a larger urban folk-narrative tradition. In this tradition, we find a pantheon of culture heroes. First, there is the finely attired Signifying Monkey, a trickster figure who uses words to bring about ordered chaos. Then there is Shine, who according to folk legend was the only black on the Titanic when it sank.

Shine is working down in the kitchen when he notices that the ship is leaking. He informs the captain of the ship's impending catastrophe, but the captain rebukes Shine, saying that the ship is well equipped with enough pumps to keep it afloat. After repeatedly trying to warn the captain that the ship is sinking, Shine jumps overboard into the ocean. The captain, finally realizing that Shine is right, implores Shine to save him:

... Just then the captain said, "Shine, Shine, save poor me; I'll give you more money than a nigger ever did see."
Shine said to the captain: "Money is good on land and on sea, but the money on land is the money for me."
And Shine swam on...

Along the way Shine encounters a whale and a later a shark. The shark says: "Shine, Shine, you swim so fine; you miss one stroke and your black ass is mine." Shine replies:
"You may be king of the ocean, king of the sea; but you gotta be a swimmin' motherfucker to outswim me." And Shines swims on. Shine traditionally ends up safely back home in the United States, usually in the vicinity of the raconteur's home.

Other folk heroes of the urban narrative include the foul-talking bad men of the gun. Folk characters like Big Bad Bill, Stagger Lee, and Billy Lyons wear their meanness as a badge of honor. Undoubtedly the folk speech that springs from these street narratives has influenced the style of much contemporary black literature. Playwrights like Ed Bullins, Ronald Milner, Douglas Turner Ward, and Joseph Walker utilize these modes of black urban speech in their dramatic works. Much of the tone here is frankly aggressive.

This brings us to another feature of some of the new literature, its scatological content. The conscious use of scatological language and imagery is a deliberate attempt to shake the language loose from its genteel moorings. There are several possible lines of literary precedence here. Black writers are familiar with the works of James Joyce, Henry Miller, Jean Genet, and Allen Ginsberg. Furthermore, scatology is as old as the English language itself. In black poetry, scatology functions to release tension, invoke laughter, or to heighten the sense of outrage against the forces of injustice.

Scatology can be an embarrassing device in the hands of an unskilled poet, but when modulated carefully, as in Welton Smith's suite of poems entitled "Malcolm," it operates as a unit of energy. There are six movements to this work. The first movement is lyrical; the voice is somewhat withdrawn and contemplative as it speaks to the private memory of Malcolm X.

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i cannot move
from your voice,
there is no peace
where i am. the wind
cannot move
hard enough to clear the trash
and far away i hear my screams.
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Then the poet invokes the memory of Sister Betty Shabazz, the widow of the assassinated leader:

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the lean, hard-bone face
a rich copper color.
the smile. the
thin nose and broad
nostrils. Betty—in the quiet
after midnight. your hand
soft on her back. you kiss
her neck softly
she would turn
to face you and arch up—
her head moving to your chest.
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her arms sliding
round your neck. you breathe deeply.
it is quiet. in this moment
you know
what it was all about.
your voice
is inside me; i loaned
my heart in exchange
for your voice......

This section continues with an overall poetic design of Malcolm’s life and sense of mission. Finally the section ends in something of an elegiac tone:

now you pace the regions
of my heart. you know
my blood and see
where my tears are made.
i see the beast,
and hold my frenzy;
you are not lonely—
in my heart there are many
unmarked graves.

The “beast” referred to is the one mentioned in the biblical book of Revelations. In the iconography of many black writers the beast symbolizes the evils of white Western civilization. This apocalyptic image lays the ground for the next poem in the suite. Entitled “The Nigga Section,” it is an outraged invective directed against Malcolm’s Afro-American assassins.

slimy obscene creatures. insane
creations of a beast. you
have murdered a man. you
have devoured me. you
have done it with precision
like the way you stand green
in the dark sucking pus
and slicing your penis
into quarters—stuffing
shit through your noses.
you rotten motherfuckin bastards....

The scatology seems to be functioning here as a precisely directed burst of tension-releasing images. Heard aloud, this poem takes on the characteristics of a contemporary saxophone solo by a John Coltrane or an Albert Ayler.

Very few of the writers of the sixties were as successful as Welton Smith in the utilization of scatological invective. A great deal of the writing in this vein descended to the level of obscene sloganeering. What are we to make of a phrase like; “Up against
the wall motherfucker this is a stickup”? This line appears in a poem by LeRoi Jones, and was the subject of legal discourse during Jones’s trial for weapons charges at the time of the Newark rebellion in the summer of 1967. Subsequent to the court case, in which Jones was acquitted, the lines appeared on the placards of white youth protesting the war in Southeast Asia.

However significant the above factors are to the understanding of some aspects of the black literary revival of the sixties, they did not affect the work of all black writers with the same degree of intensity. Nevertheless, the general sociopolitical climate was also reflected to some extent in the work of more established Afro-American writers like the poet Gwendolyn Brooks or the novelist Ernest Gaines, whose *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is both one of the best novels of the sixties and a highly significant American novel (in 1974 it was made into a prize-winning television feature presentation starring Cicely Tyson in the title role). Here again we see evidence of the inevitable tension between the private and public character of the writer. In a sense the work of art, the novel, the poem, or the play, is the dialectical working-out of this tension. A literary work may evolve as a private dialogue with one’s literary ancestors, but its survival depends upon whether or not it speaks to some significant segment of the contemporary reading public. And in fact, the new black literature, even when parochial and pedestrian, has raised questions of such compelling emotional significance that writers like Richard Gilman, William Styron, Albert Murray, and Ralph Ellison could not ignore them.

**Nonviolence and its Aftermath**

The struggle for civil rights was essentially directed outward, against the most obvious symbols of racism. The emphasis was on acquiring the rights presumably guaranteed by the United States Constitution with its amendments. The struggle of the 1960s emerged at first as an assault against the social custom of segregated public facilities. There were sit-ins, marches, and picketing. These activities began as uncomplicated nonviolent demonstrations, but white resistance gradually forced a change of tactics. Organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began to conduct voter-registration drives in the deep South. Subtly, the simple demand for fair treatment in a restaurant or on a bus was escalated into a bid for political power.

But there was also an inward direction to this process which took place on the psychic level, affecting both those who participated physically in the movement and the audience, who with the aid of mass media, witnessed the conflict as if it were taking place on a gigantic television screen. The civil rights struggle, when directed inward, sought to convince Afro-Americans of the righteousness of their cause.

King’s constant insistence that the movement remain nonviolent assumed that there was an overriding extralegal moral principle behind the struggle for civil rights. It also assumed that dramatization of this principle would have the positive effect of
winning the racist adversary over to the righteous cause of the oppressed. This is what King meant when he enjoined his followers to refrain from violence, thus maintaining the struggle on a "high plane of dignity." In the now-famous March on Washington speech of August 28, 1963, he admonished his predominantly Afro-American audience:

Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force [our italics]. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the colored community [our italics] must not lead to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom... 6

Here King set forth values which were basically independent of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution. These values centered around what might be called the public-relations aspect of the struggle. But he was to find himself faced with an opposition which eschewed public relations and tended to see the movement in more parochial terms. In the summer of 1964, for example, a year after the March on Washington, there was a proliferation of middle-class white youth in the movement. Civil rights tradition up to that point would have ordinarily considered this development a blessing. It would bring needed allies into the movement and would perhaps lead to the politicization of a significant segment of the white community. But the presence of white youth created problems for some of the nationalistic black activists. Proceeding from an orientation different from that of their more liberal elders, they viewed the increased participation of whites as a threat to independent black leadership.

This philosophy led to a backlash—a distinct reaction against interracial organization and cooperation. Black activists suddenly demanded racial autonomy in the running of their organizations. The new will toward self-determination as expressed in all of its cultural variations, from controlling the institutions in the black community to the way one dressed or wore one's hair came to be called the Black Power movement. It is important to understand that this movement is not a historical accident. There has been a subterranean history of nationalism operative throughout the whole of Afro-American cultural history. It has not always expressed itself in radical political terms, but nevertheless, nineteenth-century nationalists like Martin Delany, David Walker, and Wilmot Blyden are as clearly a part of this nation’s history as Frederick Douglass or Booker T. Washington. In fact, many black writers and intellectuals suddenly discovered themselves to be in closer sympathy with Marcus Garvey than with Walter White. They compared their militant zeal for liberation with that of men like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. Some writers of the sixties identified themselves as descendants of militant heroes, very much in the manner of men reciting their biological genealogy. Here is a character in The Reluctant Rapist, a novel by Ed Bullins:

He spoke of black intellectuals in a historical context. "Before me was Richard Wright, DuBois..." he continued. He read off the names of negroes I had read about, negroes I had heard of briefly. It was like returning to a place that I had abandoned once, a place of my childhood that I longed for but feared. Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglass.
Names from history and modern personalities spilled from the pages, all connected by the color of the characters' black skins and the dark history that they influenced. Len had his name intermingled with theirs, but where did I stand?

Nationalism and the Search for Self

As we have seen, black writers of the midsixties and after increasingly shaped their ideologies along nationalistic lines. They were not concerned with linking hands with their “white brothers.” Rather they demanded a separate orientation, a movement whose essential thrust was internal, directed toward the realization of a separated identity, a separate set of values, and even a separate ontology. They were seeking a break with Western cultural and political values. What cultural compulsives lay behind this quest for alternative values?

On one level, there is the natural tendency of the modern artist to seek innovative forms. But in the context of political insurgency, the quest for new forms becomes an aspect of the larger quest for freedom and identity. In this respect, black writers and artists have much in common with their white avant-garde colleagues, who themselves have a special attitude toward tradition. For example, T. S. Eliot, indisputably a major voice in contemporary poetry, longed for a deeply rooted cultural tradition. We can make an analogy between his migration to England and subsequent change of citizenship, and that of a similarly alienated black writer who sets up shop in Nigeria or Marrakesh. Both have in common an aversion to what they see as the spiritual bankruptcy of American culture.

In like manner, the African or Caribbean writer seeks a more profound identity—one that is firmly rooted in his native culture. Tensions and contradictions arise here from the fact that he must find his own voice within an enslaving colonial linguistic structure. He could, of course, attempt to step out of the Western frame altogether. In Haiti, this might mean that the poet shuns French, choosing instead to recite his poetry in Creole on the streets of Port-au-Prince. Similarly, a poet like Leopold Senghor might try to continue his poetry in the oral traditions of the Senegalese Griots, the African tribal poets. But such an approach would seem almost impossible for men like Senghor, the poet-president of Senegal, or Aimé Césaire, the Martinican father of the term "Negritude." These men have firm ties to the formal literature and philosophical systems of the West. Like the concepts of Black Power and the Black Aesthetic, Negritude is a defensive frame, the purpose of which is the resolution of the cultural and psychological identity crises brought on by the Africans' contact with the West. Both colonialism and slavery confront the black writer with such crises. Consistently in these encounters we find the writer trying to arrive at some kind of rapprochement between his native culture and that of the enslaving force.

*See “The Black Arts Movement,” later in this chapter.
As previously stated, this identity problem is not confined simply to black writers. Rabindranath Tagore faced it as an Indian writing in English. The poets and playwrights of the Irish Renaissance—even the perpetually alienated James Joyce—felt compelled to modulate the influence of English literature on their works by plunging into their own Celtic mythology and folklore.

To writers influenced by the ideology of Frantz Fanon, the West was a dying place. It was perceived as dying because its philosophical and cultural values seemed to have produced nothing but chaos. To paraphrase a metaphor Reverend King used in his famous March on Washington speech, America had defaulted on her promissory note; the freedom promised by the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence had been denied to Americans of African descent.

The so-called moderates and militants were in accord on this point, but they differed in essential matters of strategy and tactics. As a result, they projected different rhetorical styles. One style assumes the voice of traditional Western reasoning; the other, often violent in tone, attacks that tradition at its very roots. For example, what are we to make of an orientation that sees the totality of Western culture as demonic? Where King spoke of reaching out for "our white brother," to the Muslims "the white man was the Devil."

Indeed, for some black writers, America, with its rapid technological development, its material values, and its history of racism, emerges as the ultimate symbol of decadence. One of the first young black writers to project this tendency was Askia Muhammad Touré, who in 1963 founded Umbra magazine on New York's Lower East Side. The Umbra group included such writers as Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, Albert Haynes, Tom Dent, and the volatile Calvin Hernton. According to Ishmael Reed, it was Touré, known as Rolland Snellings before his conversion to orthodox Islam, who spearheaded the movement.

Toure, from the beginning of his literary career, called for the rejection of Western values:

...Like a nurseryman prunes a tree or a jeweler fashions an uncut stone, so must we prune and fashion our minds and spirits; we must strive to develop a revolutionary soul—total psychic unity with the masses of our people. We must become the very embodiment of their hopes, dreams, consciences, and desires for justice. We must develop into mental and spiritual fighting machines of Black America, instruments of the people... Yes we must know, absorb, and value our cultural heritage, but not as a shield for inferiority complexes; rather, to become one with Self, with Blackness—embracing the Universal in man. Brothers and Sisters, this is the only sure way that militants, intellectuals, and potential leaders can begin their inevitable triumph over the West. By becoming so determined, so dedicated, so full of faith in a greater future, the materialistic hedonism of White America becomes the undesirable trait of a dying civilization.

A complex of strategies is at work here. First, the statement is addressed specifically to a black audience. Second, it calls for the development of a "revolutionary soul." The
unity it demands is not political, but "psychic." It sees as essential the development of "spiritual fighting machines." The function of the "cultural heritage" (tradition) is the development of a Self that is one with itself and with Blackness. And Blackness itself is perceived as "embracing the Universal in man."

There is a decidedly religious impulse operative through the above statement, as well as distinct echoes of the writings of Garvey, DuBois, Malcolm X, Senghor, and the Marxist critic Christopher Caulwell. In his willed drive toward righteousness, Touré suggests the profound debt the New Militancy owes to the language of religious reform. The Idea of Blackness (Self) as presented here seems to indicate some kind of religious transcendence. Most obviously, it portends a profound shift in poetic symbolism and iconography. It clearly eschews the traditional Western metaphysical attitude toward Blackness as a symbol of evil and sin and forms the symbolic context for the emergence, later in the decade, of the counterslogan "Black Is Beautiful."

The quest for Self has a ritualistic dimension as well. This can be clearly seen in the ritual divesting of the so-called slave names; e.g., Malcolm Little becomes Malcolm X; Rolland Snellings becomes Askia Muhammad Toure; and LeRoi Jones becomes Imamu Amiri Baraka. But this renaming process is only one aspect of a larger historical myth/ritual construct.

The names adopted derive from all parts of the African world. Their very diversity is indicative of the complex and often confused manner in which large segments of the black community view the African past. For example, some of the names stem from Arabic sources. This is especially ironic, given the historical relationship between slavery and the spread of militant Islam in Africa. The same is true of Swahili, a language so intimately connected with the East African slave trade that it owes its very existence to the commerce between the Bantu-speaking tribes of East Africa and Arab merchants.

This is not in any way meant as a denigration of any particular orientation toward names, but rather as an indication of the intricate value system which gave rise to such actions.

Ralph Ellison was one of the first Afro-American writers to isolate the particular complex of emotions surrounding the black American's attitude toward his name:

And when we are reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents, we are apt, especially if we are potential writers, to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events, the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults; yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable loves through which our names were handed down unto us.11

Ellison goes on to cite the examples of the followers of Father Divine and Elijah Muhammad. For Ellison the discarding of their original names symbolized a "rejection of the bloodstained, the brutal, the sinful images of the past. Thus they would declare new identities, would clarify a new program of intention and destroy the verbal evidence of a willed and ritualized discontinuity of blood and human intercourse."12 In this
kind of emotional approach to history, the acquisition of a new name designates not only a change of identity in the present, but the possibility of some prior existence in a state of what Baraka calls “former glory.” The study of black history is an essential part of the new religiously inspired nationalism... a nationalism which, although perhaps excessively brutal at times, springs from a profound and fervent need among a group of Afro-Americans to claim something in the world that deepens the collective humanity of black people everywhere.

The Black Arts Movement

It is quite possible that this romantic search for a “former glory” provided the psychic backdrop for the emergence of the Black Arts Movement. The Movement may also have arisen from the compulsive need of the literary artist to address himself to the spiritual and philosophical implications of the freedom struggle. Although the Movement is closely associated with the opening of Imamu Baraka's Black Arts Theatre/School in the spring of 1965, shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X, its beginnings coincide with those of other literary groups—particularly the aforementioned Umbra group.

Politically oriented magazines such as the quarterly Freedomways also played an integral part in the creation of the Movement. Liberator magazine, founded like Freedomways in 1961 and edited by Daniel H. Watts, operated as an important source of news concerning the African liberation struggles and the Third World revolutionary movements. Then came the revolutionary nationalist journals like the Revolutionary Action Movement's (RAM) Black America, founded in 1963 by Max Stanford. RAM was one of the first organizations in the sixties to advocate the principle of armed struggle which later became so prominent a part of the political ideology of the Black Panther Party. Closely associated with Black America was Soulbook, which also had a Third World orientation. It was founded in the mid-1960s by Ken Freeman and Bobb Hamilton.

On the West Coast, the Movement was marked by the appearance of two especially significant magazines. The first and most important was the Journal of Black Poetry, founded in late 1964 by Joe Goncalves, who is still its editor. The Journal's creative orientation is essentially a blend of traditional black nationalism and revolutionary Pan-Africanism. It has been instrumental in introducing black American writers to the works of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and the Afro-Cuban Nicolas Guillen. It has also published translations of such African poets as David Diop, Birago Diop, and Leopold Senghor. The second of these West Coast publications, Black Dialogue, first appeared in 1966. Its editor was Abdul Karim. Black Dialogue published such writers as Eldridge Cleaver, Marvin X, and the playwright Ed Bullins.

But the magazine that has probably had the most consistent effect on contemporary black letters is Black World, originally published as Negro Digest in 1941 by John H. Johnson, who is also the publisher of Ebony magazine. Some of the most significant
questions concerning the role of the black writer were first raised in Black World. It was Hoyt Fuller, the magazine's editor, who started the relatively recent controversy concerning the possibility of developing a Black Aesthetic. This controversy originally stemmed from a survey of the artistic and ideological views of thirty-eight black writers. The flurry of critical and/or ideological debate this engendered has persisted into the seventies. Black World's strong influence on the new literary movement derives from the fact that it is the most stable and widely read of the magazines concerned with the full range of issues confronting the black artistic community. It is significant that the home office of Johnson Publications is located in Chicago, since it was here that Richard Wright got his start as a writer with the John Reed club in the early thirties.

Chicago is also the home of the previously mentioned Gwendolyn Brooks, a long-time established voice in contemporary American poetry. Together with Fuller she helped to spark a literary movement in Chicago which brought writers and poets like Don L. Lee, Sam Greenlee, Carolyn Rodgers, and Johari Amini (Jewel Latimore) to the attention of a newly conscious black reading public.

Another factor contributing to the growth of the Black Arts Movement was the creation of independent publishing houses like Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit, Don L. Lee's Third World Press in Chicago, and Baraka's Jihad Press in Newark.

The above developments and trends, along with the flowering of black theaters and the proliferation of black bookstores around the nation, helped to define the literary personality of the politically active sixties. They do not tell the entire story of Afro-American writing during the decade, however. There are and were significant writers like Margaret Danner, Mari Evans, Alton Anderson, Alice Walker, Charles Wright, William Melvin Kelley, Stanley Crouch, Paule Marshall, Ronald Fair, and Barry Beckham who, although thematically related to the tradition of Afro-American letters, chose to concentrate upon the private aspects of language and deal essentially with the problems of literary craftsmanship on its own terms.

Nationalism and the Folk Spirit

One of the most influential aspects of the new nationalism on black writers has been its emphasis on the study of African and Afro-American culture. This has deeply affected writers like Henry Dumas, Stanley Crouch, Paul Carter Harrison, Ishmael Reed, Imamu Baraka, James Stewart, and Charles Fuller, who became especially interested in the aesthetic use of African and Afro-American cosmologies and mythological systems.

Even more important, there developed among these writers a profound respect for the power and dignity of black music. In Blues People, a book on Afro-American music, LeRoi Jones wrote:
...I am saying that if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, i.e., society as a whole.¹³

Here is a hint that a specific set of cultural characteristics can be found embedded in the music; that the music, in its numerous manifestations, is the expression of the black American's collective ethos. This is Jones's variation on the theme of the nineteenth century folk spirit.

This same emphasis on folk spirit is seen in the research undertaken by such German scholars as Johann von Herder and the Grimm Brothers. It is also evident toward the end of the nineteenth century in the Irish literary Renaissance. Yeats, O'Casey, Synge, and even that ultimate exile, James Joyce, are products of this kind of orientation. Variations on the theme of folk spirit also occur in the writings of such nineteenth century colorists as John Greenleaf Whittier, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bret Harte, and Joel Chandler Harris. Folk themes reach their apogee in American fiction in the work of Mark Twain. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* also owes something to this essentially romantic tradition.

In a sense, the new nationalism can be compared to an earlier flowering of "black consciousness" during the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties. This first wave of literary nationalism announced its entry into the American cultural scene with the publication of Alain Locke's anthology, *The New Negro* (1925). This seminal anthology contained the works of such writers and poets as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, and Arna Bontemps. Locke described the new sensibility as being characterized by a "deep feeling toward race." Further, he stated, there was among these writers a "consciousness of acting as the advance guard of the African peoples in their contact with twentieth-century civilization." Harlem, he reasoned, was the home of Negro "Zionism," the symbolic crossroads of black people in the diaspora. Anticipating the Pan-Africanism of the sixties, he wrote: "...In terms of the race question as a world problem, the Negro mind has leapt, so to speak, upon the parapets of prejudice and extended its cramped horizons. In doing so it has linked up with the growing group consciousness of the dark peoples and is gradually learning their common interest."¹⁴

This persistent strain of nationalism could never have become a significant factor in Afro-American intellectual history if it were not somehow rooted in folk tradition. For example, what are we to make of the high premium many black communities, particularly in the South, put on self-reliance? A northern black American, upon visiting relatives in the South, will ritualistically inquire as to the status of the attempt of the community to gain economic and political power. His relatives will give him the latest news: Black contractors have developed a new tract of land; the church mortgage is paid up; the local black college has a new science building; and one of the local high-school students has been accepted at a prestigious eastern college. And what of the symbolic importance in popular black consciousness of such folk heroes as Jack Johnson,
Joe Louis, Bessie Smith, Adam Clayton Powell, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown? Are not these persons, and others too numerous to cite, in fact being conceived of as living embodiments of the soul of the race?

Again, given the nature of the particularly brutal oppression Africans experienced during the Middle Passage and slave period, is it not logical that many black people would develop a special view of history? Accordingly, a novel like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) derives much of its tension from the nameless narrator's encounter with various attitudes toward tradition and history. At one end of the spectrum of the novel is the folk-consciousness of the narrator's grandfather. At the other is the romantic nationalism of Ras, the Exhorter, whose view of history swings back to the "former glory" of Africa, while gesturing toward a world controlled by black men:

> You *my* brother, mahm. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men *brother*? Shit, mahm. That's shit! Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! . . . You got bad* hair*! You got thick *lips*! They say you *stink*! They hate you, mahm. You African. AFRICAN! . . .

This speech occurs in the midst of a physical clash between representatives of two opposing Harlem political factions. Each claims to have the valid view of history. Ras's orientation is derived symbolically from the racial view of history as promulgated by Garvey, while the narrator and Tod Clifton represent the pseudoscientific attitudes of the Marxist-oriented brotherhood. At one point in Ras's eloquent appeal to the African racial memory a plane passes over:

> His chest was heaving and a note of pleading had come into the harsh voice. He was an exhorter, all right, and I was caught in the crude, insane eloquence of his plea. He stood there, awaiting an answer [from Tod Clifton]. And suddenly a big transport plane came low over the buildings and I looked up to see the firing of its engine, and *we* were *all* three silent, watching [our italics]. Suddenly the Exhorter shook his fist toward the plane and yelled, "Hell with him, some day we have them too! [our italics] Hell with him!"

This is a typical Ellisonian epiphany. At this moment of stillness, in the midst of conflict, three black men are confronted with the awesome force of the twentieth century's technological realities, realities which on one level exclude black people from exercising control over their destinies, while on another presenting them with a set of new possibilities. Thus the broadening horizon of experience represents, for some, a possibility for creative endeavor; while for others it serves only to deepen a sense of collective alienation and frustration.

Afro-Americans have traditionally played a complex role in the folklore of the nation. On the one hand, they represent the perpetual servant and buffoon—a singing, dancing, laughing clown. In another context they are seen as soulless beasts. In the theater they have been the object of dramatic satire. Their folkways have been burlesqued by white men in blackface. Their songs have been copied by white entertainers and composers, many of whom went on to build famous careers on the basis of white interpretations of Afro-American music, dance, humor, and oral style.
But this does not tell the whole story. There are other attitudes toward the Negro American as well. Some of them revolve around the perception that the Afro-American presence in the United States permeates the entire range of the nation's culture, coloring white attitudes toward all forms of aesthetic activities from lovemaking to writing novels. There is what Albert Murray called a "blues sensibility" present in much of American cultural life as well as a sense that the black American symbolizes something of the essential truth about America as a whole. Thus despite a long history of social injustice and the subsequent brutalization which sprang from that injustice, the Afro-American often appears in popular American culture as the quintessence of the American man of feeling. This is so because Afro-American culture adds a unique emotional dimension to the overall texture of American life, and is what Murray is getting at in his book, *The Omni-Americans*, when he makes the following statement:

...But the United States is in actuality not a nation of black people and white people. It is a nation of multicolored people. There are white Americans so to speak. But any fool can see that the white people are not really white, and that black people are not black. They are all interrelated in one way or another. . . .

To illustrate the soundness of Murray's thesis, one has only to trace the history of cultural exchange and interaction between black and white Americans. Constance O'Rourke, in *American Humor*, has designated some of the ways in which the image of the black American impinges on the popular and folk consciousness. This thesis is further supported when we study the history of popular and dance music in America. Humanists like Murray and Ellison rejoice in this fusion of cultures, but nationalists must of necessity maintain their antagonism toward cultural exchange, since the overall aim of nationalism is the conservation of group cultural values. Nationalism is essentially a defensive frame aimed at providing a nation or an ethnic group with a common sense of history and purpose.

**Nationalism and the Black Aesthetic**

Among black Americans today, the nationalistic impulse gives rise to a romantic longing for the pastoral innocence of the African past. Increasingly writers and artists are turning to the folk culture for inspiration and new formal ideas. The central purpose here is the revitalization of memory. The national artist explains that this resurrection of the African and folk past is necessary for the collective uplifting of the race. One of Garvey's most famous slogans was: "Up, You Mighty Race; You Can Accomplish What You Will!" Behind this exhortation lies the idea of an Edenic Africa where black men built the pyramids, explored the sciences, and engaged in philosophical discourse. Given the circumstances of racial oppression in America, it should be easy to understand how this kind of romantic orientation can foster emotional bombast.

Typically the American writer's sensibility has been torn between Europe and America. The Afro-American writer, however, experiences an added tension, that of
his romantic "allegiance" for Africa. The resulting conflicts underlie much of the writing about Africa which emerged in the twenties and which reemerged with renewed fervor in the militant struggles of the sixties. Furthermore nationalism, wherever it occurs in the modern world, must legitimize itself by evoking the muse of history. This is an especially necessary step where the nation or group feels that its social oppression is inextricably bound up with the destruction of its traditional culture and with the suppression of that culture's achievements in the intellectual sphere.

This latter attitude accounts for the defensive posture some contemporary black writers have assumed toward Afro-American culture. Some critics like Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle, and Don L. Lee have expressed the idea that white critics are not qualified to judge black literature. They maintain that the criticism of black creative arts should be the special province of the black writer himself. These critics assume that black people have a special history, a special set of artistic values which can be understood only within a black-aesthetic frame of reference. The obvious pitfalls of this kind of critical position do not concern us here. What must be understood, however, is that positions of this kind spring from a specific set of attitudes toward tradition and history. Obviously Afro-American writers and intellectuals who hold such positions are expressing their ideas in the context of a particular cultural nationalist history. What is being manifested here is a fear of the destruction of black culture; a position that perceives Western culture as an aggressive and alien force. This posture accounts for the strident tone of much of the literature of the sixties:

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts. . . .

Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts. . . .

Fuck poems
and they are useful, they shoot
come at you . . .
we want poems like fists beating niggers
out of Jocks . . .

These lines are from the famous Baraka poem entitled "Black Art," which weaves together several significant themes. First, poetry is perceived as having a decidedly revolutionary function. Second, the poem is specifically addressed to black people; this point is of utmost importance, because one of the things the nationalist literary artist attempts to do is to envelop his art in what he perceives to be the exclusive spirit of his people:

Let Black People understand
that they are lovers and the sons
of lovers and warriors and sons
of warriors Are poems & poets &
all the loveliness here in the world . . .

In this context, the poet sees himself as functioning as the voice of the nation. Such aesthetic orientation arises as a response to the struggles taking place in the political
Advocates of this viewpoint, a species of Marxist literary thought, hold that the role of the artist is to foment revolution. Ron Karenga, chairman of the cultural-nationalist organization US, expresses this position in the following terms:

Black art, like everything in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution. It must become and remain a part of the revolutionary machinery that moves us to change quickly and creatively. We have always said, and continue to say, that the battle we are waging now is the battle for the minds of Black people. . . . It becomes very important, then, that art plays the role it should play in black survival and not bog itself down in the meaningless madness of the Western world wasted. In order to avoid this madness, black artists and those who wish to be artistic must accept the fact that what is needed is an aesthetic, a black aesthetic, that is a criteria for the validity and/or beauty of a work of art.20

What Karenga means by a “black aesthetic” is not clear. Nowhere in any of his work is the concept outlined or described. However, the main thrust of his ideas seems to indicate that a black aesthetic is, in fact, implicit in artistic works that champion the cause of racial solidarity and black liberation. A similar view is expressed in the critical writings of Addison Gayle and Don L. Lee, now known as Haki R. Mahubuti; upon close examination, however, these ideas turn out to be updated versions of Marxist literary theory in which the concept of race is substituted for the Marxist idea of class. In his book, Dynamite Voices, a critical study of contemporary black poetry, Lee (Mahubuti) makes the statement several times that the “critic is first and foremost a blackman, redman, yellowman or whiteman who writes. And as a critic, he must stem from the roots that produced him.” What he is stressing here is the belief that the black critic owes a special allegiance to the Afro-American community and its problems, and further, that his special experiences as a black man must somehow interact positively with his critical role, which is to aid in the psychological and spiritual liberation of black people. Lee’s (Mahubuti’s) critical orientation places a great deal of emphasis on the idea of art as experience instead of method.

What this amounts to is an attack against the tendency of modern critics to concern themselves with questions of form, structure, and genre (what Northrup Frye calls “modes”). (Actually, the hub of much so-called contemporary black criticism revolves around the question of form over content.) Black critics who stress the importance of content over form are usually trying to get the edge on white critics whose social backgrounds often differ radically from those of black artists. To stress content over form, structure, texture, and conscious craftsmanship is simply a way of stressing questions of social morality over those of abstract aesthetics. (This critical method, as we have noted, has its roots in Marxist proletarian literary criticism.) Hence any writer who evinces a persistent concern for artistic “method” is looked upon as engaging in art for art’s sake. This approach to literary art as experience is problematic at best. As Kenneth Burke points out in Counter-Statement: “When the appeal of art as method is eliminated and the appeal of art as experience is stressed, art seems futile indeed. Experience is less
the aim of art than the subject of art; art is not experience, but something added to experience. But by making art and experience synonymous, a critic provides an unanswerable reason why a man of spirit should renounce art forever." In other words, if a man can make real physical love to a woman, what's the sense in writing a love poem?

The critical positions advocated by Addison Gayle, Don Lee (Mahubuti), and Ron Karenga are finally attempts to apply the ideology of race to artistic creation. Only on the level of emotional rhetoric do these propositions make sense. Afro-Americans do have a distinctive culture and, as Albert Murray points out, a distinctive blues-oriented attitude toward experience. However, in a larger sense, their experiences ramify throughout the whole of human existence. The task of the contemporary black writer, as of any serious writer, is to project the accumulated weight of the world's aesthetic, intellectual, and historical experience. To do so he must utilize his artistry to the fullest, distilling his experience through the creative process into a form that best projects his personality and what he conceives to be the ethos of his national or ethnic group.

Writers like the late Henry Dumas and Ishamel Reed were able, by dint of craftsmanship and study, to create literary works which are uncompromising in their quest for Pan-African forms, yet refuse to sacrifice anything in the way of artistic integrity. Dumas, killed by a white policeman in a Harlem subway station, was a student of both African and Afro-American mythology and folklore. His poetry and fiction clearly illustrate the possibilities of a Pan-African approach to literary expression in the English language. Similarly, we find an analogous synthesis in the voodoo novels and poetry of Ishmael Reed.

In summary, it is clear that many contemporary literary attitudes toward tradition stem from highly emotional evaluations of the meaning of life in Western society. Literature is, after all, an attempt to define creatively man's place in the world and in doing so to aid him in the discovery of his profoundest self. The historical problem of black literature is that it has in a sense been perpetually hamstrung by its need to address itself to the question of racism in America. Unlike black music, it has rarely been allowed to exist on its own terms, but rather been utilized as a means of public relations in the struggle for human rights. Literature can indeed make excellent propaganda, but through propaganda alone the black writer can never perform the highest function of his art: that of revealing to man his most enduring human possibilities and limitations.

Notes

2. The "dozens" are sometimes called the "dirty dozen." This is a verbal context in which the contestants ritually insult one another in rhymed scatological doggerel. The object of insult is usually the respective combatant's mother. The point of the game is to defeat an opponent with sheer verbal dexterity. For a study of the dozens see Roger Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (New York, Folklore Associates, 1964).
8. Negritude is a concept developed in Paris during the thirties by African and Afro-Caribbean writers while they studied in French universities. Negritude is an outgrowth of, or a reaction to the psychological consequences of colonialism. It is a defensive frame whose essential function, like a talisman, is to ward off the presumed evils of assimilation. Leopold Senghor, Leon Damas, and Aimé Césaire, the acknowledged creator of the term, all felt psychologically threatened by a formidable French culture. They felt that they were becoming black Frenchmen. Negritude was the attempt of these writers to return to the psychic roots of their native cultures. See Leopold Senghor's *Liberté : Negritude et Humanisme* (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1964). Also see, Irving Leonard Markovitz, *Leopold Sedar Senghor and The Politics of Negritude* (New York, Atheneum, 1969).
10. This change of names also relates to a rejection of Christianity as an operational mythology. Christianity is rejected by many of the new nationalists who see it as the religion of the oppressor. On the aesthetic level, there is a tendency to probe African religious systems in search of new motifs and symbols. In some of the fiction, drama, and poetry of the sixties we find allusions to Yoruba deities like Shango and Yemaya. There are in the work of Henry Dumas, for example, allusions to tree spirits and ancestor worship. And two of Ishmael Reed's novels, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (1969), and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), revolve around ideas derived from Haitian voodoo and New Orleans-style Hoodoo. Jahneiz Jahn's *Muntu* (1961) is one critical source for some of the neo-African experiments in Afro-American writing during the late sixties.

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Contains an excellent selection of the New Poetry, along with an intensive critique of black aesthetics.

