Editor's Column

Looking Back on the Black Aesthetic

IT IS FAIR TO SAY THAT THE INSTITUTIONS OF INTERPRETATION HAVE not been kind to the black arts movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s or to its aesthetic ideology. Reflecting on the renaissances that have come to provide an essential map for black literature in the last century and a half, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., describes the black arts movement as limited in scope and short-lived:

> Defining itself against the Harlem Renaissance and deeply rooted in black cultural nationalism, the Black Arts writers imagined themselves as the artistic wing of the Black Power movement. Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez viewed black art as a matter less of aesthetics than of protest; its function was to serve the political liberation of black people from white racism. Erected on a shifting foundation of revolutionary politics, this "renaissance" was the most short-lived of all. By 1975, with the Black Arts Movement dead, black culture seemed to be undergoing a profound identity crisis.

Perhaps no text better represents the apparent promise and peril of the black arts movement than *The Black Aesthetic*, an anthology edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., which many consider the movement's aesthetic manifesto. Published in 1971, at the height of the cultural tremors of the civil rights movement, Gayle's book stands out as a testimony to the burden and the debt that emerge when aesthetic and revolutionary politics are invoked in the same register. Today, when the question of the value of black lives has returned to haunt the narrative of American citizenship, looking back on the black aesthetic as a conceptual category might provide us with useful lessons about the role of art in politics now. Gayle's book remains pertinent to anyone who cares about the relation between poetry and poetics and about the global resonance of local events. For while the black arts movement

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is associated with neighborhoods in American cities—Detroit, Newark, Oakland, and Chicago—its soul could be felt and is still felt in places as far away as Kingston and Nairobi.

I, too, was once caught in this network of art and politics. Gayle's text, introduced to me as a young student at the University of Nairobi in the late 1970s, once functioned as a shadow bible in a time of cultural doubt and unfulfilled political cravings. My generation invested in this volume as a manifesto of a revolution to come, a revolt that was to be chaperoned by a good dose of poetry and political anaphora. Today, when the aesthetic has returned to literary scholarship as a counterweight to the politics of identity, I'm puzzled by the silence on the black arts movement in general and on Gayle's book. I'm also puzzled by the absence of debates about the movement in postcolonial criticism, since in the movement's time the black aesthetic represented, for ex–colonial subjects like me, a way out of the inherited *doxa* of Englishness, a critical straitjacket formed by the unquestioned logic of the English canon. Revolting against a residual colonial Englishness, I was part of a generation that believed, if only briefly, that the black aesthetic provided the sole radical critique of the cultural order that had evolved in the colonial world. We young Africans were sure that the irruption of black power in the United States and the Caribbean represented a significant stage in decolonization. And if we turned to the United States rather than to Europe for our literary education, it was not because we found the American empire more palatable than the European ones whose terror we had experienced; rather, somewhere in America, we assumed, there was an aesthetic that named itself black and challenged the hegemony of a transplanted European culture.

It is significant to underscore the young Africans' turn to America as a willed gesture because when many commentators think of the relation between Africa and the black arts movement, they tend to focus on the symbolic economy of the connection. They tend to be almost obsessed with the romance of Africa in the black American imagination: the dashikis, the Afros, and the aphorisms. If they look in a different direction, these commentators will notice the role of an imagined Africa in the making of African American cultural nationalism. But I want to suggest that the most substantive aspect of the relation between African and African American intellectuals in the postcolonial period can be found in a reversed influence, the effect of African American cultural nationalism on the politics of decolonization in Africa. It was in the black arts movement that African intellectuals, trying to come to terms with what Frantz Fanon had called the "pitfalls of national consciousness" (148–205), sought a language of critique and a rhetoric of insurgency.[1]

Let me give an example. On 24 October 1968, three young lecturers at the University of Nairobi startled the educational establishment by calling for the abolition of the English department. In their memo to the university senate, the governing body of the university, the three (James Ngugi, Henry Owuor-Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong) rejected the idea that the English literary tradition was the central root of African "consciousness and cultural heritage." Repudiating the priority given to English in the study of imaginative literature, the three insisted that the literary curriculum needed to be oriented "towards placing Kenya, East Africa, and then Africa in the center." They argued, "All things are to be considered in their relevance to our situation, and their contribution towards understanding ourselves. . . . The primary duty of any literature department is to illuminate the spirit animating a people, to show how it meets new challenges, and to investigate possible areas of development and involvement" (146). More significantly, the troika insisted that if a radical outlook was to be developed in education, there had to be a rethinking of criticism and literary judgment:

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> One of the things that have been hindering a radical outlook in our study of literature in Africa is the question of literary excellence; that only works of undisputed literary excellence should be offered. (In this case it meant virtually the study of disputable "peaks" of English literature.) The question of literary excellence implies a value judgement as to what is literary and what is excellence, and from whose point of view. For any group it is better to study representative works, which mirror their society, rather than to study a few isolated "classics," either of their own or of a foreign culture. (149)

Readers of the documents issued by the black arts movement, many of them collected in Gayle's *Black Aesthetic*, will immediately recognize the movement's influence in the Nairobi manifesto. They will recognize the call for a black-centered aesthetic in the essays by Hoyt W. Fuller ("Toward a Black Aesthetic"), Larry Neal ("Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic"), and, of course, Addison Gayle ("The Function of Black Literature at the Present Time"). In these documents, the work of art was asked to play a lead role in the transformation of black consciousness. Literature was to be the handmaiden of a cultural rehabilitation and a kind of sentimental education. Larry Neal made this point in his afterword to *Black Fire*, an anthology he coedited with Amiri Baraka:

> Most contemporary black writing of the last few years, the literature of the young, has been aimed at the destruction of the double-consciousness. It has been aimed at consolidating the African-American personality. And it has not been essentially a literature of protest. It has, instead, turned its attention inward to the internal problems of the group. The problem of living in a racist society, therefore, is something that lurks on the immediate horizon, but which cannot be dealt with until certain political, social and spiritual truths are understood by the oppressed themselves—inwardly understood. (647)

There was a general belief that a new black aesthetic needed to be cognizant of the singular experience of the African American subject in the incomplete project of modernity:

> There is a revolution in black literature in America. It is nationalist in direction, and it is pro-black. That means in effect, that it is deliberately moving outside the sphere of traditional Western forms, limitations, and presumptions. It is seeking new limits, new shapes, and much of it now admittedly is crude, reflecting the uncertainty, the searching quality of its movement. But, though troubled and seeking, it is very, very vital.
> (Fuller, "New Black Literature" 327)

A new mode of criticism would overturn existing models of literary judgment and valuation:

> The function of the critic is to demand that the writer adhere to the proposition that a sane universe is possible, that a new morality and a new ethical system are possible only when the new man has come into being, and that the writer must devote his talents to these ends. At every stage of human history, there have been those, romantic in nature, who envisioned a world of principle and justice against the overriding pragmatic considerations of the moment. This must be the position of the Black writer. The function of the Black critic at the present time is to see that he accepts this position. The critic will fulfill his function by devoting himself, not to spurious theories of art for art's sake, but to art for the sake of Black people everywhere.
> (Gayle, "Function of Black Criticism" 175)

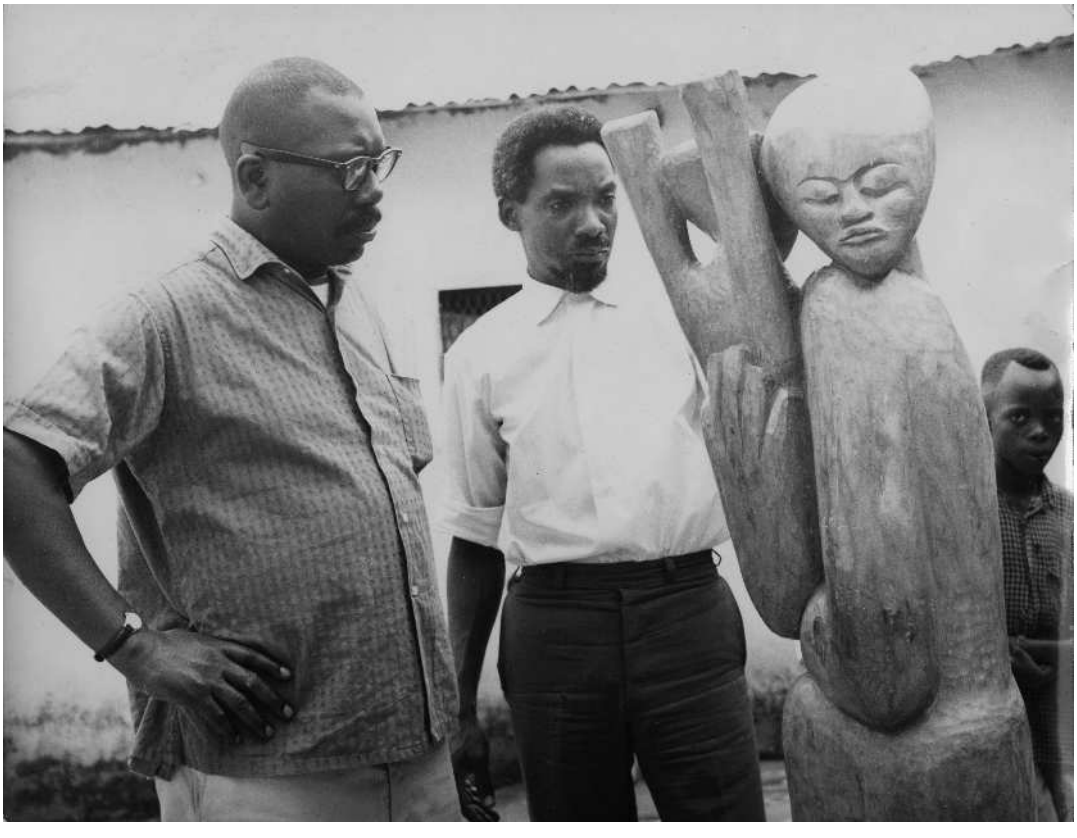
Comparing the literary projects at the University of Nairobi in 1968 and those at various centers of black thinking in the United States is one way of recognizing the location of the black aesthetic at the intersection of local and global cultural networks. And the history of how these networks developed is an important antidote to the erroneous belief that the black arts movement was a parochial, inward-looking project.

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Still, one has to ask how theory had traveled from one cultural and geographic sphere to the other.[2] What was the line connecting Gayle, an outsider at Baruch College, with radical intellectuals at the University of Nairobi? Or, to put it another way, how did the rhetoric of the black arts movement journey from Gramercy Park, in Manhattan, to the Central Court at the University of Nairobi? There is a simple answer to this question: the Nairobi radicals and their New York counterparts were drawing from a common textual and ideological tradition. In spite of its claim to newness, the black aesthetic was a continuation of a project started by Pan-Africanists such as W. E. B. Du Bois in the beginning of the twentieth century. This project considered art central to black self-making and self-understanding. Black being in the world was to be constituted and mediated by the work of art. As early as 1902, in a famous passage in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois had identified the work of art as a place of recognition, restitution, and even redemption:

> I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land? (82)

A key, but not always obvious, aspect of the black arts movement was the connec-



Jacob Lawrence with Dennis Williams in Ibadan, Nigeria, 1964. Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation / Art Resource, NY.

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tion between the desire for a black aesthetic and the narrative of decolonization. The struggle of black people in America, noted John O'Neal in his contribution to the Gayle anthology, was a liberation struggle analogous to the ones that had taken place in former European colonies in Africa and Asia: "America defines the context of, but does not and cannot define, the terms of that struggle. The world, with Africa as a base, defines our struggle. For we are an African people" (52). But the global nature of the black arts movement cannot be explained simply by this affiliation with late Pan-Africanism, for, as I argued earlier, the aesthetic project that was developing in local American urban settings was also overflowing its boundaries.

The desire for a black aesthetic as a tool of questioning negotiated decolonization was also driving debates in the Caribbean and in Africa. One of the earliest examples of this desire for a black aesthetic in a global context can be found in the Caribbean artists movement, started by Kamau Brathwaite, John La Rose, and Andrew Salkey in London in 1966. Initially conceived as a network of black artists in Britain, this movement had by 1968 become a galvanizing but also controversial participant in the politics of black power in the Caribbean.[3] Here, too, art had become a mode of calling into question the existing order of things. In his contribution to this project, Salkey, a novelist, insisted that the art of blackness could produce new subjects in the Caribbean: "Black awareness in our Caribbean terms is the will to make concrete and viable our vision of ourselves as an initiating, self-protecting, inventive, courageous, productive and ultimately culturally enriched people. Black awareness is the beginning of our search and definition of revolution" (qtd. in Walmsley 244).

By the early 1970s irruptions of the black aesthetic were common in the black world. Poetry and revolution were conjoined in the fight against the logic of the postcolonial state. And whenever there was a riot, a poet could be found lurking, or a poem would be written to serenade the event. When the radical historian Walter Rodney was assassinated in Guyana in 1980, the poet Martin Carter wrote a poem bemoaning the crime:

> Assassins of conversation
> they bury the voice
> they assassinate, in the beloved
> grave of the voice, never to be silent.

The English dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson turned to rhythms that had traveled from Jamaica to London to capture the event in "Reggae fi Radni," one of his most famous dub poems or songs:

> some may say dat Waltah Radni
> woz noh shaak fi di sea
> an all dat him did want
> woz fi set him people free
> wid di workaz an di pezants
> him shooda kawpahrate
> but like a fish to di ook
> him goh bite pan Burnham bait
>
> but look how mi dream
> come just get blown to smidahreen
> blown to smidahreen
> inna di miggle a di dream
> di miggle a di dream
> before di really crucial scene
> di really crucial scene is
> wen di people dem come een . . .
> (46–47; ellipsis in orig.)
>
> some may say that Walter Rodney
> was no shark from the sea
> and that all that he wanted to do
> was set his people free
> with the workers and peasants
> he should cooperate
> but like a fish to the hook
> he bit on Burnham's bait
>
> but look how my dream
> just gets blown to smithereens
> blown to smithereens
> in the middle of the dream
> the middle of the dream

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> before the really crucial scene
> the really crucial scene is
> when the people come in . . . (my trans.)

Brathwaite would seize on the assassination of Rodney as an occasion to test the limits of the elegiac form and its ability to console:

> To be blown into fragments. Your flesh
> Like the islands that you love
> Like the seawall that you wish to heal
>
> bringing equal rights & justice to the brothers
> a fearless cumfa mashramani to the sisters
> whispering their free/zon . . . (60)

Rodney's dead body had come to function as a depository of the desires repressed during decolonization and of the aspiration for a poetics that could be structured by established forms yet speak in the vernacular. The commemoration of the dead historian was also an indicator of how the black aesthetic and the dream of black power survived under the radar in the changing literary landscape.

Dates are instructive here. Doubleday published Gayle's *Black Aesthetic* in 1971. In the same year, a Colloquium on the Black Aesthetic was held at the University of Nairobi as part of the Festival of East African Writing. The papers of the colloquium were published by the East African Literature Bureau in 1973 in *Black Aesthetics*, a volume edited by Andrew Gurr and Pio Zirimu. Most of these papers were attempts to define the black aesthetic in relation to specific African cultural practices, but it was not accidental that the introductory essay, aptly called "Prolegomena for Black Aesthetics," was by David Dorsey, an African American lecturer at the University of Nairobi. Why was Dorsey chosen as the author of the prolegomena? Gurr and Zirimu answered this question in their introduction to the volume:

> The relationship of a Black Identity to Black Aesthetics is a crucial one, and has been extensively discussed in the USA. For that reason as well as for the definitions it provides, we have placed first in our series the contribution of our Black American colleague David Dorsey. His definitions and his survey of modern East African writing make a prolegomena to the whole book. (2)

Two cultural movements divided by time and space had found common ground in two concepts—blackness and the aesthetic.

Now, I do not claim that these concepts were being used in the same way or that they meant the same things to Africans in Nairobi as they did to African Americans in the United States. There were important differences in the conception of the aesthetic and of its cultural work. Advocates of the black aesthetic in the United States seemed eager to define and redefine the aesthetic as a singular project. Many acknowledged that it was not clear what defined this aesthetic, but few questioned its singularity as a mark of black identity and difference. The black aesthetic, declared Julian Mayfield, was an inherent part of blackness—"It is in our racial memory, and the unshakeable knowledge of who we are, where we have been, and, springing from this, where we are going" (26). In Nairobi such a singular vision was defeated by the reality of cultural pluralism and the absence of a fixed racial matrix in Africa. Here Dorsey, appointed to provide prolegomena, argued that a definition of black aesthetics "presupposes that there are as many black aesthetics as there are black societies." There were commonalities as well as differences. The black aesthetic, Dorsey argued, was diachronic and was bound to "change with time as well as geography" (10). Yet these differences in time and space could barely conceal the fact that the black aesthetic had been triggered by a shared sense of crisis, a crisis of the present, of modern culture at what appeared to be its vanishing point. The turn to the black aesthetic and to the powerful invocation of dissociation and rupture associated with it was

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an attempt to deal with now familiar anxieties about genealogy and emplacement.

But what are we to make of the invocation of the aesthetic in the black arts movement at home or abroad? The ideology of the aesthetic is to be found nowhere and everywhere in the movement's poetics. None of the major theorists of the aesthetic in the European tradition are to be found in the movement's key documents. Neither Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten nor Immanuel Kant makes any appearance in the discourse of the black aesthetic. Nevertheless, a close reading of the key documents of the black arts movement reveals something startling: the intellectuals of the movement were attuned to the eighteenth-century European ideology of the aesthetic.[4] Indeed, they used the aesthetic in a phenomenological sense, to explain the black subject as defined by the senses and capable of taste. They also used it as a mode of apprehending the world and as a vehicle to transcend the crisis of a modernity that had failed to live up to the promise of freedom. The aesthetic was imagined as a vehicle toward nonalienated truth. To put it another way, the black subject, imprisoned in the objective world of modern life, would turn to art as a phenomenological category, an entry into an interior realm of blackness.

Gayle opened *The Black Aesthetic* by approvingly quoting Pauline Hopkins's remark, from 1900, that the value of art lay in its roles as a "preserver of manners and customs" and as a conduit into "the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro" (xvi–xvii). Later, in his autobiographical reflections, Gayle took this argument further, contending that the African American was imprisoned by the facts of American life and only a retreat into a "subjective reality" would provide the basis of freedom:

> Confronted with this wall of insurmountable facts, the Negro intellectual was forced to look within, forced to take the excursion into self where truth reigned undistorted. Whatever calm, whatever peace was to be found by rejecting the outer reality and clinging to an inner subjective reality which could not be proved, either to the bigoted skeptics or more important, to one's loved ones: wife and child. ("Black Fathers" 416)

For Gayle previous modes of theorizing black subjectivity and its art forms were to be rejected because of their inability to penetrate the inner realm of blackness. In this realm of being, the self would not be defined by its alienation from an objective experience that was exterior to its consciousness.

But would art provide a home for the weary travelers? For many members of the black arts movement, the essential problem was that of eternal homelessness. John O'Neal, for example, saw the "concept of home and roots in America" as the central problem of black being in the world: "People can only bring a nation out of mutual commitment to their common good. Here, we have simply been victims. Our concept must be a world concept, and we must see our roots as African. We are an African People" (46). The expectation was that the aesthetic could function as a mode of reconciliation between equally alienated subjects. The aesthetic could now be invoked as a vehicle of dis-alienation. More specifically, the black aesthetic could be conceived as the first step in what Gayle called "the destruction of the old table of the laws" that constituted the white aesthetic and the construction of a new system that would "unearth the treasure of beauty lying deep in the untutored regions of the Black experience—regions where others due to historical conditioning and cultural deprivation, cannot go" ("Cultural Strangulation" 45).

The aesthetic was attractive because of its capacity to phenomenalize blackness—to imagine it outside the materiality of American life and to affirm the subjective experience of the black subject in itself. That point explains why poetry was favored in the black aesthetic. Conceived as part of what Larry Neal called "a concrete function, an action," the poem would be given the power of representing "the

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real impulse" of the black power movement. In the poem the ethics and aesthetics of the black arts movement would be reconciled. For Neal the poem would come "to stand for the collective conscious and unconscious of Black America—the real impulse in back of the Black Power movement, which is the will toward self-determination and nationhood, a radical reordering of the nature and function of both art and artist" ("Black Arts Movement" 260–61). For Carolyn Gerald, images offered "a certain way of focusing on the world outside, and therefore they represent a certain point of view" outside the crude materiality of American life (349). The work of art, then, derived its power and authority not from its referential function—signs and signifiers represented a world exterior to blackness—but from its capacity to reach out into the autonomous realm of blackness. The artist, declared Gerald, was "the guardian of image" (353).

Let me end with what appears to be the most perplexing aspect of the black arts movement and of the ideology of the black aesthetic—their insistence on the nation as a condition of possibility of black art and its horizon of expectations. Why did the writers and critics associated with the movement privilege a category—the nation—that was in decline as the organizing principle of human life and art? The movement's rhetoric of nationhood was undeniably paradoxical. On one hand, there was the renunciation of America as the national framework for black identities, exemplified by O'Neal's statement, quoted above, that home and roots were impossible in America. On the other hand, the black arts movement sought to frame itself as nationalist. Neal insisted that the movement and the black aesthetic were premised on "self determination and nationhood" ("Black Arts Movement" 257); Fuller asserted that the revolution that was enabling a new black literature was "nationalist in direction" ("New Black Literature" 327). How do we explain the attraction of nationalism to an aesthetic of revolution?

One way of trying to understand the desire for a national consciousness in the aesthetic project of a movement that was born out of revolt and ressentiment is to consider the aesthetic as a response to a problem central to freedom in modern culture—namely, the question of the state both as the guarantor of freedom and as the operative structure of artistic expression. As is well known, the category of the aesthetic has been most attractive to intellectual and artistic movements in stateless situations. The aesthetic has often been asked to supplement or stand in for the absent state. This has certainly been true in African American culture, where aesthetic states, as it were, have both provided a medium of critique of the actually existing American state and represented the utopian yearning for alternative communities. A certain ambiguity was hence implicit in the relation between the state and the black aesthetic. From one perspective, black art would be used to affirm the black subject's dissociation from the institutional power of the American state. If the American state was involved in describing and circulating representations of what the nation ought to be, as Wahneema Lubiano has noted, black Americans found themselves present in and yet absent from them. Black nationalism, notes Lubiano, has functioned as "the articulated consciousness of black Americans' awareness of their place in the state's intentions" (158).

The key to articulating this consciousness was the work of art, now summoned to provide a redemptive hermeneutics—to articulate an alternative, albeit imaginary, community. This was Neal's claim in "The Social Background of the Black Arts Movement":

> Some of us did things intuitively, some of us did certain things theoretically. I for some reason always tended to be a little bit of a hodge-podge, a little bit theoretical, a little bit intuitive. In the readings that we were doing we were always trying to make sure that the form we were evolving was a form that could

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> include the people, the community. . . . And so we were looking at black national culture for things that would be usable for national liberation or for nationhood. . . . [The] question was, how to convey to black people the strength and the values of Afro-American culture and politics through culture? (18–19)

Art would become a vehicle for galvanizing a community and educating black subjects into new forms of citizenship. In this sense, the achievement of the black aesthetic was neither the consolidation of neighborhoods nor the production of new racial subjects but the ability to imagine communities outside the domain of the state and to propose the production of subjects who could function in alternative communities.

In Africa and the Caribbean, young writers unhappy with the emergence of the authoritarian postcolonial state seized on the possibility of communities built along aesthetic or artistic lines as an alternative to a compromised citizenship. Poetry would be a major weapon of writers during the Nigerian civil war, the Soweto uprising, and the Brixton riots, in London. In 1978 Michael (Mikey) Smith represented Jamaica at the Festival of Youth and Culture in Cuba with "Mi Cyaan Believe It," a powerful dub poem and song about the destructive power of interparty politics in his country. Smith's composition talks of the pain of living in a hovel infested with cockroaches, scorpions, and rats, fighting with other impoverished youths over crumbs, and realizing that he had been a victim of "de tricks dem call partisan politics." His lyrics were intended to intervene in a brutal war between gangs affiliated with the two main political parties in Jamaica and perhaps



Jacob Lawrence with Nigerian children playing talking drums, 1962. Photo: The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation / Art Resource, NY.

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force listeners to question their acquiescence to the violence. But the powerful did not take lightly a young, untutored poet's intervention in statecraft. On 17 August 1983, Smith was stoned to death by activists associated with a leading Jamaican political party. His sin? He had heckled the minister of education at a political rally. We don't remember who the minister was, but we still hear Smith's voice in the recording of his song.

Simon Gikandi

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented as the Seventeenth Annual Addison Gayle Lecture, at Baruch College, on 31 March 2011. I thank Tuzyline Allan for initiating the invitation and facilitating the lecture.

1. For the full range of debates about the black arts movement and the black aesthetic, see Baker; Smethurst; Clarke; Ongiri; Glaude; and Collins and Crawford.

2. In "Traveling Theory," Edward Said has provided one of the most influential accounts of how theories travel from one situation to another, "a process of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin" (226).

3. A comprehensive history of the Caribbean artists movement and its art can be found in Walmsley.

4. For two different perspectives on the aesthetic ideology, see Eagleton; de Man.

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