



PROJECT MUSE®

The Black Arts Movement: Its Meaning and Potential

Amiri Baraka

Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art, Number 29, Fall 2011, pp. 22-31 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nka/summary/v029/29.baraka.html>

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

Its Meaning and Potential

Amiri Baraka



Amiri Baraka, New York City, 1976. Photo: Anthony Barboza

By the late 1950s the US civil rights movement had reached a new height of intensity with the victory of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the emergence of Martin Luther King Jr., and the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Cuban Revolution brought the 1950s to a roaring climax with yet another popular democratic victory. By 1960 the Black Student

Movement had formed out of the Greensboro Black student sit-ins, and soon the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee would step onto the stage of Black people's struggle. And at the beginning of the 1960s we welcomed the move into the leadership of Malcolm X.

Clearly, this was the era when, as Mao Tse-tung said, "Countries want Independence, Nations want

Liberation and The People want Revolution!” And as we used to quote him often, “Revolution Is The Main Trend In The World Today!”

The African Liberation Movements, from the earlier Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya, were likewise gaining worldwide recognition. And the names Kenyatta, Azikiwe, Toure, Nyerere, and Nasser were becoming familiar. In 1961 I first met Askia Toure, along with other lifelong comrades, in front of the US Mission to the United Nations, where we were gathered with hundreds of other people, including Aishah Rahman and Mae Mallory and Calvin Hicks, to protest the murder of Patrice Lumumba by the United States, Belgium, and the traitorous scum who at the time of this writing still sat in the seat of power of Zaire, Joe Mobutu.

For many of us who lived in the Village in New York, the political dimensions of the times were always muted by the petty bourgeois anarchy of the largely white soi-disant arts community we lived in. But as the whole society heated up with struggle and rebellion and revolution, I suppose the most politically sensitive of us began to pull away from the bourgeois rubric that art and politics were separate and exclusive entities.

So by the beginning of the 1960s, not only had I already gone to Cuba to witness the beginnings of the revolution that Fidel Castro and the people of Cuba had brought into the world, but when I returned I became quickly involved in helping put together political organizations like the Organization of Young Men; founding a political newspaper, *In/Formation*; and joining the leftist organization On Guard, headed by Calvin Hicks, along with Archie Shepp.

In a few months I had also become the New York chairman of the Fair Play for Cuba organization. I had gone to Cuba with Harold Cruse, Sarah Wright, Julian Mayfield, and Ed Clark, among others, and there had met the great Robert Williams, of Monroe, North Carolina, who had most recently been excommunicated from the NAACP for stating openly that Black people had the right to self-defense against the attacks of the Klan. Williams even led his unique branch of the NAACP to ambush the Klan and remove their hoods and guns.

I’m saying all this to set the stage for the coming together of the young Black people who would put

forth the concept and the organization called the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS).

Not only was the struggle for democracy raging at higher and higher levels, but when Malcolm X stepped onto center stage, there came also a wave of Black Nationalist agitation and propaganda unlike anything many of us had ever heard before. Many of us were not familiar with the Nation of Islam, especially if we were living outside Black communities. Elijah Muhammad was unknown, but Malcolm X put words to the volcanic torrent of anger and frustration many of us felt with the civil rights movement.

The “turn-the-other-cheek,” “nonviolent” approach to the struggle for democracy we rejected. We did not understand why we must continue to let crazed ignorant hooligans attack us to show that we were noble or that we deserved to be citizens. The endless television horror shows of Black people being water-hosed, beaten, dogged by two- and four-legged dogs, lynched, jailed, got our jaws tight not only at the scum who did this but at the negroes who accepted it.

That’s why the Cuban Revolution was so heavy in our sensibility. That’s why Robert Williams was our hero. That’s why we demonstrated for Lumumba and wrestled in those streets with the police despite Ralph Bunche telling us he was embarrassed that we were in public acting like niggaz.

So when Malcolm stepped forward and began to teach Self-Determination, Self-Respect, and Self-Defense, it struck a chord deep within the soul of a wide spectrum of Black people, particularly Black youth. And for those of us living outside the community, his impact was profound and life-changing.

In some respects it was like what Frantz Fanon says about the native intellectuals in colonial societies who have become so integrated into the petty bourgeois superstructure and even the marginal social life of the oppressor nation that when we first receive that degree of self-consciousness that makes us aware of how deeply we have joined with our own oppressors, even taking up the philosophies of our own inferiorization, we are deeply mortified.

Fanon says such intellectuals next become blacker than Black, or Super African, to cover and dismiss their double consciousness, as W. E. B. Du Bois calls it. I think there is very obviously some of this overcompensation in some of the interior and

public manifestations of the Black Arts Movement. Fanon also said that if such intellectuals continue to struggle in the day-to-day practical revolutionary movement, then there is a chance that they might become authentic revolutionaries rather than compensating poseurs.

We were a group of Black intellectuals living mostly in downtown New York, Greenwich Village, or the Lower East Side. Our daily social life was, for the most part, joined directly, or marginally, with the petty bourgeois arts and intellectual community, or at least that was their and our presumption. Except that whatever else the most sensitive of us was doing, what remained is what was the deepest hunger in our souls, the urge to democracy, to self-determination, the understanding that no matter how much we might be recognized or accepted or even lionized as artists etc., we were still somehow burdened with the disorienting realization of alienation.

On the surface, as we grew more conscious, we knew that as we demanded an art of struggle, an art that related to the reality of our history and the real life of the world, particularly of the Afro-American people, it became clearer and clearer that the standard bourgeois aesthetic of separation of arts and politics was stupid and becoming more and more openly bankrupt.

In a deep sense the music, jazz, blues, new music, these were sustaining elements of our lives. We could feel it ourselves; we could become truly self-conscious inside it. And as the 1960s moved on, a significant sector of Black artists downtown became more isolated from that so-called mainstream by the growing need to fully express our soul and mind connection with Black struggle in our art and in the street. When I met Askia, I didn't even know he was a poet. Ditto Larry Neal, Max Stanford. We were in the struggle to liberate Black people, to liberate ourselves.

We began to come together to discuss the movement. We were in different organizations. On Guard, RAM, Umbra, some even in the CP and the SWP. Black intellectuals and artists seeking true self-consciousness. We hit upon the idea of circulating propaganda and agitation among the downtown Blacks to involve ourselves directly in the liberation struggle. When Robert Williams was struggling



LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) leads the Black Arts parade down 125th Street toward the Black Arts Theater Repertory/School on 130th Street, New York City (detail). Source: *Liberator* 5, no. 6 (1965): 27

with the Klan, we even discussed sending him guns. One of our group was even busted in a setup by the FBI, where he was framed for trying to blow up the Statue of Liberty, just like the Muslims framed by the FBI and Mossad at the time of this writing for the World Trade Center Reichstag explosion.

We spent much time now traveling back and forth between the Village and Harlem. Working politically in Harlem, that became the badge of our sincerity. No matter that we still lived downtown for the most part, some in integrated marriages or what have you.

The explosive transformation of our quantitative frustration, built on genuine desire for liberation, into the qualitative persona who must be a wholly militant activist in the liberation struggle was Malcolm's murder. His murder by the FBI, the federal government, through native agents, Spike Lee, not by the Nation of Islam, was what sent us hurtling out of those various downtowns across the country, seeking our "Blackness" like Faust trying to reclaim his soul.

The month after Malcolm's assassination a group



Amiri Baraka (center) at the entrance to Spirit House, Newark, with musicians and actors of the Black Arts Movement, 1966. Yusef Iman (second from left) had played the role of the rogue magician, Jacoub, in a production of Baraka's play *A Black Mass*. Courtesy Prints and Photographs Department, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

of us arrived in Harlem, this time to seek permanent residence and to avenge Malcolm's murder. We had held fund-raisers downtown. Just before we left, we had a fund-raiser at the old St. Marks Theater, where my plays *The Toilet* and *Experimental Death Unit #1*, featuring Barbara Ann Teer; Charles Patterson's *Black Ice*; and *The Black Tramp*, by Nat White (whom we never heard from again), were performed to raise money to go uptown.

We rented a brownstone on West 130th Street near Lenox Avenue, tore down the first-floor walls, and began our work. The announcement of our arrival in Harlem was a parade, with the small group of young Black artists, led by the great genius Sun Ra and his then "Myth Science" Arkestra. We still have photos of that. What the people of Harlem thought of that, we would find out in various ways as we travailed. But that was the opening. The weird, the interplanetary, the heliocentric world of Sun Ra, our syncopated point, and I carried a brand-new flag, designed by painter William White, the tragic/comic (like the earth, the south the smile of joy, the north the frown of sadness, dig it) dialectical mask

of drama, fashioned into an African shield in black and gold. We walked all the way, determined to make a revolution.

The name Black Arts had come in one of our meetings downtown where we gave each other military rank and made a commitment to any means, even armed revolution. We said, what should we call this, then, secret Black organization of artists and intellectuals? I remember Larry Neal, Max Stanford, Cornelius Soares, Clarence Franklin, Askia Toure, William White, Charles and William Patterson (the last two from Umbra, our in-house troublemakers). And it came to me out of the black hole, I said, the Black Arts!

Part 2

But whatever our vision and theory, they could be nothing but speculation and argument unless we could make them real with the objective "proof" of practice. At best, we were a loose united front, joined most securely around the "new" idea of "Blackness." "But what was that?" was the relentless question that defined our confusion.

We had put out a manifesto of sorts, as we prepared to go uptown, which said we wanted to draw the most serious and committed Black artists and intellectuals from everywhere in the world to help us create the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School. We linked the common Eurocentric distortion of Black Arts as an evil magic, as a mystic pursuit. A power used to transform reality. We had long before understood the twisted racism of Europe and America when referring to Black. That everything Black was bad. But we *was* Bad; in fact, we was trying to get Badder dan Nat. We was trying to get outright “terrible.” Understanding, in various degrees, that “to turn their Evil backward is to Live!”

We set up classes on history, politics, drama. Sun Ra even taught “Myth Science” as part of “the Blacker Arts.” We began to put on plays in the small downstairs space. We had forums, some of which became near-violent ideological shootouts. But one thing was clear: we were not merely subjective in our registration of the tenor of the times or in the motion of history. People came, not only residents from the larger community of Harlem but young Black artists making the trek to the brownstone on West 130th Street with the black-and-gold flag hung outside, to find out what was going on — to support this new movement and to participate.

Not only that, but as we began to function, to do our programs — the plays, poetry readings, new music concerts — and to stalk through the community preaching Blackness (which differed depending on whom you were talking to), the world spread in all directions. And, indeed, talk began to come back to us of a Black Arts Movement!

One escalating problem with this united front of Black artists and intellectuals was that among a small group of us, on the inside, we began to struggle each day with more and more intensity. About what? About Blackness. Who was Black, and who wasn't. What was, and what wasn't.

We had made a line of demarcation (we felt) between the artists we'd left downtown and ourselves. We could put them down too easily as “whited out” or as unserious negroes committed only to hedonism and individualism. With serving white people. But certainly that could not be factual in many cases.

We were arrogant, often the Super Black neo-

phytes that Fanon spoke of. But at the same time there was real resistance from many of our erstwhile friends and fellow Afro-American artists downtown. There was a common dismissal of our efforts that we were crazy and even violent.

Some said we weren't really artists. How could you be an artist when all you wanted to talk about was Black and Hating White people . . . “specially since some of yall just left their company a few minutes ago.”

But there was, no matter how crazy and wild and even violent and nonartistic we might have seemed to our onetime friends (many of whom now openly denounced us) or to various white folks and negroes, there was a developing line of truth to our ideas and our practice, that part of them not wholly distorted by our continuing ideological confusion. For one thing, in that broad but small united front, there were mainly the petty bourgeois. Certainly most of the leadership was. Which meant that we were given to extremes and occasional fanaticism. It meant we would vacillate from this to that, which was exacerbated by the disciplineless environments many of us had come out of. Yet in spite of these impediments to ideological clarity, plus constant internal conflicts, some manifest as disruptive undermining, others as straight-out physical violence, we did accomplish some things of value, both in theory (as we later summed it up) and in actual practice.

For instance, that summer of 1965, we did bring an advanced Black Art to Harlem! But the effort became, even at our most successful and expansive, wrought and torn with ongoing problems. First of all, the BARTS was a small group of artist-intellectual-activists who formed the formal organization. All of them had paramilitary rank and responsibility in the organization. Many of our strongest supporters refused to join the actual organization, because they felt some of us were just too crazy and hard to get along with. And there is no disputing that — a couple of those dudes I couldn't even get along with. Ironically, two brothers who had split from the Umbra organization, and whom I did not know well at the outset of our attempt to build an independent institution of Afro-American artists and intellectuals, were the sickest, most disruptive negroes in militant clothing I have ever met.

There were brand-new Elijah Muslims (at least

that was the rhetoric and even the dress and style). I don't know if any of these were ever actually in The Nation. Then there were brand-new Sunni Muslims and even a few brand-new Hanafi Mussulmen, at least one of whom was related to Brother Khalis, whose DC HQ was left full of dead brothers and sisters by some crazed hitmen. Some later went to jail when Khalis occupied a building owned by or somehow associated with Jews for making a film about the prophet Muhammad.

Most of us maintained an alienation from the Nation of Islam because of Malcolm, but we knew it was the Devil that had him murdered. Baba Oserje-man's Yoruba temple also influenced us. It was, for some of us, the essence of Blackness. The authentic historical presence of our African history and culture. It is not unimportant that all of these groups had distinct and ultimately oppressive roles for women. Particularly their adherents. Whether the veils and segregation of the various Muslims or the polygamy of their tradition and the common practice of the Yoruba. And we were also influenced by these ideas and practices as legitimate forms of Blackness. There were cultural nationalists of all persuasions. Left Right & Centrist. Some as radicals, some as progressives, some as revolutionaries, some as political Black, some as mystical-spiritual Black. Some as Pick-Up-The-Gun Blacks, most as Hate-Whitey Blacks. We had the most unity on that, that being Black meant despising as openly as possible All White People, Groucho or Karl. So that since methodology and ideology are connected, doing *anything* involved sharp struggle and even violence.

But that one glorious summer of 1965, we did, even with all that internal warfare, bring advanced Black Art to Harlem. We organized, as part of HARYOU ACT, the nation's first antipoverty program, a summer arts program called Operation Boot Strap (under the overall direction of Adam Clayton Powell's point cadre, Judge Livingston Wingate). For eight weeks, we brought Drama, Poetry, Painting, Music, Dance, night after night, all across Harlem. We had a fleet of five trucks and stages created with banquet tables. And each night our five units would go out in playgrounds, street corners, vacant lots, play streets, parks, bringing Black Art directly to the people.

Young Steve Young was the most trustworthy

coordinator. He and my sister, Kimako (who was constantly attacked by certain negroes because she was an independent creative woman). She dealt with drama and dance. Andrew Hill was music coordinator; Joe Gregory coordinated the painters, assisted by Joe Overstreet and William White, who came to help us but refused to leave the Village.

One of my closest poet friends, in fact, pulled a pistol on me to emphasize his determination to stay downtown! It was that wild! But Sun Ra and Archie Shepp and Pharoah Sanders and Milford Graves and Don Pullen and Albert Ayler and, at our benefits downtown, John Coltrane, Grachan Moncur, Bobby Hutcherson, and more. And uptown Larry Neal, Askia Toure, Bobb Hamilton, Sonia Sanchez, Ted Wilson, so many poets and Black actors, directors, Jim Campbell, Rob Jackson, Kimako (who directed and played the lead role in *Dutchman*), Frank Adu, Barbara Montgomery, Yusef Iman (our stalwart classic Black Arts warrior artist) and his whole family.

That was an important, ideologically impacting, and exciting time. Black artists came by constantly to talk, to argue, to join, to support, to learn, to teach. Harold Cruse taught politics, with two agents in his class. One night even Sammy Davis Jr. came uptown and did a benefit on 125th Street. And from inside Harlem, artists like poets Clarence Reed and Clarence Franklin, Ojijiko, the Weusi artists, Ademola, Rahman, Babatunde added strength to strength, Valerie Maynard, and so many others.

We had evolved through our practice a growing rationale for what we felt and did. We wanted Black Art. We felt it could move our people, the Afro-American people, to revolutionary positions. (See my essay "The Revolutionary Theater.") (1) We wanted Black Art that was *identifiably Afro-American*. As Black as Bessie Smith or Billie Holiday or Duke Ellington or John Coltrane. That is, we wanted it to express our lives and history, our needs and desires. Our will and our passion. Our self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. (2) We wanted it to be a *Mass Art*. We wanted it to Boogaloo (like them Deacons for Self-Defense down in Boogaloosa, Louisiana, when they routed the Klan). Yeh, Boogaloo out the classrooms and elitist dens of iniquitous obliquity and speak and sing and scream abroad among Black people! We wanted a mass pop-

ular art, distinct from the tedious abstractions our oppressors and their negroes bamboozled the “few” with as Art. We thought it was Ain’t! White Ain’t. And we wanted Black Art.

That’s why rap delighted me so and still does (even though it has been widely co-opted by Uncle Bubba and the Mind Bandits), because I could see that some of what came out of us had taken root. An open popular mass-based poetry. It arrived, that’s why the corporations moved so swiftly to “cover” and co-opt. Why they disappeared Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa, accused Prof Griff of the big A-S, and brought in flesh rap like 2 Live Crew, middle-class negro rap such as Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince, and finally the straight-out Americans like Vanilla Ice and Young Black Teenagers (white). Gangsta rap was also brought in to exchange political agitation with ignorant braggadocio and thuggish imbecility, justifying the state nigger-youth annihilation program.

The last part of our eventual summation of the Black Arts Movement was that (3) we wanted an art that was revolutionary. We wanted a Malcolm art, a by-any-means-necessary poetry. A Ballot or Bullet verse. We wanted ultimately to create a poetry, a literature, a dance, a theater, a painting that would help bring revolution!

That was what it *all* was about. That’s what the whole movement and essence of the Black Arts was raised and forwarded by, the desire by Black youth to make revolution in the United States. To resist and finally destroy the slave system of racism and national oppression.

The Black Arts Repertory Theater/School lasted formally a little more than a year, but by the end of 1965 there were similar efforts rising all over the



Amiri Baraka (center) with his wife, Amina (left), and the Reverend Walter Fauntroy, national civil rights activist (right). Courtesy Prints and Photographs Department, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

country. There was a Black Arts Midwest (Woodie King and Ron Milner), a Black Arts West (Ed Bullins, Marvin X, Furaha Broadus) in San Francisco/Oakland/Berkeley. Both Emery Douglas, the Black Panther revolutionary artist, and Danny Glover came out of the Black Communications Project that we put together during that period at San Francisco State, and in the Black Fillmore community. Black Arts South emerged in New Orleans with Val Ferdinand (Kalamu ya Salaam).

At one point Black Arts theaters and poetry organizations sprang up ubiquitously across the country, usually in the larger cities where there were

Afro-American pluralities or majorities. It was clear that there was a torrent of inspiration that lifted the Black artist communities across the country, and the evidence is coming in.

What seemed most important about the BARTS was that it was a living paradigm of what many people had come to feel was the direction that Afro-American artists and the art with which they expressed the particular culture they reflected had to go in. Fundamentally we must pursue what Du Bois called True Self-Consciousness and defeat its reverse, Double Consciousness. The Black Arts Movement raised this antagonistic contradiction once again, as part of the Cultural Revolution still necessary to raise and unite the consciousness of the oppressed Afro-American people, so that they better understand themselves as well as better resist their enemies.

We felt (and I still do feel) that the Afro-American people were and are involved in a war. A war for Self-Determination, Self-Respect, and Self-Defense. It is a war for equal rights and democracy, but how can we press this struggle to victory if we suffer from Double Consciousness, i.e., if we see ourselves, like Spike Lee and the other new-wave Fetchits, through the eyes of people who hate us (Even in Living Color!)? If we look at ourselves with that grim mixture of amusement and contempt? As artists, we felt that that was our chief function, to reshape the minds of the people. To move them to revolutionary positions.

The dicta we arrived at—(1) to create a true Afro-American Art, (2) to create a mass art, (3) to create a revolutionary art—were simply three of the most important and positive aspects of our methodology, our ideological practice, such as we understood it. This was the broad spearhead of Blackness that emerged and that I feel has lasted yet still needs to be further summed up.

But this broad credo came under attack fundamentally because we had initially cloaked our call to battle in the starkest terms of cultural nationalism and Hate-Whitey language. Yet the essence of our call and our work was to try to unite the Afro-American people by raising their consciousness, by attempting to raise our own consciousness and that of the Afro-American artists and intellectuals.

We were new nationalists, older nationalists, and others, and that was the center of our loose

front. But by the mid-1970s many of us still held the general credo of the Black Arts but no longer upheld nationalism. Even so, the three points remain strong and essentially correct. But we received opposition because we called for Black Art to define itself and speak for itself from the security of its own institutions. We were opposed because we withdrew from white people, and for many of our downtown contemporaries this was unthinkable or impossible. But at the root of our most profound feeling was that it was the social context and practice of petty bourgeois liberalism that we wanted to flee.

The Afro-American people are an oppressed nation, objectively, with the right of Self-Determination. This remains the valid issue of our struggle. But even broadening the take on our opposition, for many of our contemporaries the idea was absurd that somehow Black people could express themselves through institutions of their own creation and with ideas whose validity was confirmed by their own interests and measure.

Certainly in the hot 1960s, when “revolution was the main trend in the world” and many people felt they had to at least give lip service to “Blackness,” much opposition was more covert, sub rosa, or unable to find broad circulation in the Black community. Opposition was quickly identified as from the “whited-out,” the bourgeois negroes, the backward—though that was not necessarily always true. There were some people on the left who occasionally tried to point out the excess and errors of our cultural nationalism. But since that time, from the fullest unfolding of the Black Arts concept in the 1970s until the eventual reaction that paralleled the shape and direction and dynamic of the overall political movement itself, with its Sisyphus-like historical pattern, evidence of the validity and continued existence of the Black Arts stance remains. Even though today, and for several years now, it is also obvious that the rock we rolled to the top of the mountain in the 1960s and early 1970s has rolled back down on our heads. And now the essence of the opposition to what the Black Arts stands for and symbolizes has come “full out”—it is even empowered.

The Black Liberation Movement and even the civil rights movements are held up each day to public ridicule as backward and passé, or else the

most valid ideas of our struggle are replaced with the ideas of the sickest and the most backward of our contemporaries, by Hanging Judges from the Caucasian Chalk Circle. And because of the continuous stream of distorted antidemocratic and anti-Black and counterrevolutionary images in all media that have been used to try to “reverse correct verdicts” reached through struggle, to character-assassinate the Black Liberation Movement and its chief combatants.

Spike Lee trashed Malcolm X and Dr. King, the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad, in the same movie. We hear from Bruce Perry that Malcolm was white and psychosexual. From various ex-revolutionaries we are told of the bankruptcy of the Panthers, and every day people tell me that BARTS tried to tell people what to write. No, it tried to unite the best of us to fight our oppressors!

And now in the midst of the starkest period of reaction we have ever seen, we have a new generation of the backward, the Buppies, the little neo-negro greedballs bloated with the arrogant ignorance of abject submission to imperialism. The various Fly Boys in the Butter Milk and Affirmative Action Babies, Colored People whose mission like the Spikes and Skips, just like the Tom Ass Clarences and Colin Powells, is to attack and give the lie to the idea and movement for Black Self-Determination. To make it seem that, Hey! we are all Americans and you all that ain't skipping the light fantastic of celebration by the imperialist superstructure are simply cursed by the Gods for trying to push that Black Shit — when we know it is America, America the Beautiful, that gives us our salaries, our prizes, our note, hey, even our ideas.

Yet the deepest problem, aside from our history being covered and gains won by our struggles being reversed, being claimed by our enemies, conscious or un, is that we still have not built organizations and institutions to struggle for Self-Determination, Self-Respect, Self-Defense. If we had built those institutions, those journals (like the *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Black Nation*, the *Cricket*, *BARTS*, the *Spirit House*, the *Black House*, and the *New School of Afro American Thought*), we would not have to worry about the distortions of the terminally backward, Black or White. We would define ourselves and speak for ourselves and carve up our enemies with

the graceful ease of our high art. Duke and Trane and Billie them to death! But our enemies have created our spokespersons, and they speak for us every day, covering and distorting reality, and this is the state in which we exist today.

The very people who even denied the existence of Black Art were immediately given grants to claim it. Even in this festival the Neals, Dumases, Sanchezes, Toures, Madhabutis are packed into single readings, while opposition forces (remember the name of the festival itself) are given free rein now to claim what we so painfully struggled to bring into existence! The Lesson: Where are our institutions and organizations of the Black Arts? Where are our theaters and newspapers and journals and truly independent films (not skin black but speaking from the essence of the most advanced consciousness of the Afro-American people)? That no one has the right to rule our lives for a *second*, the true self-consciousness, who we are, who we were, and who we would become!

That is the continuing task we face, as revolutionary Black artists and intellectuals, to make Cultural Revolution. To fight in the superstructure, in the realm of ideas, philosophies, the arts, academia, the class struggle between oppressed and oppressor. To re-create and maintain our voice as a truly self-conscious, self-determining entity, to interpret and focus our whole lives and history. And create those organizations and institutions that will finally educate, employ, entertain, and liberate us!

Amiri Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, is a writer of poetry, essays, fiction, drama, and music criticism. Recognized for his sometimes controversial work, the activist has taught at a number of universities. His most recent work, Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music (2010), won the American Book Award.

Note

This essay, slightly modified, was originally written in August 1994. Amiri Baraka presented it at the “Visualizing Blackness” symposium, Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, October 13, 2000.