The Black Arts Movement: The Art of Questioning

The Black Arts movement is a time in American Literature spanning roughly from 1965 to 1975. Written and spoken works from this era seamlessly and effectively merge the politics of Black liberation with the aesthetics of Black creativity. In giving an overview of this period, activist and social critic Kalamu ya Salaam writes, “When people encounter the Black Arts movement, they are delighted and inspired by the most audacious, prolific, and socially engaged literary movement in America's history.” As a historical genre, Black Arts advocated for strong and direct civil engagement and for the independent publishing of Black artists. Indeed, the emergence of Black-owned presses and publications during the 1960s not only brought to new light the talents of largely-tokenized established Black artists, but also gave voices to a fresh crop of young aspiring Black writers who, especially because of the turbulent social climate of the fifties and sixties, had plenty to write and say. Prominent African-American literary figure Ishmael Reed reflects, “I think what Black Arts did was inspire a whole lot of Black people to write. ... Blacks gave the example that you don’t have to assimilate. ... I think the challenge is for cultural sovereignty and Black Arts struck a blow for that” (qtd. in Salaam). To be sure, the promotion of cultural sovereignty propelled a new breed of writing that left behind the “protest and petition” literature of the civil rights movement and pushed forward toward “an alternative that initially seemed unthinkable and unobtainable: Black Power” (Salaam). For
many (Blacks and Whites), the political concept of Black Power was menacing and rivaled that of White Supremacy, but in the literary practice of the Black Arts movement it was widely understood as “Negro control of Negro organizations” (Wilson 141-42). Black Power meant emphasizing racial pride and social equality through the creation of Black political and cultural groups. National Black Power was not a battle cry for “reverse” racism; it was a call to rally behind the notion of true, unified Black self-determination. In the struggle to carve out a racial identity in a nation dominated by White culture, Black artists strove to speak directly to Black people, to connect Black communities, to resist the divide-and-conquer Euro-centric imperialist attitude by stressing Afro-centric harmony over general American assimilation. The written arts and songs of the day unabashedly narrated and critiqued past and contemporary abuse, inequity, and cultural losses experienced in the wake of usurping White American traditions and policies. Artists unapologetically denounced the mindset rationalizing, thus perpetuating, the (White dominant) status quo, and in so doing, they sought to test pervasively accepted and previously unchallenged truths, to enlighten, embolden, energize, and unify. Many used literature and music to spotlight the problems with the passive accommodationist solution for achieving equitable social and economic independence. This essay closely examines two poems from the Black Arts movement, “Sinner” and “Love Your Enemy,” through the lens of three essays also written during this era, “What does Nonviolence Mean?,” “Brainwashing of Black Men’s Minds,” and “The Screens.” It seeks to demonstrate how these artists used their talents and their developing voices to communicate the era’s ever-growing dissatisfaction with the fundamental incongruity between populous integrationist rhetoric and the hardships and despair grounded in the stubborn reality of discriminating social policies.
“The white man has succeeded in subduing the world by forcing everybody to think his way. The white man’s propaganda has made him the master of the world. And those who have come in contact with it and accepted it have become his slaves.”

— Marcus Garvey

**Conditioning for Control**

Historically, religion has been one of the most effective weapons in the arsenal of the propagandist. Its earthly dogma and cosmic promises create a persuasive recipe for convincing the masses to swallow subjugation and excuse unfair situations. On the whole, religion works especially well as a device for conditioning the views and behaviors of an entire group of people because its rituals and rules are brought to the public not by the faith’s god, but by partisan self-appointed stand-ins. All a leader needs is the charisma to sell the story, and Christianity during the rise of the Black Arts movement had no shortage of charismatic preachers. The message being sold was passive resistance, with Dr. Martin Luther King Junior as its most celebrated spokesman. King’s personality notwithstanding, for many vexed Black writers, including Leroi Jones and Nathan Hare, it was reasonable to associate his *turn-the-other-cheek* mantra with the endless manipulative mission to transform poverty and suffering into virtues—to implement a spiritual bait-and-switch by using the blanket of Christian values to smother the embers of collective outrage. Consequently, generations of people were shaped into what Hare calls “products of the most efficient and gigantic system of brainwashing the world has ever known” (186). Jones, Hare, and other Black Arts participants viewed leaders like King as instruments of complicity in the continuance of the status quo: Whenever “poor black folk” expressed despair or doubt about their circumstances actually changing, “King would walk among them praying, seeking to involve the most oppressed people in this country in a sham
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The ethic that only [had] value for the middle-class power structure” (Jones 140). Thus King—even with his Gandhi-like heart—came to represent the Black face of White agency in the media control of America’s so-called race problem, especially after he was awarded the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize in the midst of widespread, debilitating Black-White tensions. Hare explains in his essay “Brainwashing of Black Men’s Minds”: “[T]he black man’s passive approval of the control of media of communication by white men in this mass society makes it virtually impossible for a black leader to emerge except through the white press. Accordingly ... ‘spokesmen’ for the Negro must slant their strategy toward capturing the spotlight of the white press” (183). In other words, the Black message guiding Black direction needed whitewashing.

The peacemakers-are-the-children-of-God and other mainstream-approved Beatitudes progressively became viewed as a means for pacification, and writers picked up their pens in scathing critiques. In essence, much of the literature borne of the Black Arts movement was a way to gain some control over, and metaphorically do violence to, the existing order. It was a way to concentrate generations of anger and disillusionment into blunt cathartic release. It was a way to rail against a propaganda machine that—even if well-intentioned—sought to keep the Black population focused on greeting “local and national social evils with admirable stability” (Jones 141). Take, for example, Norman Jordan’s 1960s poem “Sinner”:

I got high
last night
alone
I had an urge to
express myself

So I started talking
to the Bible
and it kept telling
me to Die.
In fewer than thirty words, Jordan powerfully captures the depression of powerlessness that inevitably disfigures the spirit of one who accepts as immutable truth the surface message: Death is the only real freedom offered to Black America. He clearly critiques the ethereal promise of equality held up as the light at the end of the discrimination tunnel and sends the overt message that subscribing to this demoralizing school of thought is like choosing to drown rather than to fight for (at least a place in) the boat. The undertones of the poem have a more cryptic appeal, but Jordan’s use of rhetorical devices such as word placement, spacing, and capitalization allow the subtexts to emerge as strong criticisms of the “answers” offered by indoctrinated community leaders promoting Christian principles as the means to an end.

Arguably the most telling emphasis of the poem’s form is Jordan’s segregation of the word alone. Its placement physically manifests the word’s natural meaning and effectively makes the reader pause without using punctuation (an example of an alternative style used to create a distinct aesthetic). The significance of this technique, however, is not in the bucking of the more formal poetic tradition of “properly” using punctuation. Rather, it comes from the effect of the pause, from the poem’s ability to tap into the reader’s intuitive response to more deeply ponder the word’s implications. Left hanging—both visually and audibly—Jordan leads the reader to consider the concept of aloneness alone, that is, outside of its larger framework. The real genius of this singular isolation is that it demonstrates how structured form can seamlessly give way to conceptual musings. Jordan’s leap from tangible to intangible makes the statement that physical action is the impetus for emotional transformation. In so doing, the poem takes the position that change cannot happen by faith alone; the Black community needs to reject the mindset that the answer is to “tuck in their whimpering tails and conform to white
society” by subscribing to “such tidbits as: ‘The meek shall inherit the earth,’ ... [and] ‘We’ll all be one when we get over yonder’” (Hare 182). Action is required—physically (through revolution) and spiritually (by adopting alternative religions, such as Islam).

So what does the concept of alone mean? To answer this question, one should again consider the word’s placement within the poem’s structure. Ironically, alone does not reach its fullest function in isolation; it connects the idea just above it, “I got high / last night,” with the idea just below it, “I had an urge to / express myself,” into one contextual thought—and it is within the complete stanza that its independent significance is realized. Consider, first, the importance of the expression “getting high.” At first glance it appears to acknowledge the need for many African Americans—young and old alike—to use recreational drugs as an escape from the bleakness of their circumstances. The concept of alone, in this reading, alludes to both personal despair and the everyday segregation Blacks in this era faced in practice if not in theory. However, this interpretation is flawed by its allusion to hopelessness, which goes against the critical and rebellious nature of the poem. Instead, the weightier argument is that Jordan aligns his speaker with the early 1960s countercultural philosophy of taking psychedelic drugs, such as cannabis and Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), to reach for spiritual awareness. Enlightenment comes from personal ventures into altered states of consciousness, from being alone with one’s thoughts. In this way, the speaker is on a quest to embrace reality, not hide from it. Consequently, the poem argues that change flows from the inside out, and on the other side of self-examination is the inevitable questioning, as demonstrated by the speaker’s urge—his impulsive need—to express himself, that is, to challenge the efficacy and purpose of Christianity’s answers. Paradoxically, by isolating alone, Jordan manages to brilliantly convey
the idea that aloneness is both an individual and collective state of mind: A team is only as strong as its weakest member. This shrinks the voyeuristic divide that might otherwise develop between speaker and reader when poetry has a marked use of personal pronouns such as I, myself, and me. Despite the speaker’s claim of physical aloneness, the speaker is not alone—the poem creates the opportunity for the speaker and reader to emotionally connect; it creates the opportunity for a shared experience.

The theme of simultaneously being removed from and part of a larger group is once again reinforced by the physical structuring of the poem. In addition to sequestering the word alone, Jordan divides his poem into two distinct stanzas that are actually tied together as one. Obviously the two stanzas are grouped under the same title, but going beyond this fact we see that the sole punctuation in the poem comes after the very last line. The first stanza comes to an end only by the introduction of white space, which could substitute for either a comma or period. However, the lack of either suggests that the allusions of the first stanza continue into the second, and further, that their respective ideas are at once cohesive and distinct. As discussed above, the first stanza submits that individual responsibility is necessary in order to understand which questions need to be asked. On the other hand, the second stanza describes the brick wall Black people faced when asking those questions.

In emphasizing the subtext of the second stanza, Jordan uses the rhetorical device of capitalizing words that ordinarily would not appear that way in the middle of a sentence. Note the capital “B” and “D” in the words Bible and Die, respectively. Not only does he focus the reader’s attention on the words, singling them out as important, he adds depth to the words’ meanings. He capitalizes the word Bible to change it from a common noun to a proper noun,
which, in the message of the poem, transforms the idea of “bible” as a personal guide for spiritual well-being into “Bible” as a symbol for Christianity as a socializing institution. Similarly, Jordan capitalizes the word Die in order to transcend its typical meaning of physical death. The word takes on the added layer of cynicism and frustration many Black Americans harbored against the systematic Christian campaign of extolling heavenly rewards in exchange for earthly patience, a campaign intended not to seriously address issues fundamental to progressive social and economic reforms, but to promote a non-violent integrationist agenda that only served to feed the existing order by helping individuals adjust to society rather than demanding adjustments by society (Wilson 136). In calling out the principal religion practiced by mainstream America as a mechanism for Black acculturation, the poem critiques Christianity’s role in conditioning Black minds to accept the dominating White power structure. It denounces in tandem preachers like King because a “Negro minister’s presence and involvement [only] provides a moral cover to the society’s basic immorality (Wilson 136). Reducing the message of delayed gratification into an offer of death is a poetic condemnation of accepting that mindset. The first and second stanza, then, come together with the message of individual soul-searching, and sets the two in comparison through the ideas of relying on one’s self for what to think and how to respond or relying on religion—a usurping religion that set aside African beliefs.

In structure and meaning, Jordan clearly illustrates the conundrum faced by Black society in their struggle to define themselves both as Africans and as Americans. There is no doubt that his poem inverts the idea of tolerance and condemns as a “sinner” anyone who accepts the status quo of racial inequality and submits to the pacification and promise of justice in the next life offered by Christianity. The real sin is in doing nothing.
"I don't favor violence. If we could bring about recognition and respect of our people by peaceful means, well and good. Everybody would like to reach his objectives peacefully. But I'm also a realist. The only people in this country who are asked to be nonviolent are black people."

— Malcolm X

All You Need is Love

From legendary supporters of peace like Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi, who advocated against segregation in South Africa and against religious and class discrimination in India through peaceful protests and boycotts in the first half of the twentieth century, to popular cultural icons like John Lennon, who cross-culturally urged people to give peace a chance in the 1960s and 1970s, the message that love and reciprocity are all society needed to effect social change intrigued many. Even so, like Christianity’s ability to transform suffering into a virtue, the promotion of the power of love to conquer all was viewed by many Black Arts writers as yet another means for keeping (exclusively) the Black community committed to non-violence. As Jones points out, the problem with the theory of non-violence is that it is “a feigned flexibility” that “allows some gesture of social and political ‘protest,’ but offers no real alternative to the existing order” (146). The theory relies on the assumption that society’s aggressors will eventually begin to question themselves as moral and spiritual beings when it becomes evident that their violence is one-sided. However, as discussed in the previous section, the White power structure, acting in concert with an emerging Black middle-class who did not want to rock the boat, viewed religion through a lens that justified social and economic inequity.

Although King said that a man unwilling to die for something is not fit to live, he was not encouraging people to lay down their lives through acts of instigated violence; he was encouraging people to be fearless in their convictions for a life worth living. At heart he was a
pacifist who preached that in order to be non-violent, Black people not only had to avoid external bodily violence but also internal spiritual violence. In other words, he—and others who shared his approach—believed that holding on to hatred and anger was just as detrimental to cultivating real social and economic changes as would be a series of confrontational, even deadly, mini-revolutions like the one lead by Nat Turner in 1831. For King, “the way to be integrated with yourself is be sure that you meet every situation of life with an abounding love. Never hate, because it ends up in tragic, neurotic responses.” Hare, however, argues that it goes against human nature to let go of hostility in a hostile environment, offering this analogy: “[I]f somebody sticks a pin in a portion of your anatomy and you do not yell out, then something is wrong with you or that portion of your anatomy” (184). Jones agrees. In his essay, “What does Nonviolence Mean?,” he reasons that the rage against tyranny would have to be vented through “political and social violence to the existing system” or “actual physical violence” would be its substitute (146). As history proved, racial tensions erupted as changes to the status quo were frustrated by tokenism and appeasement. In the seven years spanning 1964 - 1971 the country witnessed an onslaught of more than twenty-five race riots in major cities across the nation.

This disturbing theme did not go unnoticed by Black Arts writers, such as Yusef Iman, who scorned the reformist/integrationist strategy for focusing on the wrong group of people. Iman titles one of his poems “Love your Enemy,” which likely is not a coincidental reference to a famous King speech called “Loving your Enemies.” In this speech delivered in 1957, King uses the analogy that communism (American status quo) is strong only because of the failure of capitalism (Black Christians) “to live up to its noble ideals and principles inherent in its system.”
In other words, the Black community must individually and collectively remain above reproach to expose the White dominant power structure as repressive and unjust. This tactic is the modus operandi of a “Screen”—a term C. E. Wilson coins as the successor to the defamatory “Uncle Tom.” A Screen is person who enforces and maintains the established socio-economic system “in the least brutal, most refined and most profitable ways possible” (133). People in “power” positions like King are especially effective in this role because they are able to push values that benefit the status quo, such as “patience and long-suffering hard work, super-patriotism, [and] naïve opportunism” (Wilson 134). Iman’s message does not dismiss King’s call that people must recognize there is good and evil in the deeds of all men, but what it does dismiss is the idea that electing to not love one’s enemy is an evil equivalent to the conditions informing that choice.

The poem, in both structure and content, scoffs at King’s speech. Its rhythm flows like a back-and-forth between an impassioned preacher and a church choir. The speaker recounts heartbreaking past and present realities faced by Black Americans and their ancestors and is answered by a mocking chorus of love your enemy. The punctuation is starkly different than in Jordan’s poem. While Jordan allows his words to flow together for effect, Iman uses periods to create hard stops. Thus, Iman makes a straightforward affirmation about the poem’s message: Christianity offers no real solutions, but to put others above yourself. “Brought here in slave ships and pitched over board. /.../ Rape your mother. /.../ Kill your children. /.../ Sell you rotten foods. /.../ Dilapidated schools. /.../ Water hose you down,” declares the speaker as he runs over centuries of atrocities, and each call is returned by the same flat reply: “Love your enemy.” Interestingly, Iman chooses to not use exclamations, even though the violence of the poem
begs for urgency. By deliberately denying screams, the poem conveys a sense of detachment that only can arise from numbness. According to Hare’s sensibility, the focus on loving the enemy hampers change to the status quo, since, as Iman’s poem clearly establishes, the dominant White power structure does not live up to the same non-violent commitment. He writes: “The non-violent hypocrisy has been perhaps the most ridiculous and appalling farce ever perpetuated upon and swallowed by a supposedly sane group of human beings. Only recently have black people begun showing signs of shedding this preposterous shackle” (185).

Iman’s poem echoes Hare’s conclusion, ending with the heart of the message, which cries out to be read in the tone a child might take while singing a taunt to another child on the school’s playground, l-o-o-o-v-e, l-o-o-v-e, love, love, love....:

Love your enemy.
    Love.
    Love.
    Love.
    Love.
    Love.
    Love, for everybody else.
But when will we love ourselves? (Lines 34-41)

Notice Iman’s use of indentation. He deliberately shifts these lines to indicate a quote, to signify the poem is directly responding to King’s message specifically and Christianity generally.

The speaker asks a poignant question that pleads for consideration, consideration that does not deny that hate is a form of self-inflicted injustice and does not suggest that loving one’s self and loving one’s enemy are mutually exclusive. However, the poem does argue against the claim that loving one’s enemy will bring about love in one’s self. It questions King’s logic that the oppressed should look within themselves to determine if there might be something inside “that arouses the hate response” in other individuals. The poem’s repetitive nature begs the
question, why should the oppressed take on the oppressor’s burden of self-examination? Iman clearly critiques the deadness embedded within the message to love your enemy. The poem reads, “But when will we love ourselves?” This is a statement couched in a question, speaking directly to the Black community. The word but implies preoccupation and stresses that loving your enemy is nothing but a diversion designed to ensure the survival of the status quo as Black Americans idly and fruitlessly wait for the dominant power structure to appreciate their love. Iman’s message is unmistakable: Accepting the status quo makes you your own worst enemy. Black people should love themselves not because of their fortitude to love their enemies, but because they are worth loving. The poem’s chorus of l-o-o-o-v-e, l-o-o-v-e, love, love, love translates into b-l-a-a-a-h, b-l-a-a-h, blah, blah, blah. The poem defines racial self-love and pride by reversing the brutality found in its lines. Love yourself by not accepting inequity imposed on you by your enemy. Love yourself by not accepting inferior goods, services, and education imposed on you by your enemy. Love yourself by not succumbing to the social controls imposed on you by your enemy. Love yourself by recognizing love is not all you need.

Iman’s poetic message is less enigmatically woven together than the layered subtexts of Jordan’s work, but both poems recognize and address the invisible forces working to uphold the inequities of the existing dominant social and economic systems. Jones boldly proclaims, “Nonviolence can be your ‘goal’ if you are already sitting in a comfortable house being brought the news of your oppression over television” (152). In other words, the Christian principle of non-violence, an effective political tool for keeping social unrest under control, only works to maintain the status quo, as evidenced by the conned Black middle-class who believes they are no longer oppressed. As artists, Iman, Jordan, Jones, Hare, and Wilson all shared the same
goal—to be the critical and descriptive voices pointing out the hypocrisy of non-violence in the White power structure. The Black Arts movement, as exemplified through the poems and essays cited, stressed personal enlightenment over religious doctrine. It cautioned that Christianity was not a compatible substitute for Black Nationalism. The Christian ideal of non-violence depended on the bible’s message that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23), a message that would not threaten the existing socio-economic status quo and a message that the White power structure hypocritically ignored. The Black Arts movement allowed for metaphysical violence without bloodshed. It was a way to step closer to self-determination by giving Black artists a voice independent of White audiences and publishers. Ironically, as Salaam points out, the movement became swallowed up by the very socio-economic elements it fought against: “President Richard Nixon's strategy of pushing Black capitalism as a response to Black Power epitomized mainstream co-option. As major film, record, book, and magazine publishers identified the most salable artists, the Black Arts movement's already fragile independent economic base was totally undermined.”

Even though the literary period has ceased to be recognized formally since the mid-1970s, it arguably endures today in the wildly lucrative hip-hop and rap music genres and spoken word poetry Black entrepreneurs and artists like Russell Simmons and Dante Smith [Mos Def] helped to popularize. Wilson’s words continue to invite questions, only the focus has changed from religious to secular as the status quo economically marginalizes larger segments of the population: “Screens spare the establishment the tedium of having to explain inequality as an integral part of the system” (142). Such is the Black Arts legacy.
Works Cited


