

SOUL HANDS CLAP IN THE 60s: HISTORY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY

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Abstract:

Just as the modern Civil Rights Movement differed from previous ones in style and substance, the poetry of the 1960s, and especially the late 60s, offered a new way of talking, an especially noticeable sea change in mood, that was, I argue, a consequence of two sets of significant events: one, the 1966 "Black power" speech of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure) in Greenwood, Mississippi, and, in tandem, the deaths of Medgar Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1965), and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968).

Keywords: African-American Poetry, History, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin.

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.*
Maya Angelou,
Still I Rise

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In her book, *A Song Flung Up To Heaven*, Maya Angelou describes what she saw unfolding in Watts, California, the summer of 1965 following her return to America from Ghana:

There had been no cameras to catch the ignition of the fire. a number of buildings were burning wildly before anyone could film them. Newscasters began to relay the pictures and sounds of the tumult.

“There is full-blown riot in Watts. Watts is an area in southeast Los Angeles. Its residents are predominately Negroes.” (66-67)

The event that would come to be known as The 1965 Watts Riot was triggered, according to historians, by a legacy, in South Central Los Angeles, of unfairness in housing, high unemployment, poor educational opportunities, and police brutality.

In spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans could do little to change the de facto reality of the banking industry that refused to extend them loans, or the housing industry that balkanized them in dilapidated inner city housing. What they could do is rebel against obvious police brutality, which is what some of them did following the arrest by a white motorcycle officer of an African American male for suspicion of driving while intoxicated.

When the man’s brother and mother were also arrested, actions that residents perceived as unwarranted, the volcano of anger that had simmered just below the surface since May, when a white officer had shot dead an unarmed African American man who had been stopped for speeding—he was rushing his pregnant wife to hospital—erupted.

Maya Angelou would, a few days later, record, poetically, her observations in *Our* (*A Song Flung Up To Heaven*, 73-74). Its last verse captures Watts as replicated in other American cities:

Lighting: a hundred Watts
Detroit, Newark and New York
Screeching nerves, exploding minds
lives tied to
a policeman's whistle
a welfare worker's doorbell
finger

Angelou would not be the first, and certainly she is not the last African American writer to write about, within, and against American historical moments.

"The memory of oppressed people is one thing that cannot be taken away," notes the historian Howard Zinn, "and for such people, with such memories, revolt is always an inch below the surface. For blacks in the United States, there was the memory of slavery, and after that of segregation, lynching, humiliation. and it was not just a memory but a living presence—part of the daily lives of blacks in generation after generation" (*A People's History Of The United States*, 435).

In a chapter entitled "Or Does It Explode?" Zinn cites Langston Hughes 1930s poem, *Harlem*¹ as evidence of the ways in which blacks used poetry to express their anger "In a society of complex controls, both crude and refined." Langston, in that poem, poses a number of rhetorical questions that, in the 1950s and 1960s would be answered with what James Baldwin, in 1962, called *The Fire Next Time*.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

Perhaps it was frustration at the slow pace of progress allowed African Americans that led Hughes to those questions. The hope that is embedded in his poem "I, Too,— "Tomorrow/I'll be at the table/When company comes"—having died somewhere along the way.

African American writers, especially the poets of the 1960s, can lay claim to an embodiment of political issues in their work, so much so, that it is not always easy to determine whether the historical moments inspired the works or the works ran parallel to significant political and historical moments. Certainly, as will be shown later in this essay, specific events such as the assassination of Black leaders would inspire specific works, but because so many of the poets were political activists, identities of inspiration or influence are not clearly demarcated.

It is clear, though, that the black hands making political and poetic history were clasped in a soulfully different way in the turbulent 1960s and a few years beyond than in any other period in American history.

In the introduction to *The Black Experience*, Frances E. Kearns notes, "So significant has the theme of black experience been in American thought that it can be seen as literary influence at least as pervasive as "the frontier experience" described by Frederick Jackson Turner."

The Jamaican poet, Claude McKay, inscribed his own impressions of and reactions to the black experience in America in his poem *If We Must Die*:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy

Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh kinsmen! We must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we we'll face the murderous cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!²

So powerful are the underlying threats in this poem, that Henry Cabot Lodge, Republican Senator from Massachusetts, placed it in the *Congressional Record*, Zinn reminds us, "as an example of dangerous currents among young blacks" of the 1920s.

That poetry could inspire or motivate acts of civil disobedience was a subject for discourse among African American poets long before Barbara Harlow's 1987 book, *Resistance Literature*, which claimed that "Poetry is capable not only of serving as a means for the expression of personal identity or even national sentiment. Poetry, as a part of the cultural institutions and historical existence of people, is itself an arena of struggle." (33)

Such utilitarian purposes to which poetry, or the literature, in all genres, of African Americans were placed was hardly new. The editors of *Call & Response*, *The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, in defense of their linking of history to literature, have argued,

Contemporary scholarship on the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries reveals that the full account of the origins of the United States has been ignored in popular history and, thus, erased from national consciousness. However, it is necessary for that obscured history to be uncovered in order to understand the beginning of the African American literary tradition and the repressive environments in which its birth took place. (2)

While *Call & Response* goes further than most anthologies with its emphasis on the oral tradition coming out of Africa, most anthologies of African American literature link the literary output to events in American history.

It has also been common practice for major African American leaders to express their visions of African American literature as serving mainly ideological purposes.

In 1906, six years after he had declared that "The problem of the twentieth century is the color line," W.E.B. Dubois articulated what he saw as the central purpose of black art in a manifesto entitled, *The Niagara Movement*.*

In art and literature we should try to loose the tremendous emotional wealth of the Negro and the dramatic strength of his problems through writing, the stage, pageantry and other forms of art. We should resurrect forgotten ancient Negro art and history, and we should set the black man before the world as both a creative artist and a strong subject for artistic treatment.

Langston Hughes would, in 1926, reject such an imperative in an essay, *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* published in with the *Nation* (June 23, 1926, 692-694) when he declared: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. Ifr they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." ³

Dubois's challenge seemed more conducive to the temperaments of the poets of the 1960s, many of whom were soldiers in the street struggles for civil rights. The work that poets like Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Imiri Baraka, and many others did was not

capillaries of the modern Civil Rights Movement, but penned out of the poets direct participation in that battle, and thus, reflective of the truest meaning of resistance literature.

These poets broke with long established European forms; they broke with a tradition of polite protest; they abandoned forms and structures complicit with notions of double-consciousness. Instead, they de-centered the structures of poetic power in their choice of language, and the ways in which that black language resonated on white pages.

In his *Afro-American Poetics*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. describes that period, and the efforts of Black writers:

It was as though possession of what Richard Wright called “a vocabulary of history” gave blacks precisely the terms they needed to protect themselves, to knock the serpent into the street. Or, to place the matter in another light, it was as though black people had arrived at the Western city only to find it stricken with plague or caught in the bright flames of its destruction. As an alternative to the sickness and death at hand, they proposed a new nation founded on those distinctively black and African elements that had never been allowed within the boundaries of the city. Rather than study the tortuous coils of the dying, they sought to bring forth new life. Black writers were in the forefront of this effort. (116).

Baker pays particular attention to Imamu Imiri Baraka (ne Leroi Jones), tracing his oeuvre from Baraka’s days in the early 1960s as a “schwartzze Bohemian” to the 1970s. Of particular interest to this discussion is what Baker calls Baraka’s ultimate goal in the mid 1960s: the creation of a new black humanism, one that results from the adherence of black artists to Baraka’s dictates:

The Black Artist’s role in America is to aid the destruction of America as we know it. The Black Artist must draw out of his

soul the correct image of the world. He must use his image to bond his brothers and sisters together in common understanding of the nature of the world (and the nature of America) and the nature of the human soul. (131)

Just as the modern Civil Right Movement differed from previous ones in style and substance, the poetry of the 1960s, and especially the late 60s, was a new way of "talking". There was also a noticeable sea change in mood in the latter years of the 1960s that could, arguably, be a consequence of Malcolm X (1965) the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) and Medgar Evers's (1963) assassinations.

An added and equally important factor was the 1966 "Black Power" speech by Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Toure) in Greenwood, Mississippi. In the transcribed tapes of that speech, published in *Call & Response* (1426-1430), Carmichael, leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) argued for a new direction, away from mollification and passivity.

We are on the move for our liberation. We have been tired of trying to prove things to white people. We are tired of trying to explain to white people that we are not going to hurt them. We are concerned with getting the things we want, the things that we have to have to be able to function. the question is, can white people allow for that in this country? The question is, will white people overcome their racism and allow for that to happen in this country? If that does not happen, brothers and sisters, we have no choice but to say, very clearly, move on over, or we are going to move on over you. (1430)

Baraka's, *A Poem for Black Hearts*, invoking images of Malcolm X' "by any means necessary" advocacy, was filled with the ache of Malcolm's death, and rage at the disrespect heaped upon black

Americans. But this was no mere protest against atrocities; this was a call to action that was as far from Alain Locke's 1927 figuration of the New Negro, as Harlem was from Hollywood.⁴

A Poem for Black Hearts

For Malcolm's eyes, when they broke
the face of some dumb white man. For
Malcolm's hands raised to bless us
all black and strong in his image
of ourselves, For Malcolm's words
fire darts, the victor's tireless
thrusts, words hung upon the world
change as it may be, he said it, and
for this he was killed, for saying
and feeling, and being/change, all
collected hot in his heart. For Malcolm's
heart, raising us above our filthy cities,
for his stride, and his beat, and his address
to the grey monsters of the world, For Malcolm's
pleas for your dignity, black men, for your life,
black man, for your filling of your minds
with righteousness, For all of him dead and
gone and vanished from us, and all of him which
clings to our speech black god of our time.
For all of him, and all of yourself, look up,
black man, quit whining and stooping, for all of him.
For Great Malcolm a prince of the earth, let nothing in us
rest
until we avenge ourselves for his death, stupid animals
that killed him,* let us never breathe a pure breath if
we fail, and white men call us faggots till the end of
the earth.

One might argue that this new consciousness in African American poets was long in coming, but it could only arrive with the conscious recognition and articulation of the fact that African Americans were living in a colonized state, and even quiet pleas for liberation would be met with brutal force from the colonizers.

Living inside an America, no matter their debauched conditions, meant that one was living inside the greatest country in the world. Black American soldiers had fought wars in Europe and Asia on behalf of that greatness. It required a psychic change in attitude toward the worldview of America for narratives of liberation to flourish.

The handbooks for that radicalization of consciousness appeared in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and his *A Dying Colonialism* (1967). One year later, *The Wretched of the Earth* would be published in English, and these three texts would excite the imaginations of writers living in imperiled communities in America.

As Patrick Taylor notes in *The Narrative of Liberation*,

Fanon's political writings are part of a critical tradition of social thought. They order the events of lived experience into a dynamic whole and project possibilities for the transformation of this whole in the name of common humanity. They relate a story of peoples, formerly trapped under colonialism, remaking themselves and their world in a process of decolonization. (7)

This is not to diminish the power of essays on the Black Aesthetic, the Black Arts Movement by African American writers Hoyt Fuller, Larry Neal, and Addison Gayle Jr. but working as they were, in tandem with the street struggle, and as insiders, one wonders how much attention the poets of the day gave to their work at that time. An outsider's voice such as Fanon's, with its view of a world wider than America, could have been paid more credence.

One of Fanon's great concerns was with language, and it is clear that the language of the poetry of the 1960s had changed radically from

that of earlier years. By language I mean not only the subject/object of what was being written and said—for many of the poems for performative—but, perhaps more importantly, the tone, and style.

The poets were saying that although they were tied to English as the language of expression, evidence that they had or were in the process of decolonization would be illustrated in their decentering of the power of Standard English. So capitalizations at the beginning of sentences were dropped, as were formal signs of punctuation, thus decapitating the power. Included too, were insulting names for whites, such as “honkie”, and an attitude of disdain for the confinements of symmetry were common features, as seen in the first verse of Nikki Giovanni’s (1968) *Revolutionary Music*:

you’ve just got to dig sly
and the family stone
damn the words
you gonna be dancing to the music
james brown can go to
viet nam
or sing about whatever he
has to
since he already told
the honkie
“although you happy you better try
to get along
money won’t change you
but time is taking you on”
not to mention
doing a whole
song they can’t even snap
their fingers to
“good god! ugh!”
talking bout

“I got the feeling baby I got the feeling”
 and “hey everybody let me tell you the news”
 martha and the vandellas dancing in the streets
 while shorty long is functioning at that junction
 yeah we hip to that
 aretha said they better
 think
 but she already said
 “aint no way to love you”
 (and you know she wasn’t talking to us)
 and dig the o’jays asking “must I always be a stand in
 for love”
 I mean they say “I’m a fool for being myself”⁵

These poems were often celebratory, but again, in soulful kind of way. Giovanni is celebrating black singers—individuals and groups—but she is also exposing some of their words as signs of revolutionary attitudes. She suggests that singers such as James Brown and Aretha Franklin are talking antagonistically to whites even as they speak empathically to blacks.

“Same thing but different,” as one saying in the Black community would surmise the strategy. In other words, these poets were engaging in acts of signifying, another aspect of which was the reclamation.

Many of the poems of the period sought to reconstruct the images of Black men and women. Gone were the days of black woman, as depicted in

American films, as the fat mammy, prostitute, or, as critic Mary Helen Washington would call her, *The Suspended Woman*⁶ in African American women’s fiction set in the 1920s.

Poets talked to each other in loving, even erotic ways as in Giovanni’s *Seduction* (1968):

one day
 you gonna walk in this house

and I'm gonna have on a long African
gown
you'll sit down and say "the Black..."
and i'm gonna take one arm out
then you—not noticing me at all—will say "what about
this brother..."
and I'm going to be slipping it over my head
and you'll rap on about "The Revolution..."
while i rest your hand against my stomach
you'll go on—as you always do—saying "I just can't dig..."
while I'm moving your hand up and down
and I'll be taking your dashiki off
then you'll say "What we really need..."
and I'll be licking your arm
and "The way I see it we ought to..."
and taking your shorts off
then you'll notice
your state of undress
and knowing you you'll say
"Nikki,
isn't this counterrevolutionary...?"⁷

The Black male as uncle Remus sitting under the tree reading to white children, or eyes averted from whiteness also came in for redressing. The New Negro, as Alain Locke had envisioned in his "Enter the New Negro" in the March 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic*, had finally come of age as illustrated in TWO POEMS (from "Sketches from a Black-Nappy-Headed Poet" by Don L. Lee who would officially change his name to Haki Madhubuti to reflect his altered state of consciousness:

last week
my mother died/

& the most often asked question
 at the funeral
 was not of her death
 but
 why was i present
 with/out
 a
 tie on.

i ain't seen no poems stop a .38,
 i ain't seen no stanzas brake a honkie's head,
 i ain't seen no metaphors stop a tank,
 i ain't seen no words kill
 & if the word was mightier than the sword
 pushkin wouldn't be fertilizing Russian soil/
 & until my similes can protect me from a night stick
 i guess I'll keep my razor
 & buy me some more bullets. (86)⁸

The first poem distinguishes between the attitude of the older generation of Black Americans who conformed to what they believed were white expectations, usually out of fear of retribution, some as serious as lynching. The second poem, interestingly, calls into question the very power conveyed in its language of subversion, and carries the warning that words alone will be insufficient if the process of decolonization is to be successful.

The three poets highlighted in this essay are only a few of the "new breed" of poets of the 1960s. As Gwendolyn Brooks notes in her introduction to *A Broadside Treasury*, there is, in these poems, "an agreeable invasion *of* the folk, an appropriation of supplies, wonderful supplies, *only* to shape, to fill, to enhance with substantial embroidery a fundamental strength, which is then *returned*, with proud respect." (13).

It was respect for, and pride in the modern movement toward personal reconstruction, and collective civil rights that provided both the maneuver and the jolt to these poets.

Notes

1. Howard Zinn calls the poem "Lennox Avenue Blues" in *A People's History of The United States*. I prefer to use the title "Harlem", as used in most anthologies.
2. See *The Black Experience*, ed. Frances E. Kearns, p.377.
3. At the time of this declaration, Hughes was financially indebted to white New Yorkers Amy and Joel Spingarn from whom he constantly borrowed money, and would go on to become beholden to elderly Park Avenue socialite, Charlotte van der Veer Quick Mason in what appears to be rather uncomfortable ways. Given his dependency on white philanthropy, his independence as a writer is open to question.
4. For a discussion of the ways in which the politics of the time impacted Baraka's poems, see Houston A. Baker's *These Are Songs If you Have the/Music": An Essay on Imamu Baraka*, in Baker's *Afro-American Poetics* (111-139).
* There remains widespread belief in Black communities that US government undercover operatives had a hand in Malcolm's assassination. See, for example, Allison Stark Draper's, *The Library of Political Assassinations, The Assassination of Malcolm X*. The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc. New York. (2002) Karl Evanzz's *The Plot to Kill Malcolm X*. Thunder's Mouth Press. New York, N.Y. (1992).
5. For a discussion of the ways in which the politics of the time impacted Baraka's poems, see Houston A. Baker's *These Are Songs If you Have the/Music": An Essay on Imamu Baraka*, in Baker's *Afro-American Poetics* (111-139).
6. *Op.cit.* p. 57.
7. See Mary Helen Washington's *Teaching Black Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers*. *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 11, No 1 (Spring 1977), 20-24 for a catalogue of types of African American female figures in literature by African American women writers.
8. From *A Broadside Anthology*, p.86.

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