



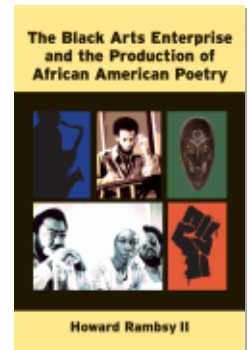
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## The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry

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## 5 • The Poets, Critics, and Theorists Are One

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Although black arts discourse gave rise to a wide range of criticism, commentary, and theoretical formulations, the critical contributions of the writers have sometimes been described in rather narrow terms. For example, Henry Louis Gates Jr. addresses what he perceives as the weaknesses of black aesthetic theories in his book *Figures in Black* by focusing on the writings of three academic critics: Stephen Henderson, Addison Gayle, and Houston Baker. According to Gates, the theory of poetry that Henderson provided is based on insufficient, “sometimes jumbled broad categories.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the flaws inherent in Henderson’s research, explains Gates, the theories of African American literature offered by Houston Baker and Addison Gayle are even weaker.<sup>2</sup> In Gates’s view, the critical writings of Henderson, Gayle, and Baker represent “the best and most sophisticated work of the black aesthetic critics.”<sup>3</sup> Gates’s conception of whose work constitutes “the best and most sophisticated” probably rests on academic evaluative standards. Yet within black arts discourse, Henderson, Gayle, and Baker are certainly not in a league of their own. In addition, their efforts to promote black aesthetic theorizing were not as pervasive during the era as the efforts of, say, Hoyt Fuller and Larry Neal.

Focusing primarily on the work of three academic critics actually delimits the broader implications of black arts critical discourse. For now, the concern is less about providing a comprehensive treatment of the merits and shortcomings of black aesthetic theories. Besides, Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have already provided fairly extensive exchanges on this subject.<sup>4</sup> Instead, keeping with this study’s overall focus, the goal is to concentrate on how poets utilized critical discourse to shape the formation of a movement. Indeed, a particularly

notable feature of the Black Arts Movement relates to the degree to which poets actively participated in the assessment and critical appreciation of African American literary art. Poets published hundreds of reviews and commentary focusing on black poetry. They published essays that highlighted the connections between black music and literature, and they were at the forefront in the critical conversations regarding theories of “black aesthetics.” Rarely have poets been so visibly involved in the publication of criticism and theoretical formulations.

Several leading poets of the time period blurred the lines between genres and modes of writing. Beyond Amiri Baraka’s reputation as a principal poet of the movement, he was an ethnomusicologist long before the term was widely used. Baraka’s *Blues People* (1963) and *Black Music* (1968) highlighted the interrelated rhythms of black music and experience. Carolyn Rodgers’s series of essays on poetics published in *Negro Digest/Black World* offered a useful and influential framework for new black poetry and anticipated Stephen Henderson’s anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Rodgers also identified “signifying” as a major technique practiced by black writers, a subject that Henry Louis Gates Jr. would address in his book *The Signifying Monkey* (1990). Sarah Webster Fabio’s essay “Tripping with Black Writing” was quite experimental, if not daring, in its blend of poetic rhythms and critical delineation, and it revealed how a poet might jazz up the typically stiff prose of academic writing.

Few studies devoted to African American poetry have been as extensive as Eugene Redmond’s thoroughly researched book *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* (1976). Covering over one hundred African American poets, from Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, and Jupiter Hammon through Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, and Jayne Cortez of the 1970s, Redmond’s *Drumvoices* constitutes a landmark study in the effort to historicize African American writing. Finally, in regards to criticism and theoretical formulations, Larry Neal’s work holds a special place in black arts discourse. Neal’s signature piece, in fact, is not one of his poems, but rather his essay “The Black Arts Movement.” It was Neal, by the way, who stated in his often quoted afterword to *Black Fire* that “the artist and the political activist are one.” Consequently, considering the active involvement of creative writers in shaping critical discourse, it might also be accurate to say of several writers associated with the black arts enterprise that poets, critics, and theorists were one. That is not to say that the writers were of one accord. Yet their use of over-

lapping terms and points of reference, as well as their tendency to address interrelated issues, reveals that despite their differences, the writers often contributed to a common conversation concerning artistic composition, black people, and political agency.

An examination of critical writings and commentary on African American poetry shows the degree to which black poets took on leading roles in framing their movement. As I demonstrate in this chapter, Larry Neal's writings anticipated and projected the defining principles of black arts discourse. Poets such as Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and Eugene Redmond offered invaluable frameworks for understanding African American verse, and poets also took vanguard positions in black aesthetic theorizing. Ultimately, the writers went well beyond conventional roles of poets by actively participating in the formulation of critical models for appreciating literary art and expressive culture in general.

### The Roles of Larry Neal

The style, content, and aims of Larry Neal's articles contributed to popularizing the idea that what he and his fellow artists were involved in was, in fact, a movement. As a cofounding member of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School, coeditor of *Black Fire*, and contributing poet and essayist to central black arts publications, Larry Neal produced and promoted black arts writings and black aesthetic theorizing in a decisive manner. "Neal found himself," observes literary critic Kimberley Benston, "continually at the heart of the most critical activity in the determination of a productive *intelligentsia*: the lively embodiment of an evolving communal consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Beginning with short articles he published in *Liberator* in the mid-1960s, Larry Neal became an active and widely read participant-observer of the developing cultural movement.

Neal's *Liberator* articles reveal his interest in emphasizing the significance of making connections between issues of black self-determination and African American artistic culture. In an article entitled "The Cultural Front," published in *Liberator* in June 1965, Neal provides a short description of a symposium in Harlem, as well as a brief report on the opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School.<sup>6</sup> Near the beginning of "The Cultural Front," Neal tells his African American audience that those who were contemplating freedom struggles should consider this: "The political liberation of the Black Man is directly tied to his cul-

tural liberation” (26). In this brief statement, Neal appeals to those readers associated with black activist and radical discourses, and he expresses the necessity of connecting politics and art, an idea that would become commonplace in discussions of literature. Neal took it for granted that his audience would know what he meant by “political liberation,” “cultural liberation,” and “the Black Man.” To support his initial assertion, Neal explains that popular cultural figures Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and Black Muslims all realized that an understanding of black artistic and expressive culture was central to any attempt to develop a comprehensive analysis of the political conditions of African Americans. Suggesting that respected black nationalist leaders valued the importance of artistry and expressive culture allowed Neal to establish more credibility for his propositions that artists should take activism seriously and that political activists should recognize the viability of artistic productions as a means of mobilizing large numbers of African Americans.

Neal also notes that during the era, Amiri Baraka came closest to describing the souls and aspirations of black folks by using music as a major point of reference in his book *Blues People*. By associating Baraka with Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey, Neal provides Baraka with high praise and suggests the favorable possibility of writers modeling themselves on political figures. Neal’s appraisal of Baraka in “The Cultural Front” anticipates, if not promotes, the idea of Baraka as the epitome of a black artist/activist and as a leading figure in the Black Arts Movement. The linkages between black politics and expressive culture, the appeal to an African American readership, the reverence for Malcolm X and Amiri Baraka, and the focus on black music displayed by Neal in “The Cultural Front” are ideas that would permeate the movement. Later in *Liberator*, Larry Neal published a series of articles on “the black writer’s role,” where he focused on Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the question of black writers’ responsibilities to “our own people.” In retrospect, it appears Larry Neal’s major role would be that of articulating, and in many ways influencing, the aims of black arts poets and discourse.

In “The Black Arts Movement,” Neal’s most widely circulated essay, he explains the objectives of black artists: “We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or destroyed. . . . What is needed is a whole new system of ideas.”<sup>7</sup> From here, Neal goes on to explain the development of a black aesthetic that formed the basis of what black arts writers were seeking to do with their literary art. Keeping in line with the fact

that he was writing for a publication on drama, Neal spends much of his essay discussing the Black Arts Theatre. He identifies Baraka as the movement's leading figure and favorably assesses his artistic vision and productions. "In drama," Neal writes, "LeRoi Jones represents the most advanced aspects of the movement. He is its prime mover and chief designer" (33). That Neal's article appeared in the *Drama Review*, a white-owned journal with a wide and diverse readership, helped ensure the visibility that it gained for the movement's objectives and principal figure, LeRoi Jones. Like "The Black Arts Movement," Neal's essays "And Shine Swam On," "Any Day Now," and "New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties" return to and expound on the issues he raises in "The Cultural Front."

The far-reaching circulation of Neal's essays was, indeed, quite impressive. His article "And Shine Swam On" appeared as the afterword to *Black Fire*, one of the most frequently referenced anthologies in black arts discourse. "The Black Arts Movement" was initially published in a special issue of the *Drama Review* in 1968 and was subsequently published in anthologies such as *The Black American Writer* (1969), *Black Literature in America* (1970), *Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1760 to Present* (1971), and *The Black Aesthetic* (1971). The essay remains in print even today. Neal's "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation" and "Ellison's Zoot Suit: Politics as Ritual" appeared, respectively, in *Ebony* in 1969 and in *Black World* in 1970. The publication of Neal's essays in these sites ensured that Neal's views would reach large, diverse groups of readers interested in black arts. The publication history of the above essays suggests that Neal, more so than academic critics Addison Gayle, Stephen Henderson, and Houston Baker, exposed a wide audience of fellow writers and general readers to the major objectives, features, and figures of the Black Arts Movement as the movement was taking shape.

Larry Neal's essays were published as widely as his poems. He was as much a black arts commentator as he was a black arts poet, and his sensibilities as a poet seemed to influence the stylized presentation of his prose. His "Any Day Now," which addresses his familiar theme about the correlation between the political and the cultural freedoms of black people, displays resonating black vernacular expressive qualities, giving the piece a vibrant, distinctive edge. For Neal, black arts discourse was not academic discourse produced for a specialized scholarly audience. Instead, he delivered his ideas in a hip prose style for a presumably hip and general black readership. Throughout the essay, he utilizes vernacular phrasings such as "can you dig it," "sho nuff," "soul,"

“right on,” and “Black freedom” and employs communal pronouns such as “we” and “us,” thus revealing a familial bond with his intended audience, in this case, the readers of *Ebony* magazine.

As he did in “The Black Arts Movement,” published a year earlier, Neal highlights the connections between Black Power and radical efforts of black arts writers. However, in “Any Day Now,” Neal goes a step further and explains that the movement among black artists actually preceded the Black Power Movement. Furthermore, Neal describes the concerns that black artists had with developing a black aesthetic, and he also utilizes elements of this African American value system and black style as a way of delivering his message. To support his underlying claims about the involvement of black people in the production of various forms of knowledge, Neal mentions dozens of black political figures, creative intellectuals, writers, musicians, and even folk heroes like Shine and Stagalee in his essay. He compares the creations and practices of singers and musicians James Brown, Aretha Franklin, John Coltrane, and Bessie Smith to the work of poets Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, and Haki Madhubuti. As a result, he could suggest that the New Black Poets were as engaging as popular musicians.

Throughout the piece, Neal testifies about the active linkages across the expansive landscape of black culture. He pinpoints the intraracial connections between varied forms of African American expressive culture by presenting lines from black poetry, blues and R&B song lyrics, and riffs on black sermons. In effect, he highlights the close proximity between modes of black expression across various genres. Taken as a whole, Neal’s approach to showcasing the intraconnectivity of different cultural forms confirms the centrality of poetry to multiple modes of black expression. But Neal’s essay is more than a descriptive historical account, as Neal also made time to speculate about new, unrealized possibilities.

To illustrate the idea of a radicalized black religion, Neal presents a eulogy for Charlie Parker, the great bebop saxophonist: “*The text of my sermon is the Life and Death of Charlie Parker. People loved him and called him Bird.*” Neal goes on to preach, “*And after my sermon, Brother Sun Ra will perform some songs about the nature of the universe; and after that we will have some words from the Self-Defense Committee.*”<sup>8</sup> Here, Neal connects fields of knowledge, including bebop, free jazz, and Black Power ideology, together with black church and sermonic traditions. Neal is doing more than simply code switching between so-called black and white modes of expression. Instead, he is impressively demonstrating his deft abilities at

synthesizing varied African American modalities of thought and expression in order to illuminate his overall message about the expansive viability of black artistic culture.

Neal returns to the sermon form to close his essay. The italics throughout the sermon section suggest that the words are to be spoken or at least read and performed differently than the words in standard font. In the closing sermonizing paragraphs, Neal declares, “*Black people you are Art. You are the poem*” (62). He goes on to write, “*Black Liberation to you Baby. Hey Now! Black Liberation for the ditty-bopping hip ones; for all of the righteous sinners and hustlers; for Chaka Zulu and Honky Tonk Bud, the hip cat’s stud.*” For the next five closing paragraphs, he calls for “*Black Liberation*” for African American people, mythic figures, and organizations, including Sugar Ray Robinson, the Signifying Monkey, Jack Johnson, High John the Conqueror, Jack and Jill, Elks, and Masons. Neal’s text is informative, entertaining, and communal. The exhaustive references to notable African Americans, organizations, and black folklore figures dispersed throughout the essay display and tap into a vast matrix of African American knowledge and expressive culture. Neal’s “Any Day Now” provides an impressive view of black arts criticism and artistic cultural production in action. Indeed, “Any Day Now” is Neal’s most spectacular piece of black arts commentary.

Larry Neal was certainly not the only black arts poet to produce stylistically daring prose pieces. Amiri Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, and Sarah Webster Fabio also composed essays that relied on unconventional syntax in the presentation of their ideas. Of course, few essays circulated as widely in black arts discourse as did Neal’s. Neal’s “Any Day Now” may have lacked the formality of standard academic writing; however, his essay was designed to communicate with a range of African Americans in ways that academic style essays are under-equipped to achieve. “Any Day Now” appeared in *Ebony*, one of the largest venues directed at a black readership, and thus allowed Neal to spread the gospel of black arts discourse far beyond the more limited range of literary journals. Among other things, Neal’s article assisted in the popularization of the New Black Poetry among readers who may not have been as familiar with the enterprises of hip, militant poets.

One of Neal’s major achievements as an essayist was his ability to produce a body of work that addresses a variety of black and general audiences. “The Black Arts Movement,” “Any Day Now,” and “New Space/The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties” explain and



define the aims of the developing cultural movement and identify some of the movement's principal figures for African American and general readerships. To be sure, "The Black Arts Movement" continues to circulate as an oft-cited point of reference for students and scholars investigating the movement. Neal codified the letter and spirit of the movement in such widely circulated articles that his ideas and descriptions represent a major window into understanding the movement, especially for African American and general readers.

On the other hand, Neal's *Liberator* articles, as well as "And Shine Swam On" and "Ellison's Zoot Suit: Politics as Ritual," appeal more specifically to African American writers, encouraging them to adopt black arts principles in their work. "New constructs will have to be developed. We will have to alter our concepts of what art is, of what it is supposed to 'do,'" Neal informs his readers, many of whom he presumes to be fellow black writers, in the afterword to *Black Fire*.<sup>9</sup> In "Ellison's Zoot Suit," Neal discourages black writers from only describing themselves in "purely negative terms." According to Neal, "We are not simply, in *all* areas of our sensibilities, merely a set of black reactions to white oppression."<sup>10</sup> Neal concludes, "What I think we have to do is understand our roles as synthesizers; the creators of new and exciting visions out of the accumulated weight of our Western experience" (50). Here, Neal does more than preach to the choir about a subject with which they all agree. He actually challenges his fellow writers to move beyond narrow conceptions of nationalism and presentations of black culture. In these essays, Neal addresses black writers, identifies their mistakes (including mistakes he has made), and proposes directions that they must take in order to achieve a more liberating future.

Neal's direct appeals to fellow artists and activists reveal his interest in helping give shape to the operations of the Black Arts Movement, and his appeals to general audiences confirm his desire to frame how the movement might be viewed. He was particularly interested in communicating the idea that the movement's participants were making connections to black music and fusing art and politics. Neal's widely circulated essays ensured that he was a major influence in the production of the movement. Neal also exemplifies the multiple roles of a black arts writer as poet-critic-theorist. Unlike most poets, who must wait for academic critics to define their places in literary history, Larry Neal, for one, was describing the objectives and principal aims of black poets as their movement took shape. Not simply as a poet but as a critic and theorist, Neal was composing a blueprint for black arts poetry.

## Classifying Black Arts Poetry

Whereas Larry Neal produced the most widely circulated essays on black arts principles, he was certainly not the only poet actively contributing to the critical discourse and commentary on poetry. Black poets were involved in a number of writing activities beyond composing and publishing poems. Amiri Baraka, Askia Toure, Haki Madhubuti, Carolyn Rodgers, Sarah Webster Fabio, and several other poet-critics also made useful contributions to the understanding of African American artistic productions and cultural activism during the time period. Like Neal, these writers often addressed themselves to their fellow black writers, seeking to establish common objectives and solidify shared interests. The journalistic writings of poets Joe Goncalves of the *Journal of Black Poetry* and David Llorens of *Negro Digest/Black World* frequently focused on the activism of poets. And June Jordan, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dudley Randall, and other poet-anthologists did editorial work that created venues for the publication of poetry. These anthologists provided introductions and biographical information that operated to pinpoint trends and leading figures in African American poetry. Similarly, the poets who provided introductions and blurbs for volumes of poetry published by Broadside Press and Third World Press contributed to the body of commentary promoting the value of African American poets and verse.

Poets often reviewed volumes of poetry themselves, rather than wait on evaluations from academic scholars and book reviewers for mainstream publications. Sterling Plumpp, Nikki Giovanni, Dudley Randall, Johari Amini, Julia Fields, Carolyn Rodgers, and Haki Madhubuti, all of whom were broadly published poets, wrote the majority of the hundreds of reviews that appeared in *Negro Digest/Black World* during the era.<sup>11</sup> The poetry of the reviewers was often more widely known than the poems being reviewed. The status of reviewers such as Giovanni, Madhubuti, and Randall, in particular, seemed to suggest that highly regarded poets could and should write about the work of lesser-known poets. In retrospect, the record of reviews in *Negro Digest/Black World* indicates a network of poets actively reading and evaluating each other's work.<sup>12</sup> Leading poets were, in this popular venue, at the forefront as composers and reviewers of poetry.

Along with their work as reviewers, poets made contributions to the interpretation of African American poetry as essayists. The poetry section of Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* includes essays by Sarah

Webster Fabio, James Emanuel, Dudley Randall, Haki Madhubuti, and Keorapeste William Kgositsile. Of all the essays on poetry by a poet, however, Carolyn Rodgers's essay "Black Poetry—Where It's At" may have been one of the most cited. "Black Poetry" was the first in a series of articles that Rodgers published in *Negro Digest/Black World*.<sup>13</sup> Literary critic Darwin Turner refers to Rodgers's "Black Poetry—Where It's At" as "the best essay on the work of new black poets."<sup>14</sup> Turner does not elaborate on why he considers Rodgers's essay the best, but what makes Rodgers's essay particularly impressive and meaningful in regards to literary criticism on black verse is that the article focuses on the literary art of emergent poets and utilizes African American verbal styles as an approach for categorizing the writings. Her article is a pioneering essay on black poetry and poetics, and her explanations of signifying and the relationships between poetry and music served as a precursor to studies in African American literature and culture by scholars such as Stephen Henderson, Houston Baker, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Rodgers's essay appeared under the subheading "A Black Perspective" in the September issue of *Negro Digest*, the month of the publication's annual poetry editions. Also, her essay followed an article on the black aesthetic by Amiri Baraka.<sup>15</sup> The byline for Rodgers in the article states, "One of the new poets takes a look at the poetry of her peers and delivers some provocative and insightful opinions."<sup>16</sup> These seemingly minor issues concerning how and where "Black Poetry—Where It's At" appeared are important in that they reveal that Rodgers was clearly a part of the early conversations about the New Black Poetry and the black aesthetic.

As the title of the article by Rodgers suggests, the essay focused on the current state of black poetry in the late 1960s. Rodgers acknowledges early in her essay that although black poets differ from each other, she would classify the New Black Poetry in several broad categories. Rodgers utilizes vernacular terms as headings for her categories, including "signifying," "teachin'/rappin'," "bein'," "coversoff," and "shoutin'." Using these culturally distinct terms allows Rodgers to indicate the viability of black words and language as tools for arranging and theorizing poetry. To explain the terms, Rodgers uses examples from New Black Poetry, including excerpts from poems by Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Ebon, and Barbara Mahone. Unlike many academic critics, she avoids relying on white scholars, Eurocentric frameworks, and literary terms such as *onomatopoeia* and *allusion* to support her explanations of black literary art. Relying on African American

frames of reference to analyze the New Black Poetry, Rodgers appeals more directly to the sensibilities of fellow black writers, literary critics, and general readers familiar with African American speaking patterns, and similar to Larry Neal, Rodgers addresses her comments directly to a presumed black readership throughout the essay.

Of the terms that Rodgers discusses, she devotes special attention to signifying because of how meaningful it was in a historical and cultural sense and also because she views signifying as a central practice in the New Black Poetry. Rodgers defines signifying as “a way of saying the truth that hurts with a laugh, a way of capping on (shutting up) someone. Getting even talking bout people’s mammas & such. It’s a love/hate exercise in exorcising one’s hostilities” (15). To illustrate her point, Rodgers uses examples from Richard Wright’s autobiography and excerpts from two poems by Nikki Giovanni and Haki Madhubuti. Rodgers writes that the most dynamic black poems of the era utilize signifying and that such poems have the ability to involve and move black people. The humor of poems that make jokes about black or white people, for instance, is entertaining to audiences grounded in a black nationalist ethos. Also, laughing at such insults allows these audiences to join poets in expressing contempt for adversaries in positions of authority. Toward the close of her essay, Rodgers states, “I trust that I have initiated here a rather complete incomplete picture of where Black poetry is at” (16). She acknowledges that some would disagree with the labels she has proposed, but her main objective, she notes, is not to let outsiders “define what we be doing” (16).

Rodgers’s essay does meet the requirements of typical scholarly articles in terms of offering extensive explanations for key terms. Her article does not provide a brief summary of the historical context that led to developments in black poetry, nor does she cite scholars in the field who have covered the subject. In addition, Rodgers’s use of conversational language, including contractions and the informal pronoun “we,” is contrary to the ostensibly objective tone employed in essays that appear in academic journals. Despite these issues, however, it is actually the seemingly nonacademic features of her article that make “Black Poetry—Where It’s At” such an accessible and groundbreaking explanation of the New Black Poetry. The shortness of the essay, its use of informal language, and the author’s arrangement of the New Black Poetry into categories are rhetorically appropriate for the readership that Rodgers addressed.

Rodgers’s use of vernacular terms to classify poetry is especially

fascinating. Organizing poetry in this manner reveals the possibilities for basing the analysis of literature more firmly on African American frames of reference. As a result, Rodgers makes direct connections between the objects and the tools of investigation. Furthermore, Rodgers bases her criteria for arranging black verse on how she sees the poetry functioning to entertain, educate, involve, or inspire African Americans. Her concern is with what New Black Poets actually “be doing” to move their audiences to various levels of consciousness and action. Rodgers is interested in producing criticism that concentrates on the effects of poetry on distinct audiences.

While Rodgers’s essay is important and groundbreaking for its interpretation of modern African American poetry, a number of factors have contributed to the lack of attention her article has received. For one, literary critics have tended to focus on a rather narrow body of male academic writers when charting the critical discourse pertaining to the Black Arts Movement, thus overlooking the significance of Rodgers’s essay. Also, “Black Poetry—Where It’s At” was published in *Negro Digest*, and for copyright issues, it seems, articles that appeared in that publication have seldom been reprinted over the years. Since Rodgers’s essay has remained out of print for so long, the article receives little attention from critics and general readers. In addition, although Rodgers was widely known throughout black arts discourse, she, like the majority of her fellow writers, received minor attention after the 1970s, thus diminishing opportunities for serious considerations of her critical work. Finally, the critical discourse on African American literature provides relatively little attention for poetry and even less for poetry criticism. Thus, even a notable essay like Rodgers’s often goes largely unnoticed.

Rodgers and several other poets contributed to the critical discourse primarily through the publication of essays and reviews, and some of them published book-length studies. Eugene Redmond, consequently, produced one of the most comprehensive works devoted to African American poetry. Redmond’s *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History* (1976) provides important biographical and interpretive information regarding a wide range of emergent poets, and just as important, Redmond’s book charts the larger history of black poetry beginning with oral and musical traditions. Few studies of American and African American literature have treated the work of such a large number of African American poets. Certainly, it has been rare for a poet to take on such an ambitious critical project.

Among other attributes, what makes *Drumvoices* especially notable rests on Redmond's mission to create a far-reaching narrative concerning the development of African American verse. Sure, poets and readers may have always known that there were connections among various writers, but Redmond's work usefully highlights the presence of interconnected themes and styles across generations of black poets. *Drumvoices* impressively demonstrates that African American poetry constitutes an established tradition and not simply periodic movements in American literature, as Redmond analyzes writings by such a large number of black poets together in one study. His extensive treatment of emergent black poets also assists in solidifying these writers, and more notably their movement, within the critical discourse of literary history. In addition to examining "new" black poets, Redmond's book paints a picture that portrays his contemporary subjects as extensions of a long line of African American verse.

Taken together, Redmond's *Drumvoices*, the articles by Larry Neal and Carolyn Rodgers, and the reviews and essays by several other poets associated with black arts discourse reveal that these creative writers were at the forefront in providing commentary on and assessments of their literary art and cultural activities. Promoting fellow writers, addressing African American readerships, employing black verbal styles to categorize ideas about black literary art, and publishing articles about black poets and poetry in African American venues are defining features of the criticism and commentary produced by many of these poets. Their writings provided invaluable publicity for fellow poets and clarified the interconnected enterprises among black artists in advancing their movement.

## Black Aesthetic Theorizing and Canon Formation

Contemporary examinations of the Black Arts Movement often chart the development and quality of theories regarding "the black aesthetic." Literary critics Jerry Ward, David Smith, and Tony Bolden, among others, have expanded our understanding of black arts critical discourse by explaining the benefits and shortcomings of black aesthetic theories.<sup>17</sup> Scholars have also been likely to examine the work of leading academic-oriented theoreticians such as Addison Gayle, Stephen Henderson, and Houston Baker. Collectively, these studies on black aesthetics provide important information regarding the most provocative theoretical

framework of black arts discourse. For now, the objective is to concentrate on a less examined aspect of this subject: how black aesthetic theorizing contributed to the formation of a black arts poetry canon.

Actually, the frequent attempts to answer the question about the definitions, functions, and viabilities of black aesthetics or philosophies of African American art constitute practices that greatly influenced the production of black arts poetry and the visibility of the poets. That many of the leading voices regarding black aesthetics, such as Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle, and Stephen Henderson, were also anthologists or editors seems significant. Fuller, for example, could translate his vision of what a black aesthetic might look like by publishing certain kinds of poems and poets. And although Dudley Randall is hardly considered a leading black aesthetic theorist, his efforts as a publisher certainly influenced perceptions of poetry. During the Black Arts Movement, writers never arrived at a consensus concerning a black aesthetic. However, black aesthetic theorizing did operate as one of the most central features of their discourse.

During the era, discussions of black aesthetics operated in at least three major ways to shape the participation of poets in black arts discourse. First, black aesthetic theorizing provided the occasion for poets to engage in lively conversations among critics, editors, activists, and other writers about a philosophy of African American literary art. Second, the discussions of black aesthetics encouraged poets to develop a more direct relationship to African American audiences, and finally, they were encouraged to incorporate the virtues of black music into their writings. Thus, the subject of black aesthetics influenced the presentation of poetry, and the topic also created opportunities for poets to serve as theorists of literary art and expressive culture.

Early on, Hoyt Fuller set the stage for poets to have a prevalent voice in the discussion of black aesthetics. In the January 1968 issue of *Negro Digest*, Fuller explained that the periodical had developed a twenty-five-question survey and polled thirty-eight black writers. Most of the questions in the survey requested that writers identify their literary influences and values. Questions 19 and 25 were particularly relevant to the objectives of the developing black arts movement: “Do you see any future at all for the school of writers which seeks to establish ‘a black aesthetic?’” and “Should black writers direct their work toward black audiences?”<sup>18</sup> According to Larry Neal, Fuller’s question initiated the discussion of a black aesthetic that was so pervasive during the era. “Not because Hoyt sat down and wrote any theory of Black Aesthetics,” explains Neal, “but

because it was Hoyt who asked the question . . . ‘is there a Black Aesthetic? Does there need to be one?’”<sup>19</sup> Among the respondents presented in the issue, Hoyt Fuller published replies from a number of emergent poets, including Carolyn Rodgers, Haki Madhubuti, Julia Fields, Sarah Webster Fabio, Etheridge Knight, and Larry Neal.

Overall, the respondents offered varied responses to the question regarding a black aesthetic. Sarah Webster Fabio offered a concise answer: “Yes. A Black Aesthetic will be necessary to create a power force which will interpret, support, and validate the reality of ‘black experience.’”<sup>20</sup> Etheridge Knight provided a more lengthy response, affirming the need for African American writers to embrace black aesthetics: “The Black Artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black Authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths and legends.” Knight also warned fellow black artists to “beware of the white aesthetic.”<sup>21</sup> The longest published response concerning the viability of a black aesthetic was written by Larry Neal. Interestingly, he rejected the push for the creation of an African American philosophy of art. “There is no need to establish a ‘black aesthetic,’” wrote Neal. “Rather it is important to understand that one already exists. The question is: where does it exist? And what do we do with it? Further, there is something distasteful about a formalized aesthetic.”<sup>22</sup> The responses from Neal, Knight, and Fabio are suggestive, revealing how differently the writers viewed black aesthetics.

The diversity of responses in the *Negro Digest* issue reveals that the writers were far from being of one accord concerning the definition and value of black aesthetics. As the editors concluded, the survey demonstrates that “there exists a dramatic division among black writers,” which the editors believed resulted from African Americans’ “alternating desire for assimilation and separation.” Despite the differences, though, many of the writers were, in some form or another, generally favorable about their “pursuit of ‘a black aesthetic.’”<sup>23</sup> The appearance of so many writers in one magazine suggests that while they did have a range of views, they were willing to share their views on literary values in a common venue, *Negro Digest*.

In retrospect, that January 1968 issue of the magazine anticipated a discussion of aesthetics that would permeate black arts discourse. And, similar to the tone set by Hoyt Fuller, poets would serve as the discussion’s most prominent contributors.

The respondents identified Amiri Baraka (then still known as LeRoi



Jones) as the “most important living black poet.”<sup>24</sup> In addition to his stature as a leading poet, however, Baraka was also a visible theorist, as his prose pieces promoting black philosophies of art circulated widely during the era. In his essay “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature,’” initially published in his 1966 collection *Home*, Baraka wonders how African American writing could “even begin to express the emotional predicament of black Western man?” Sounding what would become a recurrent tune of black aesthetic theorizing, he explains that black writers had been prevented from proposing their “own symbols” and “own personal myths.” Further, he proposes, black poets would better serve themselves and their audience by listening to Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday “than be content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe.” Baraka concludes the essay by speculating that the future development of a distinct African American literature would rest on the degree to which that literature could “disengage itself from the weak, heinous elements of the culture that spawned it, and use its very existence as evidence of a more profound America.”<sup>25</sup> In many respects, Baraka’s ideas were not new. He echoed sentiments expressed by preceding generations of black writers, including Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison. What distinguished Baraka, however, was the context in which he was writing.

In particular, the circulation routes of Baraka’s essays espousing philosophies of African American art reveal that his writings are directly related to the aims and audiences of black arts discourse. His status as a leading figure of the movement gave him the credibility, as well as the access to black publishing venues, to influence large numbers of emergent creative intellectuals and poets. So, after its initial publication in 1966, “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature’” appeared in at least six different African American anthologies between 1969 and 1971, as conversations regarding black aesthetics were gaining wide attention. Baraka’s manifesto “The Revolutionary Theatre,” which draws on vivid rhetoric in its call for the development of a distinct African American radical art form, asserts that revolutionary art must, among other functions, “look into black skulls,” teach white people “their deaths,” and create “new kinds of heroes.” The *Liberator* version of Baraka’s essay contains an opening editorial note that explains, “This essay was originally commissioned by the *New York Times* in December 1964, but was refused, with the statement that the editors could not understand it. The *Village Voice* also refused to run this essay. It was first published in *Black Dialogue*.”<sup>26</sup> Here, within the context of *Liberator* magazine, the rejection

of Baraka's piece by the *New York Times* probably gave him and his ideas more credibility among a black readership that was frequently encouraged to free itself from white standards. At the same time, *Liberator* and *Black Dialogue* were signaling their own commitments to Baraka and his militant ideology by publishing an artist and essay that was presumably too black and revolutionary for the mainstream press to understand.

Baraka's essay appeared again in the April 1966 issue of *Negro Digest*, and in this version, the article was titled "In Search of the Revolutionary Theatre" and contained the lead note "Needed: New Heroes." Most notably from a visual standpoint, the essay includes a photograph of Baraka sitting with a small group of black people on the steps outside the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School in Harlem. An excerpt from Baraka's essay appears near the bottom of the page: "The force we want is of 20 million spooks storming America with furious cries and unstoppable weapons. We want actual explosions and actual brutality."<sup>27</sup> The image of Baraka in the photograph, seated with a group of students or supporters near a large Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School flag, offers a striking and alternative visual idea concerning how a poet might engage the world beyond the page. Framing the essay with the image of Baraka at his institution in Harlem amplifies the idea that he practiced what he preached. The publication of Baraka's "The Revolutionary Theatre" in *Black Dialogue* and *Liberator* in 1965, in *Negro Digest* in 1966, and in Robert Hayden's anthology *Afro-American Literature: An Introduction* in 1971 reveals that editors were quite aware of his work as an essayist and interested in creating a larger readership for his proposals regarding the key imperatives of radical black art.

In his essay "The Black Aesthetic," published in the September 1969 issue of *Negro Digest*, Baraka directs his message more specifically to black poets, explaining the routes they might take in order to project "feelings about reality" and achieve revolution through their literary art. Similar to the modes of writing in his foreword to *Black Fire* (1968), the style of Baraka's "The Black Aesthetic" utilizes experimental or unconventional terminology and sentence structures. Using the plural pronouns "we" and "us" in reference to fellow black poets throughout the essay, Baraka writes, "Our selves are revealed in whatever we do. Our art shd be our selves as self-conscious with a commitment to revolution. Which is enlightenment." He informs poets that "the purpose of our writing is to create the nation" and thus promotes the production of black nationalist verse. Echoing the sentiments he expresses in his poem "Black Art" and his essay "The Revolutionary Theatre," Baraka

suggests that black artists must redefine themselves: “We are ‘poets’ because someone has used that word to describe us.” Thus, beyond being poets in any conventional sense, black poets must come to understand that “we are creators and destroyers-firemakers, Bomb throwers and takers of heads.” In addition, their writings must be concerned with “the breakthru the break out the move New ness New forms Explorations Departures all with the responsibility to force and be change all with the commitment to Black Revolution, utilizing the collective spirit of Blackness.”<sup>28</sup> The dynamic, original style of Baraka’s essay suggests that the development of a new, radical approach to black poetry might also lead to alternative approaches to prose.

The broad circulation of his essays concentrating on theories of black art indicates that poetry was only one means through which Baraka actively participated in black arts discourse. The pervasiveness of his essays also suggests that editors contributed significantly to ensuring the high visibility of Baraka as an essayist and theorist. Thus, Baraka potentially influenced large numbers of writers and the formation of a black arts poetry canon in at least three ways. For one, he regularly directed his writings at fellow poets and offered them suggestions, if not directions, on the themes and techniques that they should adopt in their poems. Second, he served as the most highly regarded *model* for what it meant to be a “black artist.” His own publishing career as a poet, playwright, and essayist, for instance, suggested that black artists should produce work across genres. And finally, Baraka’s widely circulating theories concerning the look and aims of new and radical black writing may have influenced the selection criteria adopted by editors and publishers during the era. Along with the writings of his fellow poet Larry Neal, Baraka’s essays were widely published and reprinted in venues commonly available to black readerships.

Baraka and Neal were among the most popular poets to participate in black aesthetic theorizing, but they were certainly not the only poets actively promoting such theories. Poets Dudley Randall, Carolyn Rodgers, Haki Madhubuti, Stanley Crouch, and Sarah Webster Fabio published essays regarding the development of distinct philosophies of African American literary art as well. Taken together, their writings, as well as the essays offered by Baraka and Neal, constitute an impressive body of theories exploring the possibilities of developing forms of black art that actively engaged the sensibilities of African Americans. As active contributors to the theoretical discourse, the poets were exerting

an influence on the formation of the black arts canon, not simply as composers of verse.

Not surprisingly, several poet-essayists published their work in *Negro Digest*, where Hoyt Fuller was apparently establishing his magazine as a major forum for black aesthetic theorizing. In the September–October 1968 issue of *Negro Digest*, Haki Madhubuti, Sarah Webster Fabio, and Keorapetse William Kgositsile published essays seeking to define the objectives of contemporary black poets in a section entitled “Toward a Black Aesthetic,” which was the same title as that of a previously published essay by Hoyt Fuller that appeared in the *Critic* magazine. As evidenced by the titles, Madhubuti’s “Black Poetry: Which Direction?,” Fabio’s “Who Speaks Negro? Who Is Black?,” and Kgositsile’s “Paths to The Future” indicate that African American poetry was at an important transitional stage, and these poets offered insight on where black verse was going. The editors of *Negro Digest* highlighted the authority of these three poets to theorize the paths of black poetry by situating the essays under the larger heading “Toward a Black Aesthetic” and positioning the three articles as a prelude to a “portfolio of poetry,” which included works by over thirty poets. It was a recurrent feature of his editorial practice that Hoyt Fuller created opportunities for poets to theorize new and ostensibly more militant directions for African American verse.

An October 1968 letter from Stanley Crouch to Hoyt Fuller reveals that Crouch was favorable to the mission of developing approaches to black aesthetics. “What we must do, and I was talking to Larry Neal about this a few days ago,” writes Crouch, “is come up with an esthetic that *actually* takes in Black Speech.” Later in the letter, Crouch informs Fuller that he was “going to try to have the bookstore get about forty-five copies of the Sept/Oct 1968 DIGEST. Those esthetic statements will be very useful.” Crouch explains that his own essay concerning black aesthetic issues had been recently accepted for publication in Joe Goncalves’s *Journal of Black Poetry*, and notes, “If you’re interested, and if he’ll give up reprint rights, I’d like to have it published in DIGEST also.” In closing, Crouch expresses his view to Fuller that in order to develop a body of distinct forms of black art, “we need as much as we can get in terms of ACTUAL poetry, and propositions that move that way.”<sup>29</sup> Notably, Crouch seemed as interested in circulating his black aesthetic propositions as he was in getting his poems published. The high visibility of publishing opportunities available to poet-essay-

ists likely made it more possible for creative intellectuals such as Stanley Crouch to view themselves as both poets and theorists in black arts discourse. In retrospect, by identifying Larry Neal, Hoyt Fuller, Joe Goncalves, the *Journal of Black Poetry*, and *Negro Digest*, Crouch's letter also confirms the existence of a broad and interconnected conversation on poetry and aesthetics.

In addition to promoting the significance of black speech in poetry, as Crouch suggests in his letter to Fuller, black aesthetic theorists regularly highlighted the importance of incorporating black music into literary art. African American musical references indeed pervade the poetry and prose of Amiri Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, Larry Neal, and many other black arts writers. James Stewart's "The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist," the lead essay in *Black Fire*, proposes that free jazz could serve as a model for how black writers might depart from relying too heavily on European forms and chart their own routes. Following the example of musicians John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Grachan Moncur, and Milford Graves, explains Stewart, black writers could "emancipate our minds from Western values and standards" and "make new definitions founded on [our] own culture—on definite black values."<sup>30</sup> Here, Stewart advocates using black music as a way to radicalize African American literary art and create a body of writing that would serve the needs of black people. Stewart's urging that writers make black music a central element of their poetics is a sentiment expressed throughout the discourse.

On the one hand, a reader could agree with literary critic David Smith's observation that the tendency of African American writers of the era to focus so often on musicians and other nonliterary artists "reflects a common problem among Black Aesthetic theorists in finding literary precedents for Black Arts Movement writing."<sup>31</sup> At the same time, however, the persistent focus on black music, especially free jazz and its musicians, allowed theorists to offer interpretations that move beyond primarily literary influences. Writers and literary critics, of course, had alluded to nonliterary forms and music prior to the 1960s. Still, black arts writers distinguished their discussions of black music with their particular fusing of concepts relating to free jazz, militant poetry, and black liberation. In addition, the widespread focus on black music in prose directly correlated to the preoccupation with black music in verse and thus further solidified links among criticism, theory, and poetry.

The frequent publication of essays that extolled black music as an

ultimate model for poets seems to suggest that this aspect of black aesthetic theorizing served as both a guide and an explanation for the tremendous number of poems focusing on music. According to many of the writers, black music represented the most advanced form of African American artistic production and thus encouraged forward-thinking or radical poets to incorporate the sensibilities of black music in their literary art. At the same time, the most popular poets focused on music and, accordingly, provided evidence to theorists and critics that music-infused poetry was essential to the production of black radical writing. Demonstrating overlapping interests among the distinct and presumably revolutionary force of black musicians, poets, critics, and theorists, along with the editors and publishers who provided the platforms to transmit the writers' views to larger readerships, ensured that music would become a distinguishing feature of the black arts poetry canon. The centrality of black music in both prose and verse is perhaps not so surprising, since many of the leading poets were also the leading theorists.

By the time Addison Gayle published his anthology *The Black Aesthetic* in 1971, a number of poets had, evidently, already established themselves as important voices in the conversation regarding black aesthetics. Without suggesting that we diminish the importance of Gayle's contributions to black aesthetic theorizing, it is nonetheless essential that we recognize that examinations of black aesthetics did not begin with the publication of Gayle's collection. One of Larry Neal's contributions to the anthology, in fact, is entitled "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic." Many of the contributors to the collection developed their reputations as black aesthetic theorists based on their writings on the subject prior to the publication of *The Black Aesthetic*. Gayle's book served the useful task of consolidating various black aesthetic theories in book form, as opposed to initiating the conversation among writers. Hoyt Fuller's influence on the organization of Gayle's collection is especially important.

One of the first essays to employ the phrase "a black aesthetic" to refer to the mission of black arts writers, Fuller's "Towards a Black Aesthetic" was submitted to the *Critic* magazine in 1967 and first published there in 1968; the essay was later reprinted in Addison Gayle's *Black Expression* (1969), David P. Demarest and Lois S. Lamdin's *The Ghetto Reader* (1970), and eventually Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* (1971). Fuller's explanation that a black aesthetic is "a system of isolating and evaluating artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and im-

peratives of black experience” served as a central framing principle for *The Black Aesthetic*. The essays by Ron Karenga, Leslie Rout, Ronald Milner, Carolyn Gerald, and Keorapetse William Kgositsile, which appeared in the collection, had been previously published in *Negro Digest*, revealing that Fuller’s magazine was a useful source for Gayle to obtain materials for his collection. Finally, Fuller’s practice at *Negro Digest/Black World* of including poets at the forefront of black aesthetic theorizing was a practice apparently adopted by Gayle as well. Larry Neal, Sarah Webster Fabio, Amiri Baraka, and Haki Madhubuti are a few of the poets who contributed to the book. Notably, poets authored all the essays in the poetry section of the anthology.

Although most modern literary critics concentrate their examinations of Gayle’s work on his theories of black aesthetics, the current investigations of the formation of a black arts canon highlight Gayle’s editorial work. Rather than only considering him a black aesthetic theorist, viewing Gayle as an anthologist supports the larger claim in this study that editors contributed significantly to establishing and maintaining the parameters of black arts discourse and circulating the writings of poets. Gayle’s three anthologies *Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts*, *The Black Aesthetic*, and *Bondage, Freedom and Beyond: The Prose of Black Americans* (1971) contain the work of historically significant African American writers such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes, as well as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Sarah Webster Fabio, and other black poets. With the publication and reprinting of a range of creative intellectuals who promoted black nationalist principles in their works, Gayle’s collections accentuate the connections between past and contemporary black writers. *The Black Aesthetic*, in particular, parallels the objectives of Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal’s *Black Fire*, Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, and Dudley Randall’s *The Black Poets*, to name a few anthologies, by featuring the work of prominent black arts poets. Overall, Gayle’s editorial work contributed to the larger mission in black arts discourse of developing publishing venues and a system for the valuation of African American literary art.

The contributions made by poets, the emphasis placed on black music as a model for radicalizing poetry, and the editorial work enacted to bring together a range of writers focusing on philosophies of African American art all constituted essential features of black aesthetic theorizing. These features were also central to the formation of a common discourse. The transmission of essays—many of which were written by po-

ets—that proposed directions for the development of black radical art and artists was quite prevalent and defined the social interactions among writers and their readers. The overlap between black aesthetic theorizing and black arts poetry was especially pronounced in the works of Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, whose prose and poetry publishing records epitomize the idea that poets and theorists are one. Moreover, the editorial work of black arts proponents such as Hoyt Fuller and Addison Gayle charted and consolidated African American writers' considerations of the definitions and functions of black aesthetics.



