

“We a BaddDDD People:” Black Ideology and Revolutionary Rhetoric in African American Poetry of the Early Black Aesthetic Period

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ABSTRACT. In the late 1960s Black poetry became inseparable from cultural and political issues. This paper examines the ideological content and revolutionary rhetoric of some selected works by two leading poets of the Black Aesthetic movement: Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni. It advocates taking an interdisciplinary approach to teaching this poetry at university level as a condition of its understanding.

KEYWORDS: Black Aesthetic; Black Art; civil rights; ideology; interdisciplinary; rhetoric; revolution.

This essay demonstrates the inevitability of taking an interdisciplinary position in the act of analyzing and interpreting poetry written by Afro-American poets during the Black Aesthetic period. In contrast to the claim of the new critical school – i.e. that a poem represents a closed entity which should be examined by the act of close reading that reveals its immanent dynamics, Black poetry of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s demands the opening of one’s critical procedures to not-strictly-literary areas in order to include – in the process of dissecting a concrete text – the external reality in which this poetry was produced. As a result, scholarly analysis of a Black poem cannot be competently undertaken without bringing into the process the sociological, historical, and political data which provide its indispensable contextual frame. It is especially important to emphasize the role of the interdisciplinary approach to Black poetry in

the university classroom since it creates strong links between a course of literature and other academic courses such as the history of the United States, American studies, and linguistics. Only under this condition can the poetry of the Black Aesthetic period be understood by students in terms of its ideological content and rhetorical strategies.

The failure of the Civil Rights movement and the dynamic growth of more radical approaches in the 1960s as an effective strategy for introducing racial equality in the United States left a clear mark on the Afro-American literature of the period. Black poetry became inseparable from political issues to the extent that, according to LARRY NEAL (1971:797), Black Art was simply *the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept*.

This essay examines the revolutionary rhetoric and ideological content of a few selected works by two poets of the Black Aesthetic movement: LEROI JONES (Amiri Baraka), and NIKKI GIOVANNI.

A great number of poetic texts produced in the 1960s and early 1970s by the young writers of the Black Revolution movement demonstrate an ambition to create attitudes, as well as affecting readers' conduct and their way of perceiving the world. This ambition went together with a strong intention to reveal the truth about the oppressive character of the dominant white culture, which led to efforts to raise the awareness of Afro-Americans' cultural separateness and forge a positive identity. Thus, it is worth paying some attention to the rhetorical dimension of this poetry, especially in the aspect of its influence on the reader. The term rhetoric is used here in a narrow and, as PAUL DE MAN (1986:269) claims, *derivative* sense – as the 'art of effective persuasion'.

It is worth reflecting on the poetry of the Black Revolution in its three aspects: thematic, i.e. concerning matters which are really important for the community; ethical, concerning the poet's strategies for gaining the trust of the audience on whose behalf and to whom the poet wants to speak; and emotional, which lies in the efficiency of manipulating the audience's feelings and emotions. These aspects correspond to three principles of Classical rhetoric which are strictly connected with three functions of speaking (informative, compelling and aesthetic): making true claims about reality supported by logical argumentation (*logos*); influencing effectively the audience's will (*ethos*); affecting directly the

addressee's emotions and feelings (*pathos*). Only on the condition that these three principles are harmonized can a speech (here: a poem) turn into an act of effective persuasion. It is also worth noticing that the triad highlights the 'outside' orientation of a text, and connects it inseparably to the reality situated beyond the poem, as a result concentrating on the speaker and addressee as participants of an act of communication.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s a vast majority of the active participants of the Black cultural and artistic revolution in their theoretical manifestos and artistic practice put emphasis on the primacy of the ideological content of poetry over its formal excellence. Like other forms of art, poetry was treated as an expression of a new Black identity – as living proof of an Afro-American consciousness freed from the oppressive ties of the fundamentally 'alien' mainstream racist white culture, and, as a means of fighting for complete equal rights in the spheres of politics, economy, and culture. All this impetus meant a tremendous trust in poetry as a powerful tool, useful both for demolition of the old order based on a rigid hierarchy in which *black* always signified *worse*, and for building a new one within whose boundaries the Afro-American culture could function completely independently of the traditional, 'universally accepted' norms and values. The Black artists of the Black Aesthetic period did not struggle towards taking a deserved place in the realm of the high culture by excelling themselves in producing works of formal perfection, universal in content. On the contrary, in their artistic practice they often question these norms as suitable criteria for the evaluation of Black poetry, apparently assuming that universality of content and excessive emphasis on form result from a stance that distances the matters of life from a social engagement in art. Black poets postulate the primacy of content over form, and reject the claim that poetry is a purpose in and of itself; they turned against the art-for-art's-sake philosophy of writing. JONES' poetic development represents a case when a Black poet deliberately chooses not to stay shut in the ivory tower of words any longer, leaving what WERNER SOLLORS (1978:36) labeled the *Eliot shell*, and moving on to live and write within the reality of Black experience.

JONES, unquestionably the leading Black voice of the late 1960s, says in "Numbers, Letters":

- (1) say it straight to be
 understood straight, put it flat and real
 ...
 Say what you mean, dig
 it out put it down, and be strong
 about it. (JONES, 1969:47)

Here JONES, like many other Black poets, rejects an academic approach to poetry which values highly hermetic messages that can be decoded only by erudite experts equipped with the tools necessary for dissecting a poem in search of its immanent value. Instead, he foregrounds the communicative quality of poetry – the poet is obliged to find and use a form and language simple enough to make his message understandable to a reader not trained in the art of analysis and interpretation of modern verse. In such a concept of poetry there is no room for hesitation, doubt and subtleties – such is the price readily paid by a Black revolutionary poet for direct communication with an audience to be converted to the poet’s view of reality and persuaded by the message to the point of taking action against a white America which is by definition oppressive and racist. The phrase *be strong / about it* apparently suggests that saying it straight, although necessary, is not sufficient to move the Black masses to action, and that the words, images and forms used have to be powerful enough to appeal to the readers’ emotions and will.

NIKKI GIOVANNI’s “The Great Pax White” is a conspicuous example of ‘being strong about it’ and represents a rhetorically successful revolutionary poem which convincingly harmonizes the above-mentioned three levels of effective persuasion: *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*. The title of the poem alludes to *Pax Romana*, i.e., to a peace introduced and maintained by force – *In the name of peace / They waged the wars* (GIOVANNI 1970:60), which receives an additional emphasis in the line: *The rumblings of this peace must be stilled* (GIOVANNI 1970:62). Thus, the poem becomes an appeal to bring an end to the racism- and violence-based American *status quo* which had been sustained by a democracy founded on slavery.

The special emotional impact of the poem is achieved by bitter and ironic references to the Bible and by the form of the poem – GIOVANNI

successfully implements here a call-response pattern characteristic of spirituals, representing a collective dialogue between the preacher intoning the song and the congregation he addresses. Two lines alternatively used throughout the text: *peace be still* and *ain't they got no shame / nah, they ain't got no shame* function as a refrain commenting on the history of the Judeo-Christian world presented in the poem as a history of racism, violence and hate. The very beginning paraphrases the Gospel of St. John:

- (2) In the beginning was the word
 And the word was
 Death
 And the word was nigger
 And the word was death to all niggers
 And the word was death to all life
 And the word was death to all (GIOVANNI 1970:60)

The poem contains many references to historical and religious-mythological examples of the violence, cruelty, hypocrisy, decay and shamelessness of white Western civilization: Noah leaving the unicorns behind, Peter denying ever having anything to do with *black* (sic!) Jesus, the Romans who *killed the Carthaginians / in the great appian way and killed the Moors / to civilize the nation'* (GIOVANNI 1970:61), Thomas Jefferson's bigotry and his racist attitude to African slaves, the Morton Salt Company turning Lot's wife into its *product*, and the economic motives behind extermination and war:

- (3) And they barbequed six million
 To raise the price of beef
 And crossed the 16th parallel
 To control the price of rice (GIOVANNI 1970:62)

By enumeration of these 'facts' GIOVANNI seems to argue that violence against and oppression of the Others have always been an immanent feature of Western civilization which committed all its atrocities *In the name of god / Whose genesis was white* (GIOVANNI 1970:61), thus pointing at the role of Christianity in providing a moral excuse for crimes against humanity and life. In the poem, this is Christian America,

- (4) where war became peace
and genocide patriotism
and honor is a happy slave (GIOVANNI 1970:61),

which represents the quintessence of the civilization of death. In GIOVANNI's vision, white cruelty and hypocrisy reached its climax and revealed its true nature in the 1960s when, to use Malcolm X's caustic remark, the 'chickens came home to roost' and America witnessed an escalation of racism and terrorism epitomized by a series of political assassinations: of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King:

- (5) So the great white prince
Was shot like a nigger in texas
And our Black shining prince was murdered
like that thug in his cathedral
While our nigger in memphis
was shot like their prince in dallas (GIOVANNI 1970:62)

In VIRGINIA C. FOWLER's (1992:41) opinion "The Great Pax Whitie" *does not so much mean something as it expresses something*. Thus, the poem should not be taken for a disciplined formulation of thoughts, but should be understood primarily as an expression of the feelings and emotions of the African American community. It is difficult to disagree with FOWLER (1992:41) that the poem's purpose lies in its *impact on the reader*, that is, *in the arousal... of the reader's (listener's) anger*, and in making an individual reader experience herself/himself as a member of the community. The latter is achieved by the call-response pattern implemented in the text and by the consistent use of the collective subject *we* contrasted with *they* signifying the white oppressor throughout the poem, both of which can be counted as examples of a rhetorical strategy based on *pathos*. But one can have at least doubts about the critic's claim that the poem also works towards purgation of the reader's anger, which is supported by her pointing out that it has much in common with the treatment in the blues of a brutal experience, as formulated by RALPH ELLISON; yet, the lines at the very end of the poem seem to do something more than *squeeze[e] from it* (i.e. a brutal experience) *a near tragic ... lyricism* (ELLISON 1966:90):

- (6) And my lord
 ain't we never gonna see the light
 ...
 ahh Black people
 ain't we got no pride? (GIOVANNI 1970:62)

The final question of the poem – clearly an example of *ethos*, an appeal to the will of the addressees – asked in 1969 when *Black Judgment*, the collection in which the poem appeared, is provokingly rhetorical. Read in the light of some other poems from the same collection, the final lines of “The Great Pax Whitie” can be paraphrased as: first, if we are going to see the light, we have to reach for it; second, are you going to pretend that you do not know what to do?

GIOVANNI’s choice of the spiritual form suggests that, although she apparently addresses Afro-Americans *en masse*, her specific targets are the people of older generation – or those more conservative ones – who in 1969 *still* supported the ideology of ‘passive resistance’ and ‘purgation of anger’ represented by King’s version of the civil rights movement. At the same time though, the poem – when read by people of GIOVANNI’s generation – argues that Black pride takes more than listening in a trance to John Coltrane’s ecstatic solos, wearing African outfits and hairdos, writing ideologically correct poems and dramas, and more than even the spontaneous riots in the Black ghettos.

In many poems in *Black Judgement*, a volume of radical verse which can be treated as GIOVANNI’s reaction to the assassination of Martin Luther King, the poet demands that Blacks take a *violent action* in order to change the American social, political and cultural system. Lines such as:

- (7) What can I, a poor Black woman, do to destroy America? (“Reflections on April 4, 1968,” GIOVANNI 1970:54).
- (8) the feeling of shame
 that we Black people
 haven’t yet committed a
 major assassination ...
 this country must be
 destroyed
 if we are to live (“Records”, GIOVANNI 1970:67)

and “Blessed be machine guns in Black hands,” (“A Litany for Peppe”, GIOVANNI 1970:57) are just a handful of blatant examples of a Black revolutionary rhetoric at its most agitational extreme. They are GIOVANNI’s response to JONES’ claim that

- (9) We want ‘poems that kill.’
 Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
 guns,” (“Black Art”, JONES 1969:116)

which represents the new credo of the Black revolutionary poets of the late 1960s. Yet, since in “Reflections on April 4, 1968” (GIOVANNI 1970:54) to *encourage others to kill* (instead of killing and protecting *those who kill*) is referred to as a *cop-out*, a question emerges: what is a real purpose of such rhetoric founded on emotional overkill (i.e. too much *pathos*) if not to exorcise Black anger?

The answer to this question may be found by close examination of Black poetry from this period in terms of the speech act theory, which allows us to decide to what extent Black revolutionary verse is rhetorically felicitous as an attempt at effective persuasion. Taken as a perlocutionary act, a persuasive poem has to pass a test of felicity, that is, to carry out its potential to affect the reader in an intended manner in real life. Here, the problem is that it seems impossible to prove whether that sort of poetry had a direct or, for that matter, any at all, impact on the average participants of the ghetto riots in Watts, Newark, and Detroit. Perhaps both the bellicose poetry and the riots simply resulted from the same source and were symptoms of frustration, impatience, and the radicalization of the Black masses.

Nonetheless, there is another possibility. Despite the fact that theoretical conceptualizations of the Black Arts movement in literature emphasized that the Black poet speaks directly and solely to the Black reader/listener, careful reading reveals that the Black revolutionary text has also another implied reader: the white American who is addressed in indirect manner as a passive witness of the Black act of speech, yet who becomes a guarantee of the poem’s effectiveness in terms of perlocution, its felicity. Quite surprisingly, this conspicuous feature of the communicative situation created in the most radical Black texts has been concealed in poetic manifestos and remained virtually unnoticed in criticism. To make

for the poem (SOLLORS 1978:201), which violated the freedom of speech principle, shows that the poet himself was reluctant to admit that the incendiary poem had had the power to move Black people in Newark to action; he chose the solace of being in the position of a *conspicuous American artist imprisoned for his poetry* (SOLLORS 1978:201) (he was initially sentenced, but later was acquitted by a higher court after the intervention of prominent literary figures, civil rights leaders, and intellectuals).

As a result, Black revolutionary rhetoric never became much more than belligerent rumbling, making SONIA SANCHEZ (1970:15) ask in a poem from *We A BaddDDD People*:

who's gonna make all
that beautiful blk / rhetoric
mean something.

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