

A JUJU OF THEIR OWN: BLACK ARTS POETRY IN ORAL INTERPRETATION

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A Juju of My Own

To make a Juju of my own
 For I was tired of strange ghosts
 Whose cool bones
 Lived on the green furnace of my blood
 Was always my destiny
 So she warned me--my grandmother,
 And now and now
 When I kindle again her small eyes with their quick
 lights
 Darting ancient love into my infancy
 And when I break through to her easy voice
 That voice like the pliant red clay she baked
 She sings the only lullaby she sang me

"Me no care fe Bakra whip
 Me no care fe fum-fum
 Come Juju come"

So I am fashioning this thing
 My own Juju
 Out of her life and our desire
 Out of an old black love
 I am baking my destiny to a lullaby--

"Me no care fe Bakra whip
 Me no care fe fum-fum
 Come Juju come . . ."

(Lebert Bethune)

The 1960s was a period of renewed interest in intellectual, political, and creative pursuits among Afro-Americans. This was inspired by the reaffirmation of African heritage and Pan Africanism as well as a rediscovery of the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Arts movement. The literature of the 1960s resulting from identification with Africa remains a center of controversy for critics, educators, and students. It grew out of a desire by Blacks to make a Juju of their own--a poetry defining them and defined by them.

One aspect of the controversy revolves around the question of whether this literature, especially the poetry, is suitable classroom content. This is a concern because Black Arts poetry is characterized by dialect, vulgarisms, profanity, emotionalism and epithet. It is an oral poetry, a performance poetry.

Nevertheless, in view of the fact that this poetry documents a highly significant phase in the history of the Afro-American community, and sheds light on trends in American society as a whole, it should be recognized as a part of the American literary heritage. More important, Black Arts poetry is the creative expression of a group of Americans motivated by the character and tenor of the American way of life.

It is precisely the oral and emotional qualities of Black Arts poetry that make it prime content for oral interpretation. Thomas Sanders and Walter Peek say "if you would seek to know a people, look to their poetry." They say,

It is there (in poetry) in the most intense, controlled but emotionally honest statements that the natural eloquence of the group reveals itself in unguarded expressions of unveiled needs and desires, provisions, aspirations and dreams.¹

Therefore, this presentation on "Oral Interpretation as Cultural Self-Expression and Cross Cultural Communication" will focus on Black Arts poetry as (1) oral poetry (2) performance art, (3) emotional truth and (4) kinetic poetry.

These areas will be explored from the perspective of "self-expression" and "cross-cultural communication" which are the concerns of this panel presentation.

Oral Poetry

Students of Black Arts poetry have recognized that it is fundamentally oral poetry. Its roots are found in African and Afro-American folk poetry.

From African tradition it inherited oral-centrism. Oral-centrism refers to the cultural predisposition to value spoken language as a formative life force.

Anthropologist Janheinz Jahn explains it in this way:

If there were no word, all forces would be frozen; there would be no procreation, no change, no life. The naming, the enunciation produces what is named. Naming is an incantation, a creative act. What we cannot conceive is unreal; it does not exist.²

Communications expert Arthur Smith concurs with Jahn when he says:

The word is productive and imperative, calling forth and commanding. Its power derives from the traditional emphasis on the spoken word in African society.³

Smith also points out that the "Western appreciation of the written word is not historically shared by Africans. . . .Africans maintained an expressive sense that manifested itself as life-force in dance, music, and speech." He concludes that "expression, therefore, is not the captive of the written word;the word is indeed the generative power of the community."⁴

The oral quality of Black Arts poetry is spawned by this carry-over from African tradition as it is seen in folk expression such as toast-telling, story-telling, sermons and music and in the definition of the role of the poet as a "carrier of the culture"--a leader, facilitator and philosopher who is responsible to the community.

Because Black Arts poetry is oral poetry, it came to the attention of the people, not through books or magazines, but through oral presentation in night clubs, church basements, and community centers as well as on street corners,

in parks and school gymnasiums. Often these performances were recorded and sold in the form of audio tapes and record albums. This public exposure contributed to the Black Arts poets' broad popular appeal and their status as heroic figures in their community.

Performance Art

The public, oral presentation of Black Arts poetry points to the next concern of this paper which is poetry as "performance art." The most interesting explanation I have found is by Black Arts poet Etheridge Knight who now lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

Knight explains poetry as "performance art" through his "Trinity" or the three P's--the poet, the poem and the people as seen in toast-telling. Bruce Jackson, an authority on Black oral tradition, says:

Learning toasts is not just a matter of learning a lot of words that happened to be metered and rhymed, but also of developing and learning a performing style.⁵

He says "it is not easy to deliver--without being boring--a poem of perhaps one hundred lines. No one listens much to a toast-teller who cannot act."⁶

Jackson explains that a performer-audience relationship or "cooperative creativity" always exists in toasts. In order to tell a toast, the teller must have an audience. Knight says "when he (the toast teller) starts telling his toast, someone in the audience will provide a stanza."⁷ This interplay and exchange go on throughout the toast. If there is a refrain, the entire audience

will join in, and they give support through answering the teller and clapping rhythmically to the beat.

Patricia Hill, in her dissertation, said that emphasis and style of the toast-teller and his audience determine the shape of the poem. Bruce Jackson affirms her statement by saying that "with written poetry the audience makes its 'judgment' after the fact; with folk poetry, the audience is part of the fact."⁸

If Black Arts poetry is basically oral and performance oriented, to what does this expression appeal? To answer that question, we must examine the third concern of this paper and that is poetry as "emotional truth."

Emotional Truth

"Emotional truth" refers to truth perceived through experience instead of logic. This is a carry-over from Africa as well. In his review of Jean Toomer's Cane, Montgomery Gregory says "Emotion is integral and a valid source of truth--a subjective higher truth."⁹

"Emotional truth" is not peculiar to African and Afro-American literature, although it probably receives greater emphasis in them. The Greek concept of empathy as physical and emotional identification with a character or situation in a play is very similar.

Ben Sidran, in his book Black Talk,¹⁰ says there is an "emotional truth" which goes beyond empirical meaning. It is often achieved through the artist's ability to fascinate or charm the audience, or what the Africans call nommo, rather than logic and argumentation.

Knight argues that the purpose of art is to appeal to feelings and give people a sense of themselves. These descriptions, though directed toward poetry, are basic to music. Ernest Borneman in his book Jazz says:

. . .while the whole European tradition strives for regularity. . . the African tradition aims at circumlocution rather than direct statement. The direct statement is considered crude and unimaginative; the veiling of all content in ever-changing paraphrase is considered the criterion of intelligence and personality.¹¹

Further on the subject of "emotional truth" there are two very important statements. One is by Black Arts poet Don L. Lee who explains the poetry of the movement in this way:

Black art, like African art, is perishable and is thus functional. For example, a Black poem is written not to be read and put aside, but to actually become a part of the giver and receiver. It must perform some function: move the emotions, become a part of the dance, or simply make one act. Whereas the work itself is perishable, the style and spirit of the creation are maintained and used and reused to produce new works . . . the people will help shape the art, and although the work may not be here forever, through the active participation of the people, its full meaning will be realized. . . . the people reflect the art and the art is the people.¹²

The second statement is by Marshall McLuhan who observes that persons in "oral centric" societies have a heightened sense of community as a result of their perception of time. As such they are more spontaneous and emotionally involved in communication than intellectually detached. These qualities lead to what is often described as emotionalism and sentimentality in black literature. Yet, contrary to this popular view, these qualities are justified by the nature and concept of African and Afro-American art.

Kinetic Poetry

Earlier, music was mentioned as a source of understanding Black Arts poetry. According to Knight and others, it holds the key to understanding where the message resides in this communication. The musical component that is central to black poetry is rhythm. If an oral interpreter expects to succeed in presenting this material, he/she must come to grips with the rhythm of a given piece.

It is rhythm in oral poetry that creates in the audience what Ezra Pound called "kinetic poetry." Kinetic poetry creates a motor or muscular response--an experience that is very physical. Pound said poetry could be divided into three categories: phanopoeia - poetry of the eye, logopoeia - poetry of the locomotor/muscular system, and melopoeia - poetry of the ear which carries the musical quality of the poem.

On the subject of rhythm Thomas Sanders says "the rhythm of a people's poetry indicates the nature of their responses to the rhythms of the world in which they live." Ben Sidran concurs that rhythmic assertion had always characterized black cultural assertion.

Sidran continues by explaining that the development of rhythmic freedom has generally preceded social freedom for the black American. He says

Thus, the time concept, as translated through musical rhythm, has affected the social situation of oral culture. . . rhythm is the expression of Black "cultural ego" inasmuch as it simultaneously asserts and preserves oral ontology.¹³

Patricia Hill identifies Etheridge Knight as a prototype of black poetic conscience. She says "moreover, Knight has created 'new forms and new values' . . . by using 'rhythm' as the controlling aesthetic principle."¹⁴

Raymond Williams in his book The Long Revolution says

. . . rhythm is a way of transmitting a description of experience, in such a way that the experience is recreated in the person receiving it, not merely as an abstraction, or an emotion but as a physical effect on the organism--on the blood, on the breathing, on the physical patterns of the brain.¹⁵

He continues by saying rhythm is a "means of transmitting our experiences in so powerful a way that the experience can be literally lived by others--it is more than metaphor; it is a physical experience as real as any other." Black Arts poetry, therefore, seeks to project emotional truth through manipulation of various rhythmic devices.

In order to approach the preparation of this poetry correctly, the oral interpreter must realize that it is generally not phanopoeia, or poetry for the eye. Because black poets have tried to transfer the oral quality to the written page, they have developed an "oral punctuation" to help the reader of a poem to get a sense of the poem as it would be said. As a result, Etheridge Knight calls his poetry "transcribed oral poetry." This oral punctuation affects the reader's perception of the rhythm of the poems. According to Louise Rosenblatt's essay "A Performing Art," the reader of Black Arts poetry performs the poem as the violinist performs the sonata.

Norman Stageberg expands this idea with his concept of "poetry as experience." Poetry is an experience that comes to life within the cooperative creativity of the poet, and the audience. Stageberg says "a poem 'means' much more than merely its central thought." He says the thought is but one of many parts which unify to produce a total experience, and it is the total experience which constitutes the "whole 'meaning' of a poem." He explains as follows:

When we read a poem something happens within us. The words on the page awaken a response. They bring to life a group of images, feelings, and thoughts. The nature of these is determined (a) by our own past experiences with the words, and (b) by our present mental and emotional

set. This response within us--the experience caused by the words--is the poem. A poem then is an interaction within a reader between the words of a poet and the total past experience and present set of the reader.¹⁶

Stageberg indicates as well that there is a poem within, the one just described above, and a poem without, which is the printed version. He says the printed poem is merely the stimulus for the real poem which is experienced within the reader or, in the case of Black Arts poetry, within the listener. Instead of a poem being completed by the poet and then disseminated to readers who examine it after the fact, Afro-American poems only become poems in the presence of an audience and with its participation in the creative process. The audience's critical approval is a part of the shape of the poem. This stance is not counter to Euro-American practices but instead, represents a difference in emphasis or point of rest on a continuum. It is a matter of perspective.

The notion of simultaneity in creativity is supported by Stageberg when he identifies a poem as a "time-experience":

A poem does not come, full-blown into being. It is, on the contrary, a cumulative experience in time. It is created in the mind part by part as we read a succession of words; and not until we reach the end of the poem does the experience become a completed whole, one in which all contributory impressions are fused into one total experience.¹⁷

The oral performance of poetry is also time-oriented. This concept, like "experience," "performance," and "the inner poem," points to common ground for unifying Afro-American poetry with traditional American poetry.

In conclusion, Richard Wright has said the writers' task is to "fuse and make articulate the experience of man, because their art possesses the cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because they can create the

myths and symbols that inspire faith in life. . . ."18

In like manner, James Baldwin states that "literature is the way to truth, therefore, to an integration of the spirit with itself."¹⁹ It is felt, therefore, that self-expression through the literary arts can promote cross cultural communication. As a result, oral interpretation can find an easy kinship with the oral-centric poetry of the Black Arts movement.

Notes

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¹Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek, Literature of the American Indian (New York: Glencoe Press, 1973), p. 103.

²Janheinz Jahn, Muntu: The New African Culture (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 134.

³Arthur L. Smith, ed. "Markings of an African Concept of Rhetoric," in Language, Communication and Rhetoric in Black America, (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 370.

⁴Smith, pp. 364-365.

⁵Bruce Jackson, Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me: Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 5.

⁶Jackson, p. 5.

⁷Patricia Hill, "The New Black Aesthetic as a Counter-poetics: The Poetry of Etheridge Knight," Diss. Stanford University, 1977, p. 28.

⁸Jackson, p. ix.

⁹Montgomery Gregory, "Review of Cane by Jean Toomer," Opportunity, December 1920, p. 374.

¹⁰Ben Sidran, "Introduction," Black Talk (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), pp. xiii, xiv.

¹¹Ernest Borneman, "The Roots of Jazz," in Jazz, eds. Nat Hentoff and Albert McCarthy (New York: Rinehart, 1957), p. 17.

¹²Don L. Lee, Dynamite Voices I: Black Poets of the 1960s (Detroit, Michigan: Broadside Press, 1973), pp. 23-24.

¹³Sidran, p. 11.

¹⁴Hill, p. 20.

¹⁵Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (London: Cox and Wyman Ltd., 1961), p. 40.

¹⁶Norman Stageberg and Wallace Anderson, Poetry as Experience (New York: American Book Co., 1952). p. 5.

¹⁷Stageberg, p. 5.

¹⁸Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Amistad 2, ed. John P. Williams and Charles F. Harris (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 11.

¹⁹Eugenie Collier, "Steps Toward a Black Aesthetic: A Study of Black American Literary Criticism," Diss. University of Maryland, 1976, pp. 259-60.