Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s

Phillip Brian Harper

I

This essay begins with an epigraph, not its own, but one from a key publication in the history of black American poetry. Dudley Randall’s anthology *The Black Poets*, published in 1971, is significant not so much for the texts it provides of folk verse and literary poetry from the mid-eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries; rather, its import derives from its participation in a contemporary process of canonization performed on poetry from the Black Arts movement. The concluding sec-


*Critical Inquiry* 19 (Winter 1993)
© 1993 by The University of Chicago. 0093–1896/93/1902-0003$01.00. All rights reserved.
tion of Randall's anthology is titled "The Nineteen Sixties," and it is introduced by the short poem "SOS" by Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), which is printed not in the main text but on the title page for the section:

Calling black people
Calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling you, calling all black people
calling all black people, come in, black people, come on in.

It seems reasonable to infer that, as it occupies an epigraphic position in Randall's compilation, Baraka's "SOS" can be identified as emblematic of the poetic project of many young black writers of the late 1960s. And it is not particularly difficult to identify exactly in what this emblematic nature might consist. We know, after all, that radical black intellectual activism of the late 1960s was characterized by the drive for a nationalistic unity among people of African descent. As Larry Neal put it in 1968 in his defining essay "The Black Arts Movement,"

Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. . . . The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics.

Addison Gayle also embraces the nationalist impulse in his conception of the movement, outlined in his 1971 introduction to The Black Aesthetic. According to Gayle, "The Black Aesthetic . . . is a corrective—a means of helping black people out of the polluted mainstream of Americanism." And in 1972 Stephen Henderson elaborated the development of this


Phillip Brian Harper is assistant professor at Harvard University, where he teaches in the departments of English and Afro-American studies. He is the author of Fiction and Fracture: The Social Text of Postmodernism (forthcoming). The present essay is from a volume in progress entitled The Same Difference: Social Division in African-American Culture.
impulse through the late 1960s: "the poetry of the sixties is informed and unified by the new consciousness of Blackness . . . a consciousness [that has] shifted from Civil Rights to Black Power to Black Nationalism to Revolutionary Pan-Africanism." Thus do three of the Black Aesthetic's most prominent theorists conceive the importance of nationalist unity to the Black Arts movement. For the moment, we can leave aside the various directions in which the nationalist impulse might develop as we attempt to identify its presence, in however rudimentary a form, in Baraka’s poem.

In the introduction to their authoritative anthology, Black Nationalism in America, John Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick assert that

the simplest expression of racial feeling that can be called a form of black nationalism is racial solidarity. It generally has no ideological or programmatic implications beyond the desire that black people organize themselves on the basis of their common color and oppressed condition to move in some way to alleviate their situation. The concept of racial solidarity is essential to all forms of black nationalism.

It is precisely this essential impulse to racial solidarity that is manifested in Baraka’s “SOS.” Considered with respect to nationalism, the political import of the poem inheres not so much in the stridency and exigency of its appeal but rather in its breadth, in the fact that Baraka’s call apparently includes all members of the African diaspora, as it is directed explicitly and repeatedly to “all black people,” thereby invoking a political Pan-Africanism posited as characteristic of the Black Arts project. Moreover, the enjambment of the last two lines and their modification of the injunction definitively transform the SOS from a mere distress signal into a general summons for assembly. What is striking about Baraka’s poem, however, is not that it “calls” black people in this nationalistic way but that this is all it does; the objective for which it assembles the black populace is not specified in the piece itself, a fact I take to indicate fundamental difficulties in the nationalist agenda of the Black Arts poets, as we will soon see.

In the meantime, I think it is useful to consider Baraka’s “SOS” as a

synecdoche for all of his poetic output of the 1960s, which constituted a challenge to other black poets to take up the nationalist ethic he espoused. Insofar as a significant number of black poets did heed his call, Baraka can certainly be seen as the founder of the Black Aesthetic of the 1960s and “SOS” as representative of the standard to which his fellow poets rallied. “SOS” is part of Baraka’s collection Black Art, comprising poems written in 1965 and 1966 and published, along with two other collections, in the volume Black Magic: Poetry, 1961–1967. Its message was subsequently engaged by other black writers from different generations and disparate backgrounds. In her 1972 autobiography, Report from Part One, Gwendolyn Brooks, who built her reputation on her expertly crafted lyrics of the 1940s and 1950s, makes Baraka’s enterprise her own as she describes her new poetic mission in the early 1970s: “My aim, in my next future, is to write poems that will somehow successfully ‘call’ (see Imamu Baraka’s ‘SOS’) all black people: black people in taverns, black people in alleys, black people in gutters, schools, offices, factories, prisons, the consulate; I wish to reach black people in pulpits, black people in mines, on farms, on thrones.” Sonia Sanchez, on the other hand, in her 1969 poem “blk / rhetoric” invoked Baraka’s language to question what might happen after the calling had been done:

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

like

i mean

who’s gonna take 
the words 
blk / is / beautiful 
and make more of it 
than blk / capitalism.

u dig?

i mean

like who’s gonna 
take all the young / long / haired 
natural / brothers and sisters 
and let them 
grow till 
all that is
impt is them
selves 
revolutionary / lines 
toward the enemy

(and we know who that is)

like. man.

who’s gonna give our young

blk / people new heroes

(instead of catch / phrases)

(instead of cad / ill / acs)

(instead of pimps)

(instead of wite / whores)

(instead of drugs)

(instead of new dances)

(instead of chit / ter / lings)

(instead of a 35¢ bottle of ripple)

(instead of quick / fucks in the hall / way of wite / america’s mind)

like. this. is an S O S

me. calling. . . . . . . .

calling. . . . . . .

some / one

pleasereplysoon.9

Sanchez’s call—prefaced as it is by her urgent question and attended by the entreaty to her listeners in the final line—is more pleading than Baraka’s, which is unabashedly imperative. I would suggest that the uncertainty that characterizes Sanchez’s poem is the inevitable affective result of writing beyond the ending of Baraka’s “SOS,” which it seems to me is what “blk / rhetoric” does. By calling into question what will ensue amongst the black collectivity after it has heeded the general call—succumbed to the rhetoric, at it were—Sanchez points to the problematic nature of the black nationalist project that characterizes Black Arts poetry.

What remains certain, in Sanchez’s rendering—so certain that she need not state it explicitly—is the identity of the “enemy” against whom the assembled black troops must struggle. While Sanchez’s elliptical reference might appear somewhat ambiguous at this point, especially after the emergence in the early and midseventies of a strong black feminist movement that arrayed itself against patriarchal forces, it seems clear enough that in the context of the 1969 Black Arts movement the enemy was most certainly the white “establishment.” But this is the only thing that is “known” in Sanchez’s poem, and while the identification of a generalized white foe is a central strategy in the Black Arts movement’s effort to galvanize the black populace, here it provides a hedge against the overall uncertainty that characterizes the rest of the poem—a definitive core on which the crucial questions about the efficacy of nationalist rhetoric can center and thus themselves still be recognizable as nationalist discourse.

With its counterbalancing of fundamental inquiries about the future of the black nationalist enterprise by recourse to the trope of the white enemy, Sanchez's "blk / rhetoric" verges on the problematic that I take to be constitutive of the Black Arts project. Insofar as that project is nationalistic in character, then its primary objective and continual challenge will be, not to identify the external entity against which the black masses are distinguished—this is easy enough to do—but rather to negotiate division within the black population itself. I specifically invoke negotiation here and not, for instance, resolution because I want to claim that the response of Black Arts nationalism to social division within the black populace is not to strive to overcome it but rather repeatedly to articulate it in the name of black consciousness.

2

It has been widely held that the fundamental characteristic of Black Arts poetry is its virulent antiwhite rhetoric. For instance, as Houston Baker has noted, the influential black critic J. Saunders Redding disparaged the Black Aesthetic as representative of a discourse of "hate," a "naive racism in reverse." And it is true that Baraka himself became known for a generalized antiwhite sentiment, often manifested in highly particularized ethnic and religious slurs, especially anti-Semitic ones. His "Black Art" provides an exemplary litany, calling for

poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
politicians Airplane poems . . .
. . . Setting fire and death to
whities ass. Look at the Liberal
Spokesman for the jews clutch his throat
& puke himself into eternity . . .
. . . Another bad poem cracking
steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth.11

"Black People!" calls for the "smashing [of] jellywhite faces. We must make our own / World, man, our own world, and we can not do this unless the white man / is dead. Let's get together and killhim."12 Similarly, Nikki

Giovanni, in a poem that we will soon consider more fully, inquires urgently of her black reader, "Can you kill . . . / . . . Can you poison . . . / . . . Can you piss on a blond head / Can you cut it off . . . / . . . Can you kill a white man."\(^{13}\)

While the affective power of such antiwhite sentiment in much of the poetry certainly cannot be denied, it seems to me that the drama of interracial strife that this rhetoric represents also serves to further another objective of Black Arts poetry—the establishment of intraracial distinctions that themselves serve to solidify the meaning of the Black Aesthetic. In order to clarify this point, I would like to examine a few poems by key practitioners of the Black Aesthetic: Baraka, Sanchez, Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), and June Jordan. These five poems have been widely anthologized as exemplary of the Black Arts project, yet I would argue that they are exemplary, not because they are representative of the poetics deployed in most Black Arts productions, but rather because they expose the logic of the Black Arts ethic that governs work from the movement generally, but whose operation is carefully suppressed in most of that material. I think that the strength of my claim will be augmented through the presentation of the complete poems, so I give the full texts here. First, Baraka's "Poem for Half White College Students":

Who are you, listening to me, who are you listening to yourself? Are you white or black, or does that have anything to do with it? Can you pop your fingers to no music, except those wild monkies go on in your head, can you jerk, to no melody, except finger poppers get it together when you turn from starchecking to checking yourself. How do you sound, your words, are they yours? The ghost you see in the mirror, is it really you, can you swear you are not an imitation greyboy, can you look right next to you in that chair, and swear, that the sister you have your hand on is not really so full of Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton is coming out of her ears. You may even have to be Richard with a white shirt and face, and four million negroes think you cute, you may have to be Elizabeth Taylor, old lady, if you want to sit up in your crazy spot dreaming about dresses, and the sway of certain porters' hips. Check yourself, learn who it is speaking, when you make some ultrasophisticated point, check yourself,

when you find yourself gesturing like Steve McQueen, check it out, ask
in your black heart who it is you are, and is that image black or white,
you might be surprised right out the window, whistling dixie on the way in

Second, Giovanni’s “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro”:

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man
Can you kill nigger
Huh? nigger can you
kill
Do you know how to draw blood
Can you poison
Can you stab-a-jew
Can you kill huh? nigger
Can you kill
Can you run a protestant down with your
‘68 El Dorado
(that’s all they’re good for anyway)
Can you kill
Can you piss on a blond head
Can you cut it off
Can you kill
A nigger can die
We ain’t got to prove we can die
We got to prove we can kill
They sent us to kill
Japan and Africa
We policed europe
Can you kill
Can you kill a white man
Can you kill the nigger
in you
Can you make your nigger mind
die
Can you kill your nigger mind
And free your black hands to

strangle
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can you shoot straight and
Fire for good measure
Can you splatter their brains in the street
Can you kill them
Can you lure them to bed to kill them
We kill in Viet Nam
for them
We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US
And everywhere for all alphabet but
BLACK
Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK
Learn to kill niggers
Learn to be Black men

Third, Lee’s “Move Un-Noticed to Be Noticed: A Nationhood Poem”:

move, into our own, not theirs
into our.
they own it (for the moment): the unclean world, the
polluted space, the un-censor-ed
air, yr/foot steps as they
run wildly in the wrong
direction.

move, into our own, not theirs
into our.
move, you can’t buy own.

own is like yr/hair (if u let it live); a natural extension of ownself.

own is yr/reflection, yr/total-being; the way u walk, talk,
dress and relate to each other is own.

own is you,
cannot be bought or sold

    can u buy yr/writing hand
    yr/dancing feet, yr/speech,
    yr/woman (if she’s real),
    yr/manhood?

own is ours.
all we have to do is take it
take it the way u take from one another.
the way u take artur rubinstein over thelonious monk
the way u take eugene genovese over lerone bennett,
the way u take robert bly over imamu baraka,
the way u take picasso over charles white,

the way u take marianne moore over gwendolyn brooks,
the way u take inaction over action.
move. move to act act.
act into thinking and think into action.
try to think. think. try to think think think.
try to think. think (like i said, into yr/own) think.
try to think. don’t hurt yourself, i know it’s new.
try to act,
act into thinking and think into action.
can u do it, hunh? i say hunh, can u stop moving like a drunk gorilla?
ha ha che che
ha ha che che
ha ha che che
ha ha che che
move
what is u anyhow: a professional car watcher, a billboard for nothingness,
a sane madman, a reincarnated clark gable?
either you is or you ain’t!

the deadliving
are the worldmakers,
the image breakers,
the rule takers: blackman can you stop a hurricane?

“I remember back in 1954 or ’55, in Chicago, when we had
13 days without a murder, that was before them colored
people started calling themselves black.”
move.
move,
move to be moved,
move into yr/ownself, Clean.
Clean, u is the first black hippy i’ve ever met.
why u bes dressen so funny, anyhow hunh?
i mean, is that u, Clean?
why u bes dressen like an airplane, can u fly,
i mean,
will yr/blue jim-shoes fly u,
& what about yr/tailor made bell bottoms, Clean?
can they lift u above madness,
turn u into the right direction.
& that red & pink scarf around yr/neck what’s that for, Clean, hunh?
will it help u fly, yeah, swing, swing ing swing
swinging high above telephone wires with dreams
of this & that and illusions of trying to take bar-b-q
ice cream away from hon minded niggers who
didn’t even know that polish is more than a
sausage.
“clean as a tack,
rusty as a nail,
haven't had a bath
sence columbus sail."

when u going be something real, Clean?
like yr/own, yeah, when u going be yr/ownself?

the deadliving
are the worldmakers,
the image breakers,
the rule takers: blackman can u stop a hurricane, mississippi couldn’t.
blackman if u can’t stop what mississippi couldn’t, be it; be it.
black man be the wind, be the win, the win, the win, win win:

  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
if u can’t stop a hurricane, be one.

  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
be the baddest hurricane that ever came. a black hurricane.

  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
the baddest black hurricane that ever came, a black
hurricane named Beulah,
go head Beulah, do the hurricane.

  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
  wooooooooooewe boom boom wooooooooooewe bah
move
move to be moved from the un-moveable,
into our own, yr/self is own, yrself is own, own yourself.
go where you/we go, hear the unheard and do,
do the undone, do it, do it, do it now, Clean
and tomorrow your sons will
be alive to praise
you.16

Next, Sanchez’s “chant for young / brothas
& sistuhs”:

yall

  out there. looooken so coool
in yo / highs.

  yeah yall

rat there

listen to me

screeaamen this song.

did u know i've

seen yo / high

on every blk / st in

wite / amurica

i've seen yo/self/

imposed/quarantined/hipness

on every

slum/

bar/ revolutionary / st

& there yall be sitten.

u brotha.

u sistuh.

listen to this drummen.

this sad / chant.

listen to the tears

flowen down my blk / face

listen to a

dead/song being sung on thick/lips

by a blk/woman

once i had a maaan

who loved me so he sed

we lived togetha, loved togetha

and i followed wherever he led

now this maaan of mine
got tired of this sloooow pace
started gitten high a lot
to stay on top of the race.
saw him begin to die
screeaamed. held him so tight
but he got so thin so very thin
slipped thru these fingers of might
last time i heard from him
he was bangen on a woman’s door
callen for his daily high
didn’t even care bout the score.
once i loooved a man
still do loove that man
want to looove that man again
wish he’d come on home again
need to be with that maaan
need to love that maaan
who went out one day & died
who went out one day & died.
yall
out there
\[looooken so coooool\]
in yo / highs.
\[yeah. yall\]
rat there
c’mon down from yo / wite / highs
\[and live.\]
And, finally, “Okay ‘Negroes,’” by Jordan:

Okay “Negroes”
\textit{American Negroes}
looking for milk
crying out loud
in the nursery of freedomland:
the rides are rough.
Tell me where you got that image
of a male white mammy.

\[17. \text{Sanchez, “chant for young / brothas & sistuhs,” in} \textit{The Black Poets, pp. 240–42.}\]
God is vague and he don't take no sides.
You think clean fingernails crossed legs a smile
shined shoes
a crucifix around your neck
good manners
no more noise
you think who's gonna give you something?

Come a little closer.
Where you from?18

These pieces, disparate as they are, share certain features. There are,
to be sure, the disparaging references to white society—Jordan's "male
white mammy," Sanchez's rendering of the heroin high, Baraka's invocation
of film celebrities as representative of the shallowness of white
culture—all of which fit neatly into characterizations of Black Arts poetry
as essentially antiwhite. But while these works might engage conceptions
of white America as a negative force, the rhetoric of the pieces is not
addressed—not directly at any rate—to the white society that is the osten-
sible target of their wrath. Indeed, the thematic context of the poems and
their employment of the second-person pronoun you are clearly meant to
conjure a specifically black addressee and thus to give the impression that
the poetic works themselves are meant for consumption by a specifically
black audience. In other words, the rhetoric of Black Arts poetry, in con-
junction with the sociopolitical context in which it is produced, works a
twist on John Stuart Mill's proclamation that "poetry is overheard," as it
seems to effect a split in the audience for the work. Because of the way the
poetry uses direct address and thus invites us to conflate addressee and
audience, it appears that the material is meant to be heard by blacks and
overheard by whites. I think, however, that this is appearance only, and it
will be the serendipitous consequence of my primary argument to show
that, while Black Arts poetry very likely does depend for its effect on the
division of its audience along racial lines, it also achieves its maximum
impact in a context in which it is understood as being heard directly by
whites and overheard by blacks.

Clarification of that point is forthcoming. In the meantime, it is neces-
sary to acknowledge the substantial polemical effect that is achieved
through the presentation of Black Arts poetry as meant for black ears only,
for it is this presentation that commentators have seized on when they
have characterized the Black Arts movement as representing a completely
Afrocentric impulse. As Gayle, for instance, puts it in his introduction to
The Black Aesthetic, the black artist of the 1960s "has given up the futile
practice of speaking to whites, and has begun to speak to his brothers. . . .

to point out to black people the true extent of the control exercised upon
them by the American society." Gayle's claim is, in itself, not earthshak-
ing; it is typical of the contemporary conceptions of the Black Arts
movement's significance in black cultural history. What is notable is that
Gayle's statement, in positing the Black Arts strategy as historically
unique, establishes itself as a historical repetition, insofar as, nearly fifty
years before, a black theorist of the Harlem Renaissance made a very simi-
lar claim about the nature of that movement. In his 1925 article on the
flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, "Negro Youth Speaks," Alain Locke
insisted that, "Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they
speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to inter-
pret, they now speak to their own and try to express." The full irony of
this repetition lies in the fact that it is precisely on the basis of the per-
ceived failure of the Harlem Renaissance to engage black interests that
Black Arts theoreticians find fault with the earlier movement. Neal
specifically charges that the Harlem Renaissance "failed" in that "it
did not address itself to the mythology and the life-styles of the Black
community." Clearly, there is an anxiety of influence operative here,
manifested in the powerful need among the Black Aestheticians to disasso-
ciate themselves from the Harlem Renaissance; and this disassociation will
be based on the later movement's apparently uniquely effective manner of
addressing itself to the interests of black people. By examining this stra-
egy, we can see more clearly both how social division within the black com-
munity is fundamentally constitutive of Black Arts nationalism and, re-
relatedly, why it is so difficult for the Black Arts movement to postulate
concrete action beyond "black rhetoric," to project beyond the "call" man-
ifested in Baraka's "SOS."

3

What is most striking about the way the poems under consideration
—which I have suggested distill the logic of the Black Arts project—
address themselves to the black community is their insistent use of the
second-person pronoun. This aspect of the poetry is notable not only
because it is the verbal indicator of the Black Arts poets' keen awareness of
issues of audience and of their desire to appear to engage directly with
their audience (both of which I have already alluded to), but because the
you references also—and paradoxically, given the Black Aesthetic's
nation-building agenda—represent the implication of intraracial division
within its Black Arts strategy. It is clear, of course, that the use of the

second-person pronoun of indefinite number implies less inclusiveness than would, say, the use of the first-person plural, we. What remains to be explored is exactly on what this apparent exclusivity—this implicit social division—is founded, both grammatically and historically, in order for us to grasp more fully the significance of Black Arts poetics.

The import of the second-person pronoun—both generally and in the specific context of Black Arts poetry—derives largely from its special grammatical status. Because you is a deictic, or shifter, whose reference varies among a multitude of different subjects, it is always necessary to anchor that reference before we can interpret any linguistic construction in which you appears. This would seem to be a relatively easy thing to accomplish, given that you is functionally fixed in a lexemic dyad through which its meaning is conditioned and focused. Émile Benveniste has elucidated the peculiar relation that obtains between the second-person pronoun and the first-person (singular) pronoun, emphasizing that “‘you’ is necessarily designated by ‘I’ and cannot be thought of outside a situation set up by starting with ‘I’.”

Indeed, Benveniste suggests that these pronominal forms alone—exclusive of what we conventionally call the third-person pronoun—can properly be called personal because only the first and second persons are present in the discourse in which they are referenced. Having thus dismissed the genericized he as lacking this “sign of person,” Benveniste then proposes a definition of you based on its inevitable relation to I, which itself always designates the speaking subject: “It is necessary and sufficient,” he says, “that one envisage a person other than ‘I’ for the sign of ‘you’ to be assigned to that person. Thus every person that one imagines is of the ‘you’ form, especially, but not necessarily, the person being addressed ‘you’ can thus be [most accurately] defined as ‘the non-I person.’”

Once we specify the referential field for you, however, it becomes clear that the more problematic task is identifying the referent for any I with which we are confronted. For, while it may be true that I and you are defined against one another—with I representing the speaker of an utterance and you representing the “non-I person”—this mode of anchoring deictic reference is useful only for specifying the subject represented in discourse; it provides us with no information about the subject articulating that discourse, which is always only imperfectly identified with the former. As Antony Easthope puts it, deriving his formulation from Lacan, “the ‘I’ as represented in discourse . . . is always sliding away from the ‘I’ doing the speaking,” which makes for a profound crisis of identity for the speaking subject, who constantly oscillates between identification with the I represented in discourse (the realm of the imaginary in Lacanian terms)

23. Ibid., p. 201.
and recognition of the faultiness of such identification (the realm of the symbolic).  

Numerous commentators have discussed the ramifications of such post-structuralist theories of the subject for socially marginalized groups, whose political agendas have often been considered as based on a primary need to forge stable identities in the first place and not on the deconstruction of the possibility of such identity.  

Certainly, the Black Arts movement can very readily be seen as representing the impulse to establish a positive black subjectivity—based on nationalist ideals—in the face of major sociopolitical impediments to its construction. But post-structuralism’s positing of the always imperfect discursive constitution of the subjective I does not, I think, prohibit the Black Aesthetic’s construction of a powerful black nationalist subject; it merely stipulates that such construction is possible only from a position externally and obliquely situated with respect to the discursive I. I will argue, however, that the disjunction between this as yet unidentified position and the discursive I itself precludes the constitution of an effective black nationalist collectivity. This is because the strategy necessarily deployed by Black Arts poetry to establish a strong black nationalist subject—and through which it derives its meaning and power—is founded on the oppositional logic that governs the pronominal language characteristic of the work. That opposition is thematized in the poetry, not in terms of the us vs. them dichotomy that we might expect, however, with us representing blacks and them whites; rather, it is played out along the inherent opposition between I and you, both these terms deriving their referents from within the collectivity of black subjects. Thus, the project of Black Arts poetry can be understood as the establishment of black nationalist subjectivity—the forcible fixing of the identity of the speaking I—by delineating it against the “non-I person,” the you whose identity is clearly predicated in the poems we are considering. So the you in Baraka’s “Poem for Half White College Students” is the African-American who identifies with the Euro-American celebrity, against which the speaking I of the poem is implicitly contrasted. In Giovanni’s and Lee’s poems, you represents the Negro subject whose sense of self-worth and racial pride has yet to be proven. In Sanchez’s “chant,” you is the black junkie who finds solace in the “wite” high of heroin, clearly meant to be associated with Euro-American corruption. And in Jordan’s “Okay, ‘Negroes,’ ” you is the African-American who has not yet developed an understanding of the raciopolitical forces that impinge on black subjectivity. Clearly, I oversimplify to the extent that the referent of any given you might well vary even within a single poem. But my point is that

25. For example, Joyce A. Joyce objects to the use of post-structuralist theory in black literary criticism; see Joyce A. Joyce, “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism,” *New Literary History* 18 (Winter 1987): 335–44.
because, in spite of these shifts, the second person is much more readily identified than the speaking I for any utterance, any you that these Black Arts poets invoke can function as a negative foil against which the implicit I who speaks the poem can be distinguished as a politically aware, racially conscious, black nationalist subject. It seems to me that it is this intraracial division on which the Black Arts project is founded and not on any sense of inclusiveness with respect to the black community that we might discern in Baraka’s “SOS.”

Indeed, once we have clarified the I-you division that underlies the Black Arts concept of the black community, we can better understand the intraracial division that is implicit in movement references to the “black” subject itself. If it appears to us that Baraka’s “SOS” embraces all members of the black diaspora, this is only because we are forgetting that the designation black, from the middle 1960s through the early 1970s, represented an emergent identification among nationalist activists and intellectuals and not a generic nomenclature by which any person of African descent might be referenced. Consequently, if Baraka is calling “all black people,” he is already calling only those African-Americans whose political consciousness is sufficiently developed for them to subscribe to the designation black in the first place. All others—designated by you in the poems that utilize the pronominal rhetoric—will be considered as negroes, as in the titles of Giovanni’s and Jordan’s poems, a term that is intermittently transmuted into niggers in Giovanni’s text.

4

Given these poems’ authorization of their own black nationalist rhetoric, how then do we account for the historical and political factors in the movement’s differentiation of the black body politic into disparate elements? Doesn’t this division run counter to the solidarity we have taken to found black nationalism? Undoubtedly, a number of specific, local contingencies contributed to the development of the Black Arts movement’s agenda and strategy. At the same time, it is possible, within the cultural-analytical context set up here, to identify a potential general motivation for the intraracial division so insistently deployed by Black Arts practitioners. That motivation is strongly related to the degree—noted above—to which Black Aestheticians of the 1960s sought to disassociate their movement from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.

The Harlem Renaissance, apart from its evident cultural import, can be considered in sociopolitical terms as representing the culmination of a wave of black nationalist sentiment that lasted, according to Bracey, Meier, and Rudwick, from the 1880s until the onset of the Depression. During this period, they argue, “appeals to race pride and race unity became commonplace, and separate educational, religious, and economic
institutions were more and more widely advocated” (“I,” p. xl). On the other hand, they indicate the fundamentally ambiguous nature of this nationalist impulse by noting that these separatist appeals were mounted on behalf of a general accommodationist policy and not with a view toward ultimate black autonomy. They assert that while these separatist ideas “pervaded the spectrum of black social thought in the nineties and after the turn of the century . . . in general, they characterized the thinking of accommodators like Booker T. Washington more than that of protest leaders” (“I,” p. xl). And they clarify further: “The ambiguous way in which nationalism has functioned in Negro thought was never more apparent than during this period. Almost always, except in the case of out-and-out colonization movements, separatism was advocated as a means of paving the way for full acceptance in American society” (“I,” p. xli). To the degree that it conceived of this full acceptance as predicated on a Washingtonian social separatism (as opposed to the ostensibly empowering political and economic separatism espoused by the Black Power movement), and thus approximated alarmingly the agenda of segregationist whites, the racial solidarity impulse of the turn of the century would be entirely out of sync with the black nationalism of the 1960s, which was keenly sensitive to the possible cooptation of its agenda by white interests. Consequently, just as we can identify in the Black Arts movement the strong impulse to reject the cultural strategies of the Harlem Renaissance, so too was it characterized by a profound need to disassociate itself from the political objectives of the early black separatist movement. It intensely repudiated the influence of the elders.

Black Aestheticians also—as is already widely recognized—rejected the more immediate predecessor of the Black Power project, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. While the actual temporal relation between these two movements is more complex than that of mere consecutiveness—as is roughly emblemized in the overlap of the careers of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X—Black Power has nonetheless consistently been represented as a radical progression from the less urgent strategies of civil protest. Thus the notion of historical advance strongly influenced the Black Power movement’s sense of itself in relation to both turn-of-the-century and midcentury black political movements, and its need to present itself as historically distinct from these other movements can be discerned in the rhetoric of its poetic productions, the logic of which transmutes that historical differentiation into the highly self-defensive division of the contemporary black population into disparate segments.26

26. It is also possible that the intraracial division effected in Black Arts poetry is a function of the black community’s status as a sort of mutated colonial entity. During the late 1960s, analyses of the colonialized nature of black communities in the U.S. were forthcoming from both social scientists and black activists. Indeed, in their introduction to Black
It is also true, to develop the point further and in a slightly different direction, that the identification and consequent strong rejection of a putatively ineffectual bourgeois accommodationism in whatever era of black social and political history must have been a necessary undertaking for a Black Arts movement characterized by an intense and potentially crippling middle-class *ressentiment*. The Black Aestheticians’ strong consciousness of the need to appear rooted in the traditions of the folk was certainly not a new phenomenon among mass political movements, nor is it the case that movement intellectuals and the black masses were strictly dichotomized. Nevertheless, for a movement that emerged in opposition to nonviolent strategies that it represented as removed from the exigencies of everyday black existence, the threat of being perceived as similarly alienated loomed particularly large. It accounts, for instance, for the Black Aestheticians’ characterization of the emergent black studies movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as unacceptably “bourgie”; and the anxiety built up around this possibility is evident in Stokely Carmichael’s injunction of 1966: “We have to say, ‘Don’t play jive and start writing poems after Malcolm is shot.’ We have to move from the point where the man left off and stop writing poems.” Thus is made

*Nationalism in America*, the editors posit just such a conception of black America, citing as their justification some contemporary studies in sociology and political science. (See “I,” p. lvi; among the material they cite, one article in particular clearly outlines the issues at stake in conceptualizing black communities as colonial entities. See also Robert Blauner, “Internal Colonialism and Ghetto Revolt,” *Social Problems* 16 (Spring 1969): 393–408.) Given this, it is interesting to note that Abdul R. JanMohamed has identified as one of the cultural manifestations of colonialism a mapping of the social entity along a Manichean duality that defines a morally “good” constituency—the colonizers, more often than not—against one that is seen as inherently “evil”—the colonized. See Abdul R. JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst, Mass., 1983) and “The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature,” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 59–87. While I do not believe that the situation of black Americans can be posited unproblematically as a colonial one, its historical sine qua non—the slave trade—can certainly be considered as a manifestation of the colonizing impulse. Consequently, it seems possible that, just as the economics of slavery developed in a particular manner after the initial appropriation of the “resources” from the African continent, there occurred concomitant mutations in the cultural realm in which we can still trace the remnants of an essential colonial logic. Thus, the *I-you* dichotomy that characterizes Black Arts poetry might represent the internalization within the black American community of the Manichean ethic that JanMohamed identifies with the colonial situation proper. It falls outside the scope of this essay to trace the various mechanisms through which this internalization might have been effected, but its possibility suggests a direction for further work on this topic.


28. Stokely Carmichael, “We Are Going to Use the Term ‘Black Power’ and We Are Going to Define It Because Black Power Speaks to Us” (1966), in *Black Nationalism in America*, p. 472.
clear the dominant sense of the suspect nature and relative ineffectuality of artistic and intellectual endeavors in the Black Power movement. It is a sense that is reiterated often in the poetry itself; for instance, Giovanni considers her inability to produce a “tree poem” or a “sky poem” in “For Saundra”:

so i thought again
and it occurred to me
maybe i shouldn’t write
at all
but clean my gun
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic
times
at all

And, much less typically, Sanchez worries explicitly that black-power rhetoric will lead only to “blk / capitalism.” It seems to me that it is the threatening unpredictability of exactly what will issue from nationalist organizing that accounts for Baraka’s decision not to project beyond the call manifested in “SOS.” The power of the work thus derives from the energy of the essential nationalist impulse itself and is not undermined by ambivalence regarding the different directions in which that impulse might develop.

Finally, I think that it is in order to quell such ambivalence that so much of the work employs a violent rhetoric, in which the mere repetition of references to killing the white enemy seems to be considered as the actual performance of the act. The positing of this violent rhetoric as performative language predicates the status of Black Arts poetry as being heard by whites and overheard by blacks. For if, in the performative logic of the Black Arts work, to be heard is to annihilate those persons who effect one’s oppression, to be overheard is to impress upon one’s peers just how righteous, how fearsome, how potently nationalistic one is, in contra-distinction to those very peers who are figured as the direct addressee of the Black Arts works.

Which brings us back to where we began—with a consideration of conventional assessments of Black Arts poetry as primarily defined by its call for violence against whites. Clearly this rhetoric of violence, while certainly provoking various affective responses amongst white readers and auditors—responses that I don’t pretend to address here—also represents the Black Arts movement’s need to establish division among blacks, and, indeed, itself actually serves to produce such division. If we recognize

the fundamental significance of this intraracial division to such black nationalism as is represented in the Black Arts project, then it seems to me that we are much closer to understanding the full social import of the nationalist imperative. Black Arts poetry can help us to do that because, as the most recent vital example of the nationalist impulse, it reflects the contradictions of the ideology in a particularly striking way. It behooves us to study those contradictions at this historical juncture as we begin to see in this country a new florescence of black nationalist consciousness whose cultural manifestations have yet to be fully realized and whose political ramifications have yet to be effectively theorized.