Evolution of an Era: The Black Arts Movement Reinforced and Revolutionized in Contemporary African American Literature

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The Black Power Movement of the late 1960’s and 70’s served as an outlet for young activists frustrated with social and political injustices who were dedicated to changing the sociopolitical environment for African Americans. During the Civil Rights Movement, many church leaders and political activists protested peacefully and respectfully for change. In many ways they were successful, passing several laws and legislation for African American rights. However, in other ways, their methods and approach became frustrating as they took constant abuse, verbal and physical, from their opponents and had difficulty getting laws and legislation implemented once they had passed. Yet the Civil Rights Movement, with charismatic and iconic leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. gained much media exposure and became the central group of activists of their time. However, as stated by Peniel E. Joseph in his article “Black Power’s Powerful Legacy,” at the same time that the Civil Rights Movement was getting underway, the beginnings of the Black Power Movement were also taking shape, over time this quiet movement would gain momentum and attention.

[…] just as Southern civil-rights struggles were making national headlines, Northern black activists (many who had come of political age during the Great Depression and World War II) formed important relationships with Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam's outspoken and eloquent representative…Stressing racial pride, the connection between civil rights in the United States and the third world, and political self-determination through bruising and at times deliberatively provocative protests, local militants in the North were
simultaneously inspired by the heroic efforts at direct action of the civil-rights struggles in the South and repulsed by the spectacles of racial violence there. By the late 1950s, they had formed a parallel movement with no name, cynical about American democracy's willingness to defend black citizenship…] (55)

By the summer of 1966, the idea of Black Power was becoming more recognized as a key figure of the Civil Rights Movement, Stokely Carmichael, appeared to change his approach. In June of that year, James Meredith was gunned down during his “March against Fear,” which outraged civil rights activists who decided to go down to Mississippi to continue his march. During that time, the marchers, along with Carmichael, were arrested for trespassing, prompting his first black power speech. During his speech Carmichael presented strong ideas about the action that should be taken by black people as he claimed that now was the time for black power. Carmichael defined black power as, “a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations” (Joseph 55). These nationalistic ideas differed from the rhetoric of peace and unity that was being promoted by the senior leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, who were also present at the march. With his speech and the formation of the Black Panther Party, the Black Power Movement came out of the shadows and gained national attention. The Black Panther Party developed in Los Angeles and believed that a firm knowledge of rights and laws along with black militarism would help them to achieve their goals of “black self-determination, decent housing and education, and the end to police brutality and exploitation in the ghetto” (Joseph 55). These ideals created a new wave of activism with people crying for
“black pride” and “black power” and with an understanding that this nationalism may take more aggressive action to be achieved.

During this time, artists and scholars wanted to find a way to integrate the ideals of the Black Power Movement into their work in order to progress the ideals of the cause. Black artists wanted to use art to showcase black pride and nationalism and highlight the black experience. This would in turn motivate the “average black man” to take on the cause of the Black Arts Movement and enlighten him to the importance of black nationalism. Larry Neal states that, “Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.” (2039) These artists created the Black Arts Movement in order to advance the political ideals taking shape around the country.

The Black Arts Movement strove to create a black aesthetic in which black art would be created for black people and judged by their own standards of creativity and functionality. Maulana Karenga explains the intended function of black art in “Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function” stating that:

For all art must reflect and support the Black Revolution, and any art that does not discuss and contribute to the revolution is invalid…That is why we say that all Black art, irregardless of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics which make it revolutionary. In brief, it must be functional, collective and committing. It must be functional, that is useful, as we cannot accept the false doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake’.

(2087)

These artists decided that black art should speak about and to the black community and that it should have a useful function that advanced the movement above and beyond “art for art’s sake”.

In his essay “The Black Arts Movement,” Larry Neal describes the efforts as follows:
The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America…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.” (2039)

Artists of the Black Arts Movement believed that by being as authentic as possible they would be more accessible to a black audience who would then be empowered by their work, “…it must be from the people and returned to the people in a form more beautiful and colorful than it was in real life. For that is what art is: everyday life given form and color.” (2088)

The artists depicted this real life by showing the ignorance of characters who had not been awakened to the ideals of black nationalism, the militancy and power of the black male, and the female as the black man’s helpmate and tool. Older people from previous generations were usually seen as ignorant or beyond repair, believing in and relying too heavily on the white man to be enlightened. Larry Neal touches on this in his discussion of the character of the mother in Jimmy Garrett’s play, “We Own the Night”: “In Afro-American literature of previous decades the strong Black mother was the object of awe and respect. But in the new literature her status is ambivalent and laced with tension…The old constructs do not hold up, because adhering to them means consigning oneself to the oppressive reality.”(2049) Neal also describes the problem with the role of black women:

Historically, Afro-American women have had to be the economic mainstays of the family. The oppressor allowed them to have jobs while at the same time limiting the economic mobility of the Black man. Very often, therefore, the woman’s aspirations and
values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man. Since he cannot provide for his family the way white men do, she despises his weakness, tearing into him at every opportunity until very often, there is nothing left but a shell. (2049)

This problem must be solved by the woman giving up her aspirations and instead focusing on uplifting her black man. Any strong aspiration or protest by the black female was seen as a threat to the black masculinity. However, if women could be enlightened by their black men, they too can become useful in the movement. Black men, in turn, were portrayed as strong, virile, and militant, intelligent and ready for a fight.

Another concern of the creators of the Black Arts Movement was their desire to be able to publish and disseminate their work outside of white control. These nationalistic desires to control their own artistic creations lead to an importance being placed on publishing their own literary work and printing their own periodicals. They also formed writers’ workshops such as the Organization of Black American Culture and theatre companies such as the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre School.

Yet while the Black Arts Movement made a large attempt to make art for black people, the high art created at the time did not translate well to mainstream black audiences. Their plays and manifestos were mostly appreciated by like minded scholars and so did little to influence the lives of the everyday black person. The Black Arts Movement received a lot of negative press and these artists were often dismissed or criticized as simply racially charged and not critically and aesthetically important. Furthermore, while trying to create an avant-garde experience out of the everyday, there was a disconnect between the artist and the reader who, as the artists were aware, was not exposed to high art. In this way, the Black Arts Movement seemingly failed at
achieving its goal of empowering the “average black man” through the arts. However, the themes and ideals of the Black Arts Movement still resonate in contemporary black art.

While the Black Arts Movement ended in the 1970’s, some of their ideas still exist in the work of contemporary black authors. Both artists of the Black Arts Movement and contemporary artists focus on everyday dynamics and relationships to create this accessible art. By focusing on the lives on men, women, and family and their interactions with each other, these artists touch on topics that black people face in their everyday lives. In the hip hop generation, literature is geared towards the streets and the cultural influences such as rap on its characters. Writers like Sister Souljah and Sapphire delve into the gritty details of life for urban black people and do not hold back or try to pander to an audience that might be shocked by the stories they are telling.

Both artists admittedly share characteristics with the Black Arts Movement. In an interview Sapphire admits that while she could never consider herself a Black Panther or belonging to the Nation of Islam, she was politically conscious and that she considers her work “radical” because “it means challenging the status quo.” She also admits that her work expresses a certain anger which she describes as “not a ferocious anger but a useful anger. It’s the anger of a mature person who sees what denial and abuse rob from people” much like the “useful” anger used by the activists of the Black Power Movement to achieve their goals.

Sister Souljah is also admittedly influenced by the figures and concepts of the Black Power Movement. She states that the Autobiography of Malcolm X, Angela Davis: An Autobiography, and Native Son are among the many nationalistic books that inspired her as a young woman. Also several of her goals for writing The Coldest Winter Ever are similar to those of the Black Power Movement, such as recapturing the black male identity and putting the black family back together again.
However, these artists have taken their own spin on the ideas of their predecessors. They have taken time to show the problems associated with black male supremacy and how this idea might not be best while still portraying strong, intelligent black men. In these contemporary texts, while the identity of a black man can still be defined by the importance of strength and intelligence, he is usually not seen as whole unless these characteristics are accompanied by compassion and understanding for the world around him. They understand the importance of black masculinity; however, they highlight the problems that arise when black men can go unquestioned and have ultimate authority. If a man is not enlightened, his ultimate authority can lead to the destruction of his entire family and in turn his entire race. They have also taken time to reconstruct the identity of the female as more than a male counterpart but as her own independent, thinking being who may be dragged down by the men in her life if not careful. Furthermore, while writing literature with the intent to reform, they don’t only point the finger at the white man, seeing the problems inherent in their own communities. They look not only at differences between the races but differences inside the races as well.

Staying true to the core beliefs of the Black Arts Movement, these writers were able to publish their work in small, minority presses yet do something that was elusive in the Black Arts Movement. They have found commercial success. Still writing what they believed and not altering their message for their audience, they were able to have their works read and disseminated throughout the African-American community and beyond. As contemporary artists evolve from the seed planted by the Black Arts Movement, they may come closer to achieving the goals set forth by their predecessors.
Neighborhoods: The Culture of the Street

Artists of the Black Arts Movement wanted to focus on the lives of the everyday black person and therefore focused on the poor urban experience. This idea of finding authenticity in the poor urban experience can also be seen in contemporary work and is a tool that they have taken from their predecessors of the Black Arts Movement, as Amy Ongiri states in her book, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic*:

In contemporary culture, that which is urban, black, and poor continues to be marked as the most authentic manifestation of African American culture…The notion that the urban poor experience is definitional in the construction of African American identity is largely a result of the Black Arts/Black Power movement. (23)

In both cases, while urban neighborhoods have negative characteristics and in some ways are detrimental to black people, they are also celebrated as the essence of black culture and experience. Recognized as a place that, whether good or bad, is not artificial.

Larry Neal attests that “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.” Because of this and their desire to write about the raw, urban black experience, black arts writers discussed the war zone like aspects of the ghetto in terms of drugs and violence. However, drug use is often excused as an escape from white oppression and the oppression of the urban experience. In Sonia Sanchez’s poem “Summer Words of a Sistuh Addict,” she discusses the use of drugs as an escape:

the first day I shot dope
was on a Sunday,
    I had just come
home from church
    got mad at my motha
cuz she got mad at me. u dig/.
went out. shot up
behind a feelen against her.
it felt good.
gooder than doing it. yeah.
it was nice.

While Sanchez goes on to explain how the escape from drugs did not help the girl in this poem to solve her problems, she does not explain how the girl might be responsible for her own issues and drug use. Drug use is explained as a reaction to oppression that is a symptom of a long history of white dominance, however, the black environment is not the culprit of the problem. Furthermore, violence in Black Arts writing was often perpetrated between white and black people. In Jimmy Garrett’s play, “We Own The Night,” the main character Jimmy gets injured in a riot against the police and one of his friends calls his mother. When Jimmy announces that he doesn’t want her to come because she will try to take him home, his friend Lil’T states, “Home. This is home. This alley and those bodies. That’s home. I’m your brother and you’re my brother and we live and fight in the alleys. This is home. And we’ll win against the white man.” (530) He also states, “She can’t stop us, Johnny. Nobody can. The white man can’t. Your mama can’t. Nobody. We’re destroying the white man. There’s wars like this in every big city…Harlem, Detroit, Chicago…all over California. Everywhere. We’ve held off these white mother fuckers for three days.” (529) For them, the true urban experience is intertwined with fighting and violence against the white oppressor. Amiri Baraka furthers this idea in his poem “Black Art,” he writes:

Poems that shoot gums. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead…
Setting fire and death to
whities ass
While these poems address the need for aggression and force against the white oppressor in order to achieve black nationality, they do not address the issue of violence amongst the very people they wish to unite.

In contemporary black literature, these same issues are addressed but more in-depth and in several different dimensions. In *Push*, Sapphire shows the conflicting ideas about drug use. The main character, Precious, looks up to Louis Farrakhan, however, she does not truly understand his argument and therefore simply regurgitates his message. In doing this, issues arise that show contradictions in Farrakhan’s argument. First, Precious asserts that she, like Farrakhan, hates crack addicts because they give a bad name to black people. “First thing I see when I wake up is picture of Farrakhan’s face on the wall. I love him. He is against crack addicts and crackers.” (34) However, later on, she states that Farrakhan says white people are the problem and not crack. “Crackers is the cause of everything bad.” (57) In this way, contemporary artists evolve from the ideas of the Black Arts Movement by questioning just how much responsibility the white man can hold for the ills of black society and how much of the blame falls on the black man himself.

Sister Souljah tries to answer this question in *The Coldest Winter Ever*. The main character of this novel, Winter, looks up to drug dealers and sees them as strong men who provide for and protect their families. Her father is a drug dealer and she describes him as, “a hardworking man, a sharp thinker who doesn’t hesitate to do what he gotta do, to get you what you need to have…”(9) She idolizes the drug community and believes that the prevalence of drugs in urban communities is not due to the activities of the dealer saying that addicts will just get drugs from somewhere else if her loved ones weren’t providing them.
However, Sister Souljah accepts no excuse for drug dealing and believes that it is fully in the black man’s control to alter his existence. She sees drug dealing as a cancer of the black community that is being perpetuated by its own citizens:

> Where there are drugs, there can be no love. There can be no family. Drugs are so powerful they eradicate the God in both the taker and the giver…In life we make choices, conscious decisions to move left or right. We reap the rewards and/or disasters of the choices we make. (348)

She also believes that the problem can no longer be blamed on the white oppressor: “Drugs is a government game, Bilal. A way to rob us of our best black men, our army. Everyone who plays the game loses. Then they get you right back where we started, in slavery! Then they get to say ‘This time you did it to yourself.’ I won’t play that game.” (350)

Furthermore, Souljah addresses the issues of violence in the black community. She analyzes violence not just in a war against the white man but in a war amongst black people. The characters are constantly fighting each other for control of their neighborhood. Black men kill black men for control and respect and this violence can be seen in their children. In one instance, Winter boasts that, “I can cut a bitch with my razor so fast and so clean she wouldn’t even know what happened until she bled to death.” (52) This violence is not the aggression which leads to revolution which the Black Arts writers advocate, however, it is violence that is part of the communities which they wish to write about in the most honest and real forms. By not analyzing and criticizing this aspect, they have neglected a large part of the poor urban experience.

Contemporary black literature takes the ideas of the Black Arts Movement and expands upon them by analyzing the issues at a deeper level by expanding on the complexities of the black experience. They acknowledge that the government and white society does not help the
drug problem in urban neighborhoods and may even perpetuate it, however, they expand the issue by making the black man responsible for his actions which are killing members of his own community. Souljah states:

I want to highlight how the government made it possible for these hoods to be flooded with drugs, so that the poor would remain doped up and powerless, unable to focus, concentrate, organize, protest, or build… I also wanted to show how those who have the potential to provide the leadership in a poor ghetto community end up turning on that same community by becoming drug dealers. Instead of adopting the philosophy that we can work together to save, to heal, to build legal business in, and to control the politics of our hood, a few go for the quick dollars and sacrifice the souls they could have saved… Because there is a need for the powerful to keep the drugs available in our communities…to keep us fighting one another. To keep us in a constant state of aggravation, disunity, powerlessness, poverty, and slavery. (470)

Furthermore, they see that violence is sometimes a means of survival or revolution, but they also address the negative aspects of violence when black people turn against their own kind using violence that is in no way prosperous. Sapphire and Souljah have taken the ideas of their predecessors and expanded them, making them more relatable to the “average black man” and his everyday experience.

**Relationship to Previous Generations**

During the Black Arts Movement, artists wanted to destroy current cultural standards in order to revolutionize the black experience. As Larry Neal states in his essay “The Black Arts Movement,” “The cultural values inherent in western history must either be radicalized or
destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible. In fact, what is need is a whole new system of ideas.”(2039) This expands to the ideas of previous generations who cannot be radicalized and therefore must be destroyed. Parents cannot be radicalized and therefore they must be destroyed in order to have a successful revolution.

This idea can be seen in Jimmy Garrett’s play, “We Own the Night”. While Johnny tries to explain to his mother why he must stay in the streets and fight she continues to give him old rhetoric about the “helpful white man” and to chastise his decision to fight. Because Johnny cannot change her mind, he must murder his mother. In the last moment of the play, Johnny points a gun at his mother’s back and declares, “We’re…new men, Mama…Not niggers. Black men.” (540) He then shoots his mother in the back. She must be destroyed because she cannot be radicalized.

This is also seen in Marvin E. Jackmon’s play “Flowers for the Trashman”. In this play, the main character Joe Simmons finds himself in jail after he and a friend get in an altercation with a police officer. Though Joe has not talked to his father in a long time because he is ashamed of his father’s sterile, effeminate career as an unsuccessful flower salesman, he believes that his father will come to bail him out of jail. However, his father doesn’t understand his situation and feels that it is Joe’s fault for getting in trouble and refuses to come and bail him out. While Joe goes back to the holding cell believing that his father has abandoned him, his father actually has a heart attack on the way to the jail. Though his father could have picked him up, Joe comments that he and his father never talked, “I didn’t know ‘bout ‘m – so goddamn much. I don’t know why we couldn’t ever talk…We didn’t talk about nothin’, man – the president, Cuba, integration, nothing.” (558) So even though his father could have picked him up, there are no signs that the communication between them would have changed and therefore the revolution
would not be complete. While Joe’s father was attempting to become radicalized, the radicalization could never be completed and so he was destroyed.

In contemporary literature, the idea still exists that previous generations lack revolutionary thought and are ignorant of the change that is necessary. However, contemporary authors believe that radicalization and rehabilitation are possible. Furthermore, not only is rehabilitation possible, but helping to enlighten and uplift previous generations can also help the individual reach further prosperity and enlightenment.

In Push, Precious must leave her mother’s house in order to gain enlightenment. Her mother does not want her to attend the school that is allowing her to learn to read and write and learn about the world around her. She would prefer that Precious get a welfare check or go to school to learn a trade like computers. She is also verbally, emotionally, sexually, and physically abusive towards her daughter. If Precious were to stay in her house, she would end up in the same place as her mother, unenlightened and unaware. However, Precious decides to destroy her relationship with her mother in order to revolutionize her own existence. Yet, she does not abandon her mother and while she is not at the point where she can help radicalize her mother, she does make the attempt to share the knowledge that she has with her. When her mother comes to announce that Precious’s father died of AIDS and tells Precious that she could not have contracted the virus because they never had sex “…like faggots, in the ass and all…”(86) Precious tells her that she should get tested, helping to fight her mother’s ignorance in an attempt to save her life. So instead of destroying her mother, she tries to save her and this helps Precious on her path to revolution and self-enlightenment.

Furthermore, in The Coldest Winter Ever, Winter’s parents are living a hazardous life with a confining mindset. However, when Winter can help them she decides against it. When her
father is in jail and tells her how to find money for his defense, she starts thinking of how she can take small amounts of the money in order to buy things for herself. Also when she thinks that her father has been moved from Riker’s to another prison, she makes very little attempt to find him and try to offer him any kind of assistance.

However, Winter’s largest betrayal is with her mother. Not only does she not try to save her mother but she also aids in her mother’s destruction. When her mother becomes destitute and addicted to crack, Winter never takes any of the money that she has to help her mother’s situation. She also knowingly gives her mother crack when she sees her begging outside her boyfriend’s door. And she allows her friends to speak badly of her mother and her boyfriend to treat her mother disrespectfully. At the end, Winter gives her mother money to buy crack so that her mother will give her letters from her father. In the letters, Winter’s father tells her that there is a large sum of money for her and she should use some to send her mother to rehab. If Winter only showed interest in helping to save her mother, she would have been able to save herself as well. When discussing the character of Winter, Sister Souljah sees her callousness towards her mother as her biggest flaw:

The only thing that Winter did ultimately give her mother was crack. She took it from the cookie jar in Bullet’s apartment and dropped it through the sliding slot in the door. She secretly watched as her mother groveled for it. She even listened as Bullet humiliated her mom, treating her like a common crackhead worthy of no kind of respect. These attitudes and actions are what makes Winter the coldest winter ever. (487)

If Winter had learned to honor and help her parents she would be even closer to the enlightenment that is necessary for revolution. The character, Midnight, honors his mother’s memory by remembering her best qualities and looking for mates that demonstrate these
characteristics. He carries out her wishes by taking care of his sister and remembering his past in Africa. His feelings towards his mother make him one of the most enlightened characters in the book.

While contemporary artists still see parents as being prisoners of past ways of thinking, they do not believe that parents cannot be radicalized. They differ from their predecessors because they see that once the new generation is enlightened they can help to pull up the people that came before them. Through their interactions with the parents in their texts, contemporary artists show the importance of uplifting one’s parents, not only for their benefit, but to complete the process of uplifting one’s self.

The Black Male

One important element of the Black Arts Movement was to recreate the identity of the black man as a strong, violent, intelligent, and virile man. Members of the Black Power/Arts Movements believed that black men had been torn down by white oppressors for centuries until they had become weak and submissive. They wanted to enlighten black men and make them strong to fight against white oppression. The need for black masculinity was a central theme during the Black Arts Movement. The masculinity of the black man becomes the frame for the rest of identities of black genders and relationship structures. Black women must help to uplift and strengthen the black man by being submissive and supporting his goals and the black family must be run by and depend on the black male and his strength for survival.

Black men must not be challenged or emasculated. Neal explains that in “We Own the Night”, the fault of the mother character is that she is too strong and emasculating. “Johnny
begins a vicious attack on his mother, accusing her of emasculating his father – a recurring theme in the sociology of the Black community.’”(2049) Because black masculinity has been challenged and threatened throughout history it must be supported and upheld as an undeniable virtue from now on. In her article “The Same Old Danger/But a Brand New Pleasure’: The Black Arts Movement in the 21st Century”, Ajuan Mance argues that the history of lynching also adds to the need for a recreated image of a strong black man:

This emphasis evolved out of a need and even a hunger on the part of young, urban Blacks in the northern and West coast states for African American images that would counteract the fear and vulnerability that was introduced into and maintained at the center of Black life through the gruesome spectacle of lynching. For the young Black writers and activists who would shape the ‘60s movement in the arts, the link between Black manhood, power, and resistance was clear. (93)

She goes on to claim that, “poems depicting Black men as virile, masculine, and powerful held special appeal for a rising generation of Black activists who wished not merely to reject and disrupt white dominance, but to reject and disrupt it audaciously.”

The way that they achieved this was to depict black men living their lives with conviction and by shedding light on the injustices against them, as Mance states, “…if the idea of the dead Afro-American male reinforced white power, then any depiction of a thriving, defiant Black man, engaged in any of his life’s activities (walking, loving, speaking, “styling”) was perceived by both the men and the women of the nationalist movement as a rejection of white domination.” (95)

These depictions of the “thriving, defiant Black man” are prevalent in the literature of the Black Arts Movement.
In “We Own The Night,” the young men are depicted fighting and defending their territory against the white man in the streets. Their very strength is being celebrated as what makes them males. The entire play is a defense and celebration of black masculinity. Furthermore, in “Flowers for the Trashman,” two young men are jailed getting into an altercation with a white police officer, however, they are the heroes of the story. The story highlights the dangers of being an emasculated black man. Joe Simmons’s father is an unsuccessful flower salesman who shows no characteristics of being a strong black man and therefore is scorned and mocked by his community and his family. His father has been emasculated by a strong woman. “Mama’s down there tryin’ to be a daddy and a mama- taking care of your kids.” (551) His father cannot provide for his family and Joe tells him that he cannot fill the role of father, he also tells him that no one respects him. This is the danger of not being a strong man who is willing to fight for his masculinity.

In contemporary literature, the image of the strong black man is still extremely prevalent and important. A black man is expected to be strong, violent if necessary, and the head of his household. In The Coldest Winter Ever, Sister Souljah claims that the character Midnight “symbolizes the black man’s return to manhood and culture” (494). Midnight is a man from the streets doing what he needs to in order to survive, however he is also an intellectual, who is constantly striving to become more enlightened and improve himself. He is very black, yet he is very beautiful and desired by many women. These characteristics are the same traits that are required of a strong black man during the Black Arts Movement. Neal describes Tim, the main character in Ron Milner’s play “Who’s Got His Own” in very much the same way. “Tim is the product of the new Afro-American sensibility, informed by the psychological revolution now operative within Black America. He is a combination ghetto soul brother and militant
intellectual, very hip and slightly flawed himself.” (2048) By this definition Tim, could be
interchanged with Midnight.

While masculinity is important in contemporary African American literature, contem-
porary artists also see that black men can become destructive when women submit to
their demand. They see that leaving a black man unchallenged can lead to devastation and that
strength and success does not mean that a black man is intelligent and enlightened. For con-
temporary artists, strength and power is a secondary trait for the black man.

For example, in Push, both Precious and her mother submit to the demands of a black
man who abuses and mistreats them. His masculinity is never threatened, however, he destroys
the lives of those around him. He rapes his own daughter and fathers two children by her, while
he has a wife and children on the other side of town. He eventually dies of AIDS without his
ultimate power ever being challenged. Precious’s mother had fully submitted to him and would
have given him anything, including her child, in order to keep him happy. However, Sapphire
attempts to show her readers that the strength of black men is nothing compared to the character
of the man. As Precious gains literacy and begins to understand the world around her, she
realizes that her father was not a man because he did not have the character of a man and
therefore he did not deserve to be the head of any household.

The father, Santiaga, in The Coldest Winter Ever also leads his family to destruction even
though he did not take advantage of them or abuse them. On the surface, Santiaga is a warm and
loving father and husband. He is also able to support his family and is very intelligent when it
comes to the business of the streets. However, Santiaga is not enlightened about the world
around him and can only truly support his family financially. Once he goes to jail, he can do
nothing more for them and the family falls apart with each member falling into desperate
circumstances because the strong black man that they were submitting to was only an illusion.

When discussing Santiaga, Sister Souljah states:

A man must then, if not before, begin to build a foundation for himself, his new wife, and his children to come. The kind of foundation he is able to build will depend heavily upon his understanding of himself, his father before him, and the God he does or does not serve. If a man does not understand himself, his father before him, or his beliefs, the foundation he lays for his family will rest in quicksand... Ricky Santiaga built a foundation for his family that rested on top of quicksand. His house was destined to sink.

It never even had a chance. (519)

She believes that as a drug dealer he wasn’t enlightened enough to run a family. So even though his family respected him and submitted to him and allowed him to be strong and masculine, it was not enough to sustain them.

Both authors show the pitfalls of being afraid to critique a black man and putting his masculinity before all else. However, they do not wish to emasculate black men. They believe that an honorable, strong, intelligent black male deserves respect and support from black women and the black community. Sister Souljah presents her image of the quintessential black man.

Midnight portrays all the characteristics of a black man. Not just because he is strong, intelligent, black, and African but because he views women as his equals and looks to them for enlightenment instead of help or submission. Midnight is intrigued by Sister Souljah, an intelligent black woman who challenges him and his choices instead of submitting to his masculinity. While she is impressed by his beauty and intelligence, Souljah refuses to accept him as a drug dealer and rejects him because of his lifestyle choice. Midnight makes many pleas for her attention and tries to justify his actions, however, he is always rebuffed by Souljah who will
accept no excuse for his behavior. While this might be seen as emasculation during the Black Arts Movement, Midnight is not weakened by Souljah’s harsh words instead he uses them to strengthen himself and to become an even better man.

Furthermore, Winter constantly attempts to win the affection of Midnight, telling him that she will submit completely to him and do whatever he wants her to do. However, this disgusts Midnight instead of enticing him. He encourages Winter to read and enlighten herself instead of depending on the men around her. Her desire to submit to him does not make him feel like more of a man and he does not need her submission to validate him, he would be much more impressed if she were intelligent and independent enough to challenge him.

During the Black Arts Movement, they wanted to recreate black masculinity, nothing should threaten the strength of a black man and the black community should support his masculinity. Because he had been so emasculated by the white man, his masculinity should now be protected. However, contemporary artists expanded and evolved upon this idea to show that black masculinity must not be fragile, but it must be strong on its own. If a black man requires submission then he is not strong enough and his actions will lead to destruction. Black masculinity cannot be afraid of being challenged or threatened by black women. A black man is truly masculine when he can stand up to obstacles and challenges and overcome then and become more enlightened. The Black Arts Movement helped to re-create the black man as strong and masculine because of this, the black man is now strong enough to withstand criticism of other aspects of his life.
Help-Mate or Independent Woman

During the Black Arts Movement, the needs of women were often an afterthought due to the importance of black masculinity. The primary function of a black woman was to be submissive and support and help the black man. She was worthy and beautiful once a black man stated this to be true and the voices of black women in art were usually given over to singing the praises of black men. Mance states:

During the earliest years of nationalistic resistance, the primary contribution that the African American woman poet could make toward the deliverance of her people was to depict the defiant, empowered Black male subject…In such poems Black women appear in one of two traditional roles, either homemaker/helpmate or lover, each of which is portrayed to maximize the impact of the Black male subject’s performance of masculinity. (95)

The woman is an accessory to the agenda of the black male because the issue of strength and masculinity was so prevalent in the movement. Furthermore, since the thoughts and opinions of the black male must be valued, black women see their value through the eyes of black men. Mance cites Zubena’s poem “To My Mate (Wherever he may be)” to show the ideas about a woman’s role in the movement.

And he’ll want me
To be
Myself
Hisselld
Or
a lady
a queen
a good mother
a good housekeeper
a good cook
a good thinker
and
HIS GOOD WOMAN (97)

In this poem, the speaker is defining herself solely by the demands of her black man. This need for submission is also seen in Leroi Jones’s play “Madheart,” in this play while the black woman is strong and enlightened, the black man demands submission before he will be with her.

Black man: I want you woman, as a woman. Go down. (He slaps again) Go down, submit, submit…to love..and to man, forever. (584)

The woman asks the man not to hit her telling him that she has waited for him and that she understands his aggression because he was been oppressed for so long. However, he hits her again and when he again demands her to submit, she goes down on her knees and submits to him. The black man is then satisfied and can be with her forever.

Black women are seen as worthy as long as they understand that the needs of the black man must come before their own and are willing to be the help-mate of the black man. While many women authors were writing during the Black Arts Movement, oftentimes, they wrote about the idea of finding a strong black man to which they could submit. While there was some writing about powerful black women, the spotlight of the movement was on the power of the black male and feminism never gained prominent attention.

This representation is at odds with the Black Power/Arts Movements themselves, because women were central figures in both movements advocating strongly for change and revolution. While women such as Audre Lorde, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni were very influential artists in the movement, their work at times could not escape the shadow of promoting black masculinity. Furthermore, in his article, “The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field,” Peniel Joseph argues that women during the Black Power Movement played a pivotal though often overlooked role as iconic figures in the Black Panther Party and at the local grassroots
level. In his book on the Black Arts Movement, James Smethurst argues that while women were influential, they embraced submission as imperative to their roles:

Perhaps the high point of the vision within Black Power was the first CAP convention, where Amina Baraka (Sylvia Robinson), a woman who did not generally hesitate to argue against gross sexism within the movement) approvingly quoted Karenga in the coordinator’s statement to the Social Organization workshop: “As Maulana points out, ‘What makes a woman appealing is femininity and she can’t be feminine without being submissive.’”…In other words, even in this reconstructed Kawaidaist view, the responsibility of black women to transmit both traditional and revolutionary culture, while presupposing a submission to black men in other areas of political and social leadership, allowed women a tremendous latitude within the Black Arts movement. (219)

While women in during this period knew they could affect change, there was also the notion that this would require submission and acceptance of predominantly male dominated atmosphere.

In contemporary literature, submission to men or looking to men for definition is seen as a fault instead of a virtue. While loving and supporting strong black men is important, a woman can only offer such support if she is independent and can see her own self-worth outside of her relationship to men. If a woman does not discover her own identity before she gives a piece of herself to a man, she is doomed to be incomplete and suffer from the outcomes of her ignorance.

In *Push*, the mother’s entire self-worth is defined by her relationship with a man to whom she is completely submissive. She gives Precious’s father anything that he desires even if it means abusing her own daughter, however, in giving him this, she loses some of the worth that he has given her. Her mother shows her imprisonment to this man when she attempts to describe her conflicting feelings about the abuse, “I never wanted him to hurt her. I didn’t want him doing
Anything to her. I wanted my man for myself. Sex me up, not my chile. So you cain’t blame all
that shit happen to Precious on me. I love Carl, I love him. He her daddy, but he was my man!”
(136) She is completely destroyed by this and lashes out at her daughter who she believes has
stolen her husband. She cannot love her daughter because her daughter has stolen the man that
makes her worthy. Because her mother has no identity or self-worth outside of men, she destroys
herself and the world around her.

Precious is seemingly headed down the same road as her mother. She wants to find a
boyfriend that will validate that she is beautiful and worthy. She is very upset that boys don’t
find her attractive and laugh at her and in the beginning she is fixated on fitting the image that
boys will find attractive, “I would be light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by
boyz...Boyz overlook a lot to be wif a white girl or yellow girl, especially if it’s a boy that’s
dark skin wif big lips or nose, he will go APE over yellow girl. So that’s my first fantasy, is get
light.” (114) She believes that if she possessed white ideals of beauty she would be validated, “I
sometimes look in the pink people in the suits eyes, the men from bizness, and they look way
above me, put me out of their eyes. My fahver don’t see me really. If he did he would know I
was like a white girl, a real person, inside.” (26) However, when she begins going to class and
leaves her mother’s home, she begins to find her self-worth. Precious does this in a world that is
void of men. Once she leaves her mother’s house, men play no significant roles in her life and all
of her influences come from other women. Her teacher and role model is a lesbian who is not
being validated by a man and does not submit to a male-dominated society. Precious gains
enlightenment through her experiences with other women and without submitting to anyone,
While Precious would still like to find a man who will love her, she now knows that she is
beautiful without a man and knows that she must look for quality in a man instead of looking for
a man to identify quality in her. The novel leaves Precious still on the path to self-discovery and enlightenment, however, she is clearly headed on the path to great things because she realizes her value all on her own.

In *The Coldest Winter Ever*, both Winter and her mother are defined and confined by their relationships with men and men’s opinions of them. Her mother teaches her that she should always look her best so that she will be enticing to men and behave in a way that men will find appealing. She is taught to use men to her benefit and that she will have succeeded in life when she finds a successful man who finds her attractive. Sister Souljah states that, “Winter’s mom gave her Winter the tradition of women as physical, sexual beings, one-dimensional creatures…this information created a Winter Santiaga who was an emotional, mental, spiritual, and intellectual midget.” (485) When men do not pay attention to her or rebuff her she makes herself feel better by finding another man who is attracted to her.

This obsession with being valuable to men becomes a prison for Winter and her mother and eventually destroys them. In the beginning, both women are primarily defined and validated by their relationships with Santiaga. He loves and spoils them and therefore they are worthy. Not because they are intelligent or enlightened but because he thinks that they are beautiful. Therefore, when Santiaga is taken down, they in turn are ruined because they have no independent selves.

When Santiaga is imprisoned, the mother is at first indignant. She is supportive of her man and gets arrested instead of cooperating in an investigation against her husband. However, when she is released and her home and possessions are ceased and her husband is jailed, she begins to fall apart. She can no longer afford to make herself look beautiful and unique by wearing the most expensive clothes and makeup and when she visits her husband in jail she
discovers that he has a mistress and that she was not worthy enough to satisfy him. This leads to her complete destruction and she becomes a mentally unstable crackhead, prowling the streets of Brooklyn for a fix. Without a man’s validation, she literally cannot function and loses all of her self-worth and self-respect. Sister Souljah highlights Winter’s mother’s incompleteness and regards this as the reason why she remains nameless throughout the novel, “When a woman has not established her own personal identity, she does not deserve to have a name…When a woman meets a man of interest, she should already be somebody. She should not just be a sitting duck or dandelion waiting to be plucked.” (512) Supporting and being submissive to a man is not enough to create a quality black woman and contemporary artists discuss the other dimensions and pitfalls of womanhood.

Winter does not deteriorate as quickly as her mother but her dependence on men eventually leads to her unraveling. She originally counts on her father for value and validation, however, as she gets older she builds her worth on the fact that men are very attracted to her and are willing to appease her. The night that her father goes to jail, she goes out with a boy, Bullet, who praises her beauty and position as the daughter of a drug pin, however, she later discovers that Bullet used their night together to embarrass her father in his neighborhood after her arrest. Bullet shows early on that he does not respect or value but Winter cannot see this as long as he praises her beauty.

Furthermore, when her father is arrested, Winter immediately runs to another man to take care of her. While she has no respect for the man who is housing her, she feels good that he is attracted to her. The man eventually kicks her out, in favor of a girl who is in college and has more depth than Winter. He valued enlightenment more than superficial trappings but she does not get the message. In the end, Winter takes refuge with Bullet who had already disrespected
her, believing that his attraction to her meant that he valued her as a woman. However, Bullet leaves her to take the fall when the police find her in a car with drugs and guns and she is sentenced to prison. In prison, she has no more freedom and no more men to validate her or make her feel important. If she wants to survive, she will have to find self-worth without men, money, or clothes and look to herself for value.

Sister Souljah presents herself as the character who represents the recreated female identity. Souljah has defined herself outside of her relationship with men. While she has male friends and suitors, she does not allow them to compromise her beliefs or values. She will not date a rapper because she knows that his lifestyle would require her to submit to him and she could not compromise herself and not question his behavior. She will not be with Midnight because his lifestyle contradicts her values about drugs in the black community. Souljah is complete without men and does not need them to make her feel worthy or beautiful, however, she still values strong black men. Souljah still respects and admires black men of substance, who have intelligence and strength but she will not submit to them.

While the Black Arts Movement featured women writers, the needs and lives of women were often eclipsed by the need for recreating black masculinity. Women of the period understood the need and submitted to it as a necessary part of the revolution. However, contemporary literature understands the needs of the black man but focus on the needs of the black woman to extract herself from his shadow. Sister Souljah attempts to make black women multi-faceted individuals instead of one-dimensional figures. She believes that literature should explore all aspects of their being in order to document the real black experience. In contemporary literature, women are doomed if they do not define themselves before allowing a man into their lives. In trying to write about the everyday lives of the average black person, writing about the
struggles of the black woman is necessary. It is imperative for a writer to show that both black men and black women need to be strong and independent in order to thrive and support each other. This idea that can see beyond the immediate need of black men is more accessible to the everyday black person because it is more inclusive and speaks to a true experience.

**Conclusion**

The Black Arts Movement was the sister to the Black Power Movement and as such it was necessary for the artist to represent the causes of the movement through art. While they spoke about writing about the true black experience, they wrote about what the movement believed was the black experience and what the movement believed the black experience should be. In a revolutionary, nationalistic state, they wrote art for a very specific purpose and to make black people think a specific way. However, the New Black Aesthetic understands that the black experience is varied and cannot fit one specific mold. Contemporary writers evolve from the ideas of the Black Arts Movement and expand upon it to include ideas that were not addressed during the Movement, when black power and the destruction of white oppression were most prominent and important to the cause. Contemporary African American writers can now address the issues of the streets beyond how urban life is oppressed by white control. They can address how older generations can be helped and uplifted because now radical destruction is not as necessary as rehabilitation. Writers can speak about the black male as more than a strong, radical but a man of humility and respect and his relationship to the black female not only as a help-mate but an independent being who adds to the black community because she herself is a strong, enlightened individual equal and not submissive to men.
In his essay, “The New Black Aesthetic, Trey Ellis argues that because our predecessors have earned our freedom and cemented the beauty of the black experience, contemporary artists are now free to highlight all elements of the black experience. He states, “Either way they are letting other people define their identity. Today, there are enough young blacks torn between the two worlds that we can finally go out and create our own. The New Black Aesthetic says you just have to be natural, you don’t necessarily have to wear one (the “Natural” was another name for an Afro.)” (240) He believes that the black experience is multi-faceted and because the black experience has been defined and defended, now all its dimensions can be discussed and embraced. Mance also recognizes this shift:

More and more, the routine association of African American studies with the explication of inter-ethnic difference is giving way to a broader conception of the field that sees it less as a space for the documentation and study of Black difference (from the white norm), and more as a site for the exploration and celebration of the varied and distinct experiences and identities that coexist within Blackness. “Because the Black Arts Movement cemented and validated the blackness of the black experience, contemporary writers can focus on the rest of the identity of the black individual. (90)

These expanded, multi-dimensional ideas represent the true multi-faceted black experience and therefore are more accessible and identifiable to the black audience. Not only is it more accessible to the black audience but to all audiences that can relate to the multi-dimensional characters whose blackness is already established and can now work on the rest of their identities. People of all races can relate to the characters in Push and The Coldest Winter Ever and so these works can achieve the ultimate goal of the Black Arts Movement.
The Coldest Winter Ever, became a New York Times bestseller even though it originated in a small press because audiences understood and connected with the message. The book, Push, was made into a critically acclaimed motion picture which was embraced by international audiences of all races. It was nominated for many awards which already created change by showing large, dark-skinned women being praised for their work in the arts. Sapphire did not conform to mainstream audience expectations to garner these accolades but because of the authenticity of her work she was able to affect people’s consciousness. These artists can carry out the goals of the Black Arts Movement and affect large-scale change in their community by enlightening their audiences through the arts.


