
CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE LITERARY CANON

By Amiri Baraka

The reactionary trend of the 1950s which produced McCarthyism and the Hollywood and academic purges, the Korean War, and Eisenhower was reflected in American literature by its domination by a punishingly dry, highly mannered magazine verse equipped with hot and cold running Latin and Greek phrases mit footnotes and the emotional significance of a *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

This kind of literature was trumpeted and proselytized by the so-called New Criticism, which sought to remove all social relationship from poetry, from literature generally, making it a completely solipsistic and elitist artifact that jingled stiffly about its not not self.

As it turned out the New Critics were hardly that. Their leaders like Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren were identified with the Southern Agrarian Movement. (Allen Tate's book *Reactionary Essays* says most of it!) The Southern Agrarians preached a national chauvinist and metaphysical sentimentalization of the Chattel Slave Empire, claiming that industrialization was destroying the South, and a culture that ranked with the Greek Attic.

But the raised level of U.S. productive forces after WWII and the Korean War expanded advanced industrial labor and educational access to a much broader segment of the U.S. population, particularly to the second-generation immigrants and new generations of blacks. There were ideas set in motion that disrupted the basic disposition of class forces in post-Korean War U.S., that challenged the basic social relations of the society, particularly to class privilege in the U.S. and white supremacy, the fundamental social organization of imperialist U.S. society.

On one hand there was the group of largely petty bourgeois white youth who were called the Beat Generation, who claimed to rebel against the complacent mediocre hypocrisy of American life. This middle-class rebellion appeared in literature heralded by Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. The so called Beats, along with other young American poets (e.g., the New York school of Frank O'Hara, Koch, and Ashbery, the Black Mountain poets identified with Charles Olson and Robert Creeley) challenged the polished ready-made academic poetry as lifeless and socially irrelevant. They also challenged the American petty bourgeois lifestyle with their varied versions of mid-twentieth-century American bohemia.

But an even larger and even more sharply anti-imperialist development in the 1950s was the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and the most recent major upsurge in the continuing African American National Democratic Movement, the 1960s Black Liberation Movement, from the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools "with all deliberate speed" which apparently is extremely slow. (But that's

just 35 years ago!) The movement took on momentum with the MLK-led Montgomery bus boycott of 1957, the formation of SCLC and SNCC and the student movement, the sit-ins, freedom rides, countless demonstrations as the MLK-led “nonviolent” civil rights phase peaked by 1963 and the March on Washington and Malcolm X emerged as the new maximum leader of the movement, ushering in a more militant period, with Stokeley Carmichael, Rap Brown, Huey Newton, the Black Panthers, “US,” RNA, and CAP rising to make revolutionary challenges to imperialism and white supremacy.

The largely white antiwar movement that rose at the same time took shape as part of the general resistance to Vietnam era U.S. imperialism but influenced in great part by the African-American movement.

Any period of sharp social upsurge produces a corresponding arts and cultural movement reflecting the social motion in the arts and culture. In the nineteenth century, the antislavery movement gave rise to the slave narratives, a whole genre of powerful American writing revealing the material, ideological, and psychological basis for continuing U.S. racism.

At the same time a more original (i.e., less imitative of Europe) native U.S. literature arose from other sectors of the society as well. The work of Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, and Twain revealed this development, but such work was attacked or ignored by the still Tory dominated academic and official culture which was, and still is, English and European. The works’ very “Americanness” made them untraditional in form and content. Part of the backwardness of official U.S. culture is its continued domination by Europe, and America never has been Europe.

In the early twentieth century, as whole cities of African-American people moved from the south to north and were transformed from rural dwellers to urban, from farmers to industrial workers, an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist movement came into sharp relief throughout the world, particularly throughout the black world. The frenzied industrialization of and preparation for World War I itself raised the level of productive forces so that the newly developed world girdling form of capitalism, imperialism, also gave rise to ideas in its superstructure advanced enough to counter it.

Du Bois founded the Niagra Movement (1907) and the Pan Africanist Movement (1901). One was the first major integrated domestic organization of the twentieth century to fight for democracy and equality for the African-American people. The other was the beginning of the effort to unite African peoples worldwide to resist their common enemy, imperialism, in the form of colonialism and white supremacy.

The African-American people had been betrayed by the U.S. government and the destruction of Reconstruction after the Civil War. Instead of reaping the fruits of emancipation (1863) called for by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth Amendments and forty acres and a mule, black people had been reattacked by the newly formed Ku Klux Klan and gradually forced back into a neo-slavery, disenfranchised and legally segregated by the end of the nineteenth century. The so-called Black Codes imposed on the black population in the South instead of full U.S. citizenship proved to be the model for Hitler’s racial laws. This is understandable since fascism is fundamentally about slave labor. But under fascism even white people can be slaves!

The black arts and cultural movement in this early part of the twentieth century was

called the Harlem Renaissance, but of course it was not limited to Harlem. Harlem had become the largest black city in the world. And that was where the unifying force of the newly rejuvenated black thrust for democracy, in its domestic and international forms, was focused.

This literary, arts, and cultural movement produced great writers like James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay (not to mention Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Aaron Douglass, among so many others). It was an art that reflected the social movement of the Pan African peoples as it expressed itself through every aspect of their lives.

Hughes Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain was even a formal challenge to the social and aesthetic values of the segregated white supremacist U.S. and called for an attention by black artists to the lives and culture of the black masses as the inspirational muse that would create a great African-American Art.

The more genuine American theater that O'Neill helped create during the same period saw black characters on the stage in something approaching realism for the first time, as well as an American working class. In fact the so-called age of Modernism, one general reaction to the breakdown of the nineteenth-century formalism, metaphysics, and idealism of the Western world, its passage from competitive capitalism to monopoly, cannot be fully explained by telling us about the O'Neills, Steins, Pounds, Eliots, WCW's, Stravinskys, Picassos unless we also hear about the Harlem Renaissance and with that the Negritude, Negrismo, Indigisme movements in Europe, West Indies, Africa, and Latin America which it catalyzed.

The outbreak of the 1960s, the third major political upsurge by the African-American people in a history of continued struggle for equality and self-determination, also gave rise to an arts and cultural movement. The Black Arts Movement and, with that the Black Theater Movement, wanted to create a poetry, a literature, which directly reflected the civil rights and black liberation movements. We wanted an art that was recognizably African-American (like Duke Ellington or Billie Holiday or Charlie Parker) that was mass-oriented, a poetry for instance that could come out of the libraries into the streets where the people were. Not a poetry whose very profundity was measured by who it didn't reach, by who it was not relevant to. A poetry that was direct, understandable, moving, and political. And lastly an art that was revolutionary, poetry that would help transform society, not merely lament or mystify the status quo.

People like Larry Neal, Askia Toure, Henry Dumas, Amus Mor, Carolyn Rogers, Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez, and Leroi Jones emerged along with thousands of others to raise a black art that was a continuation of the social uprising that fought to change society itself, as well as writers like James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry whose great writings began just before this period, and in some ways even set the tone for it.

The challenge to society brought with it a challenge to the philosophical, aesthetic, and institutional superstructure of the society as well, since it is not just the material base of the society that is imperialist but the ideas reflected in its superstructure as well.

The idea of Black Art was to challenge the "whiteness" of art as posited by a white

supremacist society, as if somehow the society could be a slave society but the art not reflect that slave-owning and slave-being mentality.

The literary canon, for instance, that accreted self-aggrandizement and solipsistic conquerors' mentality that is referenced as the greatness and profundity of so-called Western Art, Western Philosophy, is simply that, a body of materials whose content supposedly is the aspired revelation and evolution of humankind, but is in reality nothing but a justification (not very convincing) for imperialism. When Bloom and the other mothers accuse anti-imperialist thinkers of relativism in opposition to his colonial absolutism he is correct but unenlightened.

The attempt to re-establish the power of the actually nineteenth-century imperialist retake on so-called classic Western values and their fragile but sweaty kitbag of "masterpieces" is part of the normative reaction to any progressive or revolutionary social period. That is, like the Sisyphus myth, the rock is pushed up the hill, but then it is rolled partially back down again.

After the 1960s attack on the social and aesthetic values of U.S. imperialism, the late 1970s saw reaction rising by the time of Jimmy Carter, with both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King shot to death, and both Kennedys shot to death, equally mysteriously. The 1960s had raised the questions of the multicultural and multinational character of society and had challenged the white supremacist origins of the so-called literary and artistic canon.

In education Black Studies was set up in many schools, though it has yet to reach the high school and elementary school level and is still shaky even on the university level. To show you how deeply and profoundly cultural revolution is necessary to continue any political advantage the insurgents make, understand the falsity of an English Department when this has never been England, and the strength of the English Departments in contrast to American Studies or Black Studies. After the U.S. Revolutionary War, the Tories continued their hold on the superstructure until this day. We still have a colonial relationship with England in our arts and culture. Broadway, for instance, is still the home of old British playwagons.

The social thrust of democracy and anti-imperialism carried with it ideas that attacked the Eurocentric bourgeois nature of American education and official arts and pushed for a multinational and multicultural American culture and art expression that reflected reality. Just as the society was attacked as an oppressive exploitative one, so the literature, the art, was attacked as merely reflecting that exploitation, and being equally exploitative.

Mao Zedong's prescription for Cultural Revolution was as a continuing political struggle in the sphere of arts and culture to maintain the dominance of the working class and revolutionary ideas in the superstructure. Mao said further that if the Chinese Communist Party could not mount and maintain such a cultural revolution then the party would "change colors" and become a bourgeois party, even a fascist party. We can see from events at Tiananman Square the tragic accuracy of Mao's teaching.

In the U.S. since the revolutionary trends of the 1960s there has been a distinct counterrevolutionary and reactionary trend. On one hand assassinations, jailings, and exiles disrupted a great part of the movement, both black and white, according to the Cointelpro documents and papers received through the Freedom of Information Act.

This meant that not only were the basic gains of the progressive period called into question as surely as the Baake decision called into question affirmative action, but as the Carter years gave way to the Reagan years many of the things we had struggled for in the 1960s were openly agitated against. Witness, for instance, how the term "Liberal" by the late 1980s had become almost akin to how "Communist" was used in the 1950s. Opposition to Affirmative Action was made vague by opposing "quotas" instead, but the effect was the same.

By the same measure calls for a restoration of the Eurocentric and white supremacist so-called Greco-Roman, Judaeo-Christian standard of philosophical and aesthetic measure are really calls for a restoration of the social norms of the pre-rebellion 1950s. For instance the way subjects are understood and classified and taught in the university confirms the segregation and white supremacy of the foulest aspect of the material base.

Historical periods of American literature are routinely taught in a divided nationally segregated fashion. Twentieth-century American literature is taught that does not connect Euro-American Modernism with the Harlem Renaissance, or the Beat Generation with the Black Arts Movement. The nineteenth-century literature removes Fred Douglass, Moses Roper, William Welles Brown, Nat Turner, Linda Brent, etc. from the literature, and any aspect of the slaves' life is made sociological. But to quote Bruce Franklin, "African-American culture is not peripheral to American culture, but at its heart." So that by ascribing some metaphysical racial greatness to the role of works corresponding to the bourgeois American canon not only is the history of the world distorted for oppression's sake but the very psychological development of the American people, certainly its *soi disant* intellectuals on these campuses.

For one thing the African people had a different aesthetic basis before our transportation to the New World. It was based on the animist philosophy which sees everything in existence as "living" but to different degrees, an aesthetic whose ancient religion was characterized by priest and congregation in a call and response relationship, in which the spirit that was to be sought could only be brought into proximity by music, and whose highest aspiration was to become possessed by that *alless* spirit.

These multiregistrations of being were reflected by the polyrhythms of the music (speech and thought) and by the polychromatic registration of bright color. Art was always preeminently social, for all from all, a part of the very development of the total society.

The separateness of art from mass concern, the emphasis on the Apollonian attributes of form and restraint, the enslavement of women by the rising philosophy and society of the northern cradle of Greece and co., the ultimate separation of thought from emotion as Nietzsche testified to in his *Birth of Tragedy* (Hamlet's disease of liberalism) are all social, philosophical, and aesthetic verifications of the culture manifest above the Mediterranean, after the ancient African-derived cultures were put in check politically and ultimately dominated. Women still carrying on the Dionysian ecstatic culture of the southern culture cradle were lynched by the Apollonian demagogues up into our own society at Salem witch burnings.

In addition to the traditional and historically developed differences of the African aesthetic, certainly the role of slave in relationship to slavemaster creates even larger

distances of social and class perspective that must inform any black aesthetic. To impose the Apollonian, the formal, the academic above the creative, the womb man ness of art, is part of imperialism's continuing work which seeks not content but only form, not ecstasy but memoranda, and chauvinism and narrowness instead of the cosmopolitan, and the spontaneous or improvised, is imperialist superstructural work.

This is why the cultural revolution is so important today. We are in the midst of a deep reactionary period when revolution is once again held up as fantastic and only cynicism and betrayal and upholding the status quo qualify as realism. In the 1960s indeed, "Revolution Is the Main Trend in the World Today," that's what we used to say. "Countries want Independence, Nations want Liberation, People want Revolution." But that is when the principal contradiction in the world was Imperialism vs. the People and Nations. But soon after, the contradiction of Imperialism vs. Imperialism, which is the trend that leads to imperialist war, became principal, and the revolutionary movements were turned around by rising fascism.

We are at a crossroads in that struggle today. The attempt to restore the so-called literary canon to make political prisoners of world art and culture in the name of some self-aggrandizing superculture with neither origins nor relationship to the rest of the world is simply white supremacy returned. You cannot speak of Greek culture without relating it to the whole of the ancient world from which it sprang and which it continues to reflect.

In the Channel 13 bit of Goebbelsmania called *The Art of the Western World*, a statement was made that "Creativity began in Greece." Naturally I wrote letters to them and a number of other folks challenging this mindless protofascism. A white rock critic for the Star Ledger told me "Creativity did begin in Greece . . . for the Europeans." Any way you take this it's gas chamber logic, but then this was Boy speaking not Tarzan.

There is no life or culture, no art or philosophy separated from the whole expression of human life and being on the planet. It is the separation that is the first strand of barbed wire for the fences at Auschwitz, the more modern versions of southern plantations.

For those of us in the arts or the universities, those of us involved with the institutions and ideas of the U.S. superstructure, we must see that the only positive direction we can go, that is the direction of life supported over death, is cultural revolution. We must oppose the reinstatement of the racist canon, like we resist Part 25 of *Friday the 13th* or *Rambo 11*.

For instance, we must join forces to socialize the university and all institutions that affect our lives. By socialize I mean to make the university deal with real life and the actual society in which it stands. If the university is the repository for higher learning, advanced philosophy, and innovative technology, why are the cities in which they stand so bereft of these resources? There is no other way to measure ideas' usefulness except in the crucible of real life.

The university professor is never made to measure his ideas in relationship to the real world, in relation to how much change (i.e., human advance) or how close to reality the world measures those ideas to be, but is valorized only by the abstract and frankly elitist interacademic dialogue. We publish for each other or to get tenure, we

create and do research for the same reasons. While the great challenge, real life, real society, stands ailing and ill because our resources have been removed.

Why poor education, unemployment, no housing, drug panics in these cities and communities of our world if the universities are full of so many self-proclaimed geniuses and mountains of ominously profound conclusions? The university must be made to relate to these cities, to establish partnerships in developing real life to higher and higher levels of understanding and sophistication, not stand aside and praise itself for being so clean and so heavy and so outside everything, as is mostly now the case.

The cultural revolution at the university must see Black Studies, Latino Studies, Woman and Labor Studies as the missing links of progressive education and preparation for a new and more humanized world society. Ignorance and lack of education must be made extinct. It is dangerous to the whole world for uneducated masses to exist. The extent to which we raise the world educational level is the extent to which we raise our own consciousness and the level of human life on the planet.

Such studies must also be extended to the high schools and elementary schools, and used in psychological tests for public employees to make sure none of them suffers from the vicious illness of racism and male chauvinism or some other fascist malady which we will lament once we see another black youth stretched out on the ground with a bullet in his head, not for playing his radio too loud, but for being black or Latino, or raped, not for playing her radio too loud, but for being a woman.

Another critical aspect of Cultural Revolution is that we must support the presence of art and artists in the educational process from elementary through university. Art is the main force against Arent. It is the creative aspect of being through which it is maintained. The development and destiny of humanity is contained more directly in essence in its art than any other dimension. The very devaluing of art is evident throughout society. There is no university without art. Art is the social life of humanity, its philosophical expression the ideological reflection of human life. To devalue it is to devalue creativity. Talk about creativity to the big money guys, and its, ha ha, a joke, you know. Yet their big money comes from the control of people and society the control of their art, from the most basic art, the creation of society itself, to the articles of its expression. Whether clothes, furniture, music, food, houses, it is all art. Let us be clear it is not academic life that is principal but creative life, the question of human development and evolution. The critical, the academic, are secondary aspects, absolutely necessary, but not to be confused with the making of what is, the continuing of life in opposition to death.