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The Black Arts Movement

The literary period referred to as “Black Arts” occurs from about 1965 to 1975, at what is generally considered a transition point between the civil rights movement and the post-civil rights era. Its major players include the thinkers who shaped its aesthetics – Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, Addison Gayle Jr., and Larry Neal; publishers Hoyt Fuller (*Negro Digest*), Haki Madhubuti/Don Lee (Third World Press), Dudley Randall (Broadside Press); and writers Ed Bullins, Lucille Clifton, Jayne Cortez, Henry Dumas, Etheridge Knight, Audre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez. This nationwide surge in African American artistic productivity that became known as the “Black Arts Movement” gets started shortly after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 – which prohibited federal discrimination based on race, color, sex, creed, or nation of origin – and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – which outlawed discriminatory voting practices. These documents marked a seeming victory for civil rights activism and suggested the possibility of a shift in African Americans’ real and imagined relationship to the nation-state. Accordingly, the legislation had an undeniable impact on the world of African American cultural production.

This chapter examines the Black Arts Movement in the context of the shifting discourse of civil rights, and it positions the social reaction to legislative advances as crucial to understanding Black Arts aesthetic frameworks and institution building. The first section demonstrates how the concerted effort to move away from a rhetorical emphasis on reform toward one on revolution becomes a defining characteristic of Black Arts logics. The next section attends to the social history of the moment in examining how the perceived urgency of breaking away from traditional means of social change results in an ideological focus on metaphorical black nation building, meaning new forms of collective consciousness raising and social and political organizing. The final section offers a reading of a specific Black Arts text, Barry Beckham’s 1972 novel *Runner Mack*, showing how Beckham uses disappointment with African American social and civic access – especially

in regard to employment opportunities – as the framework for imagining revolution. This analysis suggests the ways in which artwork from the Black Arts period can function as a crucial lens for assessing civil rights legislation and its perceived social impact.

From Reform to Revolution

The Civil Rights Act sought to secure citizens access to the full social realm. Its provisions included banning voter registration requirements, prohibiting denial of access in public facilities, encouraging the desegregation of public schools, and prohibiting employment discrimination. It was an omnibus piece of legislation that attempted to bring together and strengthen earlier legislative attempts at disrupting social inequality, specifically the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960. Although the 1964 iteration and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 promised social change for African Americans in particular, this legislation was met with continued injustice and violence against black bodies.¹ Activists found that local governments failed to enforce the Voting Rights Act and that neither the Civil Rights Act nor the Voting Rights Act did much to impede the social abuse of black American citizens, as the 1966 shooting of James Meredith in Mississippi illustrated.² In addition, the 1965 social uprising that occurred in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, California, stands as a testament not only to police mistreatment but also to the inevitable outcome of the stifling practices of segregation in U.S. society and the ongoing neglect and constriction of inner-city communities in the face of so-called legislative advances.³ These social conditions led to the rise of black activist nationalist groups such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, whose members strove to protect and improve the conditions of their communities. Although achievements were met with setbacks, such hindrances spurred activism and radicalism. Accordingly, in the sociopolitical landscape, excitement was necessarily mixed with disappointment and happiness with frustration. This social situation provides the exact context for the emergence of the Black Arts Movement.

The periodical *Negro Digest* is a crucial resource for coming to terms with these circumstances because it reveals the relationship between civil rights discourse and the developing Black Arts Movement. The Johnson Publishing Company originally printed the magazine in 1942, and it ran until 1951. In 1961, Hoyt Fuller, a former newspaper journalist who had worked as the associate editor of the magazine *Ebony* until 1957, became the managing editor of the revived *Negro Digest*. Under Fuller's editorial leadership, the reconfigured periodical extensively explored the social and

political situation of Black Americans in the United States.⁴ For example, the opening article for the November 1961 issue concerns how the centennial of the Civil War reveals social attitudes about the struggles for civil rights. In 1966, in the wake of the civil rights legislations, the December issue is dedicated to the question "Black Power and the Civil Rights Crisis." The framing language of "crisis" indicates the rising sentiment that the promise of civil rights had still not been realized after the landmark 1964 act. The periodical was a platform for developing critical frameworks for talking about African American political and social situations. Importantly, Fuller also sought to make the magazine a prominent forum for the discussion of aesthetics and African American literature generally and the Black Arts Movement specifically. As the January 1968 issue illustrates, there are staged symposia with artists talking about questions of artistic value and the shifting terrain of aesthetics. Moreover, Fuller produces annual issues dedicated to poetry, fiction, and drama and solicits essays on aesthetics that appear year round.

Issues of the *Negro Digest* demonstrate not only a textual nexus between civil rights social critique and Black Arts artistic analysis, but they also reveal how theorizing during the Black Arts period can be understood as developing, in part, as a response to the civil rights predicament. One finds that creative writers were using the magazine as a forum for analyzing the social dilemmas of the 1960s. In a 1964 article entitled "What Does Non-Violence Mean?" LeRoi Jones insists, "In order for the Negro to achieve what I will call an 'equality of means,' that is, at birth to be able to benefit by everything of value in the society, of course, the society would have to change almost completely."⁵ His point is that actual social equality would require a restructuring of the U.S. social realm, which goes beyond the ostensibly symbolic changes promised by further civil rights legislation. He goes on to say: "The point is, I think that the poor black realizes, at least instinctively, that no matter what deal goes down [in terms of civil rights legislation], i.e., no matter whose side [wins out] the 'Crackers' or the government, no help at all is being offered to him."⁶ Fiction writer and regular contributor Anita Cornwell echoes this sentiment in 1965: "Voting-Rights Bill or no, many suns will set before the majority of all eligible Negroes are registered and voting in the South, and long before that comes to pass they will have learned what the northern Negro has always known – voting won't get you in there either.... *We shall overcome is merely a dream*" (4; emphasis in original).⁷ Cornwell does not believe that pieces of legislation will necessarily do much to change the social situation of African Americans because a widespread investment in social inequality and racism will still exist at every level of U.S. society.

There is an older, larger problem that new legislation alone will do little to resolve. Cornwell's final comments reveal more than a suspicion of the possibility of legislation effecting change. She contends that "overcoming," or achieving social equality, is a wishful fantasy – no more than a fiction – thereby strategically undermining rhetoric that came to characterize civil rights movement activism up to that point. These essays (alongside many others) signal the shift in rhetoric from reform to revolution that would help to inspire the activism of the Black Power Movement and, importantly, the artistic projects of the Black Arts Movement.

In fact, the idea of reconfiguring the social realm as a whole is a central component of Black Aesthetic theorizations. A specific frustration with the social realm is the impetus for the formulation of aesthetic principles during the period of the Black Arts Movement. In his 1968 essay "Towards a Black Aesthetic," Hoyt Fuller writes, "The revolt is as palpable in letters as it is in the street.... Just as black intellectuals have rejected the NAACP, on the one hand, and the two major political parties, on the other, and gone off in search of new and more effective means and methods of seizing power, so revolutionary black writers have turned their backs on the old 'certainties' and struck out in new, if uncharted, directions."⁸ Fuller recognizes a growing dissatisfaction with the familiar means of social change and connects (arguably even analogizes) this abandoning to the artistic critique and rejection of the "certainties" about cultural production that have led to a search for new ideas and methodologies. This linkage of the analysis of African Americans' civic situation to calls for new aesthetic practices subtends other critical discussions from the period. Addison Gayle's concept of the "cultural strangulation" of African American literature is a metaphor derived from an assessment of black Americans' civic confinement.⁹ Larry Neal's insistence on a "radical reordering" of aesthetic describes an artistic strategy meant to parallel a radical reordering of the social realm beyond the reach of recent civil rights legislation. This idea is in line with Carolyn Gerald's insistence that the art of the 1960s was focused on "deliberate desecration and smashing of idols, the turning inside-out of symbols."¹⁰ In other words, the descriptions of the artistic projects that populate the Black Arts period highlight an investment in reconstituting aesthetic practices and values. Accordingly, one can understand the formulation of a Black Aesthetic and the principles that the Black Arts Movement devised as artistic articulations of dissatisfaction and disappointments with the social sphere in terms of civil rights advancements. The recurring critique of dominant aesthetic values and methodologies act as civil rights complaints. The inadequacies of the U.S. civil rights situation for black Americans became the basis for imagining new aesthetic possibilities.¹¹

Nation Building and the Modern Black Public Sphere

The social disappointment results in a turn to nationalist strategies, particularly the development of new black-controlled and black-operated organizations in the social and artistic realms. As opposed to evoking an unyielding confidence in the nation or a simple desire for an autonomous black state, nationalism – as advocated by black writers and activists at this historical moment – concerns primarily the possibility of black solidarity and the desire to redefine contemporary black identity and relationships.¹² Within nationalist frameworks, one finds thinkers fashioning both social and private identities in radical ways. In fact, Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) and Charles Johnson make it abundantly clear that the nationalist “black power” about which they write references the ability to (re)define oneself and the sociopolitical world one inhabits.¹³ Reflecting a similar impulse, the primary goals of Ron Karenga’s US organization (founded 1965) and the *Kawaida* movement were to cultivate African American cultural traditions and to shift black American consciousness from European models to African (or African-derived) ones.¹⁴ Moreover, the speech “The Ballot or the Bullet” that Malcolm X delivered in Detroit, Michigan, in 1964 emphasizes the necessity of nationalism; he believed it could lead to the development of a “new political consciousness” and a social and personal reorientation of black Americans in the context of unending prejudice.¹⁵ These examples demonstrate how the social, political, and cultural methods for addressing the desire for group redefinition and collective action in the face of injustice are all imagined as fitting under the rubric of nationalism.

The intensified investment in ideologies of nationalism that defined this moment encouraged the formation of black ideological and institutional spaces concerned with aesthetics. Cultural critic James Smethurst provides a detailed account of the development of such institutions throughout the United States in his social history *The Black Arts Movement*, which works to link together geographically distinct methods of organizing and artistic production. In 1965, LeRoi Jones announced the creation of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) in Harlem. Through this organization, Jones attempted to use creative expression to radicalize the poor of Harlem. Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam helped to establish the important southern poetry and theater collective BLKARTSOUTH in 1968 in New Orleans; this community-oriented organization focused on developing a regional consciousness and supporting local artists alongside doing political work.¹⁶ Don L. Lee (later Haki Madhubuti), Johari Amini, and Carolyn Rogers founded the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in Chicago, in 1967, which was to become one of the longest surviving Black

Arts cultural organizations.¹⁷ This period also witnessed the rise and development of black-owned and black-operated publishing houses and journals. In 1965, Dudley Randall founded Broadside Press in Detroit, and inspired, in part, by Randall's achievement, Lee, Amini, and Rodgers also began Third World Press in 1967 in Chicago. The Bay area *Journal of Black Poetry*, created in 1966 by editor Dingane Joe Goncalves, featured the work of young writers and became an important outlet for commenting on the national political scene. These organizations, and many others like them, represent an explicit fusion of cultural production and radical politics.

In part, what I am outlining here is the development of a modern black public sphere as a result of the post-civil rights sociopolitical environment. In his revision and critique of the concept of the public sphere as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, Houston Baker explains the concept of a black public sphere as a "new aesthetic consciousness" that has less to do with the exchange of arguments "in a realm between the family and the market" and more with "structurally and affectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeoisie public sphere into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning."¹⁸ This new consciousness that involves finding radical methods of expression and empowerment describes succinctly the Black Arts Movement as a response to civil rights frustrations. In fact, the Black Arts Movement, as a social phenomenon, symbolizes one of the best instances of the historical attempts at a black public sphere.

Again, this flourishing of organizations and institutions is fed by a renewed investment in the political ideology of black nationalism. This ideological framework is key to coming to terms with the modern black public sphere because of the rhetorical emphasis on nation building.¹⁹ The active development of black organizations and the attempts to theorize aesthetic strategies sensitive to the lived experiences of African Americans represent metaphorical nation-building projects to protect the lives and foster the talents of a group of people who feel particularly disaffected by the ideologies and practices of their country. In the context of African Americans' reactions to and critiques of civil rights legislation and ongoing discrimination, the notion of the black public sphere becomes legible as a cultural and political necessity and as an extension of such nation building through the social imaginary. Accordingly, through the Black Arts Movement, as the cultural expression of this perceived need, one can track the movement from reaction against ineffectual legislative reform directly to innovations in and transformation of the world of cultural production.

Unfortunately, many of the collectives and projects that emerge during the Black Arts Movement do not last long in their original manifestations, and the movement itself is most often defined as being only about a decade in

duration. It is difficult to pinpoint the "how" and "why" of the conclusion of this cultural movement and the endeavors that developed in and around it. It is more productive to think of this "conclusion" in terms of a transfer and transformation of energies as opposed to an absolute end. It is important to note that the social context for this shift is the rising conservatism in the early 1970s U.S. social world, particularly in regard to civil rights issues – marked by Richard Nixon's rise to power. Though allegedly a supporter of "black power" in the form of "black capitalism," Nixon criticized women on welfare, blamed the poor for their own poverty, and suggested nefarious links between the social movements of the 1960s and criminality and drug addiction. The overwhelming white support of Nixon represented a backlash from individuals who feared the spread of the social unrest in urban spaces and who felt that blacks were excessively benefiting from government aid. In addition, Nixon's conservative victory closely followed diligent attempts by the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to dismantle black activist organizations.²⁰ Accordingly, black activists faced new social and political pressures to rein in politically and socially radical sentiment. The 1974 National Black Political Convention's refusal to create an independent political party because of "red-baiting" effectively illustrates the outcome of such pressure.²¹

The eschewing of the realization of an independent black political party parallels and reflects the increasing desire of many activist and radicals to integrate themselves into the existing world of politics – in other words, to attempt reform from within. Martha Biondi and Matthew Countryman both characterize this historical moment by the movement from "protest" to "politics" among civil rights activists.²² The social activism in which many blacks had participated (rallies, picketing, voter registrations, et cetera) ultimately created more opportunities within the U.S. public sphere, especially at the municipal and local government levels. Historian Robin D. G. Kelley explains that African Americans made significant progress in the electoral sphere during this time: "In 1969, 994 black men and 131 black women held public office nationwide; by 1975 the number of black elected officials grew to 2,973 men and 530 women. Black politicians won mayoral races in several major cities, including Los Angeles, Atlanta, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. By 1974, more than two hundred African Americans served as state legislators, and seventeen sat in Congress."²³ Thus, Black Arts period protests and campaigns ultimately altered the social and political terrain even as the movement as such waned.

Parallel to the movement into political offices, black activists and writers also found themselves entering the world of the academy at a much higher rate. Historically one can observe how black radical activism led to the increase of minority enrollment on college campuses and the advent of

Black Studies programs. As Fabio Rojas illustrates, the creation of the Black Studies department at San Francisco State College in 1969 was in part the result of Black Panther Jimmy Garrett (among others) enrolling at the institution to mobilize the black students and uncover the racist structures of the education system.²⁴ Accordingly, the social critique manifested in much of the Panthers' work also extended to the idea of the university and a university education. Some individuals, then, directed their actions wholly to transforming this site of power and educating themselves in the process.²⁵ In addition, Black Arts period writers such as Sonia Sanchez, Askia Touré, June Jordan, and Lucille Clifton took short- and long-term academic positions, transforming the political ideals driving their artistic production into radical pedagogies and revisionist curricula. In effect, colleges and universities began to attract some of the insurgent energy that had fed the revolutionary fervor of the Black Arts moment.

Nonetheless, if one examines the commentaries and social analyses of black public figures in the midst of these radical changes, it becomes readily apparent that there is a general reassessment of the efficacy and desirability of nationalistic frameworks as they had been espoused.²⁶ In other words, nationalist revolutionary discourses actually give rise to discussions of the limits of such thought and its implications. This consideration is a factor in the rise of black women's organizations in particular. The paradigmatic focus on nation building during the period of the Black Arts Movement also yields an abiding concern with investigating gender and sexual identity because of the persistent reliance upon patriarchal and heterosexist conceptions of black identity and collectivity.²⁷ This interest in questions of gender formation in relation to artistic production and activism encouraged the creation and proliferation of organizations and modes of analysis that went beyond the initially stated goals of the period. For instance, the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective each developed as a response to both (1) the widespread desire during the Black Arts moment to transform public conceptions of black gender identity and (2) the blatant racism that many women had experienced in some nationalist and activist organizations.²⁸ In the final analysis the paradigm of nation building helped to set in motion the kinds of social transformations that policy change sought to create.

Black Arts Literature as Civil Rights Literature

This chapter concludes with a consideration of how Black Arts Movement texts can shed light on the intricacies of civil rights as a social phenomenon.

Many texts from the Black Arts period respond to the ongoing dilemmas around African American citizenship and social access. These works include Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones's play *The Slave* (1965), Etheridge Knight's collection *Poems from Prison* (1968), Ed Bullins's play *Goin' a' Buffalo* (1968), Lucille Clifton's poetry collection *Good Times* (1969), Sonia Sanchez's poetry collection *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), Jayne Cortez's poetry collection *Festivals and Funerals* (1971), and Henry Dumas's short fiction collection *Ark of Bones and Other Stories* (1974). Notwithstanding these important works, Barry Beckham's 1972 novel *Runner Mack* links together the major concerns of the Black Arts Movement and offers a particularly compelling assessment of the "civil rights crisis." Positioning this novel prominently in this discussion also makes it possible to consider how fiction writers explored Black Arts exigencies. Poetry and drama were the favored genres during the Black Arts Movement, but this prominence does not mean that fiction writers were not inspired by or involved in the aesthetic explorations that dominated the period. More important, Beckham's novel (1) illustrates a conceptual investment in revolution while casting aspersions on reform impulses and (2) traces a thwarted attempt at nation building.

Runner Mack is a surrealist novel that worries the line between dream and reality; in fact, the narrative content and structure reflect an investment in dreams.²⁹ The plot revolves around the disillusionment of twenty-year-old protagonist Henry Adams, whose one desire is to play baseball. This dream of becoming a professional (that is, salaried) baseball player structures all of protagonist Henry's actions in the narrative. The novel opens with his migrating north from Mississippi with his wife Beatrice to try to get recruited by the Stars' baseball team. Henry has faith that he will get selected to be on the team because of his undeniable talent: "I know I can make it. I can play. I can hit any pitcher they got. I can play better than them all" (38). He later insists to Beatrice, "this is the American pastime, they've got to be fair with me.... They have to judge me on my ability only" (81-82). These comments, which recur throughout the text, demonstrate Henry's belief that the professional world and U.S. society operate as meritocracies. He expects that the social world will be guided by the value of equality and will necessarily reward hard work. His dream of getting drafted onto the Stars team gets interconnected to the fundamental defining characteristics of U.S. democratic ideals.

Unfortunately, Henry's experience with the Stars transforms his dream into a nightmarish perversion of such ideals. After months of not hearing from the Stars' baseball management, Henry finally gets a letter alerting him of a tryout. While having Henry practice catching fly balls, the manager "Stumpy" throws a "hotball" (a ball rigged with electrical circuits) to Henry

that electrocutes him.³⁰ The members of the team laugh at Henry, who has been knocked down by the shocking pain. The narrative leads the reader to suspect that Henry's race was the cause of this humiliation because of the way that characters in the novel talk about baseball as a white man's sport: "Don't make no difference no more how good you are ... you still black" (39). The purpose of the tryout has not been to exhibit Henry's skill but rather to make clear his powerlessness. The reader discovers that Stumpy – who is so small that he must be carried around on team members' shoulders – has the ability to decide both Henry's future and his bodily safety. Henry leaves the baseball field with a throbbing hand and still unemployed. Not only does the scene dismiss the idea of U.S. meritocracy as naïve, but it also showcases the seemingly total vulnerability of the black individual in the social world. As much of the early tension in the narrative revolves around Henry getting the chance to perform, the scene ultimately discredits the exact notion of "opportunity." The invitation to try out stands as merely an empty gesture as opposed to a genuine commitment to recognizing talent and reforming a profession that was historically exclusive.

As Wiley Lee Umphlett explains, Beckham's decision to write in the genre of popular sports fiction is significant because this genre has traditionally been racialized and middle-class focused so that black male writers have been largely excluded;³¹ however, baseball as a subject is especially useful because the sport is rife with cultural meanings tied to national mythologies. Beckham purposefully chooses baseball as the vehicle for a metaphor of the desires for access and opportunity because of its specific social linkages to the United States' social imaginary and the country's conception of its social ideals. Cultural critic George Grella argues, "Baseball embodies some of the central preoccupations of the cultural fantasy we like to think of as the American Dream."³² The dream motif allows for the presentation of the protagonist as a hopeful, naïve dreamer, but it also creates the opportunity for Beckham to transform hopeful expectations into nightmarish situations. However, Beckham actually relies on two interconnected metaphors that move from specific to general back to specific. The organized sport of baseball represents the idea of the American Dream, and the allusions to the American Dream of success in the context of the novel signify civil rights conceptions of social progress, access, and especially employment. These conjoined metaphors pivot around the possibilities for securing gainful employment, and at the heart of its narrative, *Runner Mack* is a novel about African American employment and economic stability in the wake of legislative reform.

Henry's inability to find a job materializes a socially constructed alienation from the body politic, which Beckham is at pains to link to collective

lack of access for African American citizens. In a flashback, the reader discovers that Henry's father, a janitor and laborer, expresses interest in claiming social security in order to retire: "I'm retiring. No more cleaning up those bathrooms in the bus station after next year. So I found out from my niece who's smart, got a good job up North – I told you about her – sent me a letter saying I should look into this social security thing. You know they been taking money out of my pay for fifteen years?" (70). Unfortunately, his employers, who are surprised at his agitating "crazy" talk about social security, tell him that they forgot to send in the proper paper work to the government. Despite this "accidental" oversight, they insist that they would be happy to supply him with (menial) work for the rest of his life. In part, this conversation is important because an additional Social Security Act was passed in 1965, the same year as the Voting Rights Act. This act specifically created Medicare and Medicaid, but it also reinvigorated conversations about Social Security in general. However, this expansion of the program could not reach Henry's family. Importantly, it is not only Henry's father who emerges as incapable of benefiting from progressive legislation. Because he is without a baseball contract, Henry must search for work to provide for himself and his wife Beatrice. During an interview for a job at a manufacturing company, his height and weight are noted, and his teeth are checked, as is his penis. These examinations happen before he is offered the job and told that "you can go far – it all depends on you. Plenty of opportunities for our employees" (21). Yet, Henry quickly learns that there are no conceivable chances for promotion or advancement – his supervisor has held the same position for forty years. As most commentators on the novel have pointed out, the interview process itself mimics the protocols of a slave auction. More important, Beckham's reliance on these specific elements that are bookended by the promise of opportunity are a specific attempt to evoke and satirize the rhetoric of equal opportunity in employment that derived from the Civil Rights Act.³³ His father is unable to claim the resources that years of work have accrued, and Henry's experience first undermines the possibility of finding employment then mocks the idea that equality, non-discrimination, or achievement are any part of U.S. employment prospects. In short, the novel's focus on representing employment experiences works to suggest how official shifts in policies might do little to nothing to effect change. The employment situation of the African American characters in this novel becomes a reflection of their civic standing.

From this perspective, Beckham tracks a black disillusionment with the social world, and this idea reaches its fullest expression through the titular character: Runner Mack. This character befriends Henry in the army after the protagonist is unexpectedly drafted following his failed attempts to get

a job. If Henry is the character who believes wholeheartedly – perhaps foolhardily from the perspective of the narrative – in the civil rights narrative of progress, Runner Mack is his foil who refuses to accept this idea as truth and calls for the destruction of society. He is a social radical. In fact, he hatches a carefully crafted plan to blow up the White House, fully expressing his commitment to actual revolutionary action. Throughout the narrative, Henry is often presented as naïve and credulous no matter how curious the events around him or conniving the people. Henry is taken with Runner Mack when he meets him in the army because Mack gives the impression of knowing and understanding the world in ways that have always eluded Henry: “Mack seemed to know things, had things to say, and Henry was sure he could learn something from him” (142). When Henry tells his new friend about the situation with the Stars, Mack immediately insists, “‘Dude, can’t you see they bullshittin you?’” Statements such as this one lead Henry to say, “I’ve been asleep all my life, a slumbering giant. I didn’t know what was wrong with me and you [Mack] came along and named it” (145). Henry’s life had been characterized by an inability to see or read signals carefully; Runner Mack offers Henry an awareness that he had not had before. He gives Henry a gift of knowledge or perception and inspiration to action. In effect, their relationship can be described as a veritable education of Henry Adams. This understanding demonstrates how Beckham is alluding to the historical figure of Henry Adams, the important historian and descendant of two U.S. presidents, actively throughout the narrative.³⁴ Like his namesake, Henry learns that his education thus far has not prepared him for the world he lives in. His faith in the democratic system begins to unravel because of Runner Mack’s lessons in social radicalism.

In terms of the narrative structure, this friendship with Runner Mack stages the conceptual move from reform to revolution, which came to characterize the Black Arts Movement generally. What Runner calls for is revolution in the most absolute terms. This revolutionary destruction is imagined as being the only way to protect the country: “‘We’re takin’ over the muthafuckin’ country, goddammit. We gonna save it before those crazy muthafuckahs drive us all crazy’” (153). Disloyalty, however, prevents the men from realizing their plans. After elements of their scheme are leaked out, Mack tells Henry, “‘anyone is capable of betraying you’” (174). This statement provides the frame for the end of the story. As both men wait in Washington, D.C. for their planned rally to begin so that their revolution can start, they find that (almost) no one shows up for it (203). In discussing the end of his novel in a 1974 interview, Barry Beckham explains, “I meant for the revolution to be taken seriously. In fact, revolution is a serious event in both my novel and [John A.] Williams’s [*The Man Who Cried I Am*, 1968]. What happens, of

course, is that it becomes both funny and sad. When push comes to shove, niggers just don't show up" (39).³⁵ The black community (and its supporters) cannot be depended on to participate in the exact revolutionary actions that would undermine and annihilate racist institutions and a discriminatory culture; in other words, they do not "show up" for each other. It is this realization – that the "niggers" would never appear and participate – that causes Runner Mack to hang himself in the bathroom at the end of the novel. Rather than reading this ending as a critique of revolutionary sentiment or the idea that revolutionary action is impossible, one can read the novel as providing a critique of half-hearted and insincere revolutionary action. The point is not that revolution is a pipe dream; it is real and realizable. That being said, the novel does not posit revolution as a certainty or a guarantee. The ending presents it as a possibility that requires work and collective commitment, which Runner Mack finds that his plan lacks in the end.

Ultimately, Beckham offers in narrative form the question that opens Sonia Sanchez's well-known 1970 poem "blk rhetoric": "who's gonna make all / that beautiful blk / rhetoric / mean something?"³⁶ Throughout the poem, Sanchez foregrounds a skeptical attitude about the widespread engagement of the political pressures for unity, yet the speaker of the poem does not cast aside collective action as an achievable goal. The poem offers a critique of those who devote themselves blindly to rhetoric alone and calls out for involvement and participation to provide substance to the language of revolution just as *Runner Mack* does later. The power of the novel is that it extends the sentiments of the provocative poem by providing a sustained critique of traditional civil rights reforms, thereby calling out for new methods, but it does so without naïvely presenting revolution as always-already achievable. Beckham's work demonstrates how for texts produced during the Black Arts period, revolution is a desperate desire, but it is also a sincere question. The text indicates that simply rejecting civil rights progress as insufficient only functions as a first move. The novel, like Sanchez's poem, also attempts to re-imagine the terms of black collective action vis-à-vis civil rights concerns. In the final analysis, *Runner Mack* provides insights on how the Black Arts Movement functions as a historical, rhetorical, and aesthetic response to legislative and policy change.

NOTES

- 1 The fact that the U.S. government saw fit to pass two more Civil Rights Acts (1968 and 1991) suggests that instruments of discrimination continued relatively unabated.
- 2 Peniel E. Joseph details the social repercussions of the act's passage in *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006). James Meredith was

- shot as he was walking from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi (220 miles), in order to challenge a social system that encouraged white supremacy and racial segregation. He called it his "march against fear." After Meredith was ambushed and shot, Martin Luther King Jr. (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), Floyd McKissick (Congress of Racial Equality), and Stokely Carmichael (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) resumed the march. The event became an important moment in the civil rights movement and radicalized many individuals and groups, especially in the South.
- 3 For an examination of the situation in Watts, California, and the social climate that led to the insurgent course of events, see Gerald Horne, *The Fire this Time* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).
 - 4 See James Smethurst's discussion of Fuller in *The Black Arts Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
 - 5 LeRoi Jones, "What Does Nonviolence Mean?" *Negro Digest* 13.1 (1964): 6.
 - 6 Ibid., 14.
 - 7 See Anita Cornwell, "Why We May Never Overcome," *Negro Digest* 14.9 (1965).
 - 8 See Hoyt Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (Garden City, NJ: Anchor Books, 1971), p. 3.
 - 9 See Addison Gayle Jr., "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," *Negro Digest* 18.9 (1969): 32-39.
 - 10 See Carolyn Gerald, "The Black Writer and His Role," *Negro Digest* 18.3 (1969): 47.
 - 11 Many of the contributions from Addison Gayle's anthology *The Black Aesthetic* – including Gayle's and Gerald's – come directly from the pages of *Negro Digest*, demonstrating the significance of this periodical to the articulation of the black aesthetic.
 - 12 I make this point to clarify this period's call for nationalism as distinct from the black nationalism of the nineteenth century and from other discourses of nationalism that derive from an emphasis on the nation-state to the detriment of either local or transnational concerns. Wilson Jeremiah Moses explains the distinction between early black nationalism and modern black nationalism in *Classical Black Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). Tommie Shelby's recent *We Who Are Dark* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005) provides an assessment of the contemporary significance of nationalist thought among African Americans, and he does so by theorizing nationalism in terms of identification and relationships and not simply commitments to the nation-state.
 - 13 See Stokely Carmichael and Charles Johnson, *Black Power* (1967; New York: Vintage, 1992).
 - 14 For discussions of Ron Karenga and *Kawaida*, see Amiri Baraka, *Kawaida Studies* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972) and William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
 - 15 See George Breitman, ed., *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Essays and Speeches* (New York: Grove Press, 1994).
 - 16 The organization grew out of a workshop of the Free Southern Theatre, which was founded by John O'Neal, Doris Derby, and Gil Moses in Mississippi in 1963.
 - 17 See Carmen Phelp's discussion of OBAC in *Visionary Women Writers* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013).

- 18 See Houston Baker, "Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere," *The Black Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 13. Jürgen Habermas introduced his conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere in *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1962; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). He understands the public sphere as a body of "private" – meaning not necessarily associated with the state – persons gathered together to discuss matters of common interest or "public concern"; this body uses "publicity" to hold the state accountable to society. Reconsiderations and critiques of his concept prove more attractive to thinkers in Ethnic Studies (among many other thinkers) than the original understanding, particularly because this body of "private" persons was made up of propertied white men. Although the concept was supposed to be inclusive, it always excluded certain identities. Nancy Fraser's reconceptualization and expansion of public sphere represents one of the reconsiderations of the concept that has been deployed often. She argues for the existence of "subaltern counterpublics," defined as "discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." Fraser insists that multiple public spheres exist simultaneously and that they rely on discursive measures comparable to those Habermas theorizes to accomplish their goals. See Fraser, "Re-thinking the Public Sphere," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56–80.
- 19 Eddie Glaude Jr. offers a thoughtful analysis of the language of nation in the introductory essay "Black Power Revisited" to his edited volume *Is It Nation Time?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002), pp. 1–21.
- 20 Amiri Baraka discusses COINTELPRO's involvement in the disintegration of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (New York: Freundlich, 1984).
- 21 Harold Cruse would later characterize this publicized act as "a betrayal of the Black militant potential built up during the struggles of the Sixties" (127). See William Jelani Cobb, ed., *The Essential Harold Cruse* (New York: Palgrave 2002).
- 22 See Martha Biondi's *To Stand and Fight* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2003) and Matthew Countryman's *Up South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).
- 23 See Kelley's chapter "Into the Fire" in *To Make Our World Anew*, Volume 2, ed. Robin D. G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), esp. p. 280.
- 24 See Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
- 25 For histories of the Black Studies programs and discussions of the San Francisco State College case in particular, see Nathaniel Norment Jr.'s *The African American Studies Reader* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001); Noliwe Rooks, *White Money, Black Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006); James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*; and Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies*.
- 26 The events at the National Black Political Convention referenced earlier attest to such reconsideration. Amiri Baraka's abandoning of nationalist principles manifests the scrutinizing of this logic in ways that inform much social activism

- and artistic production. Often considered to be one of the chief architects of black arts and the BPO, Baraka underwent a radical shift in his priorities in 1974 when he left nationalism behind to become a disciple of what he called "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong" thought. Baraka's disappointment with newly elected black officials and the political lassitude of the representatives at important conferences and conventions made him feel as if nationalism served the black bourgeoisie and the elite of the white power structure primarily. He saw possibility for social change in the class-conscious ideologies to which he attached himself. More than signaling a drastic reinterpretation of his politics, Baraka's ideological reversal, as it is called, indicates an exploration of nationalism's limits. Jerry Gafio Watts provides a comprehensive discussion of Amiri Baraka and the ideological shifts that define his career in *Amiri Baraka* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
- 27 Madhu Dubey provides an in-depth analysis of how patriarchal and masculinist understandings inform the work of this era in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
 - 28 For discussions of the rise and politics of these two organizations, see Kimberly Springer, *Still Lifting, Still Climbing* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) and Duchess Harris, "From Kennedy Commission to the Combahee Collective: Black Feminist Organizing, 1960-80," in *Sisters in the Struggle*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001).
 - 29 Joe Weixlmann discusses at length the motifs of dreams and nightmares in "The Dream Turned 'Daymare': Barry Beckham's Runner Mack," *MELUS* 8.4 (1981): 93-103.
 - 30 In an interview of Barry Beckham by Sanford Pinsker, a parallel is drawn between this moment of electrocution and the one that happens in the "Battle Royal" scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. See "About Runner Mack," *Black Images* 3 (1974): 35-41.
 - 31 See Wiley Lee Umphlett, "The Black Man as Fictional Athlete," *Modern Fiction Studies* 33.1 (1987): 73-83.
 - 32 George Grella, "Baseball and the American Dream," *The Massachusetts Review* 16.3 (Summer 1975): 268.
 - 33 Phyllis Klotman discusses the parodying of the notion of "equal opportunity" in the novel in *Another Man Gone* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977).
 - 34 Barry Beckham explains that he actively used particular sections of Henry Adams's 1907 autobiography *The Education of Henry Adams* in constructing his narrative.
 - 35 See Sanford Pinsker, "About Runner Mack."
 - 36 See Sonia Sanchez, *We a BaddDDD People* (Detroit, MI: Broadside, 1970), p. 15.