

from Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics
and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*
(Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2011)

INTRODUCTION

Renegade Poetics (Or, Would Black Aesthetics
by An[y] Other Name Be More Innovative?)

Though Maroons, who were unruly Africans, not loose horses or lazy sailors, were called renegades in Spanish, will I turn any blacker if I renege on this deal?
—“DENIGRATION,” HARRYETTE MULLEN

marronerons-nous Depestre marronerons-nous?
(*Shall we turn maroon, Depestre, shall we turn maroon?*)
—“LE VERBE MARRONNER,” AIMÉ CÉSAIRE

To speak of a Black literature, a Black aesthetic, or a Black state, is to engage in racial chauvinism, separatist bias, and Black fantasy.
—“CULTURAL STRANGULATION: BLACK LITERATURE AND
THE WHITE AESTHETIC,” ADDISON GAYLE JR.

IN THIS STUDY, I build a case for redefining black aesthetics to account for nearly a century of efforts by African American poets and critics, beginning just after World War I with the New Negro Renaissance, to name and tackle issues of racial identity and self-determination on the field of poetics. Delineating the contours and consequences of African American poetic innovation in an assortment of historical and cultural moments, I aim to highlight and resituate innovative poetry that has been dismissed, marginalized, and misread: first, in relation to the African American poetic tradition, because its experiments were not “recognizably black”; and, second, in relation to constructions of the avant-garde tradition, because they were.¹

We might begin with an inquiry: what do we mean when we designate as “black” certain behaviors, values, or forms of expression? More particularly, what did the young poets and theorists who created, developed, and associated themselves with the Black Arts Movement (BAM, also called here the Movement) beginning in the mid-1960s mean when they spoke of a black aesthetic? We think we know, even though there

is hardly a “we” we could delimit, regardless of race, whose members would have a common understanding or usage of the term. We defend or disparage or dismiss it, as if we agreed upon what *it* is—as if even the originators and first promoters of the concept of a black aesthetic had come to an agreement about its parameters, its value, its reach.² The central theorists of the BAM also revised their own thinking over time, as the example of poet and scholar Larry Neal reveals, for instance. Renewed attention to his work demonstrates that his thinking on black aesthetics evolved significantly between the years of his early BAM writings, which focused on narrower definitions, and his untimely death in 1981. Carter Mathes, who in 2006 co-organized a two-day conference devoted to re-evaluating Neal’s creative and critical work on black aesthetics, argues that if we examine his whole oeuvre, we find that “Neal went to great lengths to caution against a parochial view of the black aesthetic as a singular arbiter defining the creative and the everyday realms of African-American cultural life.”³

Despite the complex debates about and transformations of the concept of black aesthetics during and immediately following the Movement, at a certain level of generality, a picture—a caricature, in many respects—of a BAM-era black aesthetic has taken shape in which, as frequently happens with caricatures, several of its features are exaggerated and other qualities some of us know to be present are rendered invisible. I refer herein to this caricatured version—this sloppy, slippery, well-circulated notion—as the Black Aesthetic. The capital letters signify the subsequent reification of a particularly rigid construction of black aesthetics that had its fullest, most passionate articulation during the BAM, but that does not at all exhaust the range of ideas BAM theorists raised in their ongoing dialogues concerning the politics of African American art—nor does it wholly encompass the range of work produced by the poets and other artists in that moment. The Black Aesthetic suggests, among other things, a set of characteristics of black art—poetry, in this case—that are said to be derived organically from African and African diasporic cultures and yet, paradoxically, must often be imposed upon African American poets, who would appear to be dangerously close to assimilation into European American culture.⁴ These characteristics, such as an emphasis on and celebration of black music, black speech, black heroes, and black history, should and do determine both the form and content of black poetry—according to this reductive view of BAM theory that I am calling the Black Aesthetic,⁵ commonly associated with militant, revolutionary politics and angry, incisive criticism of white supremacy and racial

oppression.⁶ How ridiculous, or offensive, or limiting it is, we dissenters say, to argue that all African American poets write from—or have a responsibility to write from—this sharply circumscribed location! How all-important, or necessary, or inevitable it is, we defenders say, to understand that African American poets can, do, and should write primarily from this rich and varied cultural heritage, this moral and politically empowering social stance!

What goes missing in the arguments on both poles of the spectrum is the kind of nuance that comes with recalling the historical context in which the concept of a black aesthetic, *per se*, was first expressed. As Neal makes clear immediately in his 1968 essay on the subject, the BAM emerged out of a charged political context in which radicalized young black people insisted on the interconnectedness of culture and politics. His essay begins:

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. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (“Black” 62)

I offer this extended quotation because it provides a relatively concise snapshot of some of the Movement’s key motivations and methodologies. Its call for black nationhood reminds us that, a century after the emancipation of the enslaved and the end of the U.S. Civil War, African Americans still were not fully enfranchised participants in the nation of which they were citizens. Impatient with the pace and degree of the reforms achieved via the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power advocates sought a dramatic and, if possible, immediate restructuring of American society that would result in African Americans obtaining the political and economic power necessary to become a self-determining people. The emphasis on the artist’s role in the political change that Black Power activists sought derives from an analysis of American culture that understands its denigration, demonization, and outright exclusion of black

people and their ways of seeing and being in the world as an effective tool for perpetuating African American disenfranchisement. Rather than seek validation in the art forms of a culture in many ways founded upon the notion that black people are less than human or, at best, decidedly inferior to white people, Black Arts proposed to establish a new set of cultural reference points and standards that centered on "the needs and aspirations" of African Americans.

Neal's analysis assumes what Addison Gayle, in a later essay, asserts explicitly: that aesthetics are not universal, but culturally specific, and as long as black art was being written out of one set of cultural materials and values, but being evaluated in accordance with the touchstones of another culture—especially where the latter culture takes the former to be inferior by definition—black art would be found wanting.⁷ To conceive of "a Black aesthetic," then, was not to indulge in a "separatist . . . Black fantasy," as Gayle suggested BAM's detractors would argue (see the third epigraph to this Introduction), but to recognize and insist upon the validity of an African American culture that encompasses not only the retentions of the African cultures from which the enslaved population was drawn, but also the unique culture that the enslaved developed out of the conditions and imperatives of their lives in the U.S. ("Cultural" 207). Black Arts, by portraying black people and their political situation more accurately, would teach them what they needed to know in order to struggle effectively for collective power. The degree to which this idea of cultural specificity is now widely accepted is one measure of the impact (and analytical efficacy) of the Movement. The democratization of American poetry, the greater formal and thematic diversity of the poetry of the latter half of the twentieth century as compared to the former, is also attributable in part to the dynamic, poetic avant-garde the BAM nurtured, along with other groups of envelope-pushing writers during that era, such as the Beats or the Black Mountain poets, of whom one more regularly reads in accounts of American literary avant-gardes. The final third of Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History*, written and published in the waning of the Movement, and James Smethurst's retrospective literary history, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, provide complementary, indispensable accounts of the scope and impact of the work achieved by BAM poet-activists.

But the Movement's problems cannot be overlooked. Most obviously, there is the problem of the constricting, racially essentialist limitations some BAM theories placed upon what a black aesthetic could encom-

pass. These constrictions, by some accounts, would have African American poets address themselves *only* to black audiences, eschew traditional European forms, and draw solely upon African and African American speech, music, folklore, and history for subject matter. To speak of these boundaries as limitations is not to imply that the "approved" territory is small or impoverished, which is certainly not the case; rather, the impracticability and inherent contradictions of such boundaries for a people whose experience has been bound up in the U.S. and the Western cultural tradition for hundreds of years overwhelms the logic of drawing them in the first place. Thus, these limitations helped open the door to the more or less dismissive treatment of the idea of black aesthetics by the African American scholars who might otherwise have been sympathetic interlocutors, when in subsequent years—and due in part to the work of the Black Power and Black Arts activists—they entered the academy and began to develop and shape the emerging field of African American literature. Further, two additional and closely related problems engendered by the Movement's politics concern the sexism and heterosexism attendant to its (black) nationalist ideology. To the extent that the nationalist agenda typically relies upon gender norms and hierarchies in organizing the ("domestic") nation as a "home" and its people as a "family," it should not be surprising that black nationalism figured the black man as the focal point of racist oppression and the frontline warrior in the fight against racism. But such nationalist imperatives placed black women in the position of having to choose between race and gender as the source of their oppression—as if the two were mutually exclusive.⁸ This false dichotomy operated upon the realm of black aesthetics not only in terms of content—for example, the appropriate portrayal of men and women in poems or the voices women poets could properly adopt—but also in relation to the formal tropes that were designated "black" and made central to the canon, which consistently privileged heterosexual masculinity.⁹

The dust from the Movement's vigorous, nationwide activity had barely settled before retrospective constructions of its scope and aims and assessments of its efficacy and legacy began to be offered. Houston Baker Jr. and Henry Louis Gates Jr., in 1976 and 1979, respectively, published essays that established their critical trajectories in relation to BAM-era black aesthetics and cleared the ground for their widely influential theoretical studies: Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and Gates's *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988). In his essay "On the Criticism of Black American Literature: One View of the Black Aesthetic," Baker

applauds the BAM critics for beginning the work of theorizing African American literature—that is, for seeking to define the “Black aesthetic” or articulate “a theoretical perspective that treats Black American literature as a distinctive body of writings” (113, 114). Gates, by contrast, in “Preface to Blackness: Text and Pretext,” finds little of value in the Movement’s theoretical production (and less in its artistic production), offering as merciless a critique of Jones/Baraka, the poet and theorist, and his poetic and theoretical comrades as Jones had earlier offered of the Harlem Renaissance and mid-century critics and writers. (Gates and Jones equally overstate their cases, it must be said, each to the detriment of his argument.) Gates agrees with Baker, however, that a theory of African American literature is required, one that will privilege the evidence of the text over the political ideology of the moment. Where Baker insists upon the importance of cultural context to the meaning and operation of literary language, a proposition that underwrites his theory of the “blues matrix” (*Blues* 9), Gates calls for a theory in which literary structure and form are foregrounded even as they evidence cultural specificity, which approach frames his conception of the “signifyin(g)” function of the African American “speakerly text” (*Signifying* xxv).

These two theorists, whose work has played a material role in shaping the canon of African American literature that we know today, situated their critiques of BAM-era black aesthetics, as well as, ironically, their own subsequent theories of the centuries-long African American literary tradition, in relation to efforts to define the elusive concept of blackness. Both Baker and Gates, as critics influenced by poststructuralism and postmodernism, reject the racial essentialism that openly shapes (or lurks just beneath the surface of) many BAM-era theories of black aesthetics. Yet their extremely sophisticated and elegant articulations of culturally based, rather than racially based, notions of the characteristics around which African American literature coheres still purport to identify that which is black about these textual structures and, therefore, the texts that employ them. Moreover, for all that they criticize about the construction of race in BAM-era black aesthetics, neither Gates nor Baker moves significantly beyond the problematic masculinization of blackness that those aesthetics incorporate. Thus, their critical approaches necessarily exclude texts by African American writers that are not most productively read through the lens of the blues tradition or the practice of signifying, such that black music and black speech become, once again, the defining rubrics for understanding black literature—not unlike the very BAM theories that Baker and Gates criticize. Further, insofar as Baker’s version

of the blues tradition writes out the women blues singers in favor of the “bluesman” and his guitar, and Gates chooses to ground his theory in signifying, typically a men’s linguistic practice, these approaches also incorporate a masculine bias not unlike that found in BAM theories and no less potent for being implicit rather than overt.

Harryette Mullen identified the problem of these exclusionary constructions of the tradition about ten years ago, with particular reference to the canon-making *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, of which Gates was a primary editor. The problem with a canon shaped fundamentally by theories grounded in oral traditions of black music and black speech, from Mullen’s perspective, is that what she calls “writerly texts”—those that get their primary traction out of their written, visual elements—are marginalized, if not excluded altogether.¹⁰ Mullen’s objection arises out of her concern that a significant portion of the most innovative writing by African Americans falls under that banner of the “writerly text” and that, on this basis, a number of excellent, important writers and challenging, innovative works are inadequately written about or taught. Her generative essay “African Signs and Spirit Writing” not only identifies this problem, but in tracing an alternative to the slave narratives, most of which are authored by men, as a genre in which to ground the African American tradition, she points us toward the line of spiritual conversion narratives, for which the most well-known authors were women.¹¹ Thus, although gender is not an explicit focus of her argument, we are reminded that even seemingly gender-neutral rubrics like “orature” and “writerly texts” may have distinctly gendered implications for our criticism.

Renegade Poetics is my attempt to address these concerns about ways that African American critical traditions have excluded exciting, significant, and innovative writing, specifically with regard to African American poetry. Eschewing racial essentialism, but maintaining a healthy respect for “the integrity of . . . black cultures,” I suggest that the term “black aesthetics,” from which many contemporary critics have distanced themselves, need not be inevitably linked to static understandings of how blackness is inscribed in literary texts.¹² Instead, what is called for is a redefinition of the term, one that makes it descriptive, rather than prescriptive. While Gates and Baker took important steps in this direction, ultimately their theories return to outlining qualities that “black” texts can be expected to have. Certainly, their theories contain no political imperative that African American writers *should* deploy these qualities in their texts, as BAM theories often did; however, one might argue that

these influential conceptions of the tradition suggest—in their effect, if not in their intent—a kind of conditional prescriptive: one's work should have these qualities of "blackness" if one wants the work to be ripe for canonization. That the implications of this prescription seem to weigh more heavily upon women writers is not only important to recognize, but a factor that, as we will see, raises the stakes of this project of redefinition and helps bring them into clearer visibility.

BAM-era black aesthetics—which were in the first instance powerful and empowering expressions of artistic and political agency—and both of its rearticulations (reductively, as the Black Aesthetic, and implicitly, as the unspoken grounding for culturally based theories of black textual forms like Gates's and Baker's) have deeply influenced African American poets and their poetic production. Moreover, they have had similar impact upon the dissemination and reception of African American poetry, insofar as they shape the criteria and values applied to this work by scholars, critics, editors, judges, and publishers, both academic and popular. That is, the core concept of black aesthetics that came out of the Movement has had a much longer and wider scope of influence on African American poetry than we might expect given the close identification of the term with the discrete span of the BAM and later scholars' renunciation of the Black Aesthetic for its essentialism. Thus, poets writing during and since the Movement, up to the present moment, have been directly or indirectly influenced by the explosive aesthetics of such figures as Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Askia Touré, Mari Evans, and others whose work epitomized the defiant, unapologetically political, unabashedly Afrocentric, BAM ethos. Additionally, scholars and critics of African American literature—from the time the field was first gaining recognition within the discipline of English literature through at least the turn of the twenty-first century—have been influenced by BAM-era ideas about black aesthetics. Those ideas inform their conceptions of the canon and the larger tradition, shape editorial decisions, and, along with prevailing directions in the contemporary poetry of these decades, construct readers' expectations for African American poetry.¹³ Moreover, even the way we understand African American works written prior to the Movement has been shaped by the BAM legacy—or by our reactions to it. BAM poets' and critics' assertions of the newness of "the New Black Poetry," for example, have encouraged us to see BAM poetry as a more radical break with previous work in the African American tradition than it often was, hindering our ability to see the "newness" of New Negro Renaissance poetry (and other points of commonality

between these movements). The Movement has had far-ranging implications for the constitution of not just African American poetry, but multiple poetic traditions in their scholarly and general manifestations.

I propose that we think of not "a black aesthetic" or the Black Aesthetic, but of "black aesthetics," plural: a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies that African American writers may use to negotiate gaps or conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing. These strategies might be "recognizably black," as with Langston Hughes's successful experiment in bringing the blues lyric into poetry, or might not seem particularly concerned with issues of race (and, specifically, "blackness") as in the fragmented voice, disjunctive logic, and paratactic lines of Erica Hunt's poems. In any case, the "black" in the conception of "black-aesthetics" I am positing is not meant to describe the characteristics or qualities of the texts, nor does it refer specifically to the (socially constructed) race of the writer. Rather, it describes the subjectivity of the African American writer—that is, the subjectivity produced by the experience of identifying or being interpolated as "black" in the U.S.—actively working out a poetics in the context of a racist society. Black aesthetics are a function of the writing process, are contingent, and must be historicized and contextualized with regard to period and place, and with regard to the various other factors that shape the writer's identity, particularly including gender, sexuality, and class as well.¹⁴

Insofar as I understand black aesthetics to refer to types of engagement rather than specific styles, it is conceptually akin to Nathaniel Mackey's generative notion of "othering" (as opposed to "otherness"): "The privileging of the verb, the movement from noun to verb, linguistically accentuates action among a people whose ability to act is curtailed by racist constraints" (268).¹⁵ Rather than expecting black aesthetics to inhere in any *particular* strategies, tropes, devices, or themes, critics and readers might bring to a text this inquiry: do we find herein the "residual form" of aesthetic choices that have been motivated by the writer's desire to write with, against, around, about, and/or in spite of ideas or issues of race, particularly concerning black identity and cultures?¹⁶ Or, put differently, what evidence is there in the text, if any, of the African American writer's wrangling with competing expectations or desires for whether and how race will function in her work?

Renegade Poetics is interested in those instances when such race-related wrangling has led the poet beyond what experience has shown will do the job and into a space of formal risk-taking and experimentation.

I am compelled by the impulse of some African American poets to coax from the available tools of language something that is felt to have been excluded, repressed, or rendered impossible in previous poetry by constructions of blackness imposed on African Americans, inter- or intraracially. This impulse, across a number of poets' works, accounts for a staggering range of formally innovative poetic practices, encompassing those that operate by engaging blackness to such a degree that their experimentation is not perceived as falling within the field of twentieth-century poetic innovation and, at the other end of this spectrum, those that operate by engaging avant-garde poetics to such a degree that their interventions are not perceived as interrogating issues of race. Accordingly, this study addresses not only the exclusions of the African American poetry canon, but also the ways in which African American poets and their poetic engagements with black cultures can be marginalized or find their complexity diminished within the discourse around American avant-garde poetry and poetic innovation.

Admittedly, "innovative poetry" can be as difficult a term to nail down as "black aesthetics," if for different reasons. "Innovative" is one of a string of terms—including "experimental," "avant-garde," and "modernist/postmodern"—that are used somewhat interchangeably and with across-the-board dissatisfaction by poets and critics to identify work less interested in mastery and beauty (two of the literary establishment's most highly valued criteria for American poetry) than in social critique, aesthetic revolution, unbounded exploration of language, and other forms of notable unconventionality. We choose among these terms in order to make a variety of distinctions, and I have found that what matters most in discussions in this vein is not which term one employs, but that one offers a working definition and explains how the term should be distinguished from others one could have chosen. In that spirit, I will adopt the definition of "innovation" offered by Mullen in her remarks at "Expanding the Repertoire: Continuity and Change in African-American Writing," a gathering convened by Renee Gladman and giovanni singleton in April 2000, under the auspices of Small Press Traffic. On a panel concerning "The Role of Innovation in Contemporary Writing," she noted: "I would define innovation as explorative and interrogative, an open-ended investigation into the possibilities of language, the aesthetic and expressive, intellectual and *transformative* possibilities of language. Poetry for me is the arena in which this kind of investigation can happen with the fewest obstacles and boundaries" (Untitled 11).¹⁷ With that understanding as a base, I would add that I distinguish "innovative" work from "avant-garde"

work on the grounds that the latter term most usefully signifies people working in the context of a movement or a visible collectivity seeking not simply to push their own work individually, but to shift the whole discussion around poetics away from current norms. Thus, all avant-garde poetry is innovative (or aspires to be!), but not all innovative work is created within the context of an avant-garde. I prefer "innovative" to "experimental" in order to respect the fact that poets working within a wide range of aesthetics undertake experimentation in their efforts to achieve their desired effects.¹⁸ And, finally, I use "innovative" rather than "modernist" or "postmodern" in this study for a largely practical reason: because I am treating poets who collectively span the twentieth century, it seemed useful to work with a term that I could apply similarly to all of them, instead of terms that raise complicated temporal issues outside the scope of this project.¹⁹

Regardless of the term used, the discourse around innovative and avant-garde poetry in the U.S. has historically constructed these categories as implicitly "white." African American poets, even when they were involved in, perhaps central to, now-canonical avant-garde movements, have been marginalized or erased from the literary histories. A case in point would be the "occlusions" of Bob Kaufman's importance to the Beats: as Aldon Nielsen, Maria Damon, and others have recently noted, for decades a "public bleaching out of the artistic movement" obscured Kaufman's intellectual and artistic influence upon his contemporaries, not to mention such contributions as his cofounding of the Beat journal *Beatitude* (Nielsen, *Integral* 149–52; Damon 105–07).

A related phenomenon concerns the recognition of avant-garde movements themselves. The typical laundry list of U.S. avant-gardes does not automatically include the BAM, in the way that the Imagists, the Objectivists, the Beats, the New York School, the Black Mountain poets, and the Language poets, for example, are ticked off like beads on a rosary. The additional omission from this list of the Society of Umbra—an early to mid-1960s group of New York-based African American poets whose "work was formally, as well as politically, radical"—licenses the omission of the BAM, and vice versa (Nielsen, *Black* 114). That is, just as attention to the earlier group makes visible some of the roots of BAM aesthetic adventurousness, recognizing the BAM as an avant-garde, in turn, underscores the influence, direct and indirect, of the innovative Umbra poets (including Lorenzo Thomas, David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Tom Dent, Oliver Pitcher, and Rolland Snellings/Askia Touré) on the Movement.²⁰ In more recent years, poets and critics focused on avant-garde and inno-

vative poetry have increasingly acknowledged, written about, and taught African American poets. From the singularity of Jones/Baraka (whom we find cited as the sole African American among the Beats or the Black Mountain poets), we arrive in the dawning of the twenty-first century at a moment when such poets as Hunt, Mullen, Mackey, Gladman, Jayne Cortez, Ed Roberson, Tyrone Williams, and Will Alexander make regular appearances on the lists, as well as on the reading circuits, that feature innovative writers. These poets experiment with language in ways that jibe with the kinds of radical formal experimentation that have long served to identify (white) avant-garde work. But as poets among this group have pointed out, when their work is taken up by contemporary critics and readers of innovative poetry, it is too often discussed as if they are neither influenced by nor in conversation with a wide swathe of African American and African diasporic poetry, past and present. The sources and materials of aesthetic innovation in African American literature and other arenas of black cultural production and performativity may not be accounted for, or may be treated in superficial, unidimensional ways. Divorced from one or more important cultural traditions informing the work, the fact that, or extent to which, black aesthetics underwrites or shapes the innovation in these writers' texts can go unnoted and unanalyzed.

Renegade Poetics brings the poetry of African American writers like these, whose formal innovation may be presumed to have little to do with black aesthetics, into conversation with the poetry of other African American writers whose work may arise regularly in discussions of black writing, but without immediately registering as innovative. In this, my project differs from (even as it is indebted to) the models offered by Nielsen's *Black Chant* and *Integral Music* and Mackey's *Discrepant Engagement*. Where Mackey's vital scholarship illuminates the cross-cultural linkages among the poetics of African American, Caribbean, and white American (specifically, Black Mountain) innovators, mine is interested in how innovative African American poets' cross-cultural influences shape and are shaped by the context of the African American poetic tradition. And where Nielsen's indispensable work uncovers the submerged tradition of African American poetic postmodernism by recalling poets who have been marginalized or erased from the canon, I seek to juxtapose the submerged innovations of poets who are not most well-known or valued for poetic experimentation (Anne Spencer, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Sonia Sanchez) with the work of poets who function more obviously within the lineage Nielsen traces (Ed Roberson, Will Alexander, and Harryette Mullen).²¹

My project might be said to take up and interrogate the idea behind a comment Lorenzo Thomas made at the "Expanding the Repertoire" conference. Thomas notes that "[t]here was a desperate period in the 1980s when—frustrated by our inability to grasp society's real prizes (however defined)—we thought that simply being Black was avant-garde" ("Kindred" 60). Citing the widespread impact and commodification of African American culture in American society, he adds: "This was not an entirely bogus position" (60). His remarks were recalled by John Keene in response to one of the questions that Terrance Hayes and I posed, as editors of *jubilat's* recent "African American Experimental Poetry Forum," namely: "Does it take something more or different for Black poets to be understood as experimental poets?" (119). In the ensuing discussion, the idea of black people being "intrinsically experimental" (or even becoming so as a result of a common historical experience) was rejected on essentialist grounds (127). But that notion was distinguished from a different possibility also available in Thomas's formulation. As Fred Moten, in a conversation among several poets in the forum, put it: "To say that Blackness is intrinsically experimental is not the same thing as to say that Black folks are intrinsically experimental" (130). For Moten, the effort to write about "the experience of Blackness"—an arbitrary and imposed identity that some of us so-named have decided to embrace—has led him to a "mode" of writing, "taken up . . . under constraint," that "is experimental" (128, 129).²² The expanded, descriptive conception of black aesthetics with which I am working in *Renegade Poetics* might be understood, accordingly, as referring to a mode of writing adopted by African American poets in their efforts to work within, around, or against the constraint of being read and heard as "black."

Keene's response to the forum question quoted above began with an apt question of his own: "[W]ho is it that's 'understanding' Black poets as 'experimental'?" (120). For Keene, what is at stake here is "self-determination," one of the key political goals of Black Power and a concept central to BAM conceptions of black aesthetics (120). Another productive way of thinking about this question is suggested by Timothy Yu's compelling study, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*. Pointing to theories of the avant-garde that emphasize such movements' impulse to propose possibilities for social change by generating "revolutionary aesthetics," Yu argues that "the communities formed by contemporary American writers of color can . . . best be understood in the terms we have developed for the analysis of the avant-garde" (2). His argument strikes me as an insightful extension

of Erica Hunt's powerful discussion of "oppositional poetics" in the essay that emerged from her talk at the New School in 1988. Hunt asserts:

There are oppositional projects that engage language as social artifact, as art material, as powerfully transformative, which view themselves as distinct from projects that have as their explicit goal the use of language as a vehicle for the consciousness and liberation of oppressed communities. In general, the various communities, speculative and liberatory, do not think of themselves as having much in common, or having much to show each other. In practice, each of their language use is radically different—not in the clichéd sense of one being more open-ended than the other, but in the levels of rhetoric they employ. More interesting is the limitations they share—limitations of the society as a whole which they reproduce, even as they resist. ("Notes" 203)

Hunt and Yu, like Nielsen, Mackey, and Mullen, are seeking to dismantle the false dichotomy that has been constructed between writing communities that identify themselves primarily in terms of shared aesthetic values and those that ground their common aesthetic concerns in a shared racial or gender identity.

This study works toward the same end, by illuminating the common relationship between black aesthetics and formal innovation among texts by African American poets whose perceived differences are ultimately the result of racialized frameworks. *Renegade Poetics* draws its title from a line in Harryette Mullen's prose poem "Denigration," a piece that reminds us of the sonic power of language through wordplay around the morphemes "nig" and "neg." It begins:

Did we surprise our teachers who had niggling doubts about the picayune brains of small black children who reminded them of clean pickaninnies on a box of laundry soap? How muddy is the Mississippi compared to the third-longest river of the darkest continent? In the land of the Ibo, the Hausa, and the Yoruba, what is the price per barrel of nigrescence? Though slaves, who were wealth, survived on niggardly provisions, should inheritors of wealth fault the poor enigma for lacking a dictionary? (*Sleeping* 19)

By shifting between actual and false cognates—such as, "niggling," "Niger," "nigrescence," and "enigma"—in the poem's explicit and implicit lexicon, Mullen draws our attention to the seemingly inescapable racist

baggage our language carries, a factor much discussed in recent debates about the ability of African Americans to recover or redeem "the n-word" by using it not to denigrate, but to affirm or express identification with one another.

The poem ends with the line that serves as this introduction's first epigraph: "Though Maroons, who were unruly Africans, not loose horses or lazy sailors, were called renegades in Spanish, will I turn any blacker if I renege on this deal?" (*Sleeping* 19). The morpheme "neg" in "renegades" has no etymological connection to the word "negro" (which is Spanish for "black"), but as the Spanish equivalent of Maroons—the name given by English speakers to black people who ran away from slavery to live in isolated, hidden communities in the hills of Jamaica or the South Carolina swamps, for example—it cannot escape the racial connotation. I use the word "renegade" in my title to signify the rebellious, nonconformist approaches the poets in this study have taken in their aesthetics. Indeed, the work examined herein might be said to have run away from (or with) the confining expectations many nonblack and black audiences hold for the styles and subjects of poetry by African Americans. But *Renegade Poetics* demonstrates that the poets writing such work leave only their confinement—not their racial subjectivity—behind. One such renegade poet, the Martinican founder of *négritude*, Aimé Césaire, illustrates this gorgeously in his invitation to the Haitian poet René Depestre "to break ranks and join him in an artistic secession": "marronerons-nous Depestre marronerons-nous?" ("Shall we turn maroon, Depestre, shall we turn maroon?").²³ Making a verb of the noun Maroons (as if anticipating Mackey's discussion of "othering"), Césaire appeals to Depestre to break free from the aesthetic constraints his Communist political allegiances placed upon his art, reminding him (and us) that black poets can find freedom *and* make community as "renegades"—a designation that does and does not mean "black."

THE SIX MAIN CHAPTERS of *Renegade Poetics* study some of the innovative ways that African American poets writing during the long twentieth century have negotiated tensions among influential conceptions of black aesthetics, competing imperatives of mainstream and avant-garde American aesthetics, and their own individual artistic impulses. These chapters treat through close, but thoroughly contextualized, readings the rich forms of innovation—including uncommon or unconventional ways of negotiating or engaging black history, cultures, and politics—that have often gone unnoticed or unexamined within ana-

lytical frameworks that are structured or deeply influenced by dominant Black Aesthetic approaches. The chapters are grouped in two parts, each of which coheres around an arena of poetry that has traditionally been understood to exclude poets like those whose work I take up. I purposefully locate my explorations of black aesthetics in areas of poetics that raise explicit issues of gender and are not closely associated with the African American poetry tradition to more clearly illuminate the rewards of working with the more process-oriented, descriptive conception of black aesthetics that I have proposed.

Part I, called "Voice Held Me Hostage: Black Aesthetics and Polyvocality in African American Women's Epic Poems," examines long poems by three African American women poets—Brooks's "The Anniad" (1949), Sanchez's *Does Your House Have Lions?* (1997), and Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* (1995)—all of which I argue should be understood as epics. The epic genre, historically constructed as a highly masculine form and one not regularly undertaken by African American poets of either gender, presents as a result certain formal challenges for Brooks, Sanchez, and Mullen, each of whom sought to achieve something with the epic that it was not created to do. I first became attuned to the usefulness of reading their poems together when I realized that these poets were (and are to date) the only African American women to employ lyric stanzas in building poems of epic length, scope, or structure. Confronted similarly with the genre's exclusionary norms—the singular warrior hero, the battlefield setting, the mandate to tell "the tale of the tribe" (Ezra Pound's phrase) in an elevated diction—each of these poets found ways to combine the lyric and epic modes to engender polyvocality in their poems.

The title of this part comes from a stanza of Mullen's playfully fragmented *Muse & Drudge*, which I read as suggesting the capacity of voice to bind some bodies to one another, even as they are violently silenced:

chained thus together
voice held me hostage
divided our separate ways
with a knife against my throat (13)

Taking Mullen's cue, part I of this study examines the ways that African American women poets have sought to escape the fetters or transgress the boundaries of voice in their poetry. As noted, the three works I consider, in creating epic long poems from recurring lyric stanzas, form a constellation of rarities. Combing my bookshelves and my memory, and sifting

through studies and discussions in print and online, I have identified just over fifty long poems in the African American tradition—a sizeable number, but a very low proportion of the number of poems, or even books, published by African American poets. Fewer than half of these long poems appear to be at all interested in the conventions of epic poetry.²⁴

But the numbers really shrink when we add the second condition of a formally regular stanzaic structure. Very few African American men have created long poems in regular stanzas, and, to my knowledge, Brooks, Sanchez, and Mullen are the only women poets in the African American tradition to have published such poems, to date.²⁵ What draws me to these poems, then, is the opportunity they present to consider issues of race, gender, and voice in poems that are both thematically ambitious and formally innovative.

That is to say that Brooks's, Sanchez's, and Mullen's long poems all tap into the possibilities opened by the insistent and intimate combination of the epic poem's lofty expansiveness and the stanzaic form's intricate constraints. Together, these formal structures create spaces in which the three poets can circumnavigate or productively engage with the limitations the concept of voice proposes for them, associated as it is with the (gendered) "orality"—black vernacular speech—that defines the African American literary tradition for many. There may seem to be some irony in the idea that such structures as the epic (and the long poem generally) and rhyme royal (and other received stanzaic forms) might lend themselves to African American women's liberatory poetic projects, given their construction as male and European forms. But the existence of African traditions of epic poetry, as well as a growing awareness of women's adoption of epic and other long form structures, arguably mitigates the surprise we might otherwise feel.²⁶ And, surprising or not, in the hands of such supremely skilled craftswomen, these potentially inhospitable poetic structures become tools that cooperatively facilitate *polyvocality*.

When I refer to the "polyvocality" of a poem, I mean the extent to which its language, tone, diction, form, and other stylistic choices generate the effect of multiplicity in a single speaker's voice or create space for a number of different speakers—an effect that runs counter to (or around) the predominant expectation for lyric poems to function as internally consistent, first-person utterances. While I of course recognize the importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on this subject, my thinking about polyvocality is more directly indebted to (though distinct from) Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's theory of black women writers as "speaking in tongues," which recognizes an acquired ability to "speak in a plurality of

voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses" (352).²⁷ To survive and thrive, she submits, black women have had to learn to speak dialogically in ways that can be heard by our "others," both through similarity and across difference. Responding creatively to the environments in which they write, particularly with respect to the ways they understand their audiences, Brooks, Sanchez, and Mullen exercise this skill by innovatively manipulating the formal elements of their poetry, so that the works might be heard differently by different listeners.

Chapter 1, "Changing the Subject: Gwendolyn Brooks's 'The Anniad,'" examines the long poem that stands as the centerpiece of Brooks's Pulitzer Prize-winning volume *Annie Allen*. "The Anniad" is frequently characterized as a "mock-epic" because the poem's subject matter is seen as incommensurate with Brooks's use of highly elevated diction, dazzling and unique formal intricacy, and conventions of the Greek epic. The poem's criticism, largely produced subsequent to the BAM, reads the Movement's black aesthetics retroactively onto Brooks's earlier, post-World War II work, producing a reading of the poem that insists upon an equivalence between "blackness" and vernacular speech. This reading renders Brooks's attempt to *change the subject* of the epic (in both senses)—that is, to elevate her poor, young, working-class, female protagonist to the role of epic hero—incomprehensible, except as an exercise in ridicule. I read Brooks's innovative formal choices—including the decision to develop a unique, extremely torqued version of the rhyme royal stanza as a vehicle for her epic—instead as manifestations of black aesthetics grounded, in part, in a perceived need for a political and aesthetic revaluation of young black women like Annie.

Whereas chapter 1 expands the chronology of black aesthetics back into the 1940s, chapter 2, "Expanding the Subject: Sonia Sanchez's *Does Your House Have Lions?*," brings it forward into the 1990s. *Does Your House Have Lions?* is Sanchez's seventy-page elegy for her brother, who died of AIDS in 1980. This breathtaking poem, I argue, *expands the subject* of the traditional epic by refiguring the singular hero's quest as a collective, familial struggle. She enlarges the epic's subject not just numerically, but also temporally, casting its reach back into the era of slavery by including in her representation of the family two ancestral figures who lost their lives during the Middle Passage. Relatedly, Sanchez expands the *black* subject, insofar as she calls forth a more encompassing black subjectivity, one which can incorporate the previously proscribed identities of gays and people who are HIV-positive and/or living with AIDS. Taking Brooks as her starting point, Sanchez brings elements of the tradi-

tional Western epic, the lyric, and the contemporary narrative of slavery together in dense, highly figurative rhyme royal stanzas. Her skillfully crafted amalgamation of forms emerges as a variety of black aesthetics that both draws upon and reinterprets the aesthetics that dominated the BAM of which she was a part, enabling her to navigate cultural taboos in order to memorialize her brother and contribute to HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention in the African American community.

In her fourth book, *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen fundamentally achieved her goal of creating a text that would engage both the greater numbers of black readers (and other readers of color) who had responded to the culturally specific invitation of her first volume of poetry *and* the predominantly white community of readers who had appreciated the post-modernist techniques she employed in her second and third books. Writing in lyric quatrains composed of disjointed, fragmented lines, Mullen samples blues lyrics and black vernacular speech; references a range of diasporic figures, events, and practices; and ultimately collages these myriad sources into an epic, collective portrait of black female subjectivity. Chapter 3 of my study, "Complicating the Subject: Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* as African American Blues Epic," counters the dominant readings of the poem, whose reliance on notions of cultural "hybridity" often resolves into a binary of "black" (blues) *content* and "white" (traditional and avant-garde) poetic *forms*. I argue that Mullen's intensely polyvocal, thematically wide-ranging quatrains (which reference everything from Mexican maquiladoras to Dahomey symbols of royalty) insist upon the manifold and diasporic nature of black women's experiences. The result is a new form—an African American blues epic—that takes its language, structural cues, and expansive, non-autobiographical first-person subjects primarily from the blues and African American literary traditions, even as it foregrounds the extent to which American poetic traditions, and other aspects of American culture, have always themselves comprised complex, polymorphous mixtures. The black aesthetics underwriting *Muse & Drudge* thus rejects the BAM's racial essentialism, even as it rearticulates the Movement's emphasis on the richness and plenitude of black cultural traditions—including traditions of artistic innovation.

As part I will make clear, the differences in the way polyvocality operates in each work emerge from differences in the black aesthetics motivating each of the three poets. But all of them respond to and revise the genre of epic poetry—a contribution that the scholarship on this genre has not adequately taken into account. Lynn Keller's excellent study,

Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women, stands out as one of the few exceptions to the general rule that works by African Americans (female and male) are ignored or relegated to the footnotes of scholarship on the long poem (whether epic or other forms). The rule has been true even of studies I have found otherwise useful, such as Michael André Bernstein's *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic*, Susan Stanford Friedman's "When a 'Long' Poem Is a 'Big' Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women's Twentieth-Century 'Long Poems'"; Smaro Kamboureli's *On the Edge of Genre: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem*; and Brian McHale's *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole*. Keller devotes a chapter of her book to poems by Brenda Marie Osbey and Rita Dove, which she characterizes as "testifying" long poems. But where Keller contextualizes Osbey's and Dove's works as deeply invested in "African American spiritual traditions" of "tell[ing] the truth through story" (103), I focus on the ways Brooks, Sanchez, and Mullen tell African American stories and truths by wresting the epic from its traditional contexts—in part by channeling it through rhyme royal or ballad stanzas—to make it serve their unconventional purposes of societal critique.

Where part I takes off from a formal tradition, the epic genre, part II gathers together poets whose work foregrounds a subject that has not traditionally been associated with poetry by African Americans: nature. The three poets considered in this part—Spencer, Roberson, and Alexander—are drawn to what our society constructs as "nature" (in opposition to "culture" and politics), and return repeatedly to images and ideas from contexts and discourses focused on nonhuman aspects of the world. This preoccupation has contributed to the invisibility or marginality of their poetry, insofar as, for most of the twentieth century, neither the traditionally "white" genre of "nature poetry" (including the newer rubric of "ecopoetry") nor the African American poetry tradition (especially as understood from our post-BAM vantage point) has contemplated African American poets who make the garden, the wilderness, or the near and far reaches of the universe a primary concern of their writing. Simultaneously, because of this focus on nature, rather than more "recognizably black" topics and settings (such as urban neighborhoods, street culture, or overt political protest), the ways their poetry engages black culture and/or matters of politics often goes unnoticed or undiscussed.

Though it may be a less obvious point of departure for either black aesthetics or formal innovation than the generic rubric of the epic, the

category of nature poetry or "ecopoetry" is likewise a productive site for analyzing the innovative strategies African American poets have used to write their way out of racially constricted spaces. Just as with the formal structures of the epic and the rhyme royal and ballad stanzas, nature poetry is a construction that comes to American poets from a European tradition (notably, Romantic poetry) whose construction has been understood to exclude African American poets, for more than one reason. The long tradition of nature poetry features the outdoors, particularly rural and scenic areas, as the site of relaxation, recreation, and contemplation; the nature poem is not about labor, except in its most romanticized sense, and, even then, the laborer is not the poet himself. For a people whose collective identity is, in a sense, defined by (but not reducible to) their status as enslaved workers or the descendants thereof, the traditional nature poem functions as the literary erasure or prettification of an unutterably significant aspect of their experience or history. The challenge this erasure presents to the would-be African American nature poet is magnified by the fact that black people have historically been constructed as nature: metaphorically, as savages who operate based on instinct and emotion (rather than intellect and reason); legally, as chattel slaves who were treated as being on a par with livestock; fundamentally, non- or sub-human. Add to this mix the inclination of African Americans themselves to identify blackness with the city, a strategy that can be traced as far back as the New Negro Renaissance era, when Harlem's metonymic relationship with the African American community was intended to signal the arrival of Afro-modernism. The BAM leaned heavily on the association of African Americans with urban life—that and the sheer numbers of black urban dwellers after two enormous waves of rural-to-urban/industrial migration by African American people support what has become almost an equation between "black" and "inner city" in American social discourse. In light of the foregoing, it is not surprising that the African American poets I bring together here for their interest in writing about nature beyond the human and human ecosystems employ aesthetics that are consciously (if not "recognizably") "black" and productively (one wants to say necessarily) innovative.

I have indicated that the "natural world" and "nature" are contested terms, because one of the things we learn from these poets is to be skeptical of the nature/culture dichotomy that pretends that humans and the environments we build are fundamentally distinct from everything else. Because black people (like Native Americans) have been constructed as part of "nature," African American poets are well situated to ques-

tion what Lance Newman has called “[t]he first premise of most nature writing—that human and nonhuman places belong to sharply separate categories of being” (19). The title for this part of the book—“The Blackening Sun, That Standard of Clarity: The Nature of Black Aesthetics”—plays upon language from Ed Roberson’s work to suggest that poets whose nature writing is informed by a black subjectivity may be able to shed some new light on environmental matters. Newman argues that “how nature writers see and understand nature has everything to do with how they see and understand the society whose relations with it they hope to change” (19). If he is correct, then African American poets’ critique of this society’s racism (among other concerns) must inevitably shape their conception of humanity’s position within nature.

It is thus regrettable that African American poetry has been all but invisible within “the green tradition” until only very recently. Lawrence Buell begins the preface of his 2005 book, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, by proposing that where W. E. B. Du Bois had identified racism as the “great public issue of the twentieth century,” the twenty-first will be consumed with the environmental crisis. Buell justly notes that this question of whether and how the earth will continue to be a viable environment for its current inhabitants is “ultimately . . . more pressing” than the ongoing problem of race; it is hard to imagine what does not take a back seat to a problem of such all-encompassing concern (vi). Still, I think he might agree that had we done a better job over the last hundred years of understanding and eradicating racism, we might be facing a less severe environmental crisis today. For instance, how much sooner would the powerful and wealthy people of this nation have begun to insist on alternatives to toxic industrial processes and environmentally indefensible waste management practices if they had not been able to shift the burden for their choices onto the poor communities where people of color are disproportionately represented—or onto developing nations that are also, not coincidentally, home to people of color? Along with the scholarly interventions of critics like Christine Gerhardt, I have been deeply gratified to see the publication of the anthology *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, which provides those of us interested in African American writers’ constructions of and responses to nature with nearly a couple hundred primary texts.

One of the poets anthologized in *Black Nature* is the focus of chapter 4 of *Renegade Poetics*. In “Protest/Poetry: Anne Spencer’s Garden of ‘Raceless’ Verse,” I take up the poetry of an initially well-received but now understudied poet of the New Negro Renaissance who lived and

worked in segregated Lynchburg, Virginia. Her marginalization in late-twentieth-century assessments of the New Negro Renaissance can be attributed in large part to the fact that she more often drew her subjects and imagery from her beloved garden than from the cultural particularity and unjust treatment of the “New Negro.” Commonly, Spencer criticism understands her garden as a space of beauty and refuge from the oppressive society in which she lived, noting her long-term commitment to civil rights work and the role of social heretic only as a counterpoint to the relative lack of racial protest in her poetry. I argue, however, that Spencer used both her poetry and her garden as spaces where she could *think* about and *experiment* with ways of conceptualizing and articulating the power dynamics among the people of her society in light of those she observed among nonhuman creatures. Given her location in the Jim Crow South, we should not be surprised to find that her “cryptic” (J. Johnson, *Book 45*), “original” (Kerlin 158), highly compressed lines not only constitute innovative poetics within the context of the Renaissance, but also participate in, rather than simply offer refuge from, the struggle for racial and gender equality she carried out in her nonliterary life.

Chapter 5, “Black and Green: On the Nature of Ed Roberson’s Poetics,” looks at Roberson’s use of unconventional formal strategies and subject matter related to activities in realms of nature socially coded as “white” (such as, studying the Alaskan wilderness, participating in an “Explorers’ Club,” or working as a diver in an aquarium). These elements of his poetics remind us how the false dichotomies between nature and culture and between black and white are mapped onto one another—and, thus, can be simultaneously challenged. I argue that Roberson uses his distinctively fragmented yet hypotactic poetics to illustrate not merely the interrelation but the identity of the natural and the cultural (or political) realms, insisting through the example of his form upon the unitary character of nature. His entire thirty-year oeuvre, up through the recently published *To See the Earth before the End of the World*, treats racism and classism within human social settings as problems facing our ecosystems—reconceptualizing them as environmental issues, so to speak, and thus providing a new lens through which to see the dispersed impact of misuse of our natural (cultural) resources.

The natural realm foregrounded in the two surrealist long poems that comprise Will Alexander’s *Exobiology as Goddess* challenges the geocentric conception of nature that even most ecopoetry maintains, casting its net out into the universe in a search for extraterrestrial life. Alexander’s work thus takes us farther afield spatially than either Spencer’s or

Roberson's, and also aesthetically, in that the key influence of Martinican poet Aimé Césaire upon Alexander's surrealist poetics moves us beyond a narrowly African American black aesthetics. Chapter 6, "Will Alexander's Surrealist Nature: Toward a Diasporic Black Aesthetics," reads his poetry in light of both his critique of the Black Aesthetic of the didactic BAM era and his enthusiastic embrace of the liberated politics of Césairean surrealism. Césaire's poetic emphasis on African mythologies and the natural environment of Martinique prove to be points of reference for Alexander's black aesthetic strategies, which turn on an embrace of ancient Egyptian cosmology. Significantly, however, although Alexander represents himself as a "psychic maroon" ("Hauling" 402) from the African American poetry canon as currently constructed, his early influences—which led him to Césaire in the first place—comprised a quasi-localized African American avant-garde of surrealist writers and musicians. An exploration of the various sources of his diasporic black aesthetics ultimately reminds us that African American black aesthetics have long influenced and been influenced by black aesthetics beyond our national boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

1. I borrow the phrase “recognizably black” from Aldon Nielsen, whose “This Ain’t No Disco” in *The World in Time and Space*, edited by Edward Foster and Joseph Donahue, offers a provocative, incisive discussion of the role played by racialized expectations for the work of African American poets in the constitution of a canon of poetic innovation. His pointed commentary on the desire of certain audiences for “recognizably black” writing appears on page 539.

2. As David Lionel Smith observes in his sharp and useful essay “The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics,” published in *American Literary History*, “The concept of ‘the Black Aesthetic’ has been integrally linked with the Black Arts Movement, yet even at the height of that movement, there was no real agreement about the meaning of this term” (94). Smith goes on to parse some of the competing uses of the term that obtained the most traction in the short- and long-term.

3. Mathes and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson together organized the conference “Don’t Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat”: Re-evaluating Larry Neal’s Creative and Critical Vision of the Black Aesthetic, which was held at Brooklyn College in November 2006. I am quoting from unpublished writing Mathes produced in connection with this event.

4. The elements of the caricature of the BAM’s black aesthetic are, in fact, grounded in rhetoric used by Black Arts theorists and critics at times; to point to the selective nature of the construction of BAM ideology that leads to this caricature, then, is not to suggest that it is baseless. To sample some BAM-era language that contributes to this limited understanding of the Black Aesthetic, we might begin with “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” by Hoyt Fuller, editor of *Negro Digest/Black World*. With some sense of the irony, one hopes, Fuller quoted a white critic’s enumeration of the qualities that constitute the “mystique of blackness”—those catchy, colorful, and cool ways of dressing, talking, walking, and being that made black men from Satchel Paige to Sammy Davis, Jr., to Duke Ellington the epitome of style—as a way of suggesting what a black aesthetic might entail. “Black critics,” he continued, “have the responsibility of approaching the works of black writers assuming these qualities to be present” (204, 205).

Don L. Lee (later known as Haki Madhubuti) noted in “Toward a Definition,” his own essay on defining a black aesthetic, that African Americans’ sensibilities have been shaped, to their detriment, by “a white nationalist consciousness

called Americanism that's really a refined, or unrefined, depending on your viewpoint, weak version of the European sensibility" (214). Thus, "to understand the aesthetic of black art or that which is uniquely black, we must start [by examining black music, because it] was least distorted and was not molded into that which is referred to as a pure product of European-American culture" (213). My point here is not to isolate and make straw men of these two important figures, but simply to provide examples of the kinds of language and discussions that have come to stand, in too much of the subsequent discourse about the BAM, for the entire range of ideas that were in play.

5. See, for example, "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature,'" by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), for a cogent (if merciless) argument for why African American music should be the foundation and jumping-off point for African American writing; by contrast, see Stephen Henderson's introduction to his *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* for a thoughtful, descriptive analysis of the presence of black vernacular speech and music as sources for the form and content of African American poetry.

6. Two essays in the collection *Modern Black Poets*, edited by Donald Gibson and published during the waning years of the Movement, immediately suggest this view of the politics of the black aesthetic, in both its positive and negative constructions, simply through their titles: "The Poetry of Three Revolutionists: Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni," by R. Roderick Palmer, and "The New Poetry of Black Hate," by Arthur P. Davis.

7. Gayle devotes his 1971 essay, "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic," to tracing the history of the association of "black" and "blackness" with danger and evil in Western culture.

8. Black feminist critiques of the formulation that puts black women at the fork in the road, forced to choose between race and gender, are numerous. Among the relatively early examples that circulated widely both within the academy and popularly would be Toni Cade's 1969 essay, "On the Issue of Roles"; Audre Lorde's 1979 essay, "Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface"; and bell hooks's 1981 book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. A particularly influential theoretical counter to this formulation was proposed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color."

9. Specifically on this phenomenon in BAM writing, see, for example, chapter 3 of Elisabeth Frost's *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry*; Karen Jackson Ford, *Gender and the Poetics of Excess* (190-92); and chapter 2 of Phillip Brian Harper's *Are We Not Men?* For a discussion of this issue as it impacts the African American tradition more broadly, see Barbara Smith's important intervention, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism."

10. See Mullen's essays "African Signs and Spirit Writing" (especially pp. 670-71) and "Incessant Elusives" for articulations of her critique of Gates's theory and the *Norton Anthology* that lead to important explorations of writers

and alternative traditions within the African American tradition not easily accommodated by his work.

11. Jarena Lee and Rebecca Cox Jackson are two of the most familiar names from this lineage. See Mullen, "African Signs" (676).

12. My articulation here is influenced by Arlene Keizer's discussion of the relationship of black subjectivity to the genre of contemporary narratives of slavery. Her book, *Black Subjects*, argues that "through their representations of slaves, these [contemporary African American and Caribbean] writers have managed to destabilize blackness as a biological or cultural essence, while maintaining a sense of the integrity of creolized black cultures in the Americas and showing how black subjectivities are produced and contested within these cultures" (11).

13. Notably, BAM poets and thinkers such as Sanchez, Baraka, and Ishmael Reed, among others, taught some of the very earliest courses in black (and black women's) literature.

14. Clarence Major, a poet whose work might easily have been treated in this study, has stressed the importance of context to aesthetics: "Aesthetics aren't a set of abstractions existing outside historical circumstances and daily reality; they're always grounded in the needs and aims of specific artists and audiences, influenced by the social setting and context" ("I Follow My Eyes" in *Clarence Major and His Art*, 80).

15. Mackey more specifically describes othering as "black linguistic and musical practices that accent variance, variability"—an aesthetic counter to the social condition to which African Americans have been subjected, that of being kept "in their place" (266). The relationship I am drawing between my thinking and Mackey's does not equate black aesthetics with othering, but emphasizes that both notions describe actions, rather than outcomes, and that both point to the artist's interest in strategies or practices that liberate the work from confining, racially based expectations.

16. I take the quoted phrase from Stephen Henderson, who observes: "Since poetry is the most concentrated and the most allusive of the verbal arts, if there is such a commodity as 'blackness' in literature (and I assume that there is), it should somehow be found in concentrated or in residual form in the poetry" (*Understanding* 4). In Gates's discussion of the flaws in Henderson's theory of blackness, he seizes upon this phrase: "Had Henderson elaborated on 'residual form' in literary language, measured formally, structurally, or linguistically, he would have revolutionized black literary criticism" ("Preface" 157). While I am arguing, quite to the contrary, that the blackness of black aesthetics is not a feature of the literature, but—to one degree or another—a factor in the subjectivity of African American writers, I agree with Henderson that the compression and heightened attention to form required in poetry makes it a particularly productive genre in which to seek the traces of blackness and, thus, to pursue my project of redefining black aesthetics. I also agree with Gates that it is critical that we attend to the "residual form" of writers' black aesthetics in literature, if and when we find it—but,

further, I would assert that works in which we do not find it, or do not find much of it, are just as valuable and interesting to think about within the framework of the African American tradition as those that are laden with it.

17. In “After Language Poetry,” Marjorie Perloff makes a strong case that the term “innovative” has been overused to the point of meaninglessness (15–16). Perloff’s compelling objections are grounded in the sense in which the term signifies “newness,” however, whereas Mullen’s definition, which I borrow here, focuses rather on the exploratory spirit with which the poet approaches her craft.

18. John Keene kicked off the *jubilat* “African American Experimental Poetry Forum,” published in 2009, with the provocative question: “Isn’t all poetry experimental at some level?” (Hayes and Shockley 119).

19. This is not to say that I am avoiding temporal questions raised by this project; indeed, one of my goals for the following chapters is to thoroughly historicize the works they treat with relation to how both social and poetics matters are functioning contemporarily with the writing of those works. I mean to signal simply that debates about the relationship between “modernist” and “postmodern” as categories of writing, which are significantly connected to questions of periodization, are not central to this study.

20. Nielsen, who devotes a number of pages of his influential book *Black Chant* to the Society of Umbra and the work of poets who participated therein, points to the importance of the relationship between the two avant-gardes: “That so much of Umbra work was formally, as well as politically, radical is something that needs to be considered when we think about this group’s importance to the Black Arts Movement, in which several Umbra writers were key figures” (114). The larger argument of his book emphasizes the need for fuller histories of innovative writing by African Americans. On the related point of the occlusion of African American contributions to and participation in the modernist project, see Geoffrey Jacques’s recently published *A Change in the Weather*, which offers a book-length corrective to this cultural and scholarly blind spot.

21. It must be said that both Roberson and, to an even greater extent, Mullen have become much less marginal to the African American canon during the six or seven years in which I have been working on this project. However, it becomes no less important for us to analyze and understand the lines of thought and social forces that created the historical circumstances which prevented Roberson’s work from gaining a significant audience between 1970 and the turn of the century and created such complicated divisions in the collective audience for Mullen’s first few books.

22. Thus, Moten’s incomparable study *In the Break*—though with a very different approach and to different ends than my work here—may also be seen as a kind of response to Thomas’s provocation.

23. I am drawing upon Gregson Davis’s discussion of this line, as well as using his translation (17).

24. I recognize that there is ongoing debate about how the “epic” and the “long

poem” are to be defined, individually and in relation to one another. See Bernstein, Friedman, Kamboureli, and Keller. My purpose here, however, is not primarily to weigh in on that debate, but to consider the ways these poets’ innovative engagement with long form, including the deliberateness with which they invoke and exploit longstanding epic conventions, figures in their negotiation of a literary terrain full of obstacles for them.

25. Black men who have published long poems in stanzaic form include: Albery Whitman (*Twassinta’s Seminoles; or Rape of Florida*, published in 1885, was written in Spenserian stanzas); Fred D’Aguiar (*Bloodlines*, written in terza rima); and Major Jackson (“Letter to Brooks,” which, written in rhyme royal, is doubly an homage and appears in his second book, *Hoops*).

26. See, for example, *The African Epic Controversy* by Mugyabuso M. Mulokozi and *The Epic in Africa* by Isadore Okpewho. See also *The Female Homer* by Jeremy M. Downes and *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982*, edited by Bernard Schweizer.

27. Bakhtin’s formulations are not my focus here; however, I would note that his text “Epic and Novel,” in distinguishing the polyglossia of the novel from the static, monoglossia of the epic past, indirectly underscores the innovative nature of these three poets’ elicitation of polyvocality from the interaction between lyric and epic verse. See, especially, pp. 12–15. Mae Henderson’s conceptualization of black women’s writing as “speaking in tongues” is an outgrowth of her own engagement with Bakhtin in relation to her work on gender and race in African American literature.

1. CHANGING THE SUBJECT

1. For example, Don L. Lee opined in his preface to her 1972 autobiography that Brooks intended “In the Mecca” to be an “epic of black humanity” (22). Melhem herself had identified both epic and mock-epic elements in “The Anniad,” in her 1987 study, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Other critics, writing before and after 1990, would similarly deem these poems as epics (or as epic to some degree). See, for example, Cheryl Clarke, “After Mecca”; Ann Folwell Stanford, “An Epic with a Difference,” and Tracey L. Walters, “Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘The Anniad’ and the Indeterminacy of Genre.”

2. Hortense Spillers has described the title “The Anniad” as a pun on the name of one or both of the well-known Greek texts (121).

3. In a 1982 in-depth profile, when asked if certain critics (the type who “would shriek and shudder” at the idea that Brooks hopes her poetry has been “useful”) mattered to her, Brooks responded: “Absolutely not. They used to. I used to watch for reviews. Wanted to write poetry that would bowl them over. No longer” (Kufirin 50).

4. The existence of such stereotyping and its potential for negatively affecting the reception of her work in that era is undeniable, as reviews of her books and

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