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Writing Nation:
Giovanni, Sanchez, and Lorde and the Black Arts Movement

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> It is true that the Black Arts Movement resulted in a necessary and important critique both of previous Afro-American literature and of the white-established literary world. But in attempting to take over power, it, as Ishmael Reed satirizes so well in *Mumbo Jumbo*, became much like its opponent, monolithic and downright repressive.
> (Christian 58)

The epigraph from Barbara Christian's groundbreaking essay "The Race for Theory" (1987) articulates one of the most potent charges against the Black Arts Movement aestheticians levied by a contemporary black woman literary scholar and writer. This is a charge that has been revisited thoroughly by other critics such as Cherise A. Pollard, Carmen Phelps, Cheryl Clarke, and Lorenzo Thomas, to name a few.[1] These critics have interrogated the separatist and nationalist ideology of the Black Arts Movement, and the movement's concerns with developing a black aesthetic and nation. Readers are reminded that this ideology was so pre- and pro-scriptive that it limited the full participation of writers whose creative, political, social, and sexual agendas did not toe the ideological lines.

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1 Cherise Pollard, "Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions: Women's Poetry and the Politics of the Black Arts Movement." Eds. Lisa Gale Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2006) 173-86; Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2000) 143; and Carmen Phelps, "Performative Politics in Chicago: The Black Arts Movement, Women Writers, and Visions of Nation and Identity," *DAI* 65.3 (2004): 935. *MLA International Bibliography*. EBSCO. The Library of Congress, Washington, DC. 12 April 2008 <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct>.

However, what has not been investigated to a large degree regarding the limen of the Black Arts Movement ideology is the way that the early poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez complies with the parameters dictated by the male aestheticians for the building of a black nation despite some critics' arguments to the contrary. On the one hand, Giovanni's and Sanchez's seeming complicity with the elevation of black men at the expense of the independence of black women in their early published poems appears merely as a product of a pre-women's liberation cultural milieu or the seemingly coercive dictates of their male counterparts of the Black Arts Movement. On the other hand, their contemporary, Audre Lorde, stands as a lone woman poet whose voice resounds in a vast wasteland of misrecognition, wherein her radical politics about nation are elided.[2] Lorde's early poetry provides a more holistic world view than does Giovanni or Sanchez's poetry, and it interrogates the position of women, the freedom of sexual preference, and black patriarchy in creating a black nation. Her poetry also challenges violence, homophobia, separatism, and women's subjugation. In this regard, Lorde's early poetry, in comparison with Giovanni's and Sanchez's poetry of the same period, appears to be not only avant-garde, but prophetic in challenging the rigid parameters set by the male aestheticians of the Black Arts Movement and creating a more plausible inclusiveness in the construction of an equitable black nation.

Cheryl Pollard asserts that both Giovanni's and Sanchez's poetry "exposed the Black Arts Movement's sexist limitations through their usurpation of male social power as well as their critique of sexual prowess" (179-80). Likewise, Ajuan Maria Mance contends that black women poets of this period "entered the discourse of resistant Black manhood and ... they utilized its most revered images, initially to establish a role for Black womanhood within the patriarchal landscape of nationalism, but eventually in order to critique and transcend it" (96). Mance further argues that it was necessary for black women poets to construct a resistant black manhood in order to address, combat, and subvert racist oppression that resulted in the literal and figurative maiming of black men by the racist dominant society. In reference to black women poets' love

2 Audre Lorde's biographer and poet Alexis De Veaux argues that " [t]he leading voices of the Black Arts Movement were male writers and those Black women—like Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni—whose early writings reflected an 'acceptable' kinship with Black men and suppressed gendered perspectives inconsistent with a monolithic, 'authentic' Blackness. In contrast, Lorde's more lyric, understated poetry was out of sync with these raced designs. Her later poetry, however, would more explicitly reflect a politicized, self-inflected Black consciousness." See De Veaux 92.

poems, Mance refers to them as "poems of desire," that were necessary, for: "[t]o express love, admiration, and desire for Black men is to challenge the sociopolitical order in which such figures are demeaned as undesirable and worthless" (117). Although these are courageous attempts by these critics to rescue black women's poetry of the Black Arts Movement from the straight-jacket of patriarchal ideology, a closer examination of the early poetry of Giovanni and Sanchez reveals that despite these poets' later attempts to challenge black male sexist oppression and create images of black women that reached beyond the stereotype of wife, mother, helpmate, or whore, to the contrary, Giovanni and Sanchez's figurative representation of black people and nation do not release them from the banal images propagated by their male contemporaries. Giovanni and Sanchez's failed attempts, however, have very much to do with the weight of ideology that was constructed, disseminated, and adhered to by the dominant Black Arts Movement male aestheticians. Yet rather than dismiss the movement because of its overwhelming patriarchy, it is beneficial to engage in an analysis that examines how some of the women poets, in particular Giovanni, Sanchez and Lorde, either become subsumed within or resist this ideology.

Underlying the ideology for nation by the male aestheticians was the desire to usurp white male economic and political power with little regard for elevating the position of black women within the hierarchy of nation. The male aestheticians' visions of nation replicate to a frightening degree some of the dynamics of the hegemonic U.S., which was, and continues to be, steeped in sexism, violence, homophobia, domestic and international terrorism, colonialism, and imperialism. The primary architects of the Black Arts Movement—Amiri Baraka, Hoyt Fuller, Addison Gayle, and Larry Neal—argued for a more afro-centric epistemology, and "looked back" to Africa and to a glorious African past for viable alternatives to a western worldview. Since their looking back coincided with the de-colonization of Africa, these male aestheticians found models in African nations and cultures, and their agendas challenged the US Civil Rights Movement's proclivity toward post-Second World War integrationism and nonviolence. Fueled by the writings and teachings of Malcolm X, Harold Cruse, Franz Fanon, Leopold Senghor, Amié Césaire, and C.L.R. James,[3] Baraka,

3 I am specifically referring to Malcolm X's speeches and his proliferating public persona among black nationalist, and the publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965); Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967); Franz Fanon's, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967); Leopold Senghor's *The White Man's Future in Black Africa* (1962), *On African Socialism* (1964), which was translated by Mercer Cook; Amié Cesairé's *Season in the Congo; A Play* (1969); and C. L. R. James', *History of Negro Revolt* (1938), *The Black Jacobins; Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1963), and

Gayle, Fuller and Neal engaged in a restructuring of a black aesthetic, hoping to empower black artists and enabling black communities to use art— poetry and drama in particular—as a vehicle for addressing the economic, political and spiritual well-being of African Americans. Their position was nationalist. Art was to be didactic. Art was political. Art was economical. The ethos about black art during the Black Arts Movement echoes to some degree the prescriptives set forth by W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright from earlier periods.[4]

As critics have pointed out, these Black Arts Movement aestheticians, however, never explicitly define what the black aesthetic is even while grappling with issues related to the subordination and subjugation of black artistic production in the U.S. Nonetheless, examining the issues that the male aestheticians raised is useful in comprehending the direction in which they not only wanted to take black art, but black people and nation as well. Addison Gayle's essay, "Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic" published in *The Black Aesthetic*[5] (1971), provides insight into some of the challenges that beset black

History of Pan-African Revolt (1969). While in no way is this list meant to be exhaustive, it does represent some of the primary texts that B.A.M. aestheticians consistently refer to in their writings. See Kaleem Ya Salaam, "A Primer of the Black Arts Movement: Excerpts from the Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement," *Black Renaissance/ Renaissance Noire* (2002): 44.

4 Specifically, I am referring to the following essays: W. E. B. Du Bois's, "Criteria of Negro Art"; Langston Hughes', "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"; and, Richard Wright's, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." To some extent, all of these writers engaged in prescribing parameters in which black art should operate and the role that such art should play in black culture. It appears that each generation engages in prescribing the parameters and roles of black art. Coincidentally Hughes' and Wright's essays are included in Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic*.

5 In this collection of works edited by Addison Gayle, the sole woman's work represented is Carolyn F. Gerald's essay, "The Black Writer and His Role." In this essay, Gerald examines the increasing conversations about the image of blacks in the community; however, Gerald defines both image and community as being masculine. Her only reference to femaleness is "Mother Earth." This important and foundational work in the Black Arts Movement and its under-representation of women suggest a lack of concern about black women writers' contributions to nation building and revolution. Further, that the only essay by a woman represented in this collection neglects to engage in an examination of women writers speaks loudly to the challenges regarding gender that plagued the movement. See Gayle 351.

writers. Gayle asserts that literary critics, who were mostly white, demand that black literature reach beyond its "parochial boundaries," and address "universal issues" (38-45). Gayle argues that the imposition of the white aesthetic demands that black writers must construct a literature that subscribes to prescriptions set forth by the hegemonic culture, thereby, ignoring or eliminating a black aesthetic. According to Gayle, Neal, Fuller, and Baraka, part of the liberation of black people is the liberation of their literature from cultural strangulation by white critics and academics. For example, in Larry Neal's essay "The Black Arts Movement" (1968), he contends that the Black Arts Movement was an "ethical movement": a movement designed to empower and transform the cultural, political and social landscapes of oppressed peoples, particularly Africans and African-Americans, and to challenge white supremacy and dismantle white hegemony. Neal writes: "The Blacks Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics" (Neal 257). Additionally, in "The New Black Literature: Protest of Affirmation," Fuller asserts: "[t]here is a revolution in black literature in America. It is nationalist in direction, and it is pro-black" (357). However, despite these aestheticians' concerns about black cultural strangulation, black empowerment, and nationalism, they remain silent about issues regarding gender and women's relations to culture and nationalism.

However, while the aforementioned aestheticians neglect discourse about women in their essays, in Baraka's essay "Black Woman," which first appeared in *Black World* in July 1970, Baraka does imagine the role of the black women in nation building. Although the essay skates the issue of black women's oppression, it does anticipate feminism or womanism, placing issues regarding women's liberation squarely within the rubric of predictable anti-white discourse and black oppression. Any discourse arguing for the independence of women was regarded with suspicion by some of the practitioners.[6] Baraka writes:

6 In her essay, "The Art of Transformation: Parallels in the Black Arts and Feminist Art Movements," Lisa Gale Collins argues that both movements possessed similar utopian visions and "closely resembled each other; both movements shared similar traits, tendencies, tactics, and goals. Yet these were truly parallel struggles, for only a vital handful of courageous visionaries such as Frances Beal, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Faith Ringgold, June Jordan, Betye Saar, Angela Davis, and Ntozake Shange drew from and shaped both movements." Note that both Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez are excluded from Collins's enumeration of the "courageous visionaries." See Collins 273-74.

> We talk about the Black woman and the Black man like we were separate because we have been separated, our hands reach out for each other, for the closeness, the completeness we are for each other, the expansion of consciousness that we provide for each other. We were separated by the deed and process of slavery. We internalized the process, permitting it to create an alien geography in our skulls, a wandering of spirit that had us missing each other, and never never understanding just what it was. After we were gone from each other. My hand might rest on yours, and still you would be gone. And I, of course, out there, out wandering, among the rogues and whores of the universe. (7)

Baraka neglects to implicate how sexist oppression and the impact of patriarchy on black women also help to create an alien geography. In his imagination, the challenges with black men and women are attributable to white hegemony and oppression.

The following passage is yet another example of Baraka's idealized vision of black men and women's relations to the neglect of black women's self-actualization or achievement. Baraka argues that:

> . . . we do not believe in 'equality' of men and women. We cannot understand what devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals. . . nature has not provided thus. The brother says, 'Let a woman be a wo-man . . . and let a man be a ma-an . . .' But this means that we will complement each other, that you, who I call my house, because there is no house without a man and his wife, are the single element in the universe that perfectly completes my essence. You are essential to the development of any life in the house because you are that house's completion. (8)

Baraka's rhetoric privileges domesticity for black women and distorts their condition, whereas house not only signifies her body to which the black man can retreat, but it also symbolizes mother, lover, and helpmate, identities to which far too many black women had been saddled with, and that are reified

by both black men and women poets of this period.[7] However, since the Black Arts Movement was primarily about elevating not only consciousness but self-esteem, Baraka's strategic use of language and the plural pronoun "we" ignores and obfuscates complex gender issues and becomes representative of the kind of linguistic and rhetorical strategies that these male aestheticians would engage in in order to maintain the illusion of a black united front and a male/female unity. The use of "we" co-opts women, leaving them little or no space to articulate their own perception of the black nation.

Baraka concludes in this essay on the black woman that: "When we say complement, completes, we mean that we have certain functions which are more natural to us, and you have certain graces that are yours alone" (8). While in this essay he never articulates those functions that are more natural to men and those graces that are women's alone, he does lay out prescriptions for the roles of black women in building nation. These roles are exclusively drawn along traditional gender lines, and more frighteningly, consigned to a belief about the nature of women as well as their biology. For Baraka, the black woman is to bear the children and educate them, inspire her man, be his house, and maintain high morals and elevated social values in order to serve as an example to others in the community. But the real and difficult task of building a black nation is to be done by black men.

Relegated to the domestic sphere and the caring of others, the role, status, and position of black women within the building of nation differed little from roles historically drawn and often coercively assigned to black women. This subjugated position is one that black women intellectuals, writers and political activists fought against during the post-bellum era, and continued to attempt to usurp throughout the twentieth century. Despite Baraka's own acuity, he seems extremely short-sighted in his inability to understand that a black nation cannot reach actuality or fully develop without ending sexist, as well as racist, oppression and with the full participation of black women outside of the domestic sphere.[8]Although Baraka has since repudiated his position on women, Jerry Gafio Watts contends that "[e]ven though Baraka can now admit that he was sexist, he does not explain how male chauvinism ever came to be a central component of his and other black 'revolutionary' agendas" (337).

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7 Baraka's prescriptions for relegating Black women's places to the home echo the position taken by the Nation of Islam regarding the role of Black women. See Watts 328.

8 Baraka has not only recognized the inherent sexism in his rhetoric and practices during the Black Arts Movement, but he has celebrated the tenacity of his wife, Amina Baraka, for her ability to challenge his male chauvinism. See Watts 337.

But Baraka's pronouncements do anticipate, if not ostensibly respond to, the interest that black women were beginning to express in relations to the women's movement of the 1970s. Because the women's liberation was primarily viewed as a white, middle-class movement, some black writers of the Black Arts Movement regarded the push for gender equality as counter-revolutionary. The perception of the white-middle class movements is so aptly expressed by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and staunch proponents of Black nationalism and separatism, in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967). Carmichael and Hamilton argue:

> This class (the middle class) is the backbone of institutional racism in this country. Thus we reject the goal of assimilation into middle-class America because the values of that class are in themselves anti-humanist and because that class as a social force perpetuates racism. We must face the fact that, in the past, what we have called the movement has not really questioned the middle-class values and institutions of this country. If anything, it has accepted those values and institutions without fully realizing their racist nature. (41)

Some male aestheticians regarded the burgeoning women's liberation and feminist movements as vehicles for usurping black male power. Once again, men like Carmichael, Hamilton, and Baraka truly believed that the survival of a black nation was dependent on the cohesiveness and unity of black men and women. But none of these men acknowledge in print black women's oppression within their communities during this period. Neither did they provide a space for an articulation or vision of this unity by black women that challenged these aestheticians' perception of nation. The black man was a vanquished warrior, castrated by the white man and needing to regain his manhood (Cleaver 236-42). Black women were the vehicles by which the men would regain his manhood. This manhood was often symbolically regained through black women poets' celebration and reification of black men. One is left to wonder, what are the relations between black men establishing patriarchal dominance and black women's sense of self, and why have these men strayed so far away from the proto-feminist discourse of Frederick Douglass and Du Bois?

For the women poets of this period, the question that begs to be answered is how does their poetry address, respond to, embrace, or challenge the role of black women in nation building? Further, how does the Black Arts Movement

facilitate or impede black women's poetic imaginations? Cheryl Clarke reminds us that:

> Both the Black Arts and Black Power Movements were generative of a new political and cultural agency among African American. Poetry was a principal instrument of political education about the new Blackness. Wherever they stood in relation to the Black Arts Movement, most Black women writers of that time wrote *because* of it—and still do" [my emphasis]. (3)

So what do two of the leading black women poets, Giovanni and Sanchez, of the Black Arts Movement have to say about this? And where does Audre Lorde figure into the paradigm of nation building and black art?

II.

In an interview conducted by Claudia Tate and subsequently published in *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983), Tate asks Nikki Giovanni to define, if she can, the black aesthetic. Unable to define the black aesthetic, Giovanni states its drawbacks:

> As the Black-aesthetic criticism went, you were told that if you were a Black writer or a Black critic, you were told *this* is what you should do. That kind of prescription cuts off the question by defining parameters. I object to prescriptions of all kinds. In this case the prescription was a capsulized militant stance. What are we going to do with that stance? Literature is only as useful as it reflects reality. I talk about this in *Gemini*; I also say it's very difficult to gauge what we have done as a people when we have been systematically subjected to the whims of other people [my emphasis]. (Tate 63)

As one of the most avid proponents of black nationalism, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Arts Movement, Nikki Giovanni's early poetry, published by Broadside Press, supports and touts the black nationalist agenda despite her protest in the Tate interview to the contrary. Giovanni's militant poetry echoes Baraka's nationalist rhetoric and replicates discourse concerning violence and patriarchy to critique white racism and to articulate nation. Having been one of "the first Black Arts movement poets to achieve stardom" (Gates and McKay 2096) and one of Broadside Press' most

popular poets (Boyd 173), Giovanni, ideally, was perfectly situated to challenge the exclusion of women within the hierarchy of nation building and the misogyny and homophobia that characterized this period. Nonetheless, her early poetry represents personas that remain complicit with an anti-woman, anti-gay, and anti-lesbian vision of a new black nation. The black man remains the vanquished warrior who must be reinstated on his throne. And this reinstatement emerges as a celebration, not a critical examination, of patriarchy and misogyny.

Her poem,"Beautiful Black Men," which was published in her collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgement* in 1970, is representative of the celebration of black men that is so common in Giovanni's poetry of this period.

> I wanta say just gotta say something
> bout those beautiful beautiful beautiful outasight
> Black men
> with they afros
> walking down the street
> is the same ol danger
> but a brand new pleasure. (1-7)

While celebrating the beauty of black men and their afros, the persona admits, without explicitly identifying, the danger that the streets represent. The persona does not point to the white establishment as the origin of the danger. Historically, however, while whites in black poetry are often symbolic of wholesale terrorism against blacks, black women have not figuratively presented a danger to each other. Nonetheless, Black men are the dominant and celebrated presence in the poem; therefore, are black men the danger, and to whom do they present a danger? Mance contends that in this poem, "the elevation of the masculine is the vehicle, not the focus" (106). While Mance may argue that the masculine is not the focus, the ideology of the Black Arts Movement privileges the rescuing of the black male from white dominance and subjugation, as I contend earlier in this essay; and this much anthologized poem by Giovanni is complicit in this regard. The celebration does not end with the anonymous black men. Rather than celebrate rhythm and blues women of this period, the poem brings the reader's attention to black male, musical icons: "jerry butler, wilson pickett, the impressions/temptations, mighty mighty sly" (Giovanni 15-16). These stars' presence on stage alone causes the persona to see a "new breed in breed alls" (Giovanni 20), a new breed that is representative of black male assertiveness and reification.

However, even though the tone of the poem is celebratory, the origins of the danger in the poem remain unarticulated, or at best, obfuscated beneath the ongoing reification of black men. Black men with outasight afros are "sitting on stoops, in bars, going to offices/running numbers, watching their whores" (8-9), but not taking care of their children or loving their women. While this celebration of beautiful black men may challenge the representation of them as being impotent or caricatures in the literature of the dominant culture, it also presents them in stereotypical fashion, despite Giovanni's adherence to the black male, ego-building agenda that was part and parcel of the rhetoric of nation building during the Black Arts Movement. The lack of interrogation into black misogyny and patriarchy is so aptly represented in the poem by the phrase "watching their whores." There is an absence of critical engagement with the economics that precipitated black men to assume the role of pimp and black women to be whores. These roles are not critiqued by Giovanni. While Giovanni elides the issue of the more insidious aspects of black men's dangerous presence on the streets, that is, their misogyny and exploitation of black women, her poem nonetheless is operating within the paradigm established by the men aestheticians. Subjugated black women are common images in the writings of these men. The images of subjugated black women in poetry are not questioned by Giovanni in her poem. Giovanni ends this poem in a celebratory crescendo: "and i scream and stamp and shout/for more beautiful beautiful beautiful/black men with outasight afros" (25-26). Perhaps Giovanni's inability to interrogate the more complex nature of black men and women's images in her early published poetry has as much to do with her youth as it does with the dominant cultural ethos that tended to evade examining intraracial gender conflicts.

Like Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez published her early works of poetry with Broadside Press. Sanchez's position as a black poet during the Black Arts Movement is emblematic of the tensions that existed regarding the development of nation in light of the denigration of black women by both the dominant culture and by black men. Sanchez admits the contestatory negotiations that she engaged in as an outspoken black woman poet of this period. She writes unabashedly about her experiences as a member of the Nation of Islam during the 1970s, and how she continued to speak out and talk back despite the Nation's policy of silencing women. She recalls how often when she was giving a poetry reading, the men of the Nation would simply leave the room (Tate 139-41). The Nation's inability to silence her unequivocally attests to Sanchez's heightened concerns about the disparate treatment which women were experiencing, particularly if they stepped out of their places. Despite her awareness of the denigrated status of black women, Sanchez's early poetry nonetheless expresses a militant

stance and celebrates black manhood in envisioning nation. Her poetry does not broach issues concerning sexism or sexual preference.

Sanchez's first four collections of poetry, *Homecoming* (1969), *Liberation Poem* (1970), *We A BaddDDD People* (1970), and *It's a New Day (poems for young brothas and sistuhs)* (1970), clearly do not question the authoritative and dominant position of black men, and like Giovanni, Sanchez casts black men in the position of vanquished warrior needed to be reified and rescued, even while criticizing black men's interracial liaisons with white women. The second poem "to all brothers" in *Homecoming* admonishes black men for their proclivity towards desiring white women. "to all brothers" embodies both contestatory and cautionary themes. Yet, despite the poem's overt warning, the ending is clearly unexpected and attests to the pretense of unity between genders that was so much a prescriptive during the movement. In skeletal form, Sanchez writes:

yeah.
    they
hang you up
those grey chicks
parading their
tight asses
in front of you.
some will say out
right
    baby I want
    to ball you
while smoother
ones will in
tegrate your
Blackness
    yeah.
    brother
this sister knows
    and waits. (1-19)

Of course, it is the waiting for black men to forsake the pursuit of white women and embrace black women as partners that becomes problematic regarding Sanchez's perspective on gender relations. Mance argues that "[f]or Sanchez, white women's value and attractiveness to African American men rests on the popular acceptance of both her body and her social position (her proximity to white males) as a marker of wealth and power, a wealth and power that excludes Black women" (115). And while Mance concludes that black women are not powerless in this poem, they are nonetheless waiting. This waiting seems to suggest both compromise and support of black men despite the insults to black women in black men's dalliances with white women. I suggest that it is the waiting that does, indeed, render black women powerless, without agency, in this poem. However, despite the celebration of black men in this poem, by 1972 Sanchez's poetry begins to reflect on black men's misogyny and proclivity towards white women at the destruction and alienation of black women, but it does not go far enough to re-envision a gender-equitable black nation.

Although Sanchez's Black Arts Movement poetry at times symbolizes idealism in the possibilities for inter-gender unity and nationhood as well as a celebration of black men [for example, in "to Morani/Mungu" a poem from *It's a New Day (poems for young brothas and sistuhs)* (1971)], there remains a sense of the incompleteness of black women without black men, without interrogating gender inequities that were at the root of this fragmentation. "Poem No. 13" from Sanchez's collection *Love Poems* expresses this so completely:

brother—as-Salaam-Alaikum
sister—Wa-Alaikum-Salaam

brother—and how moves my queen today?
sister—my happiness creases the ground
as I walk my king.

brother—I have not seen you in days; and I
miss your face.
Sister—I have carried your picture in my eyes my brother.

Brother—in life one searches for his twin; you are mine.

Sister—since birth, I have not moved
Waiting for you to sift these waves
Until they flaked like diamonds
Over me.

Brother—I have become the sun
Sister—I feel your heat

Brother—it is hard for the sun to keep all the
Light and not have a moon to give it to.
Sister—it is hard for a moon to deal without her sun.

Brother—shall I be the sun for your darkness?
Sister—Black man shine upon me. I am
A moon for your light and christened
By your sun, will make
Nite become day and the morning
Shall cradle your Blackness. (1-25)

Using the black rhetorical strategy of call and response, "Poem No. 13" emphasizes an interconnectedness between a black man and woman, and a deep abiding respect for each other not only as deities, but also as heavenly bodies, without critical interrogation, but rather with an idealism that toed-the-line of the prescriptives set forth for black arts poetry. Although some of Sanchez's later works begin to interrogate Black women's oppression, Sanchez nonetheless primarily concentrates on the destructiveness of interracial relationships rather than on the mistreatment of black women by black men.

While the destructiveness of black men/white women interracial relationships does not surface as a predominant theme in Audre Lorde's poetry (for Lorde engaged in interracial and same gender relations most of her adult life), Lorde's position as a sister outsider, lesbian, black woman, warrior poet gives her a unique perspective from which to gaze upon the terrain of blackness, as it was constructed and prescribed during the 1960s and 1970s. Concerned that prescriptions for blackness were as limiting as they were destructive, Lorde

combated homophobia and the idealization and uncritical regard for hetero-normativity in the black community with the same fervor as she challenged white racism and black women's oppression by both blacks and whites. Like Giovanni and Sanchez, Lorde, too, published her poetry with Dudley Randall's Broadside Press. However, from her first publication with Broadside Press, *From a Land Where Other People Live* (1973), Lorde's poetry exhibits a sophistication in style and lyricism that differs quite significantly from the poetry of Giovanni, Sanchez, and other poets published by Broadside Press. One would expect a certain nationalist or militant stance in Lorde's early publications with Broadside Press; however, to the contrary, Lorde's poetry of this period examines and excavates the deep recesses of the human experience in conjunction with a vision of a black nation. Lisa Gale Collins contends that Lorde was one of the "courageous visionaries" from this period (273-74). Armed with her courage, Lorde engaged contemporary politics with personal ethos and art, and this is particularly true of her love poems implicitly written to women.[9]

The full import of Lorde's aesthetic and how she critiques the idea of a hetero-normative and male-centered, black nation that fails to interrogate sexual preference and women's subjugation can be gleaned from her poem "Conclusion." In this poem, the tension between the prescriptive nature of building a black nation and the persona's vision are aptly presented in the first stanza. Lorde writes:

> Passing men in the street who are dead
> becomes a common occurrence
> but loving one of them
> is no solution.
> I believe in love as I believe in our children
> but I was born Black and without illusions
> and my vision
> which differs from yours
> is clear
> although sometimes restricted. (1-10)

9 Randall refused to publish *Cables to Rage* unless Lorde deleted any explicitly lesbian poem. In her biography of Dudley Randall, Melba Boyd contends that "[r]egarding the lesbian content [Randall] explained that he suggested the exclusion of poems that were explicitly homosexual to protect [Lorde]." See Boyd 248.

The persona immediately challenges the idea that men need to be rescued through love, or rescued at all, which is one of the primary ethos of the Black Arts Movement. Whether the men are literally or figuratively dead, the persona unequivocally denounces love as a solution for saving dead men even while announcing its belief in love. In fact, the poem signals a response to the predominant discourse of the Black Arts Movement. For what is immediately being challenged by the poem's persona is one's vision, and the ability to have a different vision. By introducing the image of children into the poem's landscape, a sense of family and community are evoked, thus allowing Lorde to signify on the ideology and discourse of nation building.

Coming into poetic voice at a moment in U.S. history when other marginalized groups were finding voice, Lorde's position is complex in the way that she had not only to negotiate racial boundaries, but also had to scale the walls erected around gender and sexual preference. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Lorde argues that coming into blackness and demanding fair and equitable treatment were crucial components to black gay men's and lesbians' coming out and questioning the exclusivity of certain black prescriptives. Black male aestheticians like Gayle, Neal, Baraka, and Fuller (as well as Giovanni and Sanchez) had openly denounced homosexuality and linked it with white perversion in their writings. Therefore, this coming out for black gay men and lesbians threatened to cast them not only outside the black community but, because of white racism, outside a "mainstream" community altogether.[10] Lorde addresses this quite succinctly when she states that:

> To begin with, all of these things are relative, and when we speak of the openness of the seventies, we are speaking more of an appearance than a reality. But as far as sexuality is concerned, it is true that in the seventies, Black lesbians and gay men saw a slowly increasing acknowledgment of their presence within the Black community. In large part this came about because of the number of us speaking out about our sexual identities. In the 1960s, many Black people who spoke from a complex Black identity suffered

10 In recounting her political activism during 1969, Lorde exposes the fact that although she was a black lesbian, she, and some others, did not openly identify themselves as such. Lorde articulates the potential erasure that this lack of identification can pose: "[b]ut you did not know it because we did not identify ourselves, so now you can say that Black Lesbians and Gay men have nothing do with the struggles of the Black Nation." See Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays by Audre Lorde*, (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988) 23.

> because of it, and were silenced in many ways. In the mistaken belief that unity must mean sameness, differences within the Black community of color, sex, sexuality, and vision were sometimes labeled, oversimplified, and repressed. We must not romanticize the sixties while we recognize its importance. Lesbians and gay men have always existed in Black communities, and in the sixties we played active and important roles on many fronts in that decade's struggle for Black liberation. And that has been so throughout the history of Black people in America, and continues to be so. (Tate 102)

This coming out and airing of issues around sexual preference also provided a fertile terrain for the discussion of gender oppression and sexism. Lorde's quest as a woman warrior and her unrelenting commitment to ending all types of oppression clearly are her hallmarks in an era dominated by black men who denied sexism and black women who feared Lorde's sexual politics. For allegiance to the idea of building a black nation often usurped gender alliances among some black women.

While Giovanni and Sanchez's poetry appears to be complicit with the prescriptives and proscriptions delineated by the male aestheticians, in comparison the vision that Lorde shares in her poetry of the Black Arts Movement beckons attention to the way that it shatters the idea of a homogenized ideology of the Black Arts Movement. Inattention to Lorde's quest to challenge the dominant vision of nation relegates her work to the periphery and fails to entertain the causal connection between it and themes emerging in the works of later black women writers of the 1980s. Lorde's contribution to the Black Arts Movement as a dissident, radical, and challenging voice cannot be underestimated, and needs to be examined beyond the parameters set by the politics of her identity as a feminist and lesbian, and should be wholly engaged within the poetic tradition of her contemporary women poets to demonstrate how early on Lorde contested prescriptives that demanded the celebration and elevation of black men to the subordination or subjugation of black women in poetry. In no way is this essay meant to be an exhaustive treatment of this topic. However, neglecting to examine, assess, and analyze the way that Lorde's poetry, in particular, from this period disrupts narratives emerging within the critical communities regarding the Black Arts Movement only re-inscribes the subjugation and cultural strangulation that Lorde spent her entire career combating. But as Lorde reminds us, "who said it was simple" (*Sister Outsider* 39).

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