

**Beyond Nommo: Contextualizing the Literary Genealogy
Within Radical, Socially Responsible Black Poetry**

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Summary

This study explores the literary genealogy of the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976) and attempts to situate Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy as a worthwhile curricular paradigm, a critical literacy intervention, an alternative learning modality, and a tool for social transformation. Overall, the study seeks to interrogate and leverage Black Arts aesthetic inquiry and pedagogy to improve the academic, aesthetic, and cultural literacies of African American students. The narrative representation of this study is intentionally rooted in and drawn from a criticalist orientation that seeks to leverage the sentient voices, collective traditions, interpretive frameworks, and accumulated folk experiences of African Americans. The proposed Black Arts curricular paradigm encourages pedagogues and practitioners to reflect and champion the best of the African American cultural epistemology including: 1) promoting its activist philosophy; 2) critical resistance to [any form of] cultural hegemony, marginalization, or appropriation; 3) deepening inquiry into and authentic representation of its cultural antecedents and inherited traditions; 4) conveyance to and support of younger generations of students, teachers, and artists.

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CHAPTER 1. SPIRITWORK AND CONJUREFOLK

INTRODUCTION

driving latin rhythms coming out of candy store jukeboxes
trumpets, trumpets, trumpets
big brass mashed with sultry congas
sprouts palm trees in the middle of frozen streets
rhythms, rhythms, rhythms counter rhythms, polyrhythms watusi, watusi, watusi
and chano pozo lives in a thatched hut in the yambú land of mongo's mind
rhythms, rhythms, rhythms – a-ha! vaya! a-ha! vaya! a-ha! vaya!
welfare rhythms, palmares rhythms, machito rhythms, batan rhythms
they follow us everywhere

I bolted quickly into the classroom while fiercely reciting the lines of *Puerto Rican Rhythms* from memory. Caught completely off-guard, many students turned and jumped in their seats as we (Felipe Luciano and I) made a brazen entrance, kick-started the morning, and claimed aesthetic space with a rapid-fire succession of images and metaphors and music and memory. For the next two-and-one-half minutes we would be the journey of dancing fire chronicled in perpetual *songspeak* against diurnal streetscapes. We would be the tempering alloy of voice, hands, attitude, and *artpolitik* pulsing beneath the hardened, hungry skin of Afrfrican converts congregated on Spanish Harlem rooftops during the summer of sixty-six. We would be (and be again) the blessing way; the sweet parlance and prayer litany of a complex literary genealogy bequeathed and bathed in the blood of kings and commoners and *cornermen* etching spirit work and dancing hot jig and *hucklebuck* under starlight prisms of day-glo green.

Pulses quickened and a frantic sea of young faces contorted wildly as several students erupted with wild screams of excitement and shock. For several tense seconds I watched students watch me while holding their hearts in relief and cupped hands around their mouths as though

riding a ridiculously scary rollercoaster. Their eyes were fixed wide and their breathing seemed suspended. By the time I made it to “*watusi, watusi, watusi*” the shock banter in the classroom began to slowly recede and students began to pick up on what was happening in their seventh grade classroom during an otherwise typical Thursday morning. We were *doing* poetry.

Following my recitation some students said they initially thought their class was being taken hostage by some “angry, crazy dude.” Others said they thought that it was a fire drill and instinctively prepared to exit the building. One male student (who had jumped out of his seat with clenched fists) said he thought he was “’bout to have to throw down.” Unbeknownst to the students, I had suggested this approach to their teacher (Ms. A.) during our telephone conversation the previous evening. Ms. A. knew of my background as a teaching-artist and for two months had wanted me to visit her classroom. Prior to inviting me, Ms. A. would frequently mention her love for teaching, her “wonderful” students, and their immense interest in Hip-Hop music and spoken word poetry. Ms. A.’s description of her students was entirely familiar to me. I had encountered this scenario numerous times during the past twelve years. Ms. A. taught at an elementary school on the southwest side of Chicago. Her seventh grade classroom consisted of mostly Black and Latino students and a smattering of White students. As I found out during my visit and initial talks with Ms. A., her students’ interests ranged widely and included science, heavy metal music, dancing, Hip-Hop, fast food, and Facebook. Also, from my observation, they all shared a deep and abiding respect for their teacher.

When we planned my classroom visit, Ms. A. and I agreed it should take the form of a small presentation lasting roughly thirty to forty minutes. She wanted her students to be able to ask questions and to engage the presenter. I felt the same way and have always recognized the social and educative value of a vigorous Q&A session. Over a decade’s worth of aesthetic and

literacy interventions in urban schools had reinforced the inestimable, limitless value of creating, sustaining, and extending critical dialogue with students. I view it as essential to the practice of education. Over the years, during countless encounters with young people, I have observed how nervousness and excitement oftentimes transforms into embarrassment and contributes to a condition of intellectual quietude. However, questions and uncertainties always abound where poetry is concerned. Questions mean students are curious and sentient. Questions mean they want answers and may also be interested in the qualitative connections and multiple mysteries resting beneath (and/or just above) the surface: “*Who’s Chano Pozo? What’s a jukebox? What’s Palmares? What do you mean by watusi, watusi, watusi? Why did you say it like that?*”

I brought along printed copies of the Felipe Luciano poem to encourage questions and conversation. Following my recitation I distributed the copies and read the poem *with* the class. I encouraged them to underline unfamiliar words or phrases and proceeded to provide background in a Hardenbergian method of making “the familiar strange and the strange familiar.” This approach also served the demands of critical inquiry and collaborative learning. Also, it served as a powerful and dependable technique for deepening and widening contextual and collective understandings (implicit/explicit meanings, figurative language, etc.). I noticed withered dictionaries on the desks of most of Ms. A.’s students so I promptly asked them to look up and retrieve terms to enrich the discussion for their classmates. The conversation expanded to the wall map, then to the blackboard, and ultimately beyond the boundaries of the classroom walls and the southwest side of Chicago. With *Puerto Rican Rhythms* as the scratchline, we spent the next thirty-five minutes discussing history, politics, music, race/ism, and cultural identity. Along the journey we encountered the African maroon communities of Brazil (1605), the evolution of Afro-Cuban Jazz (late 1930s), the Black Panther Party, Young Lords Party, and The Last Poets

(1960s). We also encountered and traversed the intersection of black art, black politics, black culture, and black activism during something called the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976). In short, we *did* poetry.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RAISON D' ETRE OF THIS STUDY

The narrative representation of this study is intentionally rooted in and drawn from a criticalist orientation that seeks to leverage the sentient voices, collective traditions, interpretive frameworks, and accumulated folk experiences of African Americans. Our rhetorical tradition is one of the distinct hallmarks of the African American experience. Griots (professional oral historians) within the African/African American community perform the vital function of invoking, interpreting, and conveying both the remembered and the unremembered aspects of Black history and culture. As such, griots operate within the apprentice tradition of storytellers who obligate themselves to sustain the African American community and its literary genealogy.

As an African American teacher, poet, and student, my approach to critical literacy and emancipatory pedagogy is tied directly to my ability to appropriately and effectively theorize and draw from the life praxes of African Americans. With this study I attempt to situate Black Arts pedagogy as a worthwhile curricular paradigm to improve academic, cultural, and critical literacies among African American students. An ultimate goal of Black Arts pedagogy is for African American students to develop a “world encompassing conception” and functional appreciation of Black people’s shared struggles and cultural inheritances.

As a criticalist, my work is situated squarely in the African griot tradition and is therefore informed by the expansive body of cultural practices drawn from the corpus of Black radical thought and praxis. In keeping with the griot tradition, I regard myself as an extension and cultural representative of the Ancestors (Woodson, Du Bois, Septima Clark, Anna Julia Cooper,

Carolyn Rodgers, Addison Gayle, Jr., Barbara Sizemore, Asa Hilliard, to name a few). Their struggle is my struggle and our struggle. Thus, in ways that are deeply personal, my work addresses the same tensions encountered by forerunners in the field. Broadly speaking, these tensions involve ongoing struggles to apprehend, theorize, curricularize, and authenticate the literary genealogy drawn from the African American historical and cultural experience. As a committed teaching-artist operating within the griot tradition, my social and cultural obligation is tied naturally to confronting, interpreting, and (ultimately) eliminating these tensions.

To adequately serve the African griot tradition, the Black Arts curricular paradigm I propose must make worthwhile use of African American cultural knowledge. Black Arts pedagogues, in turn, are encouraged to reflect and champion the best of the African American cultural epistemology including: 1) promoting its activist philosophy; 2) critical resistance to [any form of] cultural hegemony, marginalization, or appropriation; 3) deepening inquiry into and authentic representation of its cultural antecedents and inherited traditions; 4) conveyance to and support of younger generations of students, teachers, and artists.

The griot tradition obligates me to invoke African American cultural knowledge as a form of inquiry, discourse, and critical praxis. This mission takes on expanded significance within the specific context of Black Arts curriculum and pedagogy. The Black Arts curriculum I am promoting through this study is grounded in critical literacy, cultural empowerment, and the radical thought traditions of African American activists, intellectuals, and creative artists who sought/seek to raise awareness, transform society, and improve the lives of Black students and (ultimately) the African American community. Black Arts pedagogy is presented in this study as a site for serious philosophical and epistemological investigation, valuable theorizing, and for

contextualizing the lived reality of African Americans. The curriculum is situated as a vehicle for literacy, consciousness-raising, and cultural empowerment.

FINDING AND FEELING *NOMMO*

Thus the power that whites sought over the people of Africa was not only the power to hold them as prisoner-laborers for their life and the life of their children's children: even more profoundly, it was the power to define them in North American terms according to Euro-American social, political, and economic needs. Whites in this way attempted to deny millennia of African history, pressing the tragic ironies of European names, faiths, and categories upon the black present, seeking in that and other ways to guarantee black co-operation and submission far into any future created by white racism and greed. (Harding, 1981, p. 29)

To approach understanding of the African American identity it is first necessary to explore and assess the African cultural antecedents undergirding our identity. Indeed, serious questions can (and should) be raised relative to the durability of African cultural inheritances (folkways, traditions, myths, belief systems, language, etc.) as those things, in large part, contributed to shaping the identity, psychology, and worldview of African Americans.

What cultural seeds were transplanted from the Senegal Valley (West Africa) and planted in the Mississippi Valley? Which African rituals, belief systems, and linguistic structures survived the treacherous, oceanic voyage across what medieval Arab merchants and geographers referred to as *Bahr al-Zulamat* (Green Sea of Darkness)? What and how extensive is the relationship between the primeval pitch-tone fluctuations of West African *Griots* (professional oral historians and poets) and the syncopated “field hollers” of enslaved Blacks in the Louisiana low-country? These fascinating questions set the stage for nuanced discussions about African/African American cultural epistemology and identity formation, transcendent traditions, the ethics of memory, and the “pedagogy of remembrance” (Simon, 2001).

Researchers have long recognized, written, and argued about the persistence of African culture, language, and ethnic identities. Gomez (1998) is among a coterie of contemporary scholars exploring this fascinating subject. He has written extensively about social dislocation and the psycho-cultural transformation of Africans (often crudely referred to as “saltwater negroes”) into African Americans (“new” or “country negroes”) as we were systematically sold and transplanted throughout the colonial and antebellum south. Gomez’s investigations indicate that Africans introduced into the southern United States were most likely taken from five distinct geographic zones within West Africa: Senegambia (upper and middle Niger Valleys), Sierra Leone (Guinea-Bissau, Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d’Ivoire), Gold Coast (Ghana), Bight of Benin (Togo, Benin, and southwestern Nigeria), Bight of Biafra (southeastern Nigeria). These five zones (and two additional zones in West Central and East Central Africa) are the ancestral homes (i.e., points of origin) of as many as six hundred distinct, socially stratified ethnic groups (including Mande, Iwe, Igbo, Akan, Asante, Wolof, Bambara, Baule, Fon, Fulbe, Twi) typically labeled and classified as Bantu or Bantu-speaking. According to the best estimates, for over three and a half centuries, approximately 14-20 million Africans were stolen from their ancestral homelands, imprisoned in *barracoons* on the west African coast, trafficked across the ocean, physically tortured, dehumanized, and psychologically deculturalized in islands throughout the Caribbean, and finally enslaved on plantations and farms throughout South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and eleven other southern states. G. M. Hall (2001) asserts that nearly all of the Africans brought into colonial Louisiana by the French and (later) Spanish “came directly from Africa.”

Countless scholars have elucidated that Africans relocated across the ocean carried with(in) them a complex cultural architecture reflecting their centuries-old experiences with

religion, spirituality, language, literature (spoken, written, sung), ancestral reverence, land/nature, male/female dynamics, communal living, institution-building, and other expressive forms of meaning-making. Over time these constituent cultural elements (especially religion/spirituality) formed the primary threads in the quilt of our present-day African American identity. Gomez's central thesis is that African captives, though newly enslaved in the United States, were (at the same time) still physically congregated and therefore managed to preserve (and express) far more of their indigenous cultural antecedents than previously thought or realized. Gomez's compelling thesis and reasoning is not new but is based on and supported by major voices in the field including Blassingame (1973), Curtin (1969), G. M. Hall (2007), Herskovits (1941), Lovejoy (1983), Rodney (1972), Thomas (1999), van Sertima (1987), and Weiner (1922).

Language (ex., speech, song, linguistics) and religion are perhaps the two strongest (and resilient) cultural elements that arrived and evolved with(in) Africans in the New World. As one of the first scholars to research specific linguistic carryovers from Africa to America, L. D. Turner (2002) researched thousands of intimate interconnections (words, names, numbers) between the language of Americanized Blacks (namely South Carolina) and that of their indigenous African relatives. Indeed, West African words such as *okra*, *juke*, *jazz*, *banjo*, *(n)yam*, *banana*, and *juju* were introduced into the North American lexicography by enslaved Africans. Also, transcendent religious concepts, funerary rites, ancestor reverence, and evocative rituals such as *voodoo* (vodun), the *ring shout*, and New Orleans' famous *second line* (originating in Senegal as a processional dance called the *Saba*) were incubated and synthesized for centuries on southern plantations in the United States. Separately and collectively, these (and many other)

undiluted cultural elements coalesced to mould the complex oral tradition of African Americans that sought to, as Neal (1989) asserts,

make literature move people to a deeper understanding of what this thing is all about, be a kind of priest, a black magician, working juju with the word on the world. (24)

The African American rhetorical tradition (ex., prophetic speech, the dozens, signifying, blues, storytelling, toast poetry, rap) has created a profound and distinctive imprint on American popular culture and the American imagination. It continues to do so. This is true of blues music in particular for as Ellison (1999) reminds us, “as a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of a personal [and collective] catastrophe expressed lyrically.” Indeed, the unbroken line projecting from West African culture is evident in everything from the prison *worksongs* of Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Farm... to the distinctive tonal aches and wailings of Howlin’ Wolf and Son House... the fiery preachments of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.... and the sublime (and sometimes incendiary) oratory of Black poets on Russell Simmons’ *Def Poetry Jam* cable program.

A provocative West African concept that is simultaneously spiritual and linguistic, *Nommo* is one of the many richly complex African cultural elements which has survived the centuries and taken on expanded meaning and mythication among African Americans—most especially poets and spoken word artists. Indeed, the creation and naming of institutions such as NOMMO Journal (Organization of Black American Culture, Chicago), NOMMO African American Authors Series (The Givens Foundation and University of Minnesota), NOMMO Performing Arts Company (Pennsylvania State University), and NOMMO Theater (Washington, D.C.) is clear testimony to the resilience and enduring cultural, capital, and spiritual appeal of *Nommo* among African Americans of the current age.

Nommo is a philosophical concept that originated among the Dogon (Bantu-speaking) people of West Africa (Mali) and is essentially acknowledgement and reverence of the generative and transformative power of the spoken word. The Dogon believe that [the] *Nommo* are ancestral spirits and also that *Nommo* carries and transmits a force that produces all life and influences everything. Human beings, it was believed, have power over the word and are therefore capable of directing the life force. Similar to other African cultural concepts (i.e., *sankofa*, *griot/jali faama*), *Nommo* worked its way out of the collective memory of enslaved Africans and into the popular conscience of African Americans (i.e., Africans in America) and *Nommo* was expressed through artistic mediums (dance, theater, sculpture, poetry), institution-building (i.e., artistic publications, physical structures, professional organizations, and creative guilds), and cultural practices (i.e., public prayer, Libation, culture circles, poetry readings, recognition ceremonies). Naturally, *Nommo* had profound implications for *conjure folk* (i.e., poets and spoken word artists) whose artistic contributions and political/cultural philosophy helped formulate the theoretical and aesthetic framework for the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976). For culturally conscious and critically engaged poets, our qualitative interactions and elaborate expressions of *Nommo* deeply affects and informs how we approach the process of storytelling, stagecraft, audience engagement, and indeed, the entire concept of spoken word performance.

Culturally conscience Black poets see ourselves as culture workers serving in the apprentice tradition as griot who interpret the word and world and seek the psychological, cultural, and physical liberation of Black people on all levels. Artistically, our work may entail the unshackling of Black creativity from dependence on European art forms and modalities. Culturally, our *spiritwork* may mean building independent Black institutions such as schools,

publishing presses, and culture centers. Politically, it may mean cultivating new spokespersons and groups to speak/think/work on behalf of the interests of Black people (or overthrow those persons and groups who do not do so). Thus, for committed spoken word artists, the word is spirit and raw mineral resting in the reservoir of our biological and aesthetic consciousness. The page and stage are mortar and pestle; the cultural anvil upon which we create community, engage tradition, articulate practice, and breathe life into theory.

Many Black poets and spoken word artists invoke *Nommo* as a communication medium to convey messages containing political and cultural themes that are, at times, construed as highly provocative, volatile, and/or controversial (almost especially by non-Blacks). Spoken word artists who write/recite in this vein employ the stagecraft tools of emotional appeal, projection, theatricality, and metaphorical emphasis to represent, reflect, and articulate information and ideas using artistic means. The open mic host guides this activity by dynamically orchestrating and organizing rhetoric/action and in so doing acts as catalyst, conduit, and cultural broker. As these types of open mic sets unfold they ultimately evolve a unique style and personality that differentiates them from other open mic sets. I spent serious time and effort developing these types of spoken word gatherings during my career as a professional spoken word artist and apprenticeship in the African griot tradition.

As open mic host, my duties included planning discussion topics and format, circulating the reading list, selecting and introducing poets, crowd control and logistics, performing opening Libation, segueing music, and other responsibilities. Pouring opening Libation is perhaps the most important (and intimate) duty that the host has to perform. Pouring of Libation is an ancient African custom that has transcended generations. As a spiritual ceremony, Libation is poured publicly as an act of remembrance for and cultural continuity and synchrony with departed

Ancestors – especially one’s own blood relatives. An open mic host facilitates these proceedings and, in a sense, acts as a cultural attaché between the Ancestors and the audience. Pouring Libation is *spiritwork* and serves as a form of fostering critical communication between the spiritual (ancestral) realm and the physical realm. It is a way of creating and sustaining community.

Essentially, the ultimate goal of Libation is to establish communal grounds for communication with the community. All in attendance are regarded as family and partners in dialogue. At authentic Black poetry gatherings where Libation is offered it is common to hear people call out such names as Zora Neale Hurston, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, Fred Hampton, Hatshepsut, and Malcolm X. To conclude Libation, the host will typically encourage participants to speak the names of their departed blood relatives. This serves as an official form of authoritative utterance. A conscientious and knowledgeable host will proceed to remind people about such things as the importance of recognizing and remembering loved ones, the strength of familial connections, or that spiritual kinship is maintained through the *djele* (blood). Channeling *Nommo*, the goal of such authoritative utterance is to commit deliberate acts of remembrance, foster shared cultural understandings, encourage collective dialogue, and build community (i.e., common unity).

For those engaged and apprenticed in the Griot tradition, (including the author), *Nommo* represents something more intimate, modular, and expressive. An obvious African cultural antecedent, *Nommo* is, for committed Black poets and oral artists, the exchange medium through which culture is made and maintained. As Griot, we are personally and socially obligated to transmit the word and to work within the apprentice tradition to relate and represent the expansive cultural epistemology of our people. Moreover, *Nommo* takes on broad conceptual

proportions and pedagogic possibilities when folded into discussions concerning curriculum theorizing, engaging African American students with critical literacy, transforming urban classrooms, and other ever-shifting educational considerations.

Broadly speaking, whether in a playhouse, poetry café, or classroom, *Nommo* is typically approached (“handled”) with careful adherence to four general organizational and operational principles and objectives: 1) create community by forming a symbiotic relationship between speaker and listeners; 2) engage/invoke African/African American ancestral and communal folk traditions; 3) convey the liberating possibilities and transformative potential of the spoken word; 4) nurture and sustain the genealogy of *thoughtworks* and *spiritworks* among African Americans.

Thus, to move *beyond Nommo* is to continue to critically explore, interrogate, incubate, and leverage the complex [yet marginalized] epistemology (history, folkways, traditions, experiences, memories, etc.) of African people (continental and Diasporan) and ensure that our epistemology remains accessible, decipherable, and functional for current and future generations. Indeed, this epistemology (which includes the African American literary genealogy) is rightly regarded as a cultural artifact of the African Diaspora whose stewardship is at once compulsory to and synonymous with our very survival and development. Thus, by emphasizing *beyond* I am not advocating that we move away from our traditions but deeper inside them to explore and reap new vision and possibilities. For theorists, criticalists, and (especially) Black teaching-artists, this orientation functions as a liberating, consciousness-promoting praxis and the *stuff of culture* informed by what poet Sandra Jackson-Opuku (1987) calls a “history that coils itself around us.”

PRACTITIONER BACKGROUND, PT. 1: LISTENING AND SPEAKING AS AN INSIDER

An etched stone by Swiss artist Ugo Rondinone is housed in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art and bears the following title: "*All moments stop here and together we become every memory that has ever been.*" At once, the title encourages serious and sustained personal reflection. Rondinone's art enjoins one to (re)consider the imprimatur of narrative, history, heritage, and something I refer to as the ethics of memory. Here is a fine example of committed art prompting inner dialogue by challenging the imagination and palette of the patron.

I have been attracted to writing and the arts for as long as I can remember. Speech, wordplay, and different styles of interpersonal communication are of particular interest. I believe my first *influential* exposure came via comic novels and Saturday morning cartoons. For very good reasons, comic lore has always resonated particularly well. I have always been attracted to the language, stories, and artwork – all of which came together in a kind of creative synergy that could captivate me (and still does) for hours on end. I was not only attracted to characters (names, appearance, tortured origins) but also to the way they spoke and interacted with other characters. From there, the first book I ever remember reading was a book about unicorns. And while I do not remember the exact plot of that short book I do remember reading it several times and even discussing it with others. Thus began my earliest known exploration into the world of literacy, imagination, and conversations about words. This was the beginning of what has become a lifelong relationship with the word and the world.

As an elementary and high school student I attracted a great deal of attention because of essays and poetry written for various English classes. School was a very special place to me during those days. Looking back I remember it as a place of safety and security but also as a place of wonder and mystery. I recall warm classrooms filled with full encyclopedia sets and

vibrant, colorful posters depicting celebrities (ex., Bill Cosby, Mr. T., The Muppets) promoting the power of literacy. I recall the distinct smell of mimeograph fluid, boxed pizza lunches, and pine-scented industrial hand soap. Most important, I recall teachers (particularly from elementary school) who were friendly and to whom we afforded the special reverence usually reserved for aunts and uncles – particularly those on your mother’s side of the family.

During elementary school I recall class fieldtrips to the school’s parking lot to visit the BookMobile and completing the order form for the *Weekly Reader*. I enjoyed reading the descriptions of books in the colorful columns of the *Weekly Reader*. Our teacher would set aside time during the week (usually Friday) for our class to look through the form and select books to order. There was anticipation and excitement among my classmates on days when the new books arrived. It gave me such a wonderful feeling to actually hold (i.e., be in possession of) books that I had personally selected from the catalog. I was proud of my books and would carry and rotate them (two at a time) in the white vinyl pocket of my TrapperKeeper™ notebook.

I am old enough to remember a particular segment of elementary and high school English teachers (at least in the schools I attended) who shared four characteristics: White, Irish descent, friendly, and engaged. I recall their names (Mrs. Mara, Mrs. Sutherland, Mrs. Bungert, Mr. Yesley) and their immense interest and dedication to teaching. And while I never imagined or regarded them as extended family (like I did with most of the Black teachers) I did have enormous respect for them and how they challenged and encouraged us to experience literature, think critically, and interrogate the world.

One of my high school English teachers (Mrs. Bungert) practiced the habit of awarding ribbons for well-written papers. Ribbons were awarded across several color categories (red, white, green, blue) according to the level of effort she felt the student put forth in the assignment.

To make *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* more appealing, another teacher (Mr. Yesley) would bring a phonograph to class and play “books-on-record” to enhance our interaction with the printed literature. I still remember the smiles and contorted looks of curiosity on the faces of my fellow students as we listened to recordings of (allegedly) British actors performing scenes from Shakespearean plays. As an additional complement, Mr. Yesely challenged students with an in-class assignment whereby we had to select, memorize, and recite a soliloquy from *Macbeth* in front of our classmates. And while Mr. Yesley never framed them as such, his innovative approaches to classroom engagement and literacy provided opportunities for students to develop and build skills in phonetic awareness and phonics, fluency, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. Those experiences were fun, educational, and represented a creative and dignified approach to teaching a bunch of inner city kids. I *still* remember my soliloquy verbatim. Moreover (and personally speaking), such teaching practices made (and kept) me curious and conscientiously engaged in what has been a lifelong relationship with the arts, learning, and teaching.

My fifth grade English teacher was a soft-spoken, no-nonsense African American woman named Mrs. Virginia Brown. The students loved and adored Mrs. Brown for any number of reasons. She was a proud, statuesque woman possessed of old-school mannerisms and a warm, motherly disposition. A superb teacher, Mrs. Brown never raised her voice and took great care to learn the names of all of her students (current and former). Mrs. Brown had a professed love for reading and discipline and took special care to make every student feel respected, appreciated, and loved. During English instruction, groups of students (five to six) would organize into small literacy communities. Our square desks were clustered to face one another and groups were allotted approximately 20-30 minutes per day to read and discuss the literature assignment

(usually a short story). During this time, Mrs. Brown stressed group accountability, collaborative learning, and above all—politeness. For instance, students within groups were *expected* to assist each other with spelling, pronunciation, and plot/character comprehension. Also, Mrs. Brown required every student in her class to purchase and keep a small, plastic “vocabulary box.” During the school year students were to populate their vocabulary boxes with 3”x 5” index cards containing new words, definitions, plot points, character profiles, and the like. Mrs. Brown would check vocabulary boxes frequently throughout the school year for quality and quantity of index cards. Like the other students, I wanted to impress Mrs. Brown with a full, neat, and detailed vocabulary box. Following group work, Mrs. Brown often called on different students from each group to read aloud. She would listen patiently and quaintly sip her afternoon tea from a dainty, floral-patterned porcelain cup.

When teaching in classrooms, I often reflect holistically (and delightfully) on my early literacy experiences. More, I somehow remember *and use* how I felt as a young student to inform, shape, and guide my thinking and teaching practices. Indeed I am quite fortunate to have been exposed to exceptional teachers who were patient, caring, creative, and empathetic. From those teachers (and others both good *and* bad) I learned about the importance of patience, respect, good teaching, and the effective use of imagination to facilitate learning and engagement. More, I acquired a fine, deep, and ever-evolving appreciation for the power of self-expression and self-definition. Looking back, I was exposed to excellent teachers who stressed high achievement, hard work, high expectations, and literacy (i.e., reading, writing, expression) as the general rule as opposed to the specific exception. The rebounding influence of my elementary and high school English teachers helped me to identify and discern important qualities that all good teachers should possess: patience, imagination, flexibility, respect for

children and the learning process, and genuine interest in the lives of the students whom one teaches.

I started writing poetry around the age of 13 and have not looked back since then. My first experience with poetry came by way of encountering Shakespeare. Not surprisingly, my earliest poems were sonnets. To be more accurate, they were extremely corny sonnets reflecting that I was *a friend of Bill* and therefore aesthetically capable of gaining the attention of certain girls in my neighborhood. My early writings incorporated faraway images and themes involving the moon, seasons, and the personal aesthetics of my subjects (hair, eyes, curvature of face, and other features). And while my early efforts were clumsy and imitative they were also sincere. Among female peers, my poetry writing gained me the neighborhood reputation of being a dreamy, artistic, and romantic beatnik. In sophisticated teen vernacular I was “deep.” The reaction among my male peers was mixed. Perhaps because it had nothing to do with getting dirty and acting tough, some of my male peers viewed reading and writing poetry as a “sissy” pursuit. However, other male peers respected the female attention poetry attracted. Some of my friends even went so far as to “hire” me to write anonymous poems on their behalf for their girlfriends or secret crushes. Unbeknownst to me at the time my role as “poetry consultant to the Bruhs” would continue into my young adult years.

I was a 15-year-old high school student in 1985 and had taken a job as a stock clerk at *Walgreens*. As was (and probably still is) the blue-collar custom in those days, one of the stock clerk’s primary duties was to “spot mop” the floor at the end of the night. Typically this consisted of rolling the bucket and mop around the entire store to hunt for smudges left by people wearing black rubber soles and in too much of a hurry to notice they had just scuffed the off-white linoleum. My schedule back then consisted of rushing home from school to freshen up

and retrieve my smock, grabbing a quick bite, and then hurrying to catch the train to work. I worked the 4:00p-11:30p shift four days per week at the store located in Chicago's Bridgeport neighborhood. For decades Bridgeport held distinction as one of Chicago's most notoriously racist and segregated communities. Growing up I would sometimes overhear uncles and other family members recount racist incidents they themselves experienced or had heard about in Bridgeport. I, too, experienced virulent, stinging prejudice firsthand (and regularly) during my two and a half year stint working at the location. The incident that affected me the most occurred during one late evening while two older White women stood talking near the front entrance to the store. I had noticed them during my ritualistic spot mopping.

"Am I holding you up?" the woman asked her friend as I looked back at them and then at the wall clock. It was past 11:30pm and the store was officially closed.

"Nah. But I think you're holding the store up," the friend remarked motioning with her thumb in my direction.

"Well fuck him. He's a nigger. I don't give a shit," the first woman replied as the second woman laughed.

I gripped the mop handle tightly in my hands and stopped cold. I looked back at them with an initial feeling of curious numbness. Following the woman's brusque remark they both left the store. I stood there not knowing quite what to feel. Five years earlier my father, a career soldier and U. S. Army Staff Sergeant, had been killed in a car crash in Germany while on military duty on behalf of these United States. And now, at 15, I found myself working in a retail store after school in order to save money for college. More specifically, I found myself working in Bridgeport – a southwest side Chicago neighborhood with a notorious tradition of anti-Black racism, racial politics, and racist violence. It was nothing for Blacks to be attacked in broad

daylight in Bridgeport and here I was a teenager working in that neighborhood until 11:30pm and then having to catch public transportation back home. Four nights per week. The whole affair was eerily reminiscent of the picture painted by James Baldwin (in Lomax, 1979):

The Negro masses neither join nor denounce the Black Muslims. They just sit at home in the ghetto amid the heat, the roaches, the rats, the vice, the disgrace, and rue the fact that come daylight they must meet the man – the white man – and work at a job that only leads to a dead end. (p. 67)

Immediately following the women's vulgar comment the store manager (a very kind Mexican gentleman) patted me on my shoulder and encouraged me to dismiss the comment. "Hey, man forget them. They're ignorant. Don't let them get to you." As I stood there trying to figure out *why* the woman made the remark, it quickly dawned on me that the manager and another store employee (a Mexican woman) witnessed the entire vicious encounter. For me, the moment was thick with confusion and the crackling of inequality. The long commute home provided ample time for me to reflect and try to make some sense of what had happened. This had never before happened to me. Strangely, I do not remember being angered over what the White woman said. However, I *do* remember wanting to know *why* she said it – to a child no less. That incident left me (in Pink Floyd-speak) *uncomfortably numb*.

My experiences in Bridgeport (and dozens more that have followed) taught me that there are people in the world whose intentions are not good. In this world there exist people who, for whatever reason, have absolutized notions regarding the innate superiority of some and the relative inferiority of others. During my short journey, I have encountered these pseudo-superior types in many worlds including academia and business. As a Black male teacher, these revelations continue to teach and encourage me to seek new (read *functional*) ways of accessing appropriate understandings of race, racism, and racialized conversations (Lynn, 2006). Though contentious, I have learned to view such conversations as necessary for those desiring to evolve.

Indeed, to understand and navigate hostile racist situations and dialogues, I have learned to leverage the unique history of African Americans of resistance and liberation-struggle as both reference and resource. Lynn (2006) comments on the importance of looking at the pedagogy of Black men, particularly those “using their classrooms as a tool to improve the social conditions of African Americans.” Through my *race* experiences I have also sought to develop a critical understanding of the [sometimes] curious intent and purpose of racists, race-baiters, and *passive* perpetrators who (and this can be debated) do more harm through their appalling silence and inaction than others do through their *active* perpetration.

Following my Bridgeport experiences, I began noticing “new” themes in the poems I wrote and read in high school. Perhaps predictably, the tone of my writing throughout my high school years took on a more political and cultural tone. I was introduced to Black poets (i.e., Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Phyllis Wheatley) during Black History Month observances in high school. Typically, efforts to recognize and promote Black History involved the posting of certain poems (usually Hughes’ *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*) and King’s *I Have a Dream* speech in popular spaces around the school. Favored spots included cafeteria and hallway display cases. Hughes’ poem was typically reproduced using a mimeograph machine with several copies being posted throughout the building. Needless to say, some copies were torn down and wound up on the floor or in the garbage. Other copies became the victims of graffiti to the point where they were no longer legible. However, some of the posted poems actually would last during the entire month of February. I remember reading these poems and wondering silently “Who is this Langston Hughes dude?” Prior to high school, I had absolutely no knowledge of or experience with Langston Hughes, Black poetry, the Harlem Renaissance, or the Black Arts Movement.

During my remaining years of high school I became acquainted more deeply with the history and tradition of Black poetry. This also included a foray (largely personal and outside of school) with the writers and literature of the Harlem Renaissance. However, it was not until I entered college that I became formally acquainted with the works of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Fenton Johnson, Jean Toomer, and other writers. The deeply personal and political tone of those writings naturally influenced my own writing. I also felt the heavy influence of Hip-Hop music during those formative years. In those days, the bulk of Hip-Hop music contained messages that were worlds different than the musical messages of the current age. I drew political and cultural awareness from the music of Sista Souljah, Chuck D and Public Enemy, KRS-ONE and Boogie Down Productions, Eric B. and Rakim. Owing to historical and literary references in their raps, I was also drawn to “discover” the work of earlier artists such as The Watts Prophets, The Last Poets, Gil Scott Heron, and the spoken word poem-songs of Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters. My cultural awareness, writing, and [later] spoken word performances were heavily influenced by rapper poets such as X-Clan, Paris, Def Jef, N.W.A., Kool Moe Dee, MC Lyte, and Ice-T. These artists expounded on themes such as political empowerment, militancy, Black cultural awareness, metaphysics, Pan-Africanism, artistry, communalism, and vegetarianism.

Around this time I began to formally associate rap (speaking words over music) with poetry (writing, performance, etc.). This conscious association on my part was due to a single line in a Hip-Hop song (*Follow the Leader*) by Rakim:

*Rap is rhythm and poetry. Cuts create sound effects
You might catch up if you follow the records E[ric] wrecks
Until then keep eatin' and swallowin'
You better take a deep breath and keep followin' the leader*

I considered Rakim's description of rap as *Rhythm and Poetry* a philosophical and artistic revelation of the highest caliber. All of a sudden a fantastic new world of epistemic exploration opened for me as a result of the critical, elite link established between Hip-Hop culture and spoken word poetry.

As I investigated and learned more I became more deeply interested in performance poetry. My first encounter with spoken word (performance) poetry began in 1988 at a small liberal arts college in Ohio. My undergrad major was English (Creative Writing) and I was quite active with planning and participating in literary events (mainly poetry readings) both on and off campus. Some events were student-sponsored and the English and Ethnic Studies departments sponsored others. In 1989 I began performing my poetry at college poetry sets. Back then the sets were well attended however only a small handful of writers were actually reading/performing at the sets. Owing to differences in style, content, and delivery, the campus poets quickly developed a wide and diverse following. Many of us were regularly called upon to read at literary conferences, lectures, Black History gatherings, awards ceremonies, banquets, and other campus events. Also, many poets frequented and were featured at off-campus poetry sets. I often visited sets hosted at different venues in Toledo, Cincinnati, Columbus, and Cleveland, Ohio. These events supplemented my class instruction and personal study of literature and language. I also wrote intermittently for the campus daily newspaper (*The BG News*) and served as both writer and editor for the campus' monthly Black student newspaper (*The Obsidian*). In addition to penning editorials and feature stories for *The Obsidian*, I also had my own poetry published in the paper and in *Miscellany*, an arts-focused campus magazine published monthly by students in the English department. These literary outlets provided enormous exposure for a fledgling writer and evolving poet. I started to develop a reputation and

local following on campus and self-published my first book in 1989. This was nearly a full decade before the movie *Love Jones* (filmed in Chicago) would capture the creative, cultural, and commercial imagination of young Black people throughout the United States.

I returned to Chicago frequently during college breaks and quickly became immersed in the small, local poetry scene. At first there were not many *joints* (spoken word venues) on the south side of Chicago where poets could *spit* (read and perform). The few spots in the city were limited to the south loop and the north side. Easily, these spots became *the* spots where poets from Chicago and Indiana (mainly Gary, IN) would flock during open mic night. Gradually, several poetry spots opened on the south side and a local poetry scene began to prosper in some of the Black bookstores and cafés. Sadly, with the encroachment of large bookstore and coffee store chains, nearly all of the Black bookstores and cafés have met their demise.

The commercial popularity of spoken word poetry was expanded through movies and cable television programs and this has contributed to the dearth of consciousness and cultural content. Back then some nightclub promoters held high hopes that “poetry nite” would provide a quick revenue stream in much the same way as pole dancing, karaoke, and other such gimmicks. The nightclub poetry sets were highly eroticized, spirituous, and typically only attracted particular types of performers and patrons. Also, owing to its more overt connection with Hip-Hop music, the spoken word poetry scene was co-opted and subsidized by any number of cigarette and liquor companies anxious to capitalize on the mass appeal of this cultural art form. The “conscious” poetry sets in Chicago folded (for the most part) and quietly morphed into esoteric word-of-mouth loft gatherings where cultural purists (poets and musicians) connected over natural foods and djembe drums to write, rap, share ideas, and pursue meaning.

The popular thirst for spoken word poetry has greatly increased during the last several years. In fact, during May 2011, Michelle Obama invited poets Elizabeth Alexander, Rita Dove, Common, and other artists to the White House for the second annual “White House Poetry Night.” To supplement this event, the First Lady also convened a Poetry Student Workshop (perhaps the first such) at the White House. The Poetry Foundation (based in Washington, D.C.) sponsors “Poetry Tour on Foot,” a walking poetry audio tour of Washington D.C. featuring the works of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Elizabeth Bishop, and other famous poets. Patrons can download free (.mp3) audio tours and listen with personal audio devices while taking walking historical tours that begin at the Library of Congress and end in Dupont Circle. Without doubt, the power and influence of spoken word poetry has gained increasing attention and “mainstream” exposure over the last ten years. Purists and purveyors (in service to the people) have worked hard to reassert the cultural eminence of poetry. Arguably, the mass appeal of “the spoken word” has evolved it (returned it?) from the rote cliché of dimly lit, smoke filled rooms to become (again) the stuff of heads of state.

As I investigated the world of performance poetry more deeply and interacted with other poets, the content of my poems began to take on a different shape altogether. I developed an expanded awareness of and appreciation for self-expression, critical literacy, and the transformative potential and power of the spoken word. I began to regularly incorporate historical content and political themes into my writing. For example, I wrote and performed poetry about the European Slave Trade, the horrors of African enslavement, economic disenfranchisement, political imprisonment, identity, religious conflicts, and cultural figures such as Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, and Marcus Garvey. Also the tone, timing, and emphasis of my delivery style changed. I began studying to understand *how* to deliver a poem – paying particular

attention to line breaks, emphasis words, stress, rhythm, repetition, and other technical devices. Spoken word poetry (for me) became an artistic extension of the political and cultural literature I was reading and studying at the time. In this regard, my work was touched by the teachings and writings of John Henrik Clarke, Amos Wilson, Ava Muhammad, Khalil Gibran, Frances Cress Welsing, Aimé Césaire, Haki Madhubuti, and Na'im Akbar.

After completing college I relocated back to Chicago and stepped up my involvement in the local spoken word scene. In addition to visiting multiple poetry sets I was also called on to host readings and poetry workshops at several locations including Afrika West Bookstore (on the west side) and Jazz N' Java – which was considered Chicago's most popular south side poetry spot. At Jazz N' Java (formerly located on 35th and King Drive in the Lake Meadows community) I hosted a Wednesday evening poetry set (7pm – 1am). Wednesday's sets were standing room only and we were proud to receive occasional visits from the fire and/or police departments for violating the city's maximum occupancy ordinance. Ironically, many of them became regular patrons of our poetry set. Due to the popularity of the set, the café owners decided to launch a Saturday set. I was asked to help in this effort and happily accepted the challenge. In a sense, this is similar to a radio DJ who had over time built a popular following during the morning drive and was now asked to switch time slots in order to build the new audience.

The Saturday evening set at Jazz-n-Java grew quickly in popularity to rival and eventually exceed the Wednesday evening set. At this time, many people were still becoming newly acquainted with spoken word or performance poetry. And though the practice is old, for many it represented something new in terms of a medium to socialize, network, or unwind. For artists these sets offered an exciting creative outlet, an opportunity to fellowship with other poets

and a chance to debut new work. For example, when I published my second volume of poetry (*Nappyheaded Blackgirls: new aesthetic, a*) in 1999, I hosted my first book signing and performance at Jazz N' Java coffeehouse. Hundreds of people (including dozens of poets) came out to support and purchase my book. Thereafter, writers (poets, fiction writers, essayists, etc.), musicians, and vendors (sellers of African-themed products such as art, music, toiletries, jewelry, and apparel) would continue to utilize the space to maintain kinship with other creative artists and also as an outlet in which to promote/support themselves and their work. In this sense, Jazz N' Java (and coffeehouses in general) served as circles of culture, creativity, communication, and commercial exchange. In short, the space became a place where community was made, felt, lived, and sustained.

As the popularity of spoken word poetry increased, I developed an interest in teaching poetry workshops during after-school and Saturday classes at local elementary schools. Initially, these invitations came through audience members who worked in schools (teachers, assistant principals, etc.) or community agencies as youth advocates or outreach coordinators. These were people who had seen me perform and wanted to bring a spoken word experience to their school. Later, I began to actively market my services as an Educational Consultant specializing in creative arts, literacy, and youth development. I also developed professional relationships with organizations such as The Poetry Center of Chicago, Young Chicago Authors, The Duncan YMCA, and OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture).

The widespread spoken word activity brewing in Chicago was a precursor to the release of the *Love Jones*, a 1997 movie that did more than anything else to usher spoken word poetry into the popular consciousness. Of course, Chicago's poetry scene was active and energized long before that movie's release. Following the release of *Love Jones* (filmed in part at one of

Chicago's most popular open mic venues) the popularity of the local spoken word scene grew by leaps and bounds. More so than at any other time, people began to regularly attend and support local spoken word venues and local Chicago poets (some of whom appeared in *Love Jones*) began to capitalize on this recognition. The number and frequency of poetry sets also grew and there was a literary explosion in terms of poets publishing books, organizing sets, and being asked to teach in schools, facilitate workshops and clinics, and perform at venues around the country.

PRACTITIONER BACKGROUND, PT 2: RADICAL ROOTS, ORAL ARTISTRY, AND A BLACK AESTHETIC

Around 1995 my business partner and I developed a concept for a spoken word performance quartet. Calling ourselves *Vibe-n-Verse*, we started soliciting performances at colleges and universities around the country. Eventually, my business partner left the group and I took over exclusively. I juggled the roles of lead poet, choreographer, bookkeeper, business manager, web manager, marketing specialist, and publicity agent. To market the idea, I developed a website, email promotion, business cards, elevator speech, and tagline ("*Culture and Consciousness via the Spoken Word*"). I modified the group's lineup from a fixed number of artists to a looser collaboration. In a short time, we evolved into a collective of spoken word artists and musicians (saxophone, vibes, keyboards, bass, drums, percussion, etc.). The living room of my condo served as our office and studio. We practiced together for several hours during weeknights and sought to develop a unique musical sound interpolated with voice and just the right dash of theatricality. I spent my daytime hours *rehearsing* for the upcoming evening rehearsal, making and fielding telephone calls, emailing, developing marketing materials, tightening the script, and booking performances. Depending on the venue and the size of the

honorarium, *Vibe-n-Verse* sometimes performed as a trio, quartet, quintet, or sextet. As it turned out this arrangement worked better as it made for a more spontaneous creativity and more easily accommodated artists' hectic schedules. Most of our college performances were for a school's Black Student Union or Multicultural Affairs Department. Occasionally, however, we were invited to perform at the request of the general student government association or as part of a co-sponsored activity.

One of our most memorable performances was at an American Indian Pow Wow hosted at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. We had been invited to participate in this national event by members of the UW's multicultural staff. There we were: five Black dudes from the south side of Chicago in a venue with hundreds of Indian nations and sharing stage with American Indian musicians, rappers, poets, dancers, and storytellers. Prior to a summer spent in Minnesota during 1993, I had never seen more than a small handful of American Indians and was taken aback at the sheer size of their number at the Pow Wow. For most of my life, I was handcuffed to the misconception that the Indian population in America was severely dwindled, scattered, or irreparably incapacitated owing to social ills brought about through racial oppression and political marginalization. After interacting with them all weekend, I was surprised to learn that they [those attending the ceremony, at least] opted to be called and referred to themselves as American Indians. Some proudly called themselves Natives or Americans.

After our performances my band spent most of our time talking with Litefoot, a Hip-Hop artist, actor, motivational speaker, and proud member of the Cherokee Nation. Litefoot, founder and owner of his own record label (Red Vinyl Records), starred as Little Bear in the 1995 movie "The Indian in the Cupboard." Litefoot and I swapped products (his CD for my book) and spent the evening discussing the various social and political issues affecting American Indians and

African Americans. Similar to the others I met that evening, Litefoot was extremely proud of his indigenous roots and openly expressed his people's ancestry, history, traditions, and worldview through his conversation, clothing, artistry (referring to his style of Hip-Hop as *Tribalistic Funk*), and his business model. As a charismatic initiator of "indigenous conversation" (Grande, 2004), Litefoot was tuned deeply into the noble, dignity-affirming cultural epistemology of American Indians (especially his own Cherokee nation). Moreover, Litefoot was passionate about his Indian-ness, connecting with youth culture, and using the medium of Hip-Hop to locate and leverage the inexhaustible possibilities contained in the sentient historical memory and folk traditions of his people. Naturally, this chance encounter affected me deeply and would ultimately influence my thinking relative to my own cultural identity, artistic evolution, and business pursuits.

Eventually, I became the sole poet in *Vibe-n-Verse*. We developed a tight two-hour scripted production that combined original music with 12-13 of my poems. Our band traveled to schools around the country for close to seven years and for a time our shows became my single source of income. *Vibe-n-Verse* performed for tens of thousands at dozens of schools throughout Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Alabama, Canada, Florida, Michigan, Missouri, Wisconsin, and Ohio, to name a few places. Our configuration, sound, and specific emphasis on using poetry to educate and entertain distinguished us from other creative artists on the scene. We decided our art would be described and marketed as *edutainment* and would follow in and build on the best tradition of the creative production of Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement creative artists. Hence, we performed poetry and music that intentionally emphasized Black cultural awareness, Black solidarity, and a Black Aesthetic (Gayle, 1969, 1971, 1972) across all areas of life including art, love, politics, beauty, and education.

As Freire (1971) noted, undertaking the task of authentic commitment to the people also means accepting the responsibility to conduct constant, critical self-examination.

Over time, the quality and nature of our spoken word performances took on more of a deliberate political nature. Because my poetry was featured exclusively in *Vibe-n-Verse* shows I decided to perform poems written to emphasize the rich tradition of Black radical thought and praxis. Also, I modified the performance to include more audience interaction. One of our goals was to plant seeds to radically unhinge fixed perceptions, tastes, and attitudes about art, culture, and Blackness. We endeavored to leave our audiences thinking, guessing, wondering... and entertained. In addition to creating an authentic “open mic experience,” we also wanted people to feel as though they were being entertained *and* educated (*edutained*). For as long as anyone can remember cultures have used creative art (literature, song, painting, sculpture, dance, and other forms) as a unique means for the expression, transmission, and propagation of ideas, symbols, messages, and concepts. This activity represents an attitudinal and structural process of co-construction on the part of the artist and the patron (i.e., beholder, listener, or taster). Here is where the powerfully transformative nature of art can be observed in its fullness. A dual resonance (transaction) is created between the voice of the artist and the ear of the art patron. It is this unique process that acts as *lingua Africana* to promote aesthetic awareness, encourage dialogue, and sustain culture. This is the process that we sought to understand and refine in our performances.

Expression via creative art forms has proved a particularly powerful method to construct and deconstruct history, politics, and culture. Indeed, committed art can be likened to a mighty *river* that churns ideas, messages, meanings, and concepts and ferries them forward. Committed art can also be seen as a *bridge* that human beings use to create dialogue, articulate cultural

meaning, and [ultimately] to foster understanding of each other and the world around them. Indeed, there very well might be a cognitive process responsible for the origination and germination of ideas. Pierce described this generative process as *abduction* (Prawat, 1999). For millennia, humans have used the medium of spoken word to express ideas, messages, and carefully constructed concepts laden with political and cultural themes. Indeed, poets have addressed numerous themes that remain relatable and relevant to human consciousness and our lived experience. Listeners, for their part, have drawn information and inspiration from poetic messages, committed poetic messengers, and the natural amalgamation of the two.

We referred to one of the most popular segments of our performances as “Role Call.” An acid rock song entitled “Lesson One” by The Stone Cold Boners (with spoken word supplied by Stanley Crouch from his 1969 album, *Ain’t No Ambulances for No Niggahs Tonight*) inspired this portion of our performance. During this segment, as my band played a mid-tempo blues or jazz or funk-inspired groove, I would riff (i.e., call off) the names of famous artists and attempt to engage the audience in an probing, two-way exchange that was part performance and part oral history lesson. Intentionally introspective and always improvised, the cadence went like this:

How many people know who Muddy Waters... was?
How many people know who The Rolling Stones... are?
How many people know what Impressionism... is?
How many people know what The Black Arts Movement... was?
How many people know who Elvis Presley and Pat Boone... were?
How many people know who Chuck Berry... is?

“Role Call” eventually evolved into an extensive educational performance piece. Our intent was to encourage the audience (largely consisting of young Black college students) to consider the ways in which Black art, Black artists, and Black creativity has been co-opted, marginalized, and

displaced by commercialization, racism, and cultural sabotage. Also, we sought to inform, interrogate, and invigorate the memory by invoking the names of departed Ancestors whose artistic and intellectual contributions had helped broaden and extend the African American epistemological tradition. This notion is reflected in the musings of poet Sterling Plumpp when he states, *“I am the remembrance of memory.”* We wanted our audiences to think critically about the degree and frequency with which African Americans had invested in and been saturated with White popular culture and artistic forms (Anglohegemony) while downgrading or (worst case) ignoring their own classical artists, art forms and epistemological traditions. This, we felt, was especially important to point out to Black students (i.e., youth members of oppressed Blacks) who (following the deodorized pathway of “standard” education) would probably never come into appreciable contact with the classical epistemological and aesthetic traditions which comprise the African American experience. “Role Call” was both fun and educational and evolved to become an immensely popular, extensive, (sometimes lasting 12-15 minutes) and vital component of our live performances.

Vibe-n-Verse disbanded around 2001 and I began working as an educational consultant. I decided it would be a good move to transition to working with Black youth in the public school system. One of my earliest outreach opportunities came via a consulting gig with The Poetry Center of Chicago. I was one of a dozen consultants hired to conduct a 20-week poetry residency at various Chicago public elementary schools. Later, I expanded my individual efforts by devising a series of creative arts workshops and related curricula emphasizing three components: spoken word poetry, literacy, and technology. I marketed my creative services to youth programs at several locations including University of Chicago, University of Illinois Extension, YMCA, Chicago Public Library, ETA Creative Arts, and the Cook County Juvenile Detention Center.

At this time, spoken word poetry was still peaking in popularity. During consulting stints, I began interacting with younger students. Most of them knew very little (if anything) about spoken word and performance poetry. Like most young people, their experience with spoken word was relegated to (over)exposure with commercialized rap music and its attendant emphasis on sex, partying, drugs, violence, misogyny, mass consumption, and *reactionism*. This is the music that most youth are educated on and interface with daily through radio, television, magazines, and other forms of popular media. Unfortunately, the messages (for the most part) are misogynistic, violence-laden, culturally barren, and typically paint a corrupt, fictitious, and one-dimensional vicious portrait of Black life. Fortunately, however, this provided a fresh opportunity for me to expand my teaching endeavors by developing an evolved creative arts curriculum to educate youth about purpose-driven, socially responsible poetry.

Channeling Cooper's (1988) desire for expansive, liberating thought among African Americans, I sought/seek to leverage the African American oral tradition in such a way as to encourage Black youth to develop what Karenga (2011) describes as a "world encompassing conception" of Black people's shared struggles and cultural inheritances. As Cruse (1969) emphasized, committed artists and intellectuals of successive generations are the ones who create the new ideas and new images of life and humanity. Therefore, I endeavored to introduce students to poetry that contained worthwhile messages of epistemological value and cultural substance while at the same time addressing their lived reality. I wanted to represent purposeful poetry that spoke *from* and was connected *to* a viable (though still marginalized) African American folk tradition (B.M. Gordon, 1997), which my students and I could access and leverage in order to build and dialogue. Also, this is the model I encouraged independent groups of students to organize around and build on through the development of participatory literacy

communities (i.e., Black Arts Culture Circles) within their classrooms. I sought to connect and curricularize poetry, poets, and poetic experiences that contained ideas and messages with the potential and capability to transform lives, challenge dominant ideology, and construct meaning by promoting critical consciousness (Freire, 1971; Nkrumah, 1964) along with the most creative and dignity-affirming aspects of Black culture.

THE PROBLEM: BACKGROUND AND FOREGROUND

Education Reform and the Rapid Retreat from Cultural Relevance

The collective epistemological and theoretical frameworks, accumulated folk knowledge, and historical experiences of African Americans have long been either marginalized and/or under-utilized as a site of possibility for curriculum theorizing, development, and practice (Woodson, 1933; Du Bois, 1960; Sizemore, 1973; Hilliard and Sizemore, 1984; B. M. Gordon, 1993; L. R. Gordon, 2000; Lee, 2008). For King (2005a), epistemological concerns reflect the “nature, origins, and boundaries of knowledge,” as well as the subjective process involved in determining whose knowledge is worthwhile. The incessant marginalization, mishandling, and muting of African American intellectual traditions, historical experiences, and cultural practices has ongoing contemporary reverberations and contributes to a widespread and exceedingly dangerous cultural illiteracy.

African American students are encouraged to absorb and recapitulate wholesale the views, values, discourse, and prescriptive, interpretive frameworks (i.e., the coercive center) of the dominant society with little to no regard or critical appreciation of their own history and traditions. This is commonly passed off as neutral schooling with curricula typically emphasizing themes such as “college prep,” “character development,” or “leadership development.” With some notable exceptions, the ongoing charter reform movement offers unassailable proof of this

trend to deemphasize African American history and cultural identity. The Alain Locke Charter School in Chicago is one glaring example. Despite its prestigious African American namesake, the school's website and related literature offer no information about Locke's background, artistic interests, or literary accomplishments. Interestingly, one aspect of Locke's illustrious career to which school officials *do* pay attention is his status as the first African American Rhodes Scholar. Thus, at an eponymous institution where **absolutely** none of Locke's African-centered educational philosophy is remembered, taught, or emphasized... what is, instead, emphasized is Locke's scholastic award (which is named for a British industrialist and colonial imperialist). Locke, through his writings and lectures, consistently encouraged Black artists to look to Africa as inspiration for their ideas and works. Considered the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance," Locke strongly insisted that Black scholars and artists employ a theoretical, philosophical, and methodological framework informed by African/African American epistemology and folk knowledge. Ironically, the school bearing Locke's name is White-operated, serves a near 100% African American population, and places no such emphasis on African American history or cultural identity. In predictable fashion for most urban schools, the school features a regimented, cookie-cutter approach designed to train African American students to become good test takers. In the extreme, how well a student performs on the state exam becomes **the** benchmark for the relative worth or worthiness of that student.

A recent (2011) report by one of University of Chicago's research units, the Consortium on Chicago School Research, affirms that three eras of school reform measures have proved educationally destructive for CPS students. African American students, more than any other group, the report claims, are the most behind in math and reading. Sadly, these findings square with those showing declining academic engagement (Ferguson, 2000) and the propensity to

devalue schooling (Ogbu, 2004) among African American males. Despite the millions spent on research, testing, and high-paid administrators, the situation in CPS is worse today than twenty years ago. Compounding these data is the fact that the Chicago public schools are also becoming increasingly racially segregated. In fact, some have described CPS as a two-tier apartheid system that solidly favors certain groups while systematically failing other groups. Interestingly, however, while University of Chicago cites a range of factors affecting student and school failures (including pervasive income disparities, decentralization, and the appalling lack of social resources in Black neighborhoods), the University fails to implicate itself owing to its gargantuan influence on and within CPS. Far from being just another report with pretty graphics, the Consortium report is yet another damning indictment of the system's failure to serve the educational needs of African American students.

Sadly, these unfortunate findings shed light on the chronic crisis of the Black intellectual to attend, in any significant or progressive way, to the needs of African American children (Woodson, 1922, 1926, 1933; Cruse, 1969; West, 1985; Wilson, 1992, 1993, 1998). To lay bare the onus of so-called Black intellectuals, Madhubuti (1973) asks bluntly: *When will the Black educators and other professionals become accountable to the Black community?* I would extend Madhubuti's question by raising several additional questions including: *Do they [Black educators and other professionals] even know how to become accountable to the Black community? Do they even consider this a worthwhile or practical endeavor? Do they have an interest in doing so? Have they the will? The skill? Might they, should they decide to intervene, inflict even more damage owing to their status-quo reinforcing training and socialization?*

Woodson (1922) documented early efforts by scientist and psychologists to use quantitative data to depict Black youth as naturally derelict, psychologically bereft, and/or

genetically criminal. Such efforts, according to Woodson, provide the basic justification for more authentic scientific investigations regarding the history of African Americans. As stated by Salaam (2007), “we need to know ourselves... especially the obscure sides of us, the hidden, ignored, and just plain forgotten sides of us.”

The Chicago Public Schools Office of Language and Cultural Education (OLCE) offers yet another glaring example of African/African American cultural omission. According to its website, the OLCE believes in

the importance of cultivating a true appreciation for cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in Chicago Public Schools students. We encourage students to view culturally inherent differences as building blocks rather than barriers and offer challenging opportunities to explore and grow both academically and socially. Partnering with local and international organizations, our goal is to build a citizenry open to new thoughts, ideas and experiences, ready to operate and succeed in major global arenas – economic, political and social. (Office of Language & Cultural Education website, 2011)

As of 2010-11, this system-wide project comprises 382 programs, is installed in 302 CPS schools, and impacts over 87,000 CPS elementary and high school students. Through its World Language and International Studies Program, OLCE provides workshops, curricula, history/culture and language instruction on fifteen [non-African] world cultures including: Arabic, Bosnian, Cantonese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Mandarin, Polish, Russian, Spanish, and Urdu. (NOTE: CPS’s Chinese World Language Program (K-12), implemented in 1999, is the nation’s largest such cultural program and currently serves over 6,000 student and features 38 full time teachers. The CPS World Language program enjoys the full support of Chicago’s business and cultural community as well as the Chinese Education Consulate, The Confucius Institute, The Han Ban, and partner schools throughout China. As of 2011, African American students comprised 35% of those enrolled in the World Language program).

In addition, CPS's World Language and Culture programs utilize cultural heritage curriculum guides for each of the fifteen world cultures. A special guide is dedicated to preserving and teaching the history of the Polish soldier and politician Casimir Pulaski. Activities within the curriculum guides include map literacy, word recognition, and other exercises designed to introduce and strengthen students' knowledge appertaining to the history, customs, and language of certain [non-African] world cultures. African American children represent 45% (nearly 200,000) of the CPS student body. Of special note is the fact that OLCE offers no history, curriculum guides, or instruction whatsoever in any African languages or cultures. African American children enrolled CPS's world languages program, rather, have the opportunity to learn the history and cultural heritage of fifteen non-African cultures.

African American Cultural Knowledge: The Silencing of Voices

Curricula seen as critical toward or potentially threatening to the status quo (i.e., the mythical European-American monoculture) seem to seldom (if ever) make its way into the classroom. These "dangerous" curricula are typically those which encourage/teach/empower students to question established narratives, take critical stands, challenge basic assumptions, confront exclusionary paradigms, and develop critical consciousness. Typically, these curricula include or are based on the histories and narratives of historically marginalized cultural groups within society.

One method of silencing dissent and asserting the political will of the dominant group is to engage in overt denial and hostile revisionism. Du Bois (1935, 1962) referenced a textbook study by Helen Boardman that found three dominant theses being filtered to American school children regarding Reconstruction: 1) all Negroes were ignorant; 2) all Negroes were lazy,

dishonest, and extravagant; 3) Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction. A current (though by no means new) instance of this is the effort by certain state school boards (Virginia, Texas, Georgia, to name a few) and by some GOP politicians and 2012 presidential hopefuls to rewrite and reshape Civil War history into a narrative more suited to those with politically and economically conservative tastes. The revisionists, in service to a staunchly conservative agenda, pose particular questions ranging from which side (North or South) had the most war dead to how many enslaved Blacks assisted the slaveholding southern states. Two extravagant myths stand out in their recasting of American Civil War history: 1) the enslavement of African Americans had very little (if anything) to do with the outbreak of the American Civil War; 2) an overwhelming majority of enslaved African Americans were either ardent southern sympathizers, willing soldiers for the Confederacy, or both. Curriculum revision projects favored by U.S. Christian conservatives (especially those in Texas) typically contain lessons omitting references to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and multiculturalism while emphasizing God and guns. A commonplace justification invoked by many of these conservative proponents is that they are fighting for *their* children's education and the nation's future. From their vantage point they are, in fact, at war.

Thus, "new" Civil War history is systematically fashioned to encourage readers to regard African Americans as happy and ignorant or as loyal, terminal slaves unflinchingly eager to defend and die for their White southern masters and to uphold the ideology of White supremacy. The social and political ramifications of this one example are destructive and far-reaching. All too often the political sensationalism, media (spectacle?) hype, and doctrinal arguments surrounding these controversial issues recede from the national headlines and public memory. A diabolical domino effect ensues: i) in closed-door sessions, conservative school boards vote

unanimously in favor of “democratically approved” curriculum amendments; ii) ruling-class revisionist history quietly snakes its way into school textbooks; iii) said textbooks are delivered to and used in schools throughout the United States just in time for the new school year. This pattern is all too familiar to anyone who follows the politics of education and school reform in the United States. Though peacefully conducted, such practices comprise a violent symphony reinforcing the notion that curriculum thoughts, decisions, and practices are socially, politically, and culturally constructed and situated (Schubert, 1986). As poet Adrienne Rich (in Shor, 1999) observes:

My daily life as a teacher confronts me with young men and women who had language and literature used against them, to keep them in their place, to bully, to make them feel powerless. (p. 17)

On a deeper level, the historical and cultural traditions of marginalized groups seldom (if ever) are considered within the realm of curriculum theorizing or as an alternative curriculum paradigm to effectively shape discourse and practice. Sadly, these oppressive practices induce a form of *cultural syncope* wherein African American students experience a symbolic loss of consciousness owing to insufficient oxygen (i.e., African American cultural knowledge) or a temporary reduction in blood flow (i.e., African American epistemological traditions) to the brain. As with physical syncope, the loss of consciousness induced by *cultural syncope* contributes to an interruption of awareness (or negation) of oneself and one’s surroundings (cultural alienation). In the final analysis, African American students are denied the opportunity to explore and engage their transcendent cultural traditions (resuscitation) and, instead are educated away from history and remembrance. Thus, African American students are never able to develop a cultural center that can effectively serve as a primary frame of reference for understanding themselves, their group, or other groups. African American history and traditions

becomes (at best) something to avoid and trivialize or (at worse) to mock and denigrate. Similar situations within American public education seriously call into question this system's interest (or lack thereof) in providing African American students with balanced, meaningful, and culturally enriching educational experiences.

Numerous examples support this notion. In fact, one of my colleagues (a high school English teacher) recently shared with me that her CPS school (which boasts over 95% African American student enrollment) has *never* offered a unit on African or African American history. According to the teacher, the school principal (a White man) proclaimed that the whole of the school's 2011 Black History Month activities would only consist of a crossword puzzle disseminated to students and a ten-minute excerpt of a miscellaneous President Obama speech piped through the school's intercom system. Shockingly, the principal went on to lecture staff regarding their obligation to make the school a place of diversity and inclusion for *all* representative student groups... and not simply one group (in this case, African Americans). The principal's fatuity notwithstanding, incidents such as these offer searing commentary about the hostile political and racialized atmosphere within public schools. It also points us in some very interesting directions vis-à-vis the ongoing dialogue (battle?) around curriculum, academic inequity, and social justice. Freire (2005) observes the deep and profound implications of such hegemonic practices and obfuscated thinking:

It's important always to bear in mind that the role of the dominant ideology is to inculcate in the oppressed a sense of blame and culpability about their situation of oppression.

A seemingly less overt method of "dealing with" the histories and narratives of marginalized groups appears to be to strategically insert sanitized (i.e., approved) bits alongside the dominant narrative (ulterior selectivity). Perhaps as a way of maintaining order, these

companion bits are typically presented as neutrally and apolitically as possible. Another method often utilized by purveyors and patrons of dominant class power is to simply ignore histories and narratives that they have classified as subaltern. In Illinois, for example, despite the 1990 passage of a Social Science Mandate by the Illinois General Assembly (Paragraph 27-20.4) requiring “every public elementary school and high school” to “include in its curriculum a unit of instruction studying the events of Black History,” relatively little, if any, of the cultural or historical experiences of Africans and African Americans is discussed or utilized in most public school classrooms. CPS spokespersons themselves admit that not enough African American history is taught but insist that these efforts be left to the discretion of independent schools. Indeed, the typical treatment for schools that even acknowledge Black History Month is a small, disjointed saturation of Dr. King, Rosa Parks, or Booker T. Washington. The problem is not only lack of innovation in the curriculum but also a shortage of people qualified to teach African American history. Recently, one of my students (a current CPS gifted student) informed me that during her 6th – 12th grade learning career, she has **never** had (or been encouraged to take) any classes or had any school exposure to African or African American history. The situation is, to put it mildly, dire.

“Essentially,” writes Whitehead (1929) “culture should be for action.” In that sense, developing curriculum that is culturally relevant to the historical experiences and lived realities of students is an opportune way of recognizing and resisting ideological domination and fostering educational experiences that are more expansive, substantive, and worthwhile. It is a liberating praxis requiring teachers to be properly oriented to the material and to the collective existential experience of their students.

Schubert (1986) defines praxis as “a form of study that integrates political action with intellectual inquiry in search of understanding and justice” (p. 314). Ultimately, as criticalists and committed cultural workers we must also orient our actions toward developing and/or (re)discovering ideas and institutions to liberate the mind, body, and spirit. For literacy educators working with African American students, such work takes on expanded meaning as it calls for us to motivate and empower our students to read, write, speak, and act to be/create positive social change. To effectively engage this work it is necessary (particularly for African American educators and curricularists) to make an inward odyssey and drink from the wellspring of wisdom and insight emanating from the African American epistemological tradition.

The marginalization of African/African American culture is so thoroughly pervasive that it has generally come to be viewed as normal and is uncritically accepted by both Blacks and non-Blacks. It is through such cultural hegemony that the values, perspectives, and dispositions of the dominant group translate through textbooks, curricula, classroom practices, and educational policy (King, 1992). An African American person subjected to such a toxic process is being actively “de-centered, dislocated, and made into a non-person” (Asante, 1991). Skewed curriculum policy and unimaginative and/or uninformed practitioners have contributed mightily to the unfortunate and systematic neglect and suppression of the Black heritage of educational thought and practice (B. M. Gordon, 1993). Compounding the chronic neglect and suppression of Black intellectual heritage (ex., Black Arts Movement literary genealogy) is the chronic failure to regard, leverage, and sustain that heritage (and aspects thereof) as a cultural artifact and tool for the development and expansion of critical literacy (Shor, 1999), a critical “pedagogy of remembrance” (Simon, 2001), and an alternative culturally relevant curricular paradigm (B. M. Gordon in Schubert, 1986).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

African American Cultural Knowledge as a Form of Discourse

[O]n this particular night in this particular city, the audience booed me bad. I cried. Never had been booed before. Didn't know what it felt like until the boos hit me in the face. Coming from my own people – especially coming from young people – made it worse.
(p. 227)

Though he eventually won over the young crowd with his artistry and professionalism, B. King's (1999) frank experience with artistic rejection by a younger generation of African American patrons is sadly reminiscent of the *unremembering* of and/or disinterest in African American cultural knowledge by contemporary Black artists, scholars, teachers, and students. This, of course, includes the Black Arts Movement. A cultural embodiment of the African American experience, King also (in that gut-wrenching moment) provides living witness to the real-time abandonment and/or debasement (by young Blacks) of transcendent Black folk and aesthetic traditions. King's recollection reinforces the importance of cultivating and keeping sacred the genealogy of African American cultural knowledge and inheritances whether lyrical or literary.

Attempting to (re)define critical literacy and reify worthwhile practices whereby progressive educators can effectively engage, inspire, and challenge urban youth, Morell (2008) regards critical pedagogy as "the ultimate tool of revolutionary change." The narrowness of the construction of the canon, insists Morrell, is an important issue, both theoretically and practically, and requires confrontation and reconsideration. As a criticalist, my approach to emancipatory learning involves cultural synthesis and speaks to the ability to appropriately and effectively leverage the sentient voices, collective traditions, interpretive frameworks, and accumulated experiences of African Americans, which have been systematically discounted from the educational experience. The Black Arts Movement is one such tradition that Gayle (1972)

refers to as one of the “untoured regions of the Black experience.” In their fullest sense, ideas surrounding culture and cognition are intrinsically related to how we utilize time, space (location), and memory. Hence, for those whose intellectual and cultural traditions have been marginalized and snuffed out, these ideas are compulsory to sanity. Further, the process of cultural synthesis (that is, analyzing constituent elements such as cultural experiences and traditions) touches profoundly and radically on the role (i.e., function) of culture, history, epistemology, ideology, power, and the context of political forces within/around which curriculum theorizing and practice is shaped and situated. As outlined by Woodson (1933, 1968), the education system has failed to serve Blacks successfully because the system is not based on scientific study of our life and past.

Madhubuti (2011) has spoken extensively and passionately about the importance of contemporary Black scholars and teaching-artists to legitimize the Black Arts Movement as an “area of concentration” to transform society and ourselves. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) define a *criticalist* as a “researcher, theorist, [or teacher] who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions.” The authors go on to identify seven basic assumptions accepted by criticalists. These assumptions speak to expansive issues such as values and ideology, the centrality of language, privileging of certain social groups, oppression, and the culpability of mainstream research practices in the reproduction of systems of oppression. In addition, they assert that another primary obligation of criticalists is to remain ever cognizant of how thought, language, and human interaction are politically mediated by (historical and contemporary) power relations.

And while Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) concede various reasons for the perpetuation of social inequality, they maintain that the oppression stemming from chronic social inequality is “most forcefully reproduced” when people “accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable” (p. 304).

As a critical literacy and reflective practice, Black Arts pedagogy should, by first impulse, be actively concerned with historicizing and theorizing the movement for current and future generations of students and teachers. Beyond that, authentic critical literacy efforts should be functional and tied to engaging in social critique, improving political acuity, dismantling systems of oppression, accessing and leveraging African Diasporan cultural knowledge, acquiring power, and transforming society (Morrell, 2008; Woodson, 1933). Designing and leveraging Black Arts pedagogy as a culturally relevant, liberatory curriculum essentially has to do with positioning and utilizing African American cultural knowledge (and diverse ways of knowing) as a form of critical discourse to make educational experiences meaningful and purposeful to the lives of African American students. As a matter of fact, developing the curriculum *is* curriculum. Freire (1971, 1987, 1998) contended that people’s lived experiences constitute the starting point of critical literacy education. Elaborating on Freire’s efforts to enact a culturally relevant (*native knowledge*) critical literacy campaign among Brazilians, Morrell (2008) writes:

Freire believed that the adults would be able to ultimately acquire dominant literacies if they were first taught by drawing upon the language and experiences that were most meaningful to them. Once these students were granted permission to engage in authentic dialogue about the injustices in their own world, they would have a grounded context within which they could learn the dominant literacies that they could then use to interrogate, deconstruct, and ultimately subvert the implicit logic contained in these words. (p. 54)

Some might regard Black Arts pedagogy as a postmodernist orientation that contends that all knowledge is socially constructed. However, the approach extends much farther owing to the persistent marginalization of Black epistemologies and subjectivities from educational spaces. As such, not only do we maintain that knowledge is socially constructed but we also allege it becomes more worthwhile when socially mediated by stakeholders (*criticalists*) who are caring, committed, and culturally competent. African American teachers and researchers, in particular, must take a different stance with socially constructed knowledge, as it has been successfully used to divide, dominate, and distort reality (Cruse, 1969, West, 1985; Wilson, 1993, 1999; Giroux, 2001, 2010). Such a critical stance forces us to reconsider the ‘social’ in socially constructed. Toward this end, we are compelled to ask critical questions: *What social group did the constructing? For what? To serve whom? To what end?* In the final analysis, given our unique cultural epistemology and historical trajectory, we are compelled to assume a criticalist (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005) stance that extends beyond improved test scores and knowledge for the sake of knowledge. We must, Morell (2008) insists, “have a revolutionary praxis tied to *any* [emphasis mine] intellectualizing of ideas.”

With consideration to a Marcusian-inspired struggle against false consciousness (“liberated consciousness”) and Du Boisian critical social theory (Rabaka, 2006), Black Arts curricula encourage students to develop a functional form of self-reflective knowledge dedicated to recognizing, understanding, and dismantling systems of domination and expanding domains of freedom and autonomy. Such efforts call for conscientious pedagogues (*criticalists*) to recognize, resist, and dismantle established patterns and practices of cultural, ideological, and epistemic hegemony that have been traditionally positioned to downgrade and suppress culturally relevant practices.

Hence, Black Arts curricula undergirded by critical social theory invokes a compulsory critique and promotes the dismantlement of unjust status quo values, destructive norms, hegemonic ideologies, false consciousnesses, etc. which have been imposed on and inculcated in the minds of African American students.

In numerous books, articles, and essays Gayle (1969, 1970, 1971, 1972, 2009), Neal (1967, 1989), and Fuller (1967) sought to define and articulate contours of Black Arts theory and philosophy. These theorists urged Black artists to first look inward and turn toward the African American cultural epistemology (i.e., the black experience). This *inward odyssey*, they argued, is both natural and necessary for Black artists seeking optimal cultural inspiration, creative nourishment, and artistic vision. In this sense, it puts flesh on the bones of the type of critical reflection espoused by Lockian and Woodsonian intellectual philosophy, which encourages African Americans to travel in a similar inward direction.

The artistic philosophy espoused by Black Arts theorists flows seamlessly into the educational philosophy of Woodson (1933, 1968), Du Bois (1903, 1920, 1926), Cooper (1988), and other pioneering thinkers. In kind retrospect, the aesthetic architects of the Black Arts Movement provide immense theoretical possibilities to curricularists, theorists, and advocates for critical literacy. With respect to the establishment of key institutions such as BARTS, OBAC, and Third World Press, the nationwide proliferation of Black cultural journals, anthologies and newspapers, the organization of conferences and writers' workshops, the community and political organizing activities of Black writers, and the transformative poetry of "world makers" such as Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Sonia Sanchez, the Black Arts Movement could effectively be seen as foreshadowing the emergence of critical literacy and pedagogy.

B. M. Gordon (1993) asserts that “acts of liberation and empowerment are manifested when African Americans *recast* their paradigms, theoretical and methodological frameworks, policies, and procedures as “*normative and not otherness*.” Poet Lorenzo Thomas confers that in societies that devalue and destroy their citizens for profit, “what is considered normative may actually be toxic.” Thomas’ metaphor gains expanded significance alongside Hilliard’s (2000) critique of American public education as a structure of dominance that seeks to

suppress the history of the victims; destroy the practice of their culture; prevent the victims from coming to understand themselves as part of a cultural family; teach systematically the ideology of white supremacy; control the socialization process; control the accumulation of wealth; and perform segregation or apartheid. (p. 24-25)

Ladson-Billings (1992) highlights the importance of linking literacy to culturally relevant practices. She proposes “a more holistic, socio-cultural approach to literacy” to remediate the chronic poor academic performance among African American students nationwide. Rather than simply fixate on techniques and technical strategies, Ladson-Billings suggests retooling literacy practices to reflect a culturally relevant and liberatory focus to develop in African American students skills that are “technical, social, political, and cultural.” Considered from this perspective, the question of culturally relevant curriculum contains both theoretical and practical implications and reflects exciting and real possibilities for reversing certain destructive trends in education. When “coupled with democracy,” as Dewey notes, this idea “points not only to the ideal of individuals reconstructing their own outlook, knowledge, and capacity to act intelligently, but to that of a reconstructed social system as well” (Dewey in Schubert, 1986).

Sears (1992) highlights the need to build “*praxeological significance*” into thinking and choices involving research, classroom practice, curriculum development, textbook selection, and educational policy decisions.

Curriculum that is culturally relevant takes into account history, ecology, time, memory, genealogy, and the swirling confluence of social and political forces shaping human experience. For historically marginalized and oppressed groups this takes on even deeper and more meaningful significance owing to the dangerous and destructive historical current of oppression within education and society itself. Generally speaking, this current has saddled certain marginalized groups with deformed and defective identities whose greatest function, in most cases, is the recapitulation and perpetuation of the destructive status quo. It has likewise adversely affected the psychology and actions of the dominant group by embedding within its collective membership a hard-wired mythology that undergirds an incomplete and inaccurate rendering of reality (Du Bois, 1920; Fanon, 1968; Wilson, 1993).

An approach (*centricity*) to introduce culturally relevant practices is an approach that places one's culture at the center and seeks to create within individuals a frame of reference to decolonize history and knowledge production. More, this criticalist approach establishes emancipatory and liberatory goals designed to de-emphasize dominant interpretative modes, praxes, and reference points which have been authoritatively imposed to hurriedly compose what Schutz (1967) refers to as "the social world as taken-for-granted." Asante (1991) regards *centricity* as a cognitive process and modality for students [of any culture] to help assist them with first relating "socially and psychologically" to their own and then to additional cultural perspectives. Centricity in education represents a worthwhile approach and ethical practice that allows and encourages African Americans (indeed, people of any background) to view and interact with content through their unique socio-cultural lens and to reaffirm their capacity for self-definition.

In short, the centrality process seeks to encourage in students a new orientation to the acquisition and use of content and the essential dialogue with other cultures both within and beyond the classroom.

The cultural crisis in education is still with us. Many argue that a current retrenchment of segregation is underway in the United States. They cite evidence ranging from the corporate-backed explosive growth of gentrification-inducing, selective enrollment/charter schools, the burgeoning of selective enrollment movements (i.e., Tea Partiers, Birthers, Minutemen), and the drafting of selective legislation (i.e., militarist laws banning ethnic studies (Arizona) and instituting harsh immigration crackdowns (Alabama)). Massive redistributions of wealth and people, downward shifts in housing, income, and jobs lend additional support to the argument of a more dichotomous America – a *harder* America. Our world is in the midst of a radical retooling, recasting, and retrenchment of ruling class power, values, and ideology. Thus, debates over the language of legislation, patriotism, or curriculum are, in truth, debates about the terrain of power relations, access, and definition. Entombed in the myth of a Euro-American monoculture, the politically powerful tastemakers see only their narrative as worthwhile. They, in turn, determine what is worthwhile for the masses. Meanwhile, that which the tastemakers deem not worthwhile is confined to the domain of marginalized praxes, outlaw scholarship, or “non”-Eurocentric (i.e., illegitimate) epistemology.

Oppression and political struggle still lie at the heart of debate and practice of contemporary education (Spring, 1976, 2009; Sizemore, 1973; Lipman, 2007; Carruthers, 1994). Some have described it as a pernicious two-tier apartheid system of educational have-gots and have-nots. The incessant corporatizing of public education affects not just individuals or individual schools but entire communities and cities.

In nearly all cases, the very socio-economic patterns of the community are shaken, stirred, and disrupted in favor of a politically and economically expedient model intentionally designed to benefit a private and politically powerful posse of elite capitalists and corporatists.

By no means is this a new arrangement. It is useful to consider the case of the Rochester Convention that was established during the nineteenth century by Frederick Douglass and other free Blacks. Meeting in Philadelphia in 1853, the convention sought to devise and present solutions to address the wretched plight of Blacks throughout the United States (particularly in the south) relative to jobs, justice, treatment, and social access. A special group, known as the Committee on Social Relations and Polity was chaired by William Whipper and Charles Ray. These two men would produce a rather “controversial” report that, among other things, made several suggestions to White lawmakers in the United States Senate relative to improving the quality of education for Blacks in the south. However, the most controversial aspect of the report offered a slamming condemnation of White institutions and teachers and their unyielding control over Black education (Litwack, 1965). Whipper and Ray’s 1853 report suggested that Blacks should take charge of their own educational destiny. The report’s biting criticism of White agents and exigencies came on the heels of firsthand and prolonged experience with and within a biased system of education developed and founded on White power operating via racism, greed, and manipulation. Reflecting the critical attitude of the report’s authors, Harding (1981) states that

... when it came to the issue of [B]lack education, the report sadly admitted that the “whole tendency” of White institutions and teachers, when dealing with [B]lack students, was to educate them away from a position of solidarity with their people. Thus, the committee reluctantly concluded that it was necessary to develop “the whole process of instruction to meet our particular exigencies” – a task that only [B]lacks could realistically undertake. (p. 181)

Blacks of that era understood and felt the crackling of social and educational inequality and laid plans to right the wrongs. Then, as now, the agents of reform find great difficulty in turning over to African Americans control of our own education. Indeed, to many, the very concept may seem strange and is usually met with sharp hostility, stark disbelief, disingenuousness, or paternalistic sympathy.

Today's public school curriculum is typically a rigid, intractable model that is fantastically unimaginative and therefore unable to hold students' attention. Inquiry and exploration are traded in favor of curricula models that emphasize high-stakes testing and stringent performance. The curriculum (as offered) disfavors, ignores, and (in many cases) punishes critical literacy and questioning. The curriculum enforces authoritarianism, control, and rote practices designed to track (relegate) students into prescribed societal roles. The school curriculum **does not** encourage students to develop cultural literacy or political awareness or critical consciousness.

More, status quo curriculum in today's schools is based on a Eurocentric model that is not aligned (nor designed to be) to the historical experience and lived realities of African Americans. As such, it fails to take into account our unique history and social experiences in the United States. And while some may seek to build models based on tolerance, such efforts are marginal and ultimately inadequate owing to the extreme difficulty (and irony) of securing mainstream acceptance. In a sense, it is like being relegated to read by secret candlelight. Over time, the light gets dimmer and before long one is unable to see. Compounding these challenges is the fact that public schools have greatly decreased their investment in arts education. In most cases, today's arts curriculum takes the form of a politically neutral, ineffectual offering that is deliberately tailored so as not to offend or critically question the status quo.

The current system, with its near complete de-emphasis of African American cultural relevance, is not vastly dissimilar from the model from over a century-and-a-half ago. Then as now, the lived experiences (i.e., *life praxes*) of African Americans were seldom (if ever) included in the *missionary school* curriculum in any meaningful way. These life praxes situate a critical counterargument against dominant paradigms and offer a way of locating (situating) African American students within a historical and cultural context that is functional, expansive, and worthwhile. Ideally, locating learners is a serious methodological process that seeks to affirm and value their cultural strengths and intellectual potential. A centrality paradigm seeks to treat culture as a body of practices and then to enter the skin of the culture as unobtrusively as possible. For Outlaw (2005), these life praxes hold optimal educative value for African American students and are best reclaimed through acts of reflection and by accessing and interfacing with African American history and cultural memory.

Sadly, the marginalized life praxes of African Americans represent perhaps the most understudied and underutilized resources in education. Thus (for African Americans especially) to research, interpret, and infuse what we deem educationally meaningful takes on special emphasis as it usually means the infusion of ideology and epistemology that is liberatory as opposed to predatory. B. M. Gordon (1993) relates that “acts of liberation and empowerment” occur when Blacks resurrect, (re)claim, and (re)situate their unique cultural paradigms, theoretical and methodological frameworks as normative.

In addition to valuing and vitalizing African American indigenous knowledge, also needed are critical pedagogies, compassionate pedagogues, and committed sites for social transformation that function to promote cultural literacy and to “disrupt the structures of inequality” (Grande, 2004).

West (1985), Anderson (1988), and Morrell (2008) describe this “quest for literacy” as a consistent and compulsory theme in the historical experience of Black folk in the United States. Alkalimat (2011) writes compellingly about the struggle for self-definition and self-determination among African Americans as a primary way of (re)affirming the Black intellectual tradition, critiquing and resisting all forms of oppression, and plotting a course toward true social justice and social transformation. Situating cultural preservation as a form of social justice and liberating praxis, Du Bois (1960) keenly observed early on the importance of preserving African/African American culture through the teaching and curricularizing of our folk experiences and insisted that

what we must also do is to lay down a line of thought and action which will accomplish two things: The utter disappearance of color discrimination in American life and the preservation of African history and culture as a valuable contribution to modern civilization as it was to medieval and ancient civilization. (p. 151)

Failing these efforts, Du Bois predicted the current deficiency in “knowledge of Negro history and culture.” Owing to its collusion with oppression, Rabaka (2006) describes this functioning deficiency as intentional and as a form of “epistemic apartheid.” Seen from this constructive perspective, tradition-engaging curricula grounded in that which is culturally relevant contains unlimited transformative and liberatory possibilities for both educators and students. It is through the maintenance of such important forms of knowledge that culture is kept viable and connected to possibility.

The infusion of African American cultural knowledge as a worthwhile educational enterprise is important because it also contains an expansive moral and ethical dimension. It runs toward (as opposed to away from) the obvious and unavoidable continuum of tension, subjectivity, and inequity that is ever present in education policy, research, and practice.

Commenting on public education's historical (and at times hostile) *de-emphasis* of culturally relevant practices and (what he contends are) the true operating principles of public education, Spring (1997) cogently observes, "the history of African American education is highlighted by both the denial of education in order to continue economic exploitation and the use of segregated education to assure an inexpensive source of labor" (p. 43).

Sizemore (1973) analyzed the meaning and functions of education and proceeded to outline the benefits of cultural knowledge (i.e., a liberation curriculum) for African American students. Citing Woodson (1933), Dewey (1927), Freire (1970), Greene (1972), and Bruner (1971), Sizemore categorically stressed the need for indigenous knowledge and praxis in education to bring about liberated consciousness and empower African American students and teachers to more effectively engage and transform the world. Sizemore suggested that instructors (through their outreach methods) be ever cognizant of how African American students perceive *their* situation and present *themselves* to the world.

Sizemore (referencing Stodolsky and Lesser) submitted that the particular intellectual strengths [and weaknesses] of ethnic groups should be "studied and analyzed to maximize the potential power of these patterns by matching them with the proper instructional conditions" (p. 398). The skills and knowledge required for intellectual liberation and to create knowledge, asserts Sizemore, "become the curriculum." Sizemore referenced the Woodlawn Experimental Schools Project (WESP), a curriculum reform effort (1968-1971) developed by University of Chicago, Chicago Board of Education, and the Woodlawn Community Organization to improve the quality of education in three African American public schools in Chicago.

Sizemore developed and advocated a historically and culturally grounded "liberation curriculum" to inspire improved modes of communication, cognition, and consciousness among

African American students. Sizemore outlined that the seven goals promoted by an African American liberation curriculum should:

1. develop the use of the empowering techniques of the culture; the use of symbol, image, and action systems such as language, mathematics, art, and music for problem finding as well as problem solving;
2. stimulate dialogue over mediating objects relevant to both personal and social problems of the learner;
3. create opportunities for discovery and creativity through encounters with art forms and expressions integrated into all curricular experiences;
4. promote the application to the economic-technical-political systems of skills in language, mathematics and other symbol-coded information systems (such as those used in science, art and music) for the elimination of oppression;
5. encourage the study and analysis of history, literature, drama, poetry, and the social sciences in order to reduce powerlessness and inequality in social arrangements;
6. urge the responsibility of service to the community for its development;
7. activate the use of experience as the basic substance to which content, method, and administration are related.

Freire (2005) relates the importance of learners (through interaction with one another and with their teachers) “assuming themselves as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons.” As critical pedagogues, it is essential that we explore and effectively leverage African American cultural knowledge and historical memory as viable tools to improve educational outcomes for and raise the level of cultural literacy among African American students. The literary genealogy and aesthetic philosophy of the Black Arts Movement (itself connected to an older, more expansive Black American literary genealogy) represents a rich and diverse source of immense pedagogical and theoretical value.

The socially responsible poetry of the Black Arts Movement can be accessed and leveraged as a tool to promote critical literacy, expansive discourse, and emancipatory learning among African American students.

CHAPTER 2. CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE BLACK LITERARY GENEALOGY

THE BLACK AMERICAN LITERARY GENEALOGY: TAPPING THE TREE

As early as 1937, Wright (1980) reflected on the importance of the African American existential experience as a primary, authentic, and authoritative source for developing and articulating our cultural narrative and voice:

There is, however, a culture of the Negro, which has been addressed to him and him alone, a culture which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action. This culture has stemmed mainly from two sources: (1) the Negro church; and (2) the fluid folklore of the Negro people.

It was, however, in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth, the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men, the confidential wisdom of a black father and to his black son, the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular, work songs sung under blazing suns, all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. (p. 405)

Owing to age, immensity, and patterns of generational transcendence (i.e., lineage), the Black American literary tradition can effectively and (perhaps) more accurately be described as a *literary genealogy*. The Black American literary genealogy can be uniformly traced back two hundred fifty years and is informed by a menagerie of intimately interconnected social and political forces and happenings. Our literary genealogy represents and is reflective of the voices, intellectual traditions, and diverse folk experiences of Black Americans, which have been marginalized, mistaught, or largely discounted from the educational experience of African

American students (its natural inheritors). The Black American literary genealogy begins with Lucy Terry, who was born in Africa in 1730, kidnapped as an infant, and sold into bondage in Rhode Island. Composed in 1746, Terry's poem, "*Bars Fight*," is considered the oldest known work of literature by an African American (Fabio, 1972). 1760 and 1767, respectively, marks the publication of Jupiter Hammon's first poem, "*An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penitential Cries*" and Phillis Wheatley's first poem. Wheatley's book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was subsequently published September 1, 1773 and is widely considered the first book published by a Black American writer. In 1853, William Wells Brown became the first Black novelist published in the United States. Thus, the Black literary heritage predates the formation of the United States as a nation by over three and a half decades.

Through the centuries our literary genealogy was maintained through a prodigious flowering of Black literary societies, pan-Africanist and Negro Improvement ideology and rhetoric, newspapers, conferences, and pamphlets published and disseminated during the mid-to late 1800s. The evolution continued during the early to mid-1900s through the Black cultural movements of the Washington Renaissance (early 1900s) and the better-known Harlem Renaissance (1920s-1940s). During the late 1940s-1950s, the Black literary genealogy evolved and was disseminated via literary journals, political activism, formal conferences, and literary societies such as the Harlem Writers Guild.

Enslavement, The Civil War, Great Betrayal, Jim Crowism, the Pan-African, World War I and II, Civil Rights, and Black Power Movement, were just a few of the major historical antecedents informing and framing the development and expansion of the Black American literary genealogy. Indeed, the personal narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and David Walker (like the musical poetry of Curtis Mayfield and Abbey Lincoln) chronicle

important, soul-bending turning points and the Black American collective reaction as well as the social and political history of the nation itself. Burrowed within these (and other) folk narratives are our individual and collective reactions to bourgeois democracy, racism, social transcendence, justice/injustice, acculturation, and other social phenomena. Neal (1989), reflecting on this, writes:

But history weighs down on all of this literature. Every black writer in America has had to react to this history, either to make peace with it, or make war with it. It cannot be ignored. Every black writer has chosen a particular stance toward it. He or she may tell you that, for them, it was never a problem. But they will be liars. (p. 15)

Thus, to confront and comprehend the contours of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Evans' *Black Woman*, Wright's *Native Son/Black Boy*, or Jacobs' *Slave Girl*, necessarily means to interface with inquisitive, justice-seeking, world-weary Black voices articulating cultural messages, codifications, and thought-dreams structured on direct experience with and intense expression of American social and political reality.

THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT: POSSIBILITIES FOR PRACTICE

*My mama bore me in the ghetto
There was no mattress for my head
But no, she couldn't call me Jesus
I wasn't white enough she said*

- Curtis Mayfield, *Kung Fu*

Stimulated by the assassination of Malcolm X, the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976) was a cultural movement initially influenced by writer and activist Amiri Baraka. The movement was borne out of the experiential and experimental synthesis of creative energy, Black consciousness, and political activism among young Black artists residing in New York during mid-1960s (Thomas, 1978). While concentrated primarily in New York City, Black Arts activities were also quite popular in other American cities including Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Houston, New Orleans, and Oakland. For Black jazz artists of that era such as Jayne Cortez and Phil Cohran, themes such as health, love of self, spiritual reality, historical connections to Africa figured prominently in music, poetry, and performance. An immensely influential artist and political activist, Cohran (who is still quite active on the Chicago music scene) developed his Affro-Arts Theater in 1967. A politically conscious artist, Cohran was also quite involved with fighting prostitution in the African American community, ridding Black neighborhoods of bad food merchants, and working with other artists to help elect Chicago's first African American Mayor (Semmes, 1994). African American performing artists, visual artists, and writers of the era demonstrated similar social commitment to the education, protection, and solidarity of the Black community.

Thus, by realizing and creating conscious connections between creative art, African culture, and politics, Black artists (poets, writers, sculptors, musicians, painters, performance artists, etc.) sought to articulate and assist in the physical, psychological, and spiritual liberation

of Black people in America and throughout the African Diaspora. Addison Gayle, Jr. (1970, 1971, 1972), Larry Neal (1968, 1989), and Hoyt Fuller (1976) were the major philosophical voices of the Black Arts era. They argued for and subsequently developed a theoretical basis and philosophical framework referred to as The Black Aesthetic. In some sense, the need for a Black Aesthetic evolved with “mounting emphasis” based on the particular western socialization of the Black psyche, as a patterned response to institutionalized racism, and the need for change (Emanuel, 1972). Baraka (in Neal, 1989) states that these young artist-activists “wanted an art that would actually reflect black life and its history and legacy of resistance” (p. x-xi). In short, Black artists, in keeping with philosophy of the Black Aesthetic, impressed that the main objective of Black artistic expression is to achieve complete, constructive social change (Hill, 1980).

Musicians, writers, playwrights and other movement artists pursued what Benston (2000) calls a “speculative quest for a distinctively Black modality of cultural assertion” (p. 251). Black artists sought to situate their creative products (literature, drama, music, theater, portraiture, etc.,) as cultural assets. This new aesthetic (it was hoped) would encourage Black artists to resist White artistic norms while simultaneously articulating and confirming the cultural uniqueness of Black identities, art forms, purposes, and impressions of social reality (Van DeBurg, 1992). Thus, Black artists representing multiple genres engaged in a structured, geographically diverse, decade-plus long revolution of ideas and recapitulation of thought-forms, theoretical considerations, and philosophical (op)positionality. Lennon (2006) describes how

African American visual artists led an attack on the *de facto* segregation of the art world in all its institutionalized forms: the omission of historical and contemporary African American artists from the pages of art survey texts, racially biased art criticism, the absence of art education in urban ghettos, the dearth of teaching positions, scholarships, and grants for younger artists, and, most urgently, the absence of work by black artists on gallery walls throughout the country. (p. 93)

Lennon paints an accurate description of the multiple modes of institutional marginalization that Black artists were forced to endure and its effect upon them culturally, economically, and psychologically. In a deeper sense, however, her observation reaffirms the absolute centrality of the role of culture in the “production [and maintenance] of society’s structures of domination” and power relations. Calling for cultural nationalism and aesthetic concern among Black poets, poet Eugene Useni Perkins (1970) argued compellingly that their art should “awaken” and that they should automatically be

concerned with creating authentic images of black people and dealing with the realities of black life as they actually exist... They must be committed to describing the total feelings/emotions/attitudes and values of black people so that black people can better understand themselves within a black frame of reference. (p. 88-89)

Sharpening that point further, Neal (1968) likened Black artists to “missionaries” and rejected “any concept of the [black] artist that alienates him [and her] from his [and her] community.” It is clear that Black artists, influenced and activated by the Black Power Movement, understood the vitality and function of culture and self-investigation (i.e., probing and leveraging of shared heritage, traditions, epistemologies, and cultural inheritances) relative to gaining recognition along with other groups in the United States (Jařab, 1985). Very often during the sixties and seventies, this understanding manifested as institutional and collective activity for Black liberation that was construed as politically separatist (i.e., Nation of Islam, US Movement, Black Panther Party) or deemed artistically exclusive (i.e., Avant-garde jazz, Black Arts Movement). Artist-activists (or, activist-artists) of the Black Arts Movement generally believed that their art (production, function, dissemination) was connected to the global Black community and should, by dint of political and cultural expediency, reflect and resonate its beliefs, attitudes, values, and interests. Neal (1989) described this action and called for Black artists to advocate and engage in a mass “psychic withdrawal” from the values and assumptions of White America.

The ideological taproot of the Black Arts Movement stems from Umbra Workshop, a collective of young Black writers concentrated on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Umbra's (meaning *the darkest part of the shadow of a thing*) major members included writers Steve Cannon, Al Haynes, David Henderson, Tom Dent, Calvin C. Hernton, Joe Johnson, Norman Pritchard, Brenda Walcott, Lenox Raphael, Ishmael Reed, Ed Bullins, Lorenzo Thomas, James Thompson, Askia M. Touré (Roland Snellings, also a visual artist), and musician-writer Archie Shepp. Umbra's breakup coincided with the assassination of Malcolm X. At that critical point, writer and activist Amiri Baraka developed (along with some Umbra members) the legendary Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS). Baraka is popularly credited with coining the term "Black Arts" and for conceiving "Black Arts" as a literary nationalist movement. As Baraka relates in a telephone conversation with journalist Luke Stewart (2011):

It started, really, with the assassination of Malcolm X. All of us were living down in the Village, but decided to move to Harlem to be in the center of Black life.

The Republic of New Africa and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a national organization with a strong presence in New York City, formed the initial ideological thrust for the Black Arts Movement as early as 1962. Umbra writers Touré and Neal were both members of RAM. On the west coast, Maulana Karenga's US (as opposed to "them") organization was another major institutional force that shaped the early cultural and political development of the Black Arts Movement. The Honorable Elijah Muhammad's Chicago-based Nation of Islam (NOI) was another critical force influencing the formation and political direction of the Black Arts Movement. These three organizations (RAM, US, and NOI) provided significant ideological direction for Black Arts Movement artists and patrons.

Tkweme (2007) characterized the Black Arts Movement as seeking to “stimulate African American awareness of a rich, oppositional cultural heritage, and of the need for independence of thought and organizational/institutional power.” Thus, through absorption, incubation, redefinition, and rechanneling of Black cultural memory, traditions, and experiences, Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Tom Dent, Margaret Danner, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amos Mor, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, Barbara Chase-Ribaud, and flocks of artist-activists created a vibrant synergy of literature, dance, theater, portraiture, and music infused with a radical politics of *essentialized* Black identity and Pan-African nationalism. Similar to the institutions that influenced it, the organizing principles undergirding the Black Arts Movement included solidarity, spiritual oneness, cultural unity, and political struggle. (Smith in Collins and Crawford, 2006). As Smethurst (2005) relates:

One enormous impact of the Black Arts Movement is the obvious influence it exercised on the conceptions of racial, ethnic, national, gender, and sexual identity in the United States and what might be thought of as movement poetics. (p. 73)

The ensuing Black Arts Movement would fundamentally and completely alter the nature and conception of art, culture, and creative production in the United States (Smethurst, 2003; 2005). As writer and literary critic Darwin Turner (1991) informs, the Black Arts Movement represented the “first literary movement in the American history in which Blacks defined their own theories of creativity and criticism.” Thus, from the very beginning, the Black Arts Movement served two major functions: 1) aesthetically, theoretically, and practically it represented and promoted the wellspring of [neglected] African American cultural knowledge; 2) it posed, through its activist philosophy, critical resistance to artistic and cultural thought modes of dominant (Eurocentric Anglo-American) culture which were/are reproduced daily in literary, scholarly, and artistic circles throughout the United States and the world.

Critical to even a cursory understanding of the Black Arts Movement is the fact that it neither existed nor evolved as an isolate. Thus, as phenomena, it is similar to all other phenomena in that they do not evolve in isolation nor do they emerge on their own power. In this sense, the Black Arts literary genealogy represents an extensive and expansive ancestry (Smethurst, 2005) and family of creative ideas (kith) and creating *ideaists* (kin) that emerged out of the communal ethos (and chaos) of the African American existential experience (Thomas, 1978). The literary genealogy of Black America (spoken, written, published, etc.) is, quite literally, the living DNA of Black peoples' time and testimony as we have interfaced with and engaged reality during the last two and one half centuries. Quite unlike the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement emphasized Black cultural solidarity, advocated for global pan-African liberation, insisted on a collective Black Aesthetic, and spoke an unapologetic tone of fierce Black political urgency. Nathan Hare (1968), psychiatrist and founder of the first Black Studies program in the United States, suggests "even the language of White America has exhibited a built-in force destructive of the Black man's self-image." Arguing that Black artists of the 1960s were "at war with America" Regina Jennings (1998) elaborates this point in her discussion of how

...1960s artists signified, insulted, and sought compensation for historical injustices. Proudly disregarding customary poetics and content, they mostly wrote in free verse, distinguishing the differences between Negro and White. They sought aesthetic separation, influenced by Malcolm X. Celebrating an a priori African American culture, axiology, aesthetics, and ideology, writers such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti created poetry to educate, enlighten, and motivate Black people. This method influenced Blacks to instigate, consider, and accept social change. (p. 107)

Reflecting a form of literary nationalism, the committed (culturally sentient) poetry of the Black Arts Movement is an accessible source of rich and limitless instructional possibility for progressive educators, aestheticians, curriculum theorists, and literacy teachers.

Similar to other aspects of the Black Arts Movement (i.e., theater, dance, sculpture), Black Arts poetics reflect the dynamic, culturally grounded epistemological traditions of Black intellectual thought and critical praxis situated within the Black American literary genealogy. Thomas (2000) describes poetry as the “authorized voice of collective struggle against economic oppression and racial discrimination.” Reflecting on the self-defined artistic and social obligations of Black artists (and by extension, Black educators, scholars, and political activists), Wellburn observes:

For the 1970s and beyond, the success of political, economic, and educational thrusts by the black community will depend on both an aesthetic that black artists formulate and the extent to which we are able to control our culture, and specifically our music from theft and exploitation by aliens. (p. 132)

Pedagogically, socially responsible (i.e., committed) Black Arts poetry is a site for copious philosophical and epistemological investigation, valuable theorizing, and for contextualizing the lived reality of African Americans. Historian and writer Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1993) reinforces this point when he suggests that there exists a serious need for us to burrow “into the deep veins of the Black experience.” Obviously, Bennett [and other cultural informants] senses, knows, and/or expects that there is much worth exploring, accessing, and leveraging within the souls of Black folk. This was by no means a new conception for as Griffin (2008) writes of Harlem Renaissance-era illustrator Aaron Douglass:

[he] also penned his own aesthetic statements as well. In a letter dated December 21, 1925 and written to Hughes, he wrote:

Your problem dear Langston, my problem, no our problem is to conceive, develop, establish an art era. Not white art painted black. . . . Let’s bare our arms and plunge deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let’s do the impossible. Let’s create something transcendently material, mystically objected. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.. (p. 46)

Kinloch (2005, 2011), Fisher (2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2008), and other scholars regard the infusion of poetry and orality into classrooms as part of the emergent urban literacies. Indeed, when properly leveraged, these urban literacies serve as useful means for investigating other phenomena such as race, culture, ontology, and sociology. Ayers, Kumashiro, Meiners, Quinn, & Stovall (2010) regard poetry as a democratizing force that can serve the public good while also contributing to heightened experiences and provoking political action. Utilizing Black Arts poetics to engage African American students becomes a new color in the palette of learning, teaching, and critical engagement. Black Arts Movement poetry is necessarily iconoclastic and offers broad and diverse pedagogical value for both classroom and non-classroom spaces. Freire (1999) suggests that progressive educators undertake the task of generating in the people “political dreams, political wishes, and political desires” to raise their political consciousness.

In my experiences and thinking about creative arts, literacy, and culturally relevant practices, I have identified the following educational and aesthetic benefits/practices that are possible for African American students and teachers who choose to utilize Black Arts philosophy and poetics as an alternative curricular paradigm:

Educational Benefits of Implementing a Black Arts Curriculum

- Leverage the expansive Black Arts literary genealogy (shaped primarily by the critical ideological tradition of Black Radical Thought) to challenge assumptions, broaden sensibilities and heighten levels of political, cultural, and academic literacy;
- Access and leverage Black Arts poetry as a site for Black students to gain voice and use it to frame and contextualize discourse and action around liberatory ideas, and to reflectively problematize critical and/or contentious issues;
- Situate Black Arts poetry as anti-colonial media to help analyze and understand the dynamic interrelationship of complex social, political, and historical phenomena undergirding and critically informing the Black Arts literary genealogy; understand and pay attention to the aesthetic and qualitative nature of relationships;

- Develop Black Arts Culture Circles (BACCs) that are culturally affirming, rigorous, and through which the students can scaffold rich, radiant, and realistic dialog about critical issues;
- Retire the notion and practice of positioning the creative artifacts (ex., poetry, music, visual art) of Black cultural production as cursory, non-cerebral, and evanescent; encourage students to move beyond capricious, tautological observations of trite phenomena and circumstances; leverage Black Arts poetry as a cultural asset representing an expansive literary genealogy of limitless potential to affirm, sustain, and transform lives;
- Engage in culturally and critically grounded ways of thinking about text and ideas within text; foster shared understandings and collaboration via exploration of relevant themes within Black Arts poetry;
- Understand the relevance and role of arts-based inquiry and of creative arts as a tool for encouraging meaningful reflection and critical dialog, analyze and decipher negative cultural messages emanating from popular media;
- Use Black Arts poetics to encourage African American students to think critically about their personal experiences and connect them to a larger social reality; initiate transformative and socially responsible action in their lives, families, and communities.

Aesthetic Benefits of Implementing a Black Arts Curriculum

- Equip African American students with the heuristic tools and skills to assess and critique ideas;
- Encourage the infusion of critical consciousness (to question what is worthwhile);
- Stimulate, enhance, and heighten basic senses (hearing/listening, seeing, speaking); encourage students to expand their insights and gain meditational depth;
- Challenge the attitude of *selective quietism* that pervades youth culture and typically contributes to hostility, impatience, and intemperance toward learning, inquiry, and critical questioning;
- Challenge student boredom and complacency; construct constructive change; construct/develop a new ethos; study, read, and interface with the “aliveness” of language and words;
- Develop an evolved form of *consumerability* among and within African American students, particularly those who have demonstrated an interest in poetry and Hip-Hop culture;

- Encourage students to take a critical stance toward the world; enmesh themselves in ideas/art that encourage them to reflect, question, discuss, and investigate;
- Demonstrate the intersection between critical literacy, education, and activism (i.e., literacy feeding purpose... purpose guiding action... action leading to development);
- Improve students' understanding of and relationship to the physical environment (i.e., personal space, classroom, computer lab, neighborhood);
- Encourage social action that is geared toward critiquing and dismantling social structures based on injustice, inequity, and particularistic notions of democracy, learning, etc.;
- Establish a unique and transformative dialectical relationship between African American students and the ideas reflected in Black Arts poetics; leverage the dialectic to gain access into the secret and "quiet" world of youth culture;

In my experience (classroom and non-classroom) with students, I have refined and leveraged my own research and teaching of Black Arts poetics to engage four critical, culturally grounded educational practices:

1. Link the Black Arts Movement literary genealogy to an older, more expansive literary genealogy based on African American cultural knowledge (B. M. Gordon, 1985) and the marginalized traditions and "life praxes" (Outlaw, 2005) of African Americans.
2. Explore the epistemological relevance of Black Arts philosophy, inquiry, and pedagogy within the framework of a critical pedagogy of remembrance (Simon, 2001) and emergent alternative paradigm/modality of critical literacy (Shor, 1999); Situate Black arts, philosophy, inquiry, and pedagogy as anti-colonial media informed by a heritage of Black radical thought and praxis.
3. Situate the literary genealogy of Black Arts Movement as a cultural artifact and examine its ideological and theoretical dimensions, its aesthetic contours, and its pedagogical possibilities.
4. Discuss the transformative potential of Black Arts philosophy and poetics as a tool for developing critical consciousness, stance (Bruner, 1986), expanding aesthetic and cultural literacy, and contributing to an established, evolving body of diverse scholarship comprising the African American intellectual genealogy.

THE CASE FOR BLACK AESTHETIC CRITICAL LITERACY

Gayle's (1972) exegetic describes poets as the "custodians of beauty on earth."

Aesthetics can be seen as both connected to and translatable to history and culture as well as being fundamental to a culture's identity and expressiveness. Moreover, aesthetics inform how a culture views, values, and knows itself as well as acts on what it views, values, and knows of itself. Greene (2009) suggested that we enter the created world through acts of imagination. In the broad sense, aesthetics reflects our capacity for interfacing with and expanding the imagination as we encounter and interpret works of art (poem, film, video, music, dance, sculpture, portraiture, etc.). Gale and Hutchings (2005) have identified five student learning goals associated with aesthetic learning: 1) identification and analysis of aesthetic elements that shape understanding and response; 2) ability to develop a response framework that is both personal and critical; 3) cultivation and respect for alternative ways of seeing that are rooted in different cultures, value systems, and historical contexts; 4) understanding of how disciplinary perspectives inform and are informed by the aesthetic; 5) appreciation and active pursuit of aesthetic engagements that deepen and enrich experience. Such aesthetic experiences, according to Greene (1983), encourage individuals to encounter a "conceptual awareness" that enables them to live more consciously and expansively.

Somewhere between boredom and anxiety lies creativity. Much research measuring student attitudes and engagement with school and school-based experiences reveal that many students waver between boredom and anxiety. Some data suggest that students become bored and disengaged from school largely because of encounters with flat, unimaginative curricula and educational practices that are painfully conventional and unremarkable. All too often, student boredom evolves into restlessness and agitation and may culminate in an attitude that views

school and learning itself as futile, passive, and not worthwhile. Darling-Hammond (2010) writes that “research on teaching in urban schools suggests that teachers’ limited skills and limiting beliefs about their students lead to a steady diet of low-level material coupled with unstimulating, rote-oriented teaching” (p. 208).

Additionally, current education research has identified a *silent epidemic* within schools where students are overwrought and anxiety-ridden owing to immense academic pressures. Students are over-tested, overscheduled and this, observers say, contributes to a “creativity crisis” in American public education. The recent (2009) education documentary *Race to Nowhere* exposes how creeping academic pressure contributes to an educational climate where creativity is devalued, cheating is rampant, and student burnout, depression, and stress-related illnesses are commonplace. A main point the film highlights is this nation’s obsessive over-emphasis on testing and the de-emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, and imagination in school curricula.

Aesthetics feeds, invokes, and prepares the imagination to have reflective encounters with concepts such as beauty, truth, meaning, and freedom. Broudy (1978) observed and wrote about a direct link between the development of the imagination and the moral and social development of students. Broudy identified three realms of art (production, consumption, and encountering) that require special sensitivity, attitudes, knowledge, and skills, and contribute to how aesthetic qualities are identified and organized. Eisner (1997) conceptualized curriculum as aesthetic text and aesthetic literacy as constituting special forms of thinking that make it possible for people to experience and engage the world. It is, as Eisner contends, through these special forms that culture is kept alive and accessible. Aesthetic encounters assist with how we discover and interpret meaning and also inform how we apprehend reality and experience.

Denzin (2000) articulates the intimate interconnection between aesthetics, culture, politics, art, performance and history and how within “interpretive production, cultural heroes, heroines, mythic pasts, and senses of moral community are created.” Thus, experiences stemming from arts-based education beckon students to have worthwhile aesthetic encounters, to reflect critically, and then act on those encounters with artfulness, sensibility, and meaning.

Broudy (1990) emphasized the connection between aesthetic education and its impact on other areas of the mind. Infusing arts-based experiences into the center, the very core of the curriculum offers vast possibilities for enhancing and deepening students’ encounters with discovery and meaning. It is also an effective way of educating the imagination, expanding the consciousness, and broadening the *repertoire of feeling*. Broudy (1986) asserts that students benefit from arts-infused curriculum by learning to pay attention to the qualitative nature of relationships, being mindful of imagery, and thinking alternatively. There may be, he posits, *teachable attitudes, skills, and knowledge* within the aesthetic experience.

Progressive and imaginative educators can always find innovative ways to integrate aesthetic educational experiences into the curriculum. Often the immediate challenge facing educators is to validate the immersion and to establish it as a discipline. To address this, Broudy (1986) challenges educators to identify and leverage the “field of knowledge concerning art that scholars cultivate systematically.” The knowledge base and capacity for such creative approaches among educators suggest appropriate consensus to ground and validate an educationally sound and worthwhile curriculum. However, the grounding and validation process requires that educators confront and grapple with their own prejudices, conflicts, and anchored perspectives as well as those of others. In essence, they must know their subject “intimately and well” and, in terms of aesthetic literacy and competent scholarship, break from the level of

consumer and elevate to the level of *connoisseur* (Eisner, 1998; Gayle and Norment, 2009). This is popularly known as cultural competence.

One of the most powerful and promising aspects to aesthetic education is its connection to epistemology, culture, and political praxis. In fact, the cultural knowledge, epistemological traditions, and existential condition of African Americans offer rich and unlimited possibilities for discourse, philosophical consideration, theoretical interpretation, and praxis. B. M. Gordon (1993) emphasizes the inherent social value of these overlooked traditions and that they offer students “multiple lenses through which to critique social reality.” This is especially critical inasmuch as the dialectic of the dominant society tends to pervade and influence thinking and practice. Here again the reality of the relationship between aesthetics and political praxis (a Black Arts motif and aesthetic consideration) emerges to the forefront. As Neal (1968) iterates:

The Black Artist must address himself to this reality in the strongest terms possible. In a context of world upheaval, ethics and aesthetics must interact positively and be consistent with the demands for a more spiritual world. Consequently, the Black Arts Movement is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. And much of the oppression confronting the Third World and Black America is directly traceable to the Euro-American cultural sensibility. This sensibility, antihuman in nature, has, until recently, dominated the psyches of most Black artists and intellectuals. It must be destroyed before the Black creative artists can have a meaningful role in the transformation of society. (p. 2)

B. M. Gordon (1993) identifies the “paradigms, theoretical and methodological frameworks, policies, and procedures” of African Americans as the connecting rod between our [cultural] aesthetics and [political] action that must be reclaimed and recast. Researching a role and place for aesthetic literacy within education would surely mean a reconceptualization of Black cultural voices, experiences, and pedagogies. A worthwhile vision for aesthetic and critical literacy, transformative pedagogy, and expansive consciousness resides in the veins of Black Arts aesthetic philosophy and poetics. This vision draws from and leverages cultural memory, a

critical “pedagogy of remembrance” (Simon, 1987), and African American cultural epistemology.

Aesthetically, then, to *curricularize* Black Arts history and artist-activist traditions and place both at the heart of the educational process is to put African American students in touch with a meaningful epistemological tradition and praxis model that engages their deepest sensibilities. Baraka (2002) suggests that an aesthetic description of Black Arts flows from its “speaking from [and to] the most advanced consciousness of African Americans.” Naturally, this alchemy produces multiple internal and external tensions including the development of the self-consciousness, the function of art, addressing the demands of critical literacy, and other conflicts ranging from personal to pedagogical to political. Such tensions are worthwhile and welcome.

Owing to their exposure to aesthetic and intellectual tensions with Black Arts pedagogy, students necessarily encounter fresh paradigms and perspectives and enhance their capacity to interface with what MacDonald (1967) refers to “aesthetic rationality.” Thus, a Black Arts curricular framework is not overly concerned (or concerned at all) with finding answers. Instead, the point of this framework is to pose critical questions and engage worthwhile discussions in an effort to flesh out what is worthwhile for African American students. This approach is liberatory and is linked to the African American intellectual tradition of critical inquiry and praxis. As such, it contains expansive possibilities for researchers, practitioners, curriculum theorists, and, of course, African American students.

FURIOUS FLOWERS: USING BLACK ARTS INQUIRY AND PEDAGOGY TO ENGAGE BLACK MALES

If the nation's policies towards blacks were revised to require weekly, random round-ups of several hundred blacks who were then taken to a secluded place and shot, that policy would be more dramatic, but hardly different in result, than the policies now in effect, which most of us feel powerless to change. (Bell, 2000, p. 806)

Shujaa (1994) and others have proposed that the primary goal of public schooling is to reproduce “the value system of the politically dominant culture” and the “social ordering that serves its elite” at any cost. The challenges within public education are numerous and well documented. Broadly, these challenges include underfunded (missionary) public schools, inadequately prepared/ineffective teachers, and government (state and/or federal) imposition of one-dimensional corporate-borne educational policies that ultimately serve the role of sifting and sorting young (predominantly African American) people through the system (Spring, 1976). Woodson (1919) writes revealingly of nineteenth southern laws enacted by the ruling class (“respectable slaveholders”) to further disenfranchise and intimidate Blacks by outlawing literacy and public assembly. One 1831 law, reports Woodson, even went so far as to forcibly remove so-called “enlightened members” (ex., free persons, literate persons, skillful teachers) from among the ranks of their fellow African Americans. Henry Berry (Woodson, 1919), a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, offered a cold summation of the ripple effect of these legalized apartheid measures to subjugate Blacks and thereby allay White fears:

We have as far as possible closed every avenue by which light may enter their [African Americans'] minds. If we could extinguish the capacity to see the light, our work would be completed; they would then be on a level with the beasts of the field and we would be safe! (p. 171)

Comparing the historical and contemporary record, it is not very difficult to draw sharp parallels between the “then” and “now” systems of American public education.

Without question the biggest issue in public education is the worsening national crisis affecting Black males within the school system. Their overall condition is without parallel. Abdullah-Johnson (2010) and Kunjufu (2004, 2007, 2010) have pondered and written about a possible connection between White female teachers and the rising number of Black boys being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (A.D.H.D.) and subsequently tracked into special education. It is moreover alleged that White female teachers (oftentimes poorly trained) single out Black males (particularly those fitting a certain socioeconomic model) who demonstrate off-task behaviors in the classroom. In turn, large numbers of these Black boys are disproportionately misdiagnosed and drugged.

Ford (2011) is highly critical of the speed and frequency with which Black boys who are “physically demonstrative, tactile, and kinesthetic” are labeled as A.D.H.D. Indeed, this particular student population of young Black males is the special focus of education experts, pharmaceutical companies, and urban teacher education programs throughout the country. Despite the tens of millions spent on annual conferences, glossy publications, and psychotropic drugs... despite the dizzying blitz of panel discussions, strategic press conferences, and the popular emergence of so-called experts... despite the development of special urban zones, band-aid zero tolerance policies, “hip” Hip-Hop pedagogy, and the popular elevation of the “high priest” of educational reform – charter schools – no one seems to know of a way to effectively and consistently engage young Black males in urban classrooms.

Over the years there have been frequent complaints from numerous Black male students based on their reactions to classroom experiences and curricula that they describe as boring or irrelevant to their lives and experiences. A 2006 report commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that nearly 50 percent of 470 dropouts surveyed cited boredom as their

number one reason for leaving school. In April 2012, scores of Black male students enrolled at Detroit's Frederick Douglass High School walked out of the school and organized a mass demonstration to protest the inferior education and inept, uncaring teachers employed at the school. In our current system of education, very little time and attention is devoted to encouraging students to engage in thinking, inquiry, or critical reflection. "It is, in fact," stated Albert Einstein (in Eves, 1988) "nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry" (p. 31). Consider the major life-and-death implications connected with the following statistics:

- Nearly three times as many male Black students are expelled or given out-of-school suspensions as would be appropriate, given their share of enrollments. According to the Schott report, suspensions are an efficient means to close off educational opportunities for Black youth. (Holzman, 2004).
- America's public schools suspend Black students at a disproportionately higher rate (Losen, 2011).
- Less than 50% of Black males nationwide graduate from high school on time.
- Less than 50% of male Black students nationally score at or above basic Grade 8 level in reading and math.
- As of April 2011, the national jobless rate for Black men (age 20 and over) is 17% (Bureau of Labor Statistics) and the jobless rate for Black teens in Illinois is 25.8% (Census Bureau's Employment Policy Institute).
- Black male dropouts lead the nation in incarceration. Within the pre-school-to-prison pipeline, 23 of every 100 young Black male dropouts were in jail on any given day in 2006-07 compared to only six to seven of every 100 Asian, Hispanic or White dropouts. (Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University).

Black males comprise nearly one-fourth (102,000) of Chicago Public School's student population of over 435,000 (2008-2009) and roughly 56% of its dropouts. The challenges plaguing young Black males are copiously recorded in any number of studies, journals, special reports, and scholarly pieces. During the last three decades easily hundreds of millions of dollars

and hours have been spent in the attempt to address these problems and correct the course of young Black males whom (by all accounts) appear to be on a disastrous downward trajectory. Indeed, the grim statistics beg one to wonder whether the public school system can educate Black males according to standard means and if it has the creative or political will to do so. Despite the millions spent, nothing ever seems to be done to correct the problems in any substantial way. Sadly, the only two solutions that this system seems to arrive at relative to treating young Black males is to medicate (owing to O.D.D., A.D.D., A.D.H.D., B.D. labels) or incarcerate (pre-school to prison pipeline) them. In a sense tremendous changes and reforms are implemented in order to keep things the same.

Pedagogy of the Dominated: The Chicago Negro

According to a report (Moskow, 2007) commissioned by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the “worsening condition” of much of Chicago’s low-income African American population is both a “human tragedy and a needless drag on the city’s economy.” Building on this, the Washington D.C.-based Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) reports that high school dropouts lose over \$11 billion in income over the course of their lifetime. In a 2009 brief, this same group discusses the negative societal impact of “dropouts and poorly prepared” students.

According to the report’s authors:

Illinois would save more than \$647 million in health care costs over the lifetimes of each class of dropouts had they earned their diplomas. If Illinois’ high schools graduated all of their students ready for college, the state would save almost \$210.2 million a year in community college remediation costs and lost earnings Illinois’ economy would see a combination of crime-related savings and additional revenue of about \$379 million each year if the male high school graduation rate increased by just 5%.

In addition to academic obstacles, an overwhelming majority of young African American males are routinely challenged by the allure of urban street life, which often means early and fast exposure to drugs, violence, negative media, gang activity, poverty, poor education, incarceration, and death. There are more Black men in prisons and jails in the United States (about 1.1 million) than there are Black men incarcerated in the rest of the world combined. The Manhattan Institute reports that 80% of incarcerated persons do not have a high school diploma and the U. S. Department of Commerce finds that average incomes for male dropouts have fallen by 35% since 1971. According to a 2005 report by the Advancement Project, criminalizing Black male children now starts in elementary schools with those as young as five and six years old being arrested in astonishing numbers. Alexander (2010) cites regularly that there are more Black men in prison or jail, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850, before the start of the Civil War.

One of the key cultural losses incurred by Blacks in the United States is the loss of our original African language(s) and systems of communicating and relating to one another. It is a historical fact that Africans were forcibly kidnapped from various countries throughout West Africa and scattered like leaves across vast swaths of territory throughout the United States, South America, and the islands of the Caribbean. Indeed, even within West African nations there existed (and still exists) tremendous patterns of cultural diversity among African peoples. And while many cultural signatures survived the transatlantic journey much was lost on the voyage and then systemically destroyed on the plantations of the Caribbean, South America, and the southern United States. Davis (1976) states:

... although the [B]lack man's culture may not have been destroyed, his understanding and appreciation of his culture was severely damaged. Afro-Americans were left in a cultural wasteland with no sense of belonging. Rejected and depreciated by the dominant American society, separated from and resentful of their African background, [B]lacks

were surrounded by a sea of cultural and personal confusion. They came to hate themselves. It is amazing that [B]lack people even survived the early American experience. (p. 91)

Indeed, the deliberate and systematic obliteration of language can be seen as contributing to the “colonial legacy” described by Freire (1998). Thus, a main aim of Black Arts pedagogy is to introduce (where possible) vocabulary, literature, examples, scenarios, and pedagogical approaches relevant to the lived experiences of young Black males and consistent with the best traditions of African and African American culture. Our goal in so doing is to equip African American students with a primary frame of reference for optimal cultural enrichment, character development, and personal empowerment. As Freire (1998) notes, “because we have so little comprehension of our past, we have no appreciation of its meaningful interrelation with the present” (p. xxviii). One important goal of Black Arts critical literacy curricula is for African American students to develop cultural belonging, worth, and orientation by consciously speaking, producing, and interacting with African language terms and concepts. Freire (1998) suggests that both students and “educators need to reconnect with our historical past so as to understand the colonial legacy” (p. xxvii).

Even to read the word and world of African Americans, one must be aware (cultural competence) of the nuances and epistemic complexities of African American culture. Undoubtedly, there is a unique time dimension that is set in motion and operationalized within every culture. Being out of step with one’s culture is essentially to be arrhythmic and out of step with reality. This arrhythmia contributes to wasted energy, misdirection, and cultural regression. Ultimately, to be out of step with one’s culture is to sustain and assist the program of one’s cultural oppressor; to contribute to one’s own domination and subjugation. For African Americans, ours is a world of sophisticated linguistics transmitted through such mediums as the

Dozens, folktales, barber/beauty shops, Ebonics, Baptist churches, Hoodoo and Root Rituals, street corners, kitchen tables, Ebony/Black World/Jet magazines, and the sentient wisdom of Black writers, musicians, and preachers. This is the world that African American children have inherited and inhabit simultaneously. Black Arts pedagogy offers itself as a transformative process in which participants engage in ever deepening levels of reflection and interaction in order to orient, locate, and situate themselves within critical and culturally relevant knowledge spaces.

So who are young Black males anyway? How are they connected socially, historically, and politically to the unique history and cultural experiences of Black people in the United States and abroad? Aside from musical genius and athletic prowess, what unique cultural markers exist in the DNA of young African American males to be recognized, analyzed, and *curricularized*? In what way(s) could a progressive Black Arts Movement curriculum engage Black male students and encourage them to develop a critical posture toward literacy and learning? Toward inquiry and cultural empowerment? Toward self-identify and intellectual engagement?

As Freire (1971, 1978) encountered consistently, positioning critical literacy as a form of *cultural politics* meant providing an effective framework for making literacy accessible to the masses. It is a paving stone on the path to the development of human agency and possibility. To relate literacy directly to peoples' lives is to offer them direction and encouragement. It is to inspire confidence in them and usher them toward the path of personal empowerment by exposing them to the richness of reflection, cultural memory, and applicability. Critical literacy, then, is essentially an ongoing human synthesis that *must* be political and *must* be cultural in order to appropriately serve the people and positively transform social reality. Critical literacy must be cultural because it is through (and by and with) culture that people present themselves to

the world. It should be more than obvious that for young African American males to assume a *critical posture* they must be educated and socialized in a way altogether different from that undertaken with traditional public education. The precursor for critical consciousness among and within adolescent Black males is to engage in reflective dialogue appertaining to their unique history, personality, and social experiences in the local and wider world.

Historical memory is a critical component for developing critical consciousness and inspiring human action. In a sense, we know/do today because our ancestors knew/did yesterday. Our relationship to history and historical memory is synonymous to a child's relationship to its mother. Each human being is past, present, and future and each carries the capacity to access and leverage historical memory as a tool of culture (to strengthen, reinforce, protect, nurture) and a tool of liberation. For the oppressed to embrace liberation we must first know that it is possible and attainable. We come into this knowledge by reaching deeply and defiantly into the closet of historical memory to locate, rescue, and repurpose historical achievements, affirm cultural traditions, and make functional ways of knowing and making meaning in the world.

Thus, in order to serve the people, historical memory must be located, harnessed, and put to work rescuing and reconstructing the conscious, pulsating memory of the people. The rationale for orienting Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy toward young Black males is connected to four main aspects of Freire's educational philosophy: 1) reading the word and the world, 2) building collective critical consciousness through dialogue, 3) using historical memory as a tool for liberation, 4) critical praxis. Another aspect of the Freireian approach challenges educators to address problems in ways that encourage people to "understand the relationship of the problem to other factors" (Freire, 1999).

By design, Black Arts curricula represents a functional model based on a *systems analysis* that is responsible and responsive to the unique social, cultural, and cognitive needs of African American students. Such an approach is highly beneficial for understanding the role of consciousness and for exploring the context of relationships and other phenomena affecting the immediate lives of African Americans. As critical pedagogy, the curriculum seeks to encourage young people to move toward assuming a critical posture and taking responsibility for crafting what Bakhtin (1990) calls “the humble prose of living.” To elaborate, the Black Arts curricular framework is the vehicle through which African American students listen, learn, evolve, and speak in voices that are intimately and contextually aware of the living past and present.

Thus, consciousness, collective awareness, and a nuanced understanding of social and cultural reality serve as intellectual and spiritual resources to empower African American students to transform structures by removing strictures. For committed educators, these approaches illuminate opportunities for us to reconsider (and in a Woodsonian and Tylerian-mode question) the relationship between African American history, orality, and reality and why such a relationship matters for/to the African American students that we instruct and interact with daily. The transformative, praxis-promoting poets of the Black Arts Movement and the African American literary genealogy from which they emerge inform this critical vision of socioculturally empowered students and educators.

Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy has the potential to encourage young Black males to become (wide)-awakened to the immediate political reality undergirding their very existence. In the past I have referred to this as “reality politics.” One important aspect of teaching “reality politics” is to promote *critical literacy*, which may be used as a starting point for liberation from oppressive forms of thought, stifling academic experiences, cultural ignorance, and physical

domination. One specific form of reality politics emphasized in the Black Arts curriculum is a segment referred to as “Pedagogy of the Streets.” This component of the curriculum was inspired by Amiri Baraka’s poem “Black Art” wherein Baraka deals with themes such as revolution, black community empowerment, and questioning, detangling, and challenging hegemonic forms of established authority. Other curriculum segments inspired by Baraka’s poem have included discussions of potential sources of creativity, artistic responsibility, and *Nommo* (the transformative power of the spoken word).

During “Pedagogy of the Streets,” facilitator and participants engage a vigorous historical interrogation to study the origins of street, community, and school names throughout Black neighborhoods in Chicago. Participants are provided with brief background on particular names (i.e., Roosevelt, Dan Ryan, Jefferson, Columbus) and attempt to link surnames to their owners. During this phase, we then proceed to locate African Americans within a particular historical, political, and temporal context while simultaneously attempting to reconcile our “unreconciled strivings” (Du Bois, 1903). The next phase requires participants to re-read and discuss the Baraka poem. Next, students are encouraged to engage in research (i.e., interrogate the past) in order to locate themselves (Freire’s *word/world* approach) within this same context and then to analyze and discuss the politics of 1) how place names (and Black communities for that matter) came to be; 2) how Black people’s historical and social experiences factored into the naming of Chicago streets; 3) the social and material impact of activity (street drug transactions, gentrification, foreclosures, police brutality, student brawls, etc.) taking place on those streets; 4) reverberations and contemporary political significance of place names vis-à-vis domination, social justice, and racism (White supremacy). Radical political literacy, according to Freire (1987),

must be seen as a medium that constitutes and affirms the historical and existential moments of lived experience that produces a subordinate or lived culture. Hence, it is an eminently political phenomenon, and it must be analyzed within the context of a theory of power relations and an understanding of social and cultural reproduction and production. (p. 98)

Naturally, it comes as quite a shock to African American students (particularly those residing on the Chicago's west side) to learn of the connection between city streets and the historical realities of African enslavement, racial violence, social displacement patterns, and disaster capitalism. Thus, within a classic Freirian mode of critical inquiry and Du Boisian mode of critical social interrogation, we explore "Pedagogy of the Streets" within the political and artistic framework of Baraka's poem to encourage critical dialogue and reflection. As Freire (1998) asks:

Why not discuss with the students the concrete reality of their lives and the aggressive reality in which violence is permanent and where people are much more familiar with death than with life? Why not establish an "intimate" connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals. Why not discuss the implications, political and ideological, of the neglect of the poor areas of the city by the constituted authorities? (p. 36)

Russell Atkins (in Nielsen, 1963), one of the Black Arts Movement's major theorists, observed that what typically passes for education and critical thinking is often the "mere objectification of one group's thinking processes" layered onto the contextual experiences of another group. Atkins called for the development of "*non-dominant group*" *epistemologies* which

might have to assume the DEFINING OF KNOWLEDGE (what can or should or need be 'known,' and how much treated as such). It may have to create what it knows and know what it creates: and create what it learns and learn what it has created." (p. 89)

With that notion firmly in mind, we position “Pedagogy of the Streets” as a nuanced critique and challenge to dominant ideology and narratives which have been superimposed on the environment and the social reality of young Black males and framed as normative and taken-for-granted. This segment of the Black Arts curriculum employs a critical literacy framework to encourage and challenge African American students to question the very streets on which they walk and on which their homes, schools, basketball courts, and beauty shops are constructed. In so doing, students become empowered to replace the dominating ideology with expansive, culturally affirming educational experiences and pedagogical practices more suited for their intellectual development, cultural enrichment, and sustainability.

A liberatory curriculum based on socially responsible Black Arts poetics places due emphasis on the effective and strategic role of culture to identify and surmount challenges (environmental, academic, personal, interpersonal, emotional, etc.) confronting humans. Additionally, our Black Arts curriculum emphasizes and builds upon African-centered cultural models (i.e., language, historical achievements and actors) that perform several functions including: (1) present a functional, practical, and dignity-affirming cultural synthesis; (2) encourage the development of unique problem-posing and solving techniques; and (3) present innovative instructional models that stress and magnify the role and value of cultural literacy to help young Black males assiduously interrogate and respond to their immediate and long-term contexts.

Taken literally, Freire’s “dynamic interconnection of language and reality” and Du Bois’ radical political praxis comprise a synthesis for seeing the world in a way that is more expansive and worthwhile. Similar to *deep* reading, the effective use of language requires critical perception, interpretation, and rewriting (*respeaking*).

Thus, mastery of language shapes confidence and encourages one to critically challenge oneself leading (ideally) to ever peaking levels of self-worth and agency. Our rationale for a Black Arts curriculum is to provide students with “high-octane,” culturally grounded educational experiences that are contrary to the ‘*education for service*’ model and lean more toward the ‘*education for power*’ model. We expose participants to Black Arts aesthetic philosophy and poetics and challenge them to engage in deep, serious, and systematic mining of African and African American historical experiences and [Pan-African] cultural traditions. This segment of the Black Arts curricular framework places due emphasis on essential questions such as: ‘*What is the function of education for African Americans?*’ Education for power explores and makes attempts to make functional use of Black peoples’ well-documented epistemological, artistic, and radical thought traditions. Paraphrasing Woodson (1933), Asante (1991) cogently observes:

African Americans have been educated away from their own culture and traditions and attached to the fringes of European culture; thus dislocated from themselves, Woodson asserts that African Americans often valorize European culture to the detriment of their own heritage. (p. 170)

... if education is ever to be substantive and meaningful within the context of American society, Woodson argues, it must first address the African's historical experiences, both in Africa and America. (p. 170)

We seek, then, to adequately and appropriately curricularize African American historical experiences (tragedies and victories) to extract maximum educational and cultural value for students. In keeping with the aesthetic goals of the Black Arts Movement, our goal is for young Black students to become leaders in their families, communities, and schools, owners and builders, creators of opportunities, and masters of their destinies. Properly conceived and executed, our Black Arts curriculum teaches remembrance by reminding students of their peoples’ historical achievements and of their collective responsibility to build present-day

monuments above the earth that reflect their capacity for brilliance, excellence, and greatness (Karenga, 1986). The work of Black Arts aestheticians, theoreticians, and activists gains expanded significance alongside Woodson's observation that "if a race has no history, if it has no *worthwhile* [emphasis mine] tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated."

At the crux of our Black Arts curriculum is a critical literacy that is rooted in exploring, embracing, and elucidating African American historical memory as a cultural asset of limitless value and educative potential. It is, in essence, a worthwhile enterprise for intellectual development not survival; for self-reliance and away from patronage and paternalism. It is important to consider that an education of this sort for young Black males would most likely be perceived as a clear and present danger. It might even, in a worst-case scenario, come under attack. However, as Freire (2005) notes:

There may not be life or human existence without struggle and conflict. Conflict shares in our conscience. Denying conflict, we ignore even the most mundane aspects of our vital and social experience. Trying to escape conflict, we preserve the status quo. (p. 215)

The overall purpose of this project is to enhance academic, cultural, and political literacy among African American students and to thereby increase their sense of self-worth, social status, and options for better and more wholesome lives. Our Black Arts curriculum, is organized strategically and presented as an attitudinal and structural process whereby African American students gain the ability, authority, and agency to make decisions and implement positive change in their lives and the lives of others. As radical literature, our Black Arts curriculum must, as Neal (1989) insists, be "integral to the myths and experiences underlying the total history of Black people." As Whitehead intimated, it is not enough, therefore, to merely introduce generic ideas to students "for they will not keep. Something must be *done* [emphasis mine] about them."

Thus, critical discussions lead to critical reflection (and hopefully deeper discussions) regarding the importance of cultural literacy, intellectualism, character development, civic engagement, collective empowerment, positive self-image, and self-expectations.

Important philosophical and theoretical connections are glimpsed between the Black Arts critical literacy curriculum and the leitmotifs of Freire (1971) and Du Bois (1903, 1960). Freire's approach to *praxis* (reflection + action) is important relative to curriculum design, classroom practice, student engagement, philosophical stance, implementation, and other educational considerations. Du Bois' dialectic of oppression and liberation underscores the urgency of Black educators' (especially) political engagement and their desire to seek and implement culture-centered solutions (progressive social praxis) to the problems plaguing humanity – especially those stirring in the souls of Black folk. For our purposes, the insights, educational philosophy, and intellectual complementarity of both Freire and Du Bois hold fascinating alternative pedagogical possibilities when considered alongside the liberatory aims of critical literacy and curricula based on exploring the literary genealogy and aesthetic goals of the Black Arts Movement. As Rabaka (2006) suggests, engaged critical theorists and practitioners must do more than simply claim the thoughts and so-called radical legacy of Du Bois, Douglass, Delaney, and other remarkable folks. Rather, people must be empowered to act and build upon these intellectual legacies if transformation is to occur.

Our Black Arts curriculum is grounded in critical literacy, cultural empowerment, and the thought traditions of African American intellectuals, activists, and creative artists who sought/seek to raise awareness, transform society, and improve the lives of African Americans. The curriculum moves beyond capriciousness and is situated as a vehicle for literacy, consciousness-raising, and cultural empowerment.

For Benston (2000), the Black Arts Movement was never static but instead represented a “constantly shifting field of revision and struggle.” My approach, therefore, is to expand and broaden consciousness by introducing new ways for African American students (beyond merely seeing themselves in the text) to perceive and negotiate the sifting challenges and complex demands of reality. Following reflection and critical dialog and in tandem with the development of critical consciousness, ours is a teaching and practice methodology rooted in a culturally situated liberatory framework that promotes socially responsible thought, speech, and action.

African American epistemology can be organized and presented whereby African American students become excited about and invested in their own education and intellectual development. This approach encourages students to develop a meaningful appreciation for learning and cognition as they come to understand the relevance of cultural knowledge, historical memory, and transcendent folk traditions to their everyday lives. Engaged students will demonstrate a passionate and caring attitude about what they are learning and how they are learning. Engaged students will demonstrate increased levels of energy, patience, and inquiry relative to the learning process. They may come to see connections more readily and can better apply classroom experiences to everyday life experiences. Thus, a more worthwhile challenge is to introduce culturally grounded curricula and classroom practices that appropriately capture and sustain their interest while at the same time challenging and pushing them intellectually. More than ever, such practices must be imaginative, creative, functional, and cognitively appropriate.

Engaged, students act more self-consciously and assertive relative to pushing the boundaries of knowledge acquisition and inquiry. When they understand the relevance of knowledge to the life process, students may demonstrate an increased capacity in deploying and fine tuning critical thinking skills (also, critical hearing skills, coping skills, and cooperation

skills). The heart of this theory is that when one becomes engaged with a thing (history, mathematics, science) one will become increasingly engaged with that thing and will continue to seek a deeper understanding (i.e., become more curious) about that thing. However, such action requires one to develop an appreciative investment (social, emotional, cognitive, intellectual, and material) in the thing.

When African American students become engaged in the educational process the next step is for them to demonstrate (practice) their engagement by investing in the process. Process investment can come in many forms including social, emotional, intellectual, cognitive, material, or combinations thereof. Students invested in their learning process demonstrate that they care about what they learn, how they learn, whether they learn, when they learn, and who teaches them. Further, they develop an appropriate concern for future learning experiences and question whether the existing educational model is adequately preparing them for the future. Writes Freire (1971):

In this situation the oppressed do not see the “new man” as the man to be born from the resolution of this contradiction, as oppression gives way to liberation. Their vision of the new man is individualistic; because of their identification with the oppressor, they have no consciousness of themselves as persons or as members of an oppressed class. Thus is illustrated in our previous assertion that during the initial stage of their struggle the oppressed find in the oppressor their model of “manhood.” (p. 46)

Finally, our Black Arts critical literacy curriculum is a deliberately revolutionary model designed to empower, educate, and uplift. Through a proper reading of word and world, the curriculum encourages African American students to develop critical consciousness through dialog and the utilization of historical memory as a tool for their ultimate liberation from domination, cultural ignorance (i.e., *not knowing*), cultural alienation, and the intellectual lethargy imposed (and in some cases encouraged) by our current system of public education.

Given the current political reality and the prevailing status quo, the education given to young Black males should be an education wherein they learn the art and value of critical reflection in order to positively restructure reality on their terms. This means, of course, a total break from the limitations imposed on them through cultural hegemony and ignorance, which causes them to deny reality, mock their own culture and background, and fail to participate in the building of a sustainable, equitable future for themselves and their progeny.

In another sense, a proper education for young Black males means preparing and grooming them to compete and overcome obstacles and roadblocks whether political, economic, academic, or social. Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy, then, represents an education for power – intellectual power, political power, cultural power, and social power. Ultimately, our practical goals for the curriculum square with Freireian and Du Boisian approaches that 1) critique and resist oppression and domination stemming from any source; and 2) leverage African American existential knowledge as a valuable resource and cultural asset offering unlimited pedagogic, educative, and transformative potential. Thus, we concur with Freire in his salient observation that the greatest “humanistic and historical” task of the dominated is to liberate themselves.

BLACK ARTS LITERARY GENEALOGY: TOWARDS A BLACK AESTHETIC

Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of farms or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and you think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem. (Wright, 2002, p. 3)

The literary genealogy of the Black Arts Movement represents a rich composite of voices, ideas, and creative energy that emerged during a critical time to artistically address (and attempt to redress) social and political injustices confronting Black communities. Specifically, it was spurred as a direct response to the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X.

Black Arts poet and essayist James T. Stewart (1967) makes clear the importance of the [B]lack artist to escape “white paradigms” and to instead construct new aesthetic models that contain “different basic assumptions” and that “correspond to the realities of [B]lack existence.” Stewart further points out that such efforts reflect the “natural demands of our [Black] culture.” In the poem-speak of South African poet Keorapetse William Kgositsile “*either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation.*” Politically and critically engaged artists, activists, aestheticians, and theoreticians served as the primary architects of the Black Arts literary genealogy and attempted to orchestrate culturally-responsive creative production in order to inform, inspire, and instill in African Americans a strong sense of human value, political empowerment, cultural sensibility, and reflective ethos. Neal (1968) staunchly and consistently insisted that the aesthetic issuing from the Black Arts Movement present a “separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” and should relate broadly and terminally to Black peoples’ desire for self-determination, political autonomy, and cultural authenticity.

Baker (2006) laments the “unfortunate wound of ignorance” that has deprived our current generation of an appreciable understanding of our black creative/artistic tradition. Sadly, the body of scholarship and creative content produced during the Black Arts era has been largely neglected, ignored, dismissed, or underutilized by whole generations of scholars and burgeoning Black artists. Thus, perhaps the most important aspect of today’s *spiritwork* (particularly among African American scholars) is the suturing of that wound vis-à-vis the rescue and reconstruction of our collective, functional past.

Aesthetically and politically, the architects of the Black Arts Movement sought to leverage historical memory and culturally grounded practices as core components for encouraging the development of critical consciousness in and among African Americans.

The ultimate aim of the Black Arts Movement was to define, cultivate, and synthesize a functional Black Aesthetic informed by the complex cultural and political contextualities and responsibilities of Black life. Gayle (1971) defines Black Aesthetic as

the acknowledgment that there is no dichotomy between art form and function, culture derives from the group experiences of a people and different experiences produce different cultures. That the experiences of Black Americans are distinct from those of [W]hite Americans perhaps needs no further justification than William Faulkner's oft-quoted remark that he could not imagine himself to be a Negro for five seconds. These distinct experiences have mandated a distinct language, life style, and world view. (p. 113)

The contextual foundation for a Black Aesthetic is twofold: 1) the Black American experience with enslavement, oppression, domination, discrimination (as well as the psychological and social contradictions springing from our collective experiences with American democracy, European Christianity, and American jurisprudence) and the struggle to overcome and eradicate those things; 2) a flowering of Black political consciousness and cultural nationalism informed by expansive aesthetic and epistemological traditions stemming from the reservoir of African American cultural knowledge (i.e., the African American literary genealogy and corpus of intellectual thought). Thus, developing and owning independent Black institutions, Black ideas, Black modes of being, Black thoughts, etc. constituted vital cultural cohesion as well as a radical [and healthy] form of resistance to cultural hegemony across all domains (language, symbol formation, psychology, cognition, etc.). Smith (2006) contends that the principal commitment of the Black Arts Movement was the conscious practice of “foster[ing] black expressivity within grassroots communities and within a political context of black liberation, self-determination, and resistance to white supremacy.” Presaging the call of Baraka, Neal, and Fuller for a Black Aesthetic, Wright (1937), some three decades earlier, expounded on the social consciousness and responsibility of Black writers:

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today. (p. 407)

... a new role is devolving upon the Negro writer. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die. (p. 408)

Artistically speaking, the strategic call for the development of the Black Aesthetic reflects the long history of marginalization and trivialization (what Fuller (1968) terms “outsideness”) of black art and artists. During the movement (1965-1976) certain black art and art forms were deemed too controversial for the mainstream marketplace. Or they were deemed as strange or un-American and therefore unworthy of study, research, or serious consideration. Thus, black art and art forms have been chronically and systematically devalued. Fuller (1968) observed “young writers of the black ghetto have set out in search of the Black Aesthetic, a system of isolating and evaluating the artistic works of black people which reflect the special character and imperatives of black experience.” Sadly, this chronic and systematic devaluation is part and parcel of the social history of Blacks in the United States. The history (and historiography) of Blacks in the United States has incubated under the veil of bias, social injustice, and the narrowness of a forcibly imposed Eurocentric artistic (and intellectual) paradigm that historically has regarded other groups as marginal (at best) or irrelevant (at worst). Swartz (1992) characterizes the term “Eurocentric” as

an ideology or body of myths, symbols, ideas, and practices that exclusively or predominantly values the worldview and cultural manifestations (e.g., history, politics, art, language, music, literature, technology, economics, etc.) of people of European origin, and that denigrates and subordinates the cultural manifestations of people from all other lands of origin. (p. 342)

In this regard the social history of African Americans in the United States is shaped by and tied directly to the continuities of black thought in this country. More interestingly, we have been (and continue to be) shaped by the experiences of social history whether we understand those experiences or not. Insisting that the early basis of the Black Aesthetic was already in existence, Neal (1968) suggested that the Black Aesthetic be naturally oppositional and predicated on an ethics which asks the question: “*Whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors’*”? Du Bois (1926) had posed this question some four decades earlier in the NAACP’s magazine when he asked “*Who shall let this world be beautiful?*”

The Black Arts Movement attempted to align artistic endeavor with political activism, assert the political will and cultural sovereignty of Black people by speaking truth to power, communicate to the world Black peoples’ unique cultural messages, and define *their* world on *their* terms through *their* art, music, literature, institutional development, and political activism. Author, poet and literary critic Kalamu ya Salaam (1998) writes that the Black Arts Movement stands as the singular American literary movement that promoted “social engagement” (i.e., Black power) as a necessary condition of its aesthetic. Heeding Hughes’ (1926) proclamation, Black Arts writers created art to express their “individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.” Thus, the literary genealogy of the Black Arts Movement was intended to be functional, collective, and committed and served as an artistic two-way channel through which to agitate, resist, reflect, and connect Blacks to the moving currents of their culture. In this way, people were encouraged to enter the stream to access living memory and to engage that memory to effect critical change. Cultivating the Black Aesthetic was also a way for Black writers to culturally center themselves and to use this center as a *scratchline* from which to launch and

direct creative production, community development, institution building, and build consensus. In his 1967 essay, Stewart (2007) characterizes Black artists and culture workers as the “ingredients that will create the future” and encourages us to pursue and embrace the “estrangement” from the fixities and trappings of White cultural aesthetics.

We must goad our people by every means, remembering as Ossie Davis stated: that the task of the Negro (sic, black) writer is revolutionary by definition. He must view his role vis-à-vis white Western civilization, and from this starting point his estrangement begins to make new definitions founded on his own culture - on definite black values. (p. 10)

As Crawford (2006) contends, “Blackness emerged as a veritable liberation theology: to be free one had to love blackness.” The Black Aesthetic served as a framework for Black artists to gain voice and use it to frame and contextualize cultural knowledge, discourse, and action around liberatory ideas. In a similar vein, a critical, praxis-promoting literacy curriculum fashioned from Black Arts traditions (literary, social activist, institution development, community cohesion, cultural knowledge, etc.) yields immense possibilities for transforming research, teaching, and learning within urban classrooms. For many Black writers, the Black Aesthetic was a means to reflectively problematize and bring mass attention to critical and/or contentious issues. Culturally relevant, socially responsible (i.e., committed) poetry comprising the Black Arts literary genealogy, hence, can serve as anti-colonial media and a site from which to analyze, contextualize, synthesize, and understand the dynamic interrelationship of complex social, political, and historical phenomena affecting Black American people’s lives and destinies while simultaneously attempting to link them to the global Pan-African struggle for liberation and self-affirmation.

As contributors to Black Arts literary genealogy, Black writers sought to convey and create a revolutionary relationship between Black people and the best (i.e., most functional) ideas concerning our history, heritage, and culture. Also conveyed were themes of unity, self-

affirmation, and the importance and relevance of one's culture relative to one's artistic pursuits, community development, wholeness, and sense of self. The Black Arts poetic tradition represented the creative evolution of a formidable communication space for artistic dialogue and political action concatenated by Black writers in the United States during the last two hundred sixty years. Drawing from that legacy, Black Arts pedagogy serves as a unique *heritage space* within which progressive educators and curricularists can construct liberatory (and therefore worthwhile) educational experiences to artistically engage and deconstruct ongoing cultural hegemony, launch critical interrogations of radical Black messengers and messages, and uncover/discover/recover the meaning, intent, and purpose behind such messengers and messages.

What is the role of the black artist in these intense political times? So might read the question were it posed by a Sanchez, Kgositsile, Madhubuti, Evans, Mtume, Baraka, Fuller, or The Watts Prophets. Were a Cruse (1969), West (1985), Woodson (1933), Sizemore (1973, 1987, 2008), Hilliard (1986, 1988, 2007) or Cooper (1990) to pose this meaningful question it might read like this: *What is the role of the black intellectual in these intense political times?* In the poem-speak of Madhubuti he asks *Where are the educators who see Blackly?*

As its foremost advocate and theorist, Neal (1968) espoused and articulated nationhood, cultural solidarity, and self-determination as the primary determining goals and organizing principles of the Black Arts Movement. Fervently insisting that the artist and political activist are the same manifestation, Neal (and other artist-activists) called for a new synthesis, which he elaborated as "a new sense of literature as a living reality." Other Black Arts theorists and artists including Fuller, Madhubuti, Hernton, Henderson, and Sanchez raised the ontological question in an attempt to problematize and proactively disrupt the [contradictory, hostile, tenuous, complex]

relationship between African Americans and the ideas, norms, etc. of western society. Ellison (1999) characterizes this effort as an attempt on the part of Blacks to “possess the meaning” of their lives in the United States. Reflecting on his personal awakening and desire to possess the meaning of his life, Baker (1990) writes of being born in a racialistic slave state and

bombarded with the words, images, and artifacts of the white world. My parents had been bombarded with the same images, and the Black librarian was no better off... All of us had been lobotomized into the acceptance of ‘culture’ on the white world’s terms; we failed to realize that the manner in which the white world used ‘culture’ only helped justify its denial of the Black man.” (p. 8-9)

Hence, for Black creative artists, a critical first step in establishing the Black Aesthetic involved both a restless questioning and surgical critique of dominant Western art/thought forms and modes of creative expression. The purpose of restless questioning is to interrogate the status quo and to challenge the alleged legitimacy of Western art forms as *the* first and final source for inspiration, theorization, and expression of [black] creative ideas and the creative process itself. Sanchez (2007) elaborates this position in an interview:

I will never again involve myself with what I call secondary consciousness. I will never see myself, see other Black women, see Black men, and Black children secondarily, through the eyes of the oppressor...the slave master...I maintain that I will never in my life walk secondarily again--or even appear to have any secondary views. If you approach me, you must approach me on an equal level. (p 20)

Black artists were simultaneously deconstructing and constructing; they were attempting to escape hegemonic traditions and experiences while introducing [literary, stage, music, and craft] works reflecting the Black Aesthetic. These artists sought to organize reality in ways that they considered more worthwhile and functional for African Americans given our unique social history and given the ideological and political goals of the Black Arts Movement. Townsend (2006), echoing the “breakaway” spirit and attitude of Black Arts writers, encourages us to challenge fixed boundaries and definitions by questioning the structured forms through which we

view art. In so doing, we are more likely to encounter and resist the urge to remain anchored to fixed ways of thinking.

Relatedly, for many, the question of *What is worthwhile* has for decades been a cornerstone of curriculum inquiry, research, policy, debate, and action (Du Bois, 1906; Dewey, 1916; Asante, 1991; Freire, 2000; Tyler, 1949; Woodson, 1933; Schubert, 1986; Spring, 1976, 2009; Broudy, 1990). Rutherford B. Hayes and others officially raised the “Negro” question as early as 1890 during the First Mohonk Conference in New York. Writing in 1919 and with an emphasis on the intellectual development of African Americans, Woodson asserts that the White ruling class remains as perplexed as ever “as to exactly what kind of training” Blacks should have or be exposed to. Indeed, Schubert (1986) reminds us “to realize connections between our actions and assumptions is to be in a better position to control and liberate our lives.” Ellison’s (1999) notion of “artistic selectivity” and Tyler’s (1949) widely-cited four questions concerning educational purposes, experiences, organization, and evaluation add richness, reflective contour, and broad philosophical consideration to Black Arts curricular thinking and possibilities.

To broaden educational experiences, Eisner (1997) encourages both teachers and students to be versatile and sensitive with regard to the contextual and subjective understandings we bring to and take from language. We should, Eisner insists strive to become enlightened *connoisseurs* and to use “language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say.” Other scholars and theorists have offered specific insights relative to the nature, quality, and organization of educational purposes and experiences vis-à-vis the education of African Americans (Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1906; Woodson, 1933; Asante, 1991; Outlaw, 1989, 2005; West, 1985; B. M. Gordon, 1993, Lynn, 1999, 2006; Hilliard, 1984, 1998, 2001; Wilson, 1993; Shujaa, 1994; Sizemore, 1973, 1984, 2007; Lee, 2008).

The profound impact of the Black Arts Movement on African American literature is still being felt, if not adequately understood, accessed, or leveraged. Reflecting on that unspoken impact, Gussow (2006) vigorously asserts that Black Arts writers reshaped African American literature

as a blues-toned legacy – unabashedly invested in, and supremely conscious of, its own southern-born vernacular taproot, a jook-honed survivor’s ethos of self-willed mobility, self-determined sexual personhood, and bittersweetly lyric self-inscription. (p. 228)

Surprisingly, however, the artistic, creative, and cultural influence of the Black Arts Movement remains understudied and underutilized as a zone of research, practice, and theoretical consideration. Despite its role as a catalyst for 1960s-1970s activist nationalism, for presaging the Black, Multicultural, Chicano/Chicana, Asian, and Women’s Studies movements and institution-building, and for helping pave the way for African Americans in the American academy, the Black Arts legacy is typically ignored, casually dismissed, or generally unknown. Resultantly no connections are acknowledged between the Black Arts Movement and the need for present-day political consciousness and cultural literacy. The works of major Black Arts voices including Aldon Nielsen, Stephen Henderson, Mari Evans, Addison Gayle, Jr., and Amiri Baraka remain virtually unread and under-scrutinized by all but a handful of serious scholars and enthusiasts. Typically overshadowed by the Harlem Renaissance, the literary and cultural impact of the Black Arts Movement has been tragically minimized to a few angry poems by a handful of “pissed off Black militants.”

Indeed, the minimization of the impact of the Black Arts Movement is especially commonplace in educational settings. This is especially ironic (or perhaps not) given the intense interest among many contemporary educators to introduce “progressive” curricula and pedagogical approaches (typically targeted at African American and Latino youth) based on

Hip-Hop, so-called “urban poetics,” and social justice, and tolerance themes. Perhaps because its artistic/political goals were so closely intertwined with the political goals of the Black Power Movement, many were (and remain) quick to characterize the aesthetic mission of Black Arts Movement as utopian, unrealistic, facile, narrow, or reductionist. However, such hostile and agenda-laden characterizations fail to adequately appreciate the depth, breadth, artistic variety, and cultural importance of Black Arts creative production – itself a smaller component of the expansive African American literary genealogy.

A major objective of Black Arts writers was to examine and expound the symbiotic relationship between critical literacy, African American cultural knowing, social activism, and the ethics of memory. This may explain why much Black Arts Movement activity was congregated in popular public spaces such as community centers, bookstores, libraries, vacant lots, political rallies, and street corners. One contemporary (mid-1990s-present) manifestation of the Black literary genealogy is the prevalence of spoken word events; most of which take place in cafés and bookstores. Today, a younger generation of Black writers and activists [many perhaps unaware that they are involved (directly or indirectly) in carrying on a literary genealogy] is nonetheless engaged in this critical tradition. For Gayle, Jr., Neal, and other Black Arts writers, socially responsible (i.e., committed) poetry represented and reflected the collective conscious and aesthetic voice of African Americans in the struggle to overcome political obstacles and articulate an expansive social vision predicated on liberty and cultural autonomy. Black Arts illustrator and writer Tom Feelings (1995) observes:

When I am asked what kind of work I do, my answer is that I am a storyteller, in picture form, who tries to reflect and interpret the lives and experiences of the people that gave me life. When I am asked who I am, I say, I am an African who was born in America. Both answers connect me specifically with my past and present ... therefore I bring to my art a quality which is rooted in the culture of Africa ... and expanded by the experience of being in America. I use the vehicle of 'fine art' and 'illustration' as a viable expression of form, yet striving always to do this from an African perspective, an African world view,

and above all to tell the African story ... this is my content. The struggle to create artwork as well as to live creatively under any conditions and survive (like my ancestors), embodies my particular heritage in America. (from the Introduction)

The Black Arts Movement literary genealogy served as a lens through which Black writers sought to glimpse, interface, and articulate the expansive meaning of reality. As Woodson, Du Bois, Freire, B. M. Gordon, Fanon, and many others have intimated, constructing effective frameworks for properly interpreting reality, is an especially important task for oppressed peoples. Therefore, it is not only necessary for oppressed people to see themselves in relationship to their oppression but also in relationship to their ability to comprehend, resist, overcome, and transcend oppression. Various Black Arts proponents comprising writers, theorists, and activists sought to encourage African Americans to see ourselves in relationship to unique cultural inheritances and imprints – from the legacy of resistance we have inherited to our expansive capacity to access and transmit our unique cultural messages to the world. This, after all, is the stuff of culture. As Smethurst (2005) observes:

the common thread between nearly all the groups was a belief that African Americans were a people, a nation, entitled to (needing, really) self-determination of its own destiny. While notions of what that self-determination might consist of (and what forms it might take) varied, these groups shared the sense that without such power, African Americans as a people and as individuals would remain oppressed and exploited second-class (or non-) citizens in the United States. While the right to self-determination had often been a mark of both black nationalism and much of the Left (since at least the late 1920s), making the actual seizing and exercise of self-determination the central feature of political and cultural activity differentiated Black Power from any major African American political movement since the heyday of Garveyism. And unlike the Garveyites, a major aspect of most tendencies of the Black Power and Black Arts movements was an emphasis on the need to develop, or expand upon, a distinctly African American or African culture that stood in opposition to white culture or cultures. (p. 15)

For Black Arts writers, successfully interfacing with and articulating reality meant being able to see themselves in history, understand their relationship with history, and develop the capacity to functionally read the immediate world.

Black Arts writers understood well the importance of encouraging Black people to interface with our collective capacity to positively alter reality. Much of the creative activity of Black Arts Movement involved reacquainting Blacks to their historical habits of institution building, critical praxis, and revolutionary activity. This was evidenced over an approximate span of twelve years by the creation of numerous journals, literary presses, community centers, writing guilds, and theaters throughout Boston, New York, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Oakland, Houston, and other cities. The Black Arts literary genealogy was conveyed through books, essays, pamphlets, cultural gatherings institutions, and other mediums including:

Journals/Magazines	
<i>FreedomWays</i> (New York)	<i>Vibration</i> (Cleveland)
<i>Black Dialogue</i> (San Francisco, New York)	<i>Soulbook</i> (San Francisco)
<i>The Black Scholar</i> (Oakland)	<i>Journal of Black Poetry/Kitabu Cha Jua</i> (San Francisco)
<i>Free Lance</i> (Cleveland)	<i>Liberator</i> (New York)*
<i>Dasein</i> (Washington, New York)	<i>Phylon</i> (Atlanta)
<i>The Cricket</i> (New York)	<i>Black Theater</i> (New York)
<i>Black America</i> (New York)	<i>Black Opals</i> (Philadelphia)
<i>Black Books Bulletin</i> (Chicago)	<i>Inner City Voice</i> (Detroit)
<i>Nommo</i> (Chicago)	<i>The Black Liberator</i> (Chicago)
<i>Rhythm</i> (Atlanta)	<i>Nkombo</i> (New Orleans)
<i>Negro Digest/The Black World</i> (Chicago)	<i>Umbra Magazine</i> (New Jersey)
<i>First World Magazine</i> (Atlanta)	<i>ABA: A Journal of Affairs of Black Artists</i> (Massachusetts)

*Not an official Black Arts Movement journal but many Black Arts writers published in this magazine.

Theater	
New Lafayette Theater (New York)	Black Ensemble Theater (New York)
National Black Theater (New York)	Negro Ensemble Company (New York)
New Federal Theater (New York)	Concept East Theater (Detroit)
La Mama (New York)	Group Theater Workshop (New York)
Free Southern Theater (New Orleans)	The Muntu Group (Philadelphia)
Kuumba Theatre Company (Chicago)	The East (New York)
Theater of Afro Arts (Miami)	eta Creative Arts Foundation
Dunham's Performing Arts Center (East St. Louis)	Karamu House (Cleveland)

Fillmore East Theater (New York)	Dashiki Theater Project (New Orleans)
BLKARTSOUTH (New Orleans)	Sudan Arts South/West (Houston)
Theater of Afro Arts (Miami)	Southern Black Cultural Alliance (Houston)
Children of Selma Theater (Alabama)	Blues Repertory Theater (Memphis)
Last Messengers (Greenville, MS)	Black Theater Alliance (New York)
American Conservatory Theatre (San Francisco)	Free Southern Theatre (New Orleans)
Black Arts Midwest Theater (Detroit)	Inner City Repertory Company (Los Angeles)
Ebony Showcase (Los Angeles)	Performing Arts Society (Los Angeles)

Literary/Creative Societies/Conferences	
Fisk Black Writers Conference (Alabama)	Umbra Poets Workshop (New Jersey)
BARTS (New Jersey)	Black Arts Convention (Detroit)
Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (Los Angeles)	OBAC (Chicago)
AACM (Chicago)	Black Artists Group (St. Louis)
Black Arts/West (San Francisco)	Black Communications Project (San Francisco)
Harlem Writers Guild (New York)	On Guard for Freedom (New York)
Underground Musicians Association (Los Angeles)	Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension (Los Angeles)
AFRI-COBRA (Chicago)	Watts Writers Workshop (Los Angeles)
Studio Museum (New York)	Spirit House (New Jersey)
Jihad Productions (New Jersey)	Kuumba Workshop (Chicago)
Institute for Positive Education (Chicago)	Shrine of the Black Madonna (Detroit)
UHURU (Detroit)	Southside Community Arts Center (Chicago)
Boone House (Detroit)	South Side Writers Group (Chicago)
Artistic Heritage Ensemble (Chicago)	The Black House (San Francisco)
Negro Historical and Cultural Society	Studio Watts (Los Angeles)
Art Ensemble of Chicago	Center for Black Art (Atlanta)
Afro American Association (Los Angeles)	Black Belt Cultural Center (Alabama)
Black Arts Workshop (Little Rock, AK)	Southern Black Cultural Alliance (Houston)
Ahidian Collective (Alabama)	US (Los Angeles)
Literary Conferences (Jackson State, A&M, Tougaloo, Southern, Fisk, Atlanta University, Howard University)	

Literary Presses	Newspapers
Broadside (Detroit)	Muhammad Speaks (Detroit)
Third World Press (Chicago)	Chicago Defender
Lotus Press (Detroit)	Pittsburgh Courier
	Michigan Chronicle
	California Eagle

When considered within the cultural knowledge framework encompassing a wider, more expansive literary genealogy, the Black Arts literary genealogy can be appropriately (and unfortunately) classified alongside other marginalized practices through which African Americans have attempted to comprehend reality, establish cultural autonomy, and educate successive generations. Thus, relevant themes that emerged from the Black Arts Movement included cultural development, African historical exploration, community development, institution building, progressive (as opposed to reactionary) political activism/education, and building cultural consensus. Taken individually or collectively, these Black Arts themes sync perfectly with liberatory educational practices (i.e., critical, aesthetic, and cultural literacy, resistance to hegemony, accessing and leveraging cultural knowledge, using historical memory to inform practice, developing an engaged political stance, etc.) in “schools and other learning institutions and situations” that B. M. Gordon (1985, 1993, 1997) and others (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Lynn, 2006; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008; Thomas, 1978; Asante, 1991; Giroux, 1983; Greene, 1978; Shor, 1999; Woodson, 1933; Whitehead, 1929; Hilliard, 2007; Dove, 1996) have written about and encouraged scholars and practitioners to build upon. Sadly and fortunately, Madhubuti’s Third World Press is one of the very few institutions to have survived from the era of the Black Arts Movement. Also, with respect to Black Aesthetic challenge to develop Black institutions, Madhubuti and his wife Carol D. Lee, have also created three independent African-centered schools that are still in operation on the south side of Chicago.

The literary genealogy of the Black Arts Movement drew direct influence from several sources including: Pan-Africanist/Kawaida ideological and theoretical leanings, Communist/Marxist teachings and propaganda, Third Worldism, the do-for-self, separatist ideology of the Nation of Islam, and the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Smethurst, 2005). The Black Arts literary genealogy is tied epistemologically and episodically to the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, the 1961 riot at the United Nations building in New York to protest U.S. involvement in the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the African independence explosion beginning with Ghana's independence from Britain in 1957, and the evolution of "new thing" jazz developed by musicians such as John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Archie Shepp, and Ornette Coleman. Leading Black Arts theorist and aesthetician Neal (1989) famously referred to the Black Arts Movement as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister" of the Black Power Movement. Prominent liberation themes, including the widespread call for the establishment of the Black Aesthetic, resonated and found expression in Black Arts Movement literature (poetry, fiction, essay, journals, etc.), music, paintings, theater, and dance. For Neal, the formation of the Black Aesthetic called for Black artists to locate and leverage the unique epistemology (ideas, images and other cultural assets), theoretical frameworks, and collective traditions within their own history and heritage and to make them central and primary vis-à-vis creative production, performance, and public activity (i.e., conferences, teach-ins, institution building).

Liberation themes were not only to be found only in Black Arts Movement literature. Further thematic expression was prominent in other social media forms including Black hairstyles (afro, natural hair), *geles* (head wraps), jewelry and clothing (African clothing), folk vernacular (*Brother and Sister*, *Right On*, *Power to the People*, etc.), and Black folks' systematic exchanging of European names for African names.

The intentional purposing and recasting of African and African American folk traditions resonates nicely with B. M. Gordon's (1993) call for Black scholars to diligently access and functionalize the ginormous scope of African American cultural knowledge and to develop culturally grounded interpretive frameworks to synthesize said knowledge. Smethurst (2005) observes:

In fact, despite the fairly common attribution of anti-intellectualism to Black Arts, an almost obsessive concern with the theorizing of the relationship of the African American artist and his or her formal practices to the black community (or nation) was one of the distinguishing features of the movement. (p. 68)

For Neal (1967), Gayle (1969, 1972), and B. M. Gordon, identifying and purposing (read: *making best use of*) the accumulated folk knowledge of African Americans operates as both a political imperative and a vital cultural survival strategy. By definition, such work aligns with criticalist and culturally centered perspectives and also obligates Black scholars and teachers of the Black Arts Movement to identify contested sites and to “forge in the smithy of [their] souls the uncreated conscience” of the African American cultural epistemology (Joyce, 1993). Historical memory is a key component for developing critical consciousness, inspiring human action, and providing fresh access to reality. As B. M. Gordon (1993) observes, the resourcing of cultural knowledge is precisely how culture is sustained and ceded to successive generations.

Currently, the quality and quantity of Black creative production is suffering (in part) owing to the sidelining and denigration of culturally and historically affirming Black art and art forms. Another reason, of course, is the appalling lack of independent, viable Black cultural institutions. Our portrayal in popular media (music, film, television) is yet another aspect of Blacks' social history in the United States. Black Arts writers emphasized and exemplified an edifying purpose in the art – beyond art for art's sake. The Black Arts Movement sought to recast the negative popular image of Black people in a way that was culturally authentic and dignity

affirming. Black people, it was argued, should exercise total control over their own image and how that image is relayed to the world. As such, the creative thrust of the movement involved an exhaustive search for an aesthetic to reflect a new, functional consciousness of self-determination and peoplehood.

Historically, the image of Blacks rendered in popular media has been considered exceedingly negative. Black men, for their part, are seen as angry, hostile, and hypersexual. Black women, for the most part, are portrayed as oversexed, overweight child breeders and angry welfare cheats. When cast together, Black men and women are (stereo)typically represented as one-dimensional, non-cerebral competitors obsessed with material consumption and immediate gratification. Rarely are African Americans seen in relationship to the best and most enduring aspects of our history. African and African American cultural values and artistic considerations are seldom if ever brought into the discussion. Outside of raucous roles as entertainers and comedians, Blacks are typically portrayed as non-serious, dependent, and disconnected from viable culture, heritage, traditions, and a meaningful epistemology. Thus, within education, the marginalized traditions and life praxes of Black Americans reflects (sadly) an enduring, psychically violent colonial legacy and the embarrassing absence of Black Arts literary traditions. Freire (1998) observes:

If this colonial legacy remains unexamined and the "at risk" students are denied the opportunity to study and critically understand their reality, including their language, culture, gender, ethnicity, and class position, for all practical purposes the "at risk" students will continue to experience a colonial existence. (p. xxvii)

Our alternative curricular paradigm strategically leverages Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy as sources reflecting and representing a worthwhile epistemological tradition. Curricula built around Black Arts Movement can also serve as a learning modality to construct a formative culture of critical awareness, insight, collective engagement, dialogue, and

consciousness-raising among African American students. When considered from these perspectives, Black Arts curricula serves to deepen and broaden the corridor of ideas and introduce possibilities for expanded learning, dialogue-building, and substantive meaning making. Further pedagogical dimensions of Black Arts Movement include its role as a learning modality to help students think critically about their personal experiences and connect themselves and their experiences to a broader social reality.

An over-arching theme within the Black Arts Movement was the right to independent expression and creative production. Similar to the adventurous avant-garde (free form) exploration of Black jazz artists, Black Arts writers intentionally sought to break from established literary expressionist modes which many considered stifling, confining, and ill-suited to define the new Black creative voice. A voice being shaped by radical political activism, a return to [African] roots, resistance to the established order, and a reconstruction of a liberated, affirming, and culturally insistent Black self.

For Black Arts Movement writers, effectively *reading the world* was the initial framing of a complex question that entailed “hipping” Blacks to the existence of external forces, structures, ideologies, and institutions that have historically been detrimental to their development. The larger, more complicated, and more substantive side of the issue revolved around ethics, epistemological validity and asking, quite frankly, relative to Black social, cultural, and intellectual development: *Whose vision of the world is more meaningful – that of Blacks or their oppressors?*

Representing the living memory and literal consciousness of the people, the Black Arts literary genealogy reflected the trenchant will of African American people. It held and transmitted the African American ethos and biological consciousness and projected the radical

aesthetic of black artistic sensibilities. In this way, the genealogy was sustained for later generations to access and from which they drew inspiration. The Black Arts literary genealogy also represented the sentient cultural epistemology of messages and messengers and cartography of creative ideas. In essence, it may be characterized as an ideological ecosystem and container for the accumulated cultural wisdom of Black thinkers and artists seeking to understand, interpret, and navigate their lived reality. Hence, Black Arts writers sought to develop a radical, Black cultural aesthetic committed to the visibility and viability of Black artistic forms. As a literary orientation, Black Arts literary genealogy served as a bearer of critical tradition, cause, history, memory, and radical, socially responsible action to effect constructive change. In many ways it operated as a way for people to engage and overcome conflict by placing the critical and political mediation of that conflict front and center.

The literary genealogy of the Black Arts Movement functioned as a valuable cultural resource and adaptational tool because of its ability to inspire, motivate, and transform. In a social and political climate where “centuries of Americanization” and Eurocentric mythification have undermined African American cultural formation, Black Art compels recognition and recovery of African American cultural knowledge (Gayle, 1974). Black creative artists purposed the literary genealogy as a device for leveraging the intelligence and sentiment of Black writers, aestheticians, and theoreticians. The movement’s literary genealogy served the important dual purpose of acquainting and orientating Black people to their culture (that is, their behavior and the ways in which they make meaning). The Black Arts literary genealogy is, in fact, heritage. It is the means through which African Americans locate and legitimize us to ourselves. It is a *cultural blueprint* that explains how, why, and where we happen. It is a story that Black writers and expressionists continue to tell and upon whose waters they continue to navigate.

The corpus of this genealogy constitutes our literary essence. The literary genealogy of the Black Arts Movement represents African Americans' connection, commitment to, and conveyance of an expansive ethical and cultural ethos. At once, it is a narrative of hope, tears, fears, courage, love, frustration, betrayal, fulfillment, and transcendence.

CHAPTER 3. BLACK ARTS INQUIRY AND PEDAGOGY

PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES OF THE BLACK ARTS LITERARY GENEALOGY

*I will be as black as blackness can
the blacker the mantle the mightier the man.*

(Du Bois, *The Song of the Smoke*, 1907)

Serving (in large part) as a long, self-congratulatory corporate narrative, American public education functions simultaneously as an elite political weapon and chronic subjugator of Black cultural voices, realities, political language, creative expression, history, and perspectives (B. M. Gordon, 1993; Outlaw, 2005; Hilliard, 2007; Sizemore, 1973; Giroux, 2001). The persistent masking and muting of Black life praxes (in education) has inculcated in many African American students and teachers a warped psychology and limited worldview shaped by our particular historical experience with oppression and domination stemming from White supremacy (Wilson, 1993). In effect, the existing education model is frightfully biased, hostile, and does not serve the best interests of African American students (or even the best long-term interests of students belonging to the dominant group) (Woodson, 1933, 2010). The system leaves us with broken dreams and shattered possibilities owing to our inability and/or unwillingness to develop and deploy culturally responsive curricula that makes worthwhile use of transcendent African American cultural traditions. To be sure, these worthwhile traditions

hold the most promise for serving the best interests of African American students and must therefore be rescued, reclaimed, and routinely enacted through conscious, continuous reflection and culturally grounded practice.

Pedagogical implications for teaching (*curricularizing*) the Black Arts Movement are expansive, far ranging, and offer immense possibilities for improving the academic, aesthetic, and cultural literacies of African American students. The Black Arts Movement must not be *mistaught* or *undertaught*. Properly conceived and executed, curricula based upon the Black Arts literary genealogy may translate into effective educational practices in classroom and non-classroom spaces. Hence, to be truly effective, the Black Arts [critical and cultural] literacy curriculum (like the movement itself) should fully incorporate the (historical) existential experiences of African Americans and synthesize those experiences within the framework of contemporary social and cultural contexts.

The broad pedagogical aims of the Black Arts curriculum include encouraging and preparing African American students to:

1. access and leverage the Black Arts literary genealogy (shaped primarily by the critical tradition of black intellectual thought and critical praxis) to broaden their sensibilities and deepen political, social, cultural, and academic literacy;
2. learn about the Black Aesthetic; engage the socially responsible (committed) poetry of the movement as a site for students to gain voice and use it to frame and contextualize discourse and action around liberatory ideas and to reflectively problematize contentious issues;
3. develop Black Arts Culture Circles (BACCs) that are culturally affirming, rigorous, and within which students may scaffold rich, radiant, and realistic dialog about important issues; utilize BACCs to promote critical media literacy and to sustain the Black Arts literary genealogy;
4. situate Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy as anti-colonial media to help analyze and understand the dynamic interrelationship of complex social, political, and historical phenomena undergirding and critically informing the lived realities of African American youth;

5. challenge and dismantle attitudes and practices that seek to/tend to position the creative artifacts (ex., poetry, music) of Black artists as cursory, non-cerebral, and evanescent;
6. engage alternative modes of thinking about text and ideas within text; foster shared understandings and collaboration via exploration of relevant themes within RSRP;
7. understand the relevance and transformative potential of creative arts as a tool to encourage meaningful reflection and critical dialog, analyze and decipher negative cultural messages emanating from popular media and initiate radical, transformative, and socially responsible action in lives, families, and communities;
8. use Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy to encourage African American students to think critically and reflectively about the larger social reality and about their personal experiences and inherited epistemological traditions.

Aspect One – Explore an Expanded Definition of the ‘Critical’ in Critical Literacy

Morrell’s (2008) call for an expanded definition of ‘critical’ is based, in part, on the daily challenge to progressive educators to advance critical literacy beyond the realm of mere understanding and rote practice and, instead, situate it as a purposeful “practice of freedom” to contribute to ongoing personal development and authentic social transformation. Toward this end, Morrell’s retooled notion of “critical” simultaneously emphasizes and complicates our conceptualization of and approach to critical literacy (reading, writing, synthesis) as it relates to “constituting and reconstituting” the self. This, of course, includes an imaginative reconsideration of the [best of] the Western philosophical tradition and what Morrell refers to as important “Othered” narratives – which includes the African American epistemological tradition. Morrell’s position is not new and builds upon similar articulations from Woodson (1993), Asante (1991), B.M. Gordon (1993), L. Gordon (2000), and several others.

For Black Arts pedagogy, blowing up (i.e., expanding) the critical frame allows us to move in some rather interesting directions both theoretically and practically. For one thing (with due regard to the artistic/activist legacy of the Black Arts Movement), what/where are the liberationist moments in our consideration and curricularization of the movement?

How are these liberationist moments to be excavated, defined, presented, assessed, shared, and otherwise made accessible? How do these liberationist moments in Black Arts pedagogy affect/influence the education of African American students? Where are the contours? The tensions? What are the potential virtues and defects of said liberationist moments?

Another worthwhile outcome of the recasting of ‘critical’ is realized in terms of how African American students constitute and reconstitute themselves (individually and collectively) upon exposure to Black Arts pedagogy. This represents a type of intimate reflection whereupon African American students are encouraged to generate authentic dialogues with themselves, one another, and the Black intellectual and artistic past.

Aspect Two – Critical Engagement with Text and Ideas

Seen from the perspective of critical pedagogy, a Black Arts curriculum offers an innovative approach to critical literacy centered on the social experiences of marginalized Black students struggling against a context of racial oppression, cultural alienation, and political subjugation. The curriculum is designed to create opportunities for students to engage in meaningful and significant conversations about texts and ideas within texts. This approach allows students to explore, analyze, and develop ideas and concepts within literature. Students are encouraged to make connections between literature and personal experiences and between salient features contained in different literatures. More, students are encouraged to connect themes and ideas in literature as well as make connections between literature and historical and cultural phenomena (Bowers, 1974, 1984). Learning outcomes include: fluency, word knowledge, comprehension, writing skills, listening skills, and increased cultural literacy.

Another important objective of the curriculum is to teach students to develop responsible convictions and to take informed artistic and political stands in alignment with the positive representation of Black people, the stewardship of Black cultural production, and the authentic purchase and negotiation of Black cultural messages to the wider world. Neal (1972) suggested the following five categories be explored with consideration to developing the Black Aesthetic philosophy and outlook: 1) Race Memory; 2) Middle Passage/Diaspora; 3) Transmutation and Synthesis; 4) Blues God/Tone as Meaning and Memory; 5) Black Arts Movement/Black Art Aesthetic. Each of these categories contains multiple interlaced themes encompassing the complex mythology, neo-mythology, spiritualism, history, and symbolism of the African American experience. Neal's five categories are highly useful for assisting with the theoretical and practical development of a Black Arts curricular framework.

Another pedagogical possibility of the Black Arts curriculum is to strategically leverage it as a means of introducing students to critical, thought-provoking ideas and a worthwhile epistemological tradition (Outlaw, 2005; B. M. Gordon, 1985, 1993; Woodson, 1933; West, 1985; Boateng, 1990). In so doing, students are encouraged to become intellectually empowered, culturally astute, and intellectually curious. Hence, educators and students may utilize socially responsible Black Arts poetry as a cultural artifact and tool for social action, community-building, intellectual liberation (Simon, 2001; Schubert, 1986; Graff, 1994), and the expansion of aesthetic sensibilities (Greene, 1978; Eisner, 1991; Broudy, 1978). The Black Arts literary genealogy serves as an effective tool to assist students with developing a critical frame of reference (Schubert, 1986; Bowers, 1974; Cabral, 1966) to understand and synthesize ideas (both historical and contemporary). This is especially important given the inordinate negative influence that popular media has on the lives of children.

Black Arts pedagogy shares many perspectives presented and supported by critical race theorists. Chief among them is the notion of challenging dominant ideology, reconstructing social theory, and transforming social reality (B. M. Gordon, 1993; Rabaka, 2006). The ascriptive narrative promoted and enforced by the dominant society has succeeded in both sidelining and/or neutralizing the voices, narratives, and experiences of subordinated groups. More, this narrative has helped to reinforce social injustice and the widespread belief in the alleged inferiority of oppressed groups. Thus, marginalized and subordinated people acting on this belief may often come to believe themselves that their own voices and stories are not worth telling or listening to, that the dominant group's ideology is the only ideology that matters or is worth exploring (Elmore and Sykes, 1992), and (ultimately) that their unique cultural truths are (at best) marginal or (at worse) irrelevant. These narrow beliefs contributed to the inspiration for Black Arts theorists, artists, and activists to call for the development of a Black Aesthetic. As poet Etheridge Knight (in Neal, 1968) famously warned:

Unless the Black artist establishes a "Black aesthetic" he will have no future at all. To accept the [W]hite aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live. The Black artist must create new forms and new values, sing new songs (or purify old ones); and along with other Black authorities, he must create a new history, new symbols, myths, and legends (and purify old ones by fire). (pg. 2)

In many cases, the actors, voices and stories of the subordinated become what Fanon (1968) astutely characterizes as "obscene caricatures." Thus, recognizing, resisting, and challenging the dominant ideology are important first steps constructing an educational model that is tendered on justice, respect, and affirmation. In Devorah Major's poem *Nommo: How We Come to Speak*, she stresses the significance of culture, respecting generations, and honoring our relationship to African culture, language, and memory:

so how now do we
scrape the slime from between our teeth
and rinse out the sourness of decay
how now do we
put out tongues back
in our mouths

again learn to listen
with more than ears

at once try to speak
with more than tongue

Like other Black Arts poetry, Major's piece holds significant educative value because it endears the Black Arts literary genealogy, reflects (and renders accessible) the artistic and philosophical tone of the sought-after Black Aesthetic, and contextualizes Black Arts theory.

Another aspect of a Black Arts Movement critical pedagogic approach involves acquainting African American students with the storied uniqueness and complexity of cultural voice conveyed through the Black Arts literary genealogy. This sentient voice encompasses an expansive litany of racial memory, cultural mythology, folk consciousness, and ethos. Thus, just as Black Arts writers endeavored to establish a new Black Aesthetic that intentionally resisted "art for art's sake," (Neal, 1968; Fuller, 1967; Fowler, 1976; Gayle, 1972; Henderson, 1973, Thomas, 2000) so, too, does Black Arts pedagogy deem insufficient the notion of learning for learning's sake. Similar to the culturally relevant creative production of Black Arts writers, learning for Black students must be strategically and seriously linked to an intentionality and direction that serves the intellectual and cultural needs of African American students and the optimal development of the African American community.

Contextually and pedagogically, a Black Arts liberation curriculum represents an effort to engage culturally grounded educational practices. Critically implemented Black Arts pedagogy can make enormous contributions to education and the understanding and philosophical approach to political struggles concerning education, urban literacy, and African American

youth. Black Arts pedagogy also serves as a form anti-colonial media to assist students with analyzing and understanding the dynamic interrelationship of complex social, political, and historical phenomena – which is often either under-explained or intentionally unexplored in mainstream educational practices. The curriculum may be situated as an educational tool for students to understand the transformative role of creative art. Relatedly, the curriculum enjoins teachers to become criticalists and to utilize Black Arts poetry to challenge students to analyze and decipher social conflicts, contradictions, and destructive cultural messages emanating from contemporary popular media. An example of this is illustrated in Baraka’s poem, *Ka’Ba*:

We are beautiful people
with african imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants

with african eyes, and noses, and arms,
though we sprawl in grey chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun.

We have been captured,
brothers. And we labor
to make our getaway, into
the ancient image, into a new
correspondence with ourselves
and our black family. We read magic
now we need the spells, to rise up
return, destroy, and create. What will be
the sacred words?

Here, Baraka endorses an immersion into and critical sourcing of African/African American epistemology and cultural memory as he reminds and encourages African Americans to engage in “correspondence with ourselves and our black family.” Though Baraka does not specifically emphasize *how* the “correspondence” can or might occur, the poem manages to communicate a sense of urgency, forced containment, and a desire for “captured” [Black families] to explicate themselves. The “correspondence with ourselves” might be verbal, written, aural, spiritual, or a combination thereof. Robert Hayden’s poem *Runagate, Runagate* stresses

historic themes to emphasize the shared heritage of African Americans. Hayden's correspondence with the reader centers on the legacy of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad:

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness into darkness
And the darkness thicketed with shapes of terror
And the hunters pursuing and the hounds pursuing
And the night cold and the night long and the river
To cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beckoning beckoning
And blackness ahead and when shall I reach that somewhere
Morning and keep on going and never turn back and keep on going

Hayden's references point to the collective history shared struggle and sacrifice and also the complex transitioning out of chaos and turmoil. Immediately, the poem encourages a conversation about ideas surrounding freedom, salvation, social liberty, and mobility. The reflective moments Hayden creates through the poem provides opportunities to scaffold rich dialogue about the relationship between historic and current phenomena. Thus, on many levels, both Baraka's and Hayden's poems speak to and espouse the Black Aesthetic that is rooted in the past, critical of the present, and that stresses its unique vision of a liberated future for African Americans.

Aspect Three – Developing Black Arts Culture Circles

Numerous theorists and practitioners have stressed the intimate connections between literacy and our complex identities as individuals and members of communities. These connections are evidenced in many ways through diverse literary activities occurring in cafés, on streets corners, and in classrooms. Kinloch (2011), Morrell (2008), and others encourage researchers and practitioners to be creative and to continuously “question, critique, and propose alternative and just approaches” to instigate viable community change. Kinloch, in particular,

challenges educators to identify “projects and practices” that effectively leverage the dynamic epistemological (culture and language) traditions of African Americans. Ultimately, such “projects and practices” yield the most promise in terms of holding and extending students’ interest, cultivating educational excellence, and improving levels of cultural literacy.

Our present digital age greatly extends the power and possibility of community literacy practices that emphasize political activism, cultural literacy, and essential, ongoing dialogue with a prodigious, consciousness-generating Black literary genealogy. A cornerstone for a robust Black Arts critical literacy curriculum, Black Arts Culture Circles (BACCs) function as sites wherein organized, committed communities of learners cultivate academic, cultural, and critical literacies by engaging in the formal and deep study of Black Arts poets, poetics, aesthetic philosophy, and the transcendent literary tradition of African Americans. In some ways, BACCs resemble participatory literacy communities that I have helped construct in the past. However, four basic emphases differentiate BACCs from typical literacy communities: 1) the Black Arts Movement and Black Aesthetic philosophy comprise the framework; 2) emphasis on (reading, writing, performing, discussing, critiquing) committed black poetry and encouraging students to become *criticalists* and connoisseurs; 3) a critical literacy framework drives inquiry, instruction, and community building; 4) BACCs are regarded and function as vital cultural institutions that teachers and students are encouraged to sustain and evolve. Some fundamental objectives of BACCs are to:

1. increase cultural competence and critical literacy skills by teaching the history and purpose of Black Arts poetics and introducing literature that is culturally and historically significant;
2. use critical literacy practices to engage tradition and to examine, critique, and transform power relationships inherent in language use, culture, and the organization of social reality;

3. increase listening, speaking, writing and language skills by challenging students to interact with and create literary content (poetry, magazines, etc.) that builds on and extends the rich tradition of the Black Arts literary genealogy;
4. encourage deep and sustained appreciation for the arts, critical inquiry, content analysis, and the educational uses of technology.

Educational activities occurring within BACCs encourage students to develop alternative (liberatory) ways of seeing, expressing, comprehending, challenging, valuing, creating, and relating to text, ideas, experience, memory, and reality. It is therefore imperative that African American youth develop the ability to discern what is absurd and what is worthwhile in American society (Fuller, 1972). Participants assist with constructing an expressive and non-judgmental space to write about, reflect on, and examine themes, issues, and ideas emerging from the Black Arts literary genealogy. As Freire (1987) observes:

As part of the discourse of narrative and agency, critical literacy suggests using history as a form of liberating memory. As used here, history means recognizing the figural traces of untapped potentialities as well as sources of suffering that constitute one's past. (p. 16)

Essentially then, historical remembrance supersedes the mere recovery of past factual data (i.e., remembrance for remembrance's sake) and instead serves the important purpose of leveraging (animating) memory to interrogate reality and imagine new possibilities. BACCs serve as an effective means to transmit these ideas by creating engaged communities of critical reflection and practice. Additionally, BACCs encourage students to reflect on their accumulated personal experience and [tacit] knowledge and to develop performance works and creative content aligning with the aesthetic and epistemological tradition of the Black Arts Movement. BACCs are organized as sentient, culturally grounded spaces wherein students self-consciously reflect on their context and intervene into that context. BACCs seek to encourage students to

engage the world in terms of truth-seeking, fear-dispelling, intellect-expanding, purposeful educational experiences. As poet Plumpp (1972) observes:

The brief experience I've had with Black children in a writer's workshop makes me know they want to be heard – they are not interested in being told. They listened very intently when I played a Langston Hughes record, of poetry read by Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis.

BACCs also function as intellectual “safe spaces” in which African American students are able to learn the importance of acquiring and cultivating interpersonal communications skills (soft skills) such as listening, speaking, cooperation, collaboration, and reliability. BACCs may be single or multi- “ringed” with students in different “rings” (levels) engaging text from a multitude of perspectives. As specialized networks of cooperating individuals, BACCs encourage participants to engage in consistent cultural production (newsletters, anthologies, mixtapes, public performances, etc.), enrichment, training, and artistic cultivation that is collective, functional, and purposeful. BACC participants are able to simultaneously learn about and articulate shared understandings of BAM aesthetics, foci, and history to the wider public.

Aspect Three – Black Arts Movement Pedagogy and Hip-Hop Culture

Many of Hip-Hop's earliest pioneer artists (such as Kurtis Blow, Afrika Bambaata, Busy Bee) and their later contemporaries (KRS-ONE, Public Enemy, Mos Def) have expressed familiarity with Black writers and performance poets of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, many of these contemporary Hip-Hop artists have often paid direct tribute to Black Arts Movement-era artists such as The Last Poets, Etheridge Knight, Amiri Baraka, and Sonia Sanchez.

Sadly, the literary genealogy linking Hip-Hop to the Black Arts Movement has been threatened, ignored, and/or co-opted in a similar fashion as the genealogy linking contemporary Black poets to poets of the Black Arts Movement. As a result, much Black art (poetry, music,

etc.) produced during our current era has tended to be depoliticized and deradicalized. Hence, Black art that is politically volatile (or that comments on issues deemed or perceived as politically volatile) is more often than not disfavored for Black art that is more accommodating, politically neutral, and reproducible without regard to context or catchment. In this way, Black art (especially poetry) has done a 180-degree turn and has been subsidized by profit-seeking big media conglomerates that do not wish to “offend” patrons or sponsors with politically charged art. For their part, contemporary artists attempting to continue in the classical tradition of resistance and struggle are often viewed as troublemakers and loose cannons. Their political message (which is the people’s message) is lost as people have their focus attuned only to *what* the artist said as opposed to *why* it was said. Thus, real issues requiring attention, focus, and seriousness rarely attain positions of status in an intensely depoliticized, consumer-driven marketplace (this critique extends to classrooms).

For many African American students, much of how they act, think, behave, and respond is informed by Hip-Hop culture. This includes consumption patterns as well as how their tastes, attitudes, desires, etc. are organized, classified, and mediated. Much of society today is infected with a shallow attitude toward art and skewed notions regarding the function of art. Black Arts writers and theoreticians sought to establish a direct link between art and activism.

Another negative effect of commercialized Hip-Hop is its tendency to glamorize (and over-glamorize) what has been identified as some of the most destructive and negative cultural images of African American life in centers (urban and rural) throughout the United States. Daily radio and cable television stations flood the airwaves with songs and videos glamorizing fictionalized accounts of ghetto suffering, poverty, and party lifestyles. In one glaring example of negative media saturation, the Rhythmic Airplay Chart (or Rhythmic Top 40) developed by

Billboard Magazine is a weekly listing of songs played throughout the country. The chart tracks and measures the airplay of songs played on so-called rhythmic stations, whose playlist includes mostly hit-driven R&B/Hip-Hop and rhythmic pop. This chart also lists the number of times a song is played on radio stations in the U.S. within one week. Interestingly, a handful of questionable songs by the same small number of artists classified for the urban market (which includes Hip-Hop) are routinely played (on average) between four and six thousand times. Black youth are consistently bombarded with negative cultural messages and imagery delivered in the form of Hip-Hop pimps, video vixens, thugs, and perpetual hedonists.

Popular Hip-Hop messages, while promoting a skewed and deliberate aberration of classic Hip-Hop culture, also push the seemingly ceaseless promotion of drugs, alcohol, sex, plastic surgery, and mass consumption to hordes of Black youth – many of whom who have as their greatest goals in life the acquisition of big cars, voluptuous women, perpetual celebrity, and limitless cash with which to attract and acquire more of the same. When queried, many youth (particularly Black males) list rapper or athlete as their top career goal.

The failure to produce critical, substantive art leads to cultural dichotomies and some rather unusual ironies. In one sad case in point, mega-popular entertainers Kanye West and Jay-Z, in their recent song O.T.I.S., rap about acquiring and flashing expensive luxury items (alcohol, watches, cars, etc.). This is their message and representation to their largely youth audience in the midst of epic mass unemployment and layoffs, home foreclosures, and crippling economic recession – all of which has disproportionately affected African Americans. To add insult, the song (a “tribute” to Otis Redding) features West and Jay-Z bragging about owning a G450 gulfstream jet while never acknowledging the fact that Redding died in a plane crash aboard his personal aircraft. Here is but a small sampling of the ways in which reckless,

unpurposed art (in this case commercialized Hip-Hop) encourage cultural illiteracy, values conflicts, and anesthetic experiences among youth.

Undoubtedly, the consumption of commercialized Hip-Hop has encouraged youth to make choices and pursue directions that are not always healthy or even remotely consistent with reality. Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy serves as a tool for challenging the imposition of hostile thoughts and attitudes that may affect school performance, relationships, and personal development. As the value of Black creative production deepens it leads to expanding modes of consciousness, sensitivity, and possibility for students. Thus, we are awakened to the fact that our art serves a deeper purpose than just to entertain the people – that deeper purpose is to sustain the people.

Aspect Four – Black Arts Movement Pedagogy and Black Resistance Literature

A Black Arts curriculum may be leveraged as a tool for African American students to understand (and enter) the dialogue of resistance literature and literature as a weapon against the dominant society's historical pattern of *othering* Black experiences, history, lives, and lived realities. In the fullness of this context, Black Arts pedagogy resists and challenges objectification and forces that would seek to objectify. Educators utilizing a curriculum based on Black Arts poetics can encourage students to develop critical language awareness, connectedness, and centeredness. Students may develop a repertoire of thoughts, connections, feelings, actions, predictions, practices, habits, etc. -- ALL informed by their critical interaction with Black Arts inquiry.

Another compelling aspect of the curriculum is that it can teach the importance of understanding and navigating complex relationships. Participants studying the rich artistic legacy

of the Black Arts Movement are encouraged to look at a problem in relationship to other factors that may influence and/or contribute to the problem. In this sense, the student is encouraged to look at the latitude and longitude of a particular issue. Relationships to be [potentially explored] may include (but are not limited to the following: self-to-text, self-to-others, self-to-education and schooling, self-to-nature, art-to-politics and culture, self-to-aesthetic phenomena (e.g., beauty, truth, freedom, or knowledge). Thus, by accessing and studying the cultural themes and sociopolitical content resonating through Black Arts poetry it is hoped that students will raise their level of understanding and eloquence above the fatalistic, anecdotal level. African American students are encouraged to develop the means of analyzing and assessing relationships and how historical phenomena come to bear on and help shape contemporary issues. The possibilities exist for students to understand the relationship between art and reflection.

Aspect Five – Linking Generations and Sustaining Culture

Black Arts Movement inquiry and pedagogy also serves as an educational tool to link generations. It therefore may acquaint old(er) and young(er) to the complex challenges, issues, etc. of our times. It may reveal a rich cross-fertilization of ideas, desires, etc. It may also reveal functional reasons for why the link should be created as well as ways to ensure the link is not severed.

Teaching the Black Arts Movement keeps the literary genealogy vibrant. Black Arts pedagogues ensure that it does not become a lost cultural artifact. Teaching the movement keeps alive the legacy of resistance (critical literacy) to encourage students to question authority, authorial intent, established norms (literary, political, social), meanings, and ways of making meaning. Students are encouraged to imagine new worlds, possibilities, ways of thinking, etc.

A Black Arts Movement curriculum may be positioned as a literary orientation that through its specific nature encourages a radically different form of consumerability among Black students interested in poetry and the spoken word; to stretch their thinking; vitalize their thought process by introducing them to alternative messages and messengers.

A major hallmark of the Black Arts Movement was its ability and tendency to inspire, promote, and build community among artists, patrons, and others. This was especially prevalent among Black Arts spoken word events. Owing to the particular expressive nature of poetry many Black Arts poetry gatherings either proceeded or followed the development of literary circles. These circles were comprised of individuals drawn together for a set of common purposes. Pedagogically, a properly executed Black Arts curriculum inspires this type of community among African American students. Winn (2004) understands and endorses the academic and social value of literacy circles. She describes them as African Diaspora Participatory Literacy Communities and states that they are structured as sites which are culturally affirming and rigorous, and through which the students may scaffold rich, radiant, and realistic dialog about critical issues.

Aspect Six – Black Arts Movement Pedagogy and Student Engagement

Student engagement is a key ingredient of any curriculum recipe. As pointed out previously, classroom boredom is one of the top reasons contributing to student's disengagement from school. Our Black Arts curriculum can be positioned as a site of radical experimentation, power, struggle, and hope in the interest of developing vibrant, well-versed, intellectually driven, seasoned, culturally and politically astute students. Discussing the importance of Woodsonian

philosophy and historic efforts by African Americans to gain access to “literacies of power,”

Morrell (2008) states:

Woodson outlines a radical program of re-education for African-Americans in which he challenges scholars, educators, and professionals to utilize their critical literacies to re-insert the African-American story into dominant narratives.

What is needed is a praxis of textual and linguistic production that provides future generations of African-Americans with counter-texts that they can employ to combat the continued miseducation that proliferates in social institutions such as the media and public schools. (p. 69)

Our Black Arts curriculum can be positioned and leveraged as a device to encourage students to develop a consciousness that challenges the attitude of selective quietism pervading youth culture. Such an attitude renders in them a hostility, impatience and intemperance toward learning, inquiry, intellectualism, and critical questioning. Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy encourages the decolonization of the Black mind.

Aspect Seven – Black Arts Movement Pedagogy and the Black Aesthetic

One of Black Arts Movement’s primary goals was to articulate and promote the Black Aesthetic rooted in the historical and cultural legacy of Black artists and liberation figures. Establishing the Black Aesthetic was an artistic and psychological mission to decolonize Black art and ideas, promote collective work, and push an expansive, ethical aesthetic rooted contextually in Black history and culture. This had to come about because it was considered the norm to leave the Black voice and Black experience out of education and conversation. Black writers would emerge to petition for space and access. Hence, developing the Black Aesthetic is (or may be seen) as part of the Black struggle for education in the United States. Over the years, this struggle has taken on many different forms and has included various notions, perspectives, and approaches. In the end, a major goal in the struggle included the right of Blacks to determine

their own educational destiny. That is, for African Americans to epistemologically determine for themselves what is worthwhile (to know, learn, etc.) and to determine how best to apply and engage this knowledge.

Power issues of domination and subordination lie at the very heart of the Black struggle for education in the United States. That critical observation should be acknowledged and appreciated and must accompany the framing of any serious solutions to address/solve the problem. According to Floyd W. Hayes III (1981), the education of Blacks in United States

whether supported by missionary or industrial philanthropists, meant that African Americans were encouraged to either assimilate the views and values of White society or submit willingly to the dominance of White racism. This contradiction has basically been a major dilemma in the African American struggle for education. (p. 6)

Indeed, the *navigation contradiction* is highly political, deeply psychological, and undergirds Black responses/reactions to domination (racism, oppression, marginalization, etc.). More, it tends to act as an inhibitor to conversation and action relative to Black organization and development whether economic, political, social, or cultural.

Aspect Eight – Black Arts Curriculum and Educational Technology

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) describes educational technology standards as "what students should know and be able to do to learn effectively and live productively in an increasingly digital world ..." Educational technology aptitudes include: *Creativity and Innovation, Communication and Collaboration, Research and Information, Fluency, Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, and Decision Making, Digital Citizenship, and Technology Operations and Concepts*. We live in an increasingly digitized age. According to new statistics from Nielsen, social networking now consumes twice as much time spent online as

any other activity (gaming, productivity, emailing, etc.). However, despite widening interest and technology spending and investment disparities and challenges still exist relative to broadband access, content/curricula, and technology integration. These challenges are especially noticeable between demographic groups and have resulted in a digital information infrastructure of technology have-gots and have-nots. Current and emerging Internet communications technologies represent an enormous site of educational possibility for learning about and teaching the Black Arts Movement.

In terms of educational technology curricula, the Internet boasts a dizzying array of traditional digitized content (.pdf, .txt, .doc, .tif, .mp3, .mkv, .swf, .htm files, etc.) and interactive rich media (animation, video, audio, webinars, podcasts, etc.). In addition to third-party content, Internet communication technologies now make it possible for individuals to instantaneously and simultaneously create, edit, and share content online. These media are hosted on terrestrial and cloud servers throughout the world and can (in most cases) be accessed and/or downloaded (free or fee) using simple high-speed connectivity and a compatible device. Much of this content is available for viewing, listening, and/or sharing on any number of mobile devices from cell phones to small-form tablet computers. The good news is that the vast bulk of this educational content is free and many sites offer access and substantial discounts to educators.

In some cases, entire sites exist online for the purposes of education and the sharing of curricula, research, designs, and ideas. One such site, the Zinn Education Project (zinnedproject.org), has as its goal “to introduce students to a more accurate, complex, and engaging understanding of United States History than is found in traditional textbooks and curricula.” This site offers a wealth of free lesson plans and other teaching materials as well as a free subscription service. TeacherTube (teachertube.com) and Edutopia (edutopia.org) represent

two other popular education-centered sites offering information and resources to those in education.

Another site, San Francisco-based Academic Earth (academicearth.org) describes itself as a “user-friendly educational ecosystem” that provides Internet users around the world with access to full video courses and lectures from the world’s leading scholars. Harvard, Berkeley, Princeton, and NYU are among the dozens of participating universities. Mountain View, CA based Khan Academy (khanacademy.org) is a free education portal created by Sal Khan in 2006 and boasts of having delivered over 58 million video-based lessons that include basic arithmetic, advanced algebra, calculus, and consumer finance. The Smithsonian Institute (si.edu) has placed its entire museum collection online and offers information and digital resources across many areas including art and design, history, culture, science, and technology. In addition, its sister site Smithsonian Folkways (folkways.si.edu) is an online repository of music, podcasts, and lesson plans.

Google’s digitization project (renamed Google Books) was launched in 2004 to promote the “democratization of knowledge” by making more information more accessible to more people. Google has estimated that there are 130 million unique books in the world and (as of 2010) the company has digitized roughly 15 million books in 300 languages. One of Google’s most popular projects is the digitized version of the 2,000 year-old Dead Sea Scrolls. In addition, Google Books (books.google.com) and Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) also include millions of periodicals and scholarly publications in their massive archive. All of this information is searchable and free to anyone with computer access. Google promotes the effort by developing research and scholarship programs and establishing collaborative partnerships with universities and libraries around the world.

Apple's iTunes and iBooks represent two of the most exciting online resources for educators and students. In addition to popular music and video, these services host digital books, podcasts of interviews, speeches, lectures, tutorials, classes, and seminars. In fact, institutions such as the Florida Department of Education, University of South Florida College of Education, and Stanford contribute to the iTunes U Lit2Go program. The program supports literacy teaching and learning by "providing access to historically and culturally significant literature in K-12 schools." Hosted content includes American History Speeches and Essays, African American History, and maps of Africa for iPhone/iPad. In addition to literacy teaching materials, the iTunes store features content from hundreds of colleges and universities across nearly every educational discipline. Some school districts have purchased iPads for students as a way of promoting literacy and educational technology. There are currently thousands of apps for education in language arts, math, science, social studies, and other content areas that can integrate easily into the curriculum.

According to ISTE, ICT is a broad concept that includes (at least) six interrelated aspects of 21st century learning. These include:

1. **Computer Literacy** - ability to use a computer and its software to accomplish basic tasks.
2. **Digital Literacy** - technical ability paired with cognitive skills to accomplish tasks in a digital environment.
3. **Educational Technology** - a systematic approach to teaching and learning that promotes innovative teaching approaches.
4. **ICT Literacy** - ability to use technology to develop 21st century content, knowledge, and skills in support of 21st century teaching and learning.
5. **Information Literacy** - ability to know when there is a need for information; to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively use such to solve problems.

6. **Media Literacy** - 21st century approach to education that provides a framework to access, analyze, and create messages in multiple forms; builds on essential skills of inquiry and self-expression.

Digital sharing and consumption by students is already taking place at an accelerated pace. A 2011 study by Northwestern University researchers found that Black and other minority youth ages 8 to 18 spend up to 13 hours a day consuming media content through electronic devices including television, computers, cellphones, and other electronic gadgets. The hugely popular social networking site Facebook brags of having connected over 800 million users worldwide with over 50% using the site every day. 350 million of these users use a mobile device to access the site. Approximately 250 million active users (more than 70 languages) access the site using mobile devices. According to the company, 75% of its users are outside of the United States and the average user has 130 friends. With the addition of social plugins to its main platform Facebook estimates that an average of 10,000 new websites integrate with its site every day. Facebook estimates that its users spend an average of 700 billion minutes per month on the site.

In addition, the method and practice of interactive internet marketing, geo-targeting, and digital mapping have made it possible for end users to connect and to access and share unlimited amounts and types of information. Also available to end-users is a broad and growing array of platforms and devices (including cell phones, smart phones, mobile apps, laptops) to access and share digitized content. Thus, according to current data and social trends, there is every reason to expect that students' involvement with technology will increase. And while social pursuits constitute much of student's time spent online this also presents a tremendous opportunity to redirect some of their energy and interest in the direction of pursuits that are more educationally worthwhile.

Sadly, at the present time, there are not many sites in existence dedicated to archiving the legacy of the Black Arts Movement. However, two such sites are located at Tulane University and Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Tulane's Amistad Research Center sponsors the Tom Dent Library, which houses the papers (over 1,560 items) of the New Orleans writer and Black Arts playwright. Harold Ramsby II, professor and current director of the Black Studies Program at SIUE, has compiled an online archive of Black Arts era books, research, and assorted mixed media (photos, digital scrapbooks, video, etc.). The site also features current information about Black Arts Movement writers such as Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Eugene Redmond. Currently, there are no sites that offer educational resources, lesson plans, etc. drawing on the artistic and cultural legacy of the Black Arts Movement.

Internet Communications Technology (ICT) may be effectively leveraged to teach and spread awareness about the Black Arts Movement. This may be done through the use of websites, blogs, podcasting, video/audio, electronic text files, etc. Web 2.0 technologies and simulation software may be leveraged to construct online learning spaces in which to recreate the era and the voices of Black Arts Movement era. In this way, the Black Arts Movement can be accessed (in a flat way) and virtually experienced in a holistic way. Students may gain academic, personal, and collective empowerment through using ICT to interface with the Black Arts Movement.

Myriad possibilities exist for using ICT to develop and/or expand a Black Arts curriculum. End-products can include oral history projects on BAM artists, Black Arts podcasts, rediscovery and digitization of texts, and development of online collections for Black Arts memorabilia (posters, slides, video/audio footage, etc.). More, Black Arts pedagogues can develop and share advanced lesson plans, syllabi, classroom exercises, best practices, and other

educational materials. Current and future social media technologies can be leveraged to aid the development and sustainment of Black Arts Culture Circles. Educators and students will be able to share narratives, best practices, and promote the activities of BACCs within their schools and communities.

The tools and opportunities exist for technology-oriented educators to create content and educational experiences that orient online learning and consumption to promote engagement, critical literacy, creative production, and responsible social action among students. In this way, Internet communications technologies may be strategically leveraged to augment student learning, teacher practice, and the African American educational experience itself.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS OF BLACK ARTS INQUIRY AND PEDAGOGY

Aspect One – Critical Questioning of established/presented truths (i.e., What knowledge is worthwhile)?

Whose notion of truth shall be expressed (that of the oppressor or oppressed)? What means have been put in place for accessing this truth? Why is this considered worthwhile? Even from within the veil, what are the various approximations and aspects of truth?

The worthwhile question must be asked if we strive to encourage African American students to pursue and immerse themselves in new forms of awareness and expansiveness (vis-à-vis Black Arts Movement inquiry and pedagogy). To be avoided at all costs is the potential for creating scenarios whereby students (and teachers) exchange one form of intellectual colonization for another. That is, an essential philosophical principle of the Black Arts Movement mirrors the goal of Black Arts pedagogy: it should be positioned and leveraged as critical literacy by informed practitioners (criticalists) with the goals of liberating the mind, freeing the spirit, and unleashing the imagination for students to both discover and develop new

possibilities and paradigms for engagement and learning. The essential framework for the Black Arts curriculum should be oriented toward developing of a rich pedagogy of questions about African American musings, reactions, and subjectivities. Hence, our use of radical, socially responsible poetry should draw attention to both broad and specific aspects of human existence including the concern for civilization, notions of freedom and justice, questions about and reflections on identity in relation to African/African American history and culture.

Philosophically, a Black Arts Movement curriculum should be based on and committed to legitimizing the lives and existence (what Madhubuti (1972) calls *spiritactions*) of Black people. In effect, the curriculum should invoke and channel the most influential and enduring aspects of African American social history. Likewise, it should address the frightful pattern of historical marginalization of Black epistemologies and subjectivities from educational spaces. Progressive, pro-Black Arts educators must be prepared to both raise and problematize questions arising from (and/or stimulated by) concepts and practices encountered in education. Hence, in a totalizing way, a properly conceived Black Arts curriculum is not neutral, apolitical, or culturally reductionist. Indeed, it is the direct opposite of those things.

Aspect Two – Decolonization of Ideas, History, and Historiography

An essential thrust of the Black Arts curriculum is to leverage the critical message of black poetics to create a frame of reference to decolonize history and knowledge production. Black Arts Movement writers were to serve as authors and interpreters for this new frame of reference. Hence, pro-Black Arts educators, in keeping with the assumptions of critical literacy and Black Aesthetic philosophy, should likewise seek to de-emphasize Eurocentric interpretative

modes and reference points which had been imposed on Black art by non-Blacks and by Blacks themselves.

For now, two additional aspects to be explored relative to Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy include 1) the development of a functional synthesis (ideas, expression, and interpretation) and 2) African American students as multicontextual learners. The first is a discussion of how African cultural concepts (Nommo, sankofa, jail/Griot, etc.) factor into Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy. The second aspect explores how Black Arts inquiry, as a critical literacy orientation challenges students to develop their repertoire of skills to interrogate and critique a multi-linguaged (Bakhtin, 1981) world of contradictions and fixed assumptions. If they are to understand and interpret social reality, African American students must be taught to see critically and to raise questions on a number of levels. As a holistic process, a multicontextual orientation encourages students to develop and evolve skills to improve communication. Indeed, both aspects have far-ranging possibilities for Black Arts inquiry as an alternative curriculum paradigm.

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF BLACK ARTS INQUIRY AND PEDAGOGY

In surveying the African American literary epistemology and the art, artists, and aesthetical philosophy of the Black Arts Movement I have attempted to identify parallels between it and the intellectual tradition of Black radical thought and praxis. As the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement energized a young generation of artists-activists to challenge and transform social reality with a radical infusion of fresh ideas, images, and language flowing from the African American existential experience. Black writers challenged themselves and each other to abandon narrow and patronizing descriptions of the Black experience forge a new artistic synthesis they called the Black Aesthetic.

The organizing principles undergirding the Black Arts Movement included solidarity, spiritual oneness, cultural unity, and political struggle.

As a critical literacy orientation, Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy encourages African American students to become critically (and politically) engaged and empowered. More, Black Arts pedagogues recognize that students thus engaged and empowered inherit the responsibility to act responsibly on their knowledge and newfound understandings. Leveraging and building on African American cultural knowledge, our curriculum tasks and challenges African American students to become critical thinkers as well as to understand the tremendous and awesome task before them of remaining so, impacting others, building on this strong foundation and rich legacy, making themselves useful to the African American community and the larger society, and thinking and purposing new ways to leverage and expand understanding of the Black Arts legacy.

The political responsibilities are also translatable to the work of Black Arts pedagogues (teachers, researchers). In addition, Black Arts pedagogues must also work to extend Black Arts theory and artistic philosophy, engage in and support authentic interpretations of Black Arts literature, ensure the safety and integrity of Black Arts Culture Circles, foster community spaces for the expansion of critical literacy, build on and support the African American literary genealogy, and nurture the integrity of Black Arts curricula, inquiry, and philosophy. As hotbeds promoting critical literacy and praxis, and African American student excellence in reading, writing, orality, and comprehension, these intellectual and artistic spaces are bound to come under attack. There is much more to explore and elaborate relative to the political dimensions of Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy.

CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF BLACK ARTS INQUIRY AND PEDAGOGY

Similar to the philosophical and political, the cultural dimensions of Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy reflect and attempt to articulate its uniqueness with respect to the African cultural antecedents undergirding the African American intellectual tradition. Gomez (2008), L. D. Turner (1978), and others have expounded quite extensively on the ways in which these rich, transcendent traditions have affected the African American experience during the last two and-a-half centuries. Indeed, the task of committed scholars and interpreters is to sort and articulate these connections as well as to locate function. As Asante (1990) states:

We are led to the African-centered idea of wholism, everything is everything, and we are a part of the one and the other is our own measure. To begin this pilgrimage towards disentanglement will mean that we must find intellectual paths which have long been covered by the superimposition of monoethnic ideas as universal. (p. 39)

Like the movement itself, Black Arts pedagogy emphasizes particular ways of interfacing and interrogating the Black experience in America and exploring the African context appertaining approaches to learning, literacy, language, scholarship, community-building, and aesthetics. The literature (black poetics, essays), political sensibilities (anterior/interiors), and aesthetic philosophy of the Black Arts Movement directly inform the theoretical and practical orientation of the curriculum itself. Indeed, serious questions can (and should) be asked concerning the persistence of African cultural inheritances (folkways, traditions, myths, icons, language, etc.) as they contribute(d) to shaping the identity, psychology, learning style, and worldview of African Americans.

As elaborated earlier, *Nommo* is the West African spiritual and linguistic concept representing the creative and transformative power of the spoken word. As a key cultural concept, *Nommo* is a fundamental component of Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy.

It seeks, therefore, to put African American students in touch with their ancestral tradition of regarding writing and orality as a site of struggle, critical resistance, and empowerment. Thus, developing and expressing intellectual power through writing is tied to developing cultural power, which also positively affects the literacy development of African American adolescents. Historically, this revolutionary praxis is grounded firmly in the black rhetorical tradition of social critique and political agitation against oppressive and hegemonic systems.

At all times African American children are **still** African and still, therefore, connected to Africa through epic, memory, and an essentializing oral tradition (a word-of-mouth phenomenon that preserves history and entertains (Boadu, 1990)). Children do not give birth to themselves. Relatedly, the cultural exploration of black transcendent traditions coincides with delving into African American students' implicit knowledge and understandings. This includes how they come to understand reality, how they use/structure time and space, and the interest (or lack thereof) they exhibit relative to safekeeping their cultural epistemology. Welsh-Asante (1989) has suggested that, despite years and distance, African Americans maintain cultural proximity to what she calls a traditional oral response to the African ethos:

It concerns the process of creativity itself and in that respect is a fundamental sense of the African aesthetic. The derivatives of this traditional oral response to the African ethos are seven aesthetic senses: polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic, memory, repetition, holism. (p. 74)

With consideration to Welsh-Asante, what, then, are the implications for how African American students engage literacy? How is Black Arts pedagogy to be situated? What is the pedagogic role and function of the oral artist? These questions (and so many others) reflect the importance of exploring the cultural dimension of Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy relative to the academic, cultural, and political literacies of African American students.

***BEYOND NOMMO* BLACK ARTS CURRICULUM: POSSIBILITIES FOR PRACTICE**

Beyond Nommo is a critical literacy and creative arts curriculum that synthesizes, distills, and invokes the collective epistemological, theoretical, and aesthetic frameworks, accumulated folk knowledge, and historical experiences of African Americans reflected artistically in the poetics of the Black Arts Movement. Collectively, these diverse, transformative poetics comprise a complex literary genealogy that can be leveraged as a site of possibility for curriculum theorizing, aesthetic development, and liberatory, culturally grounded pedagogical practices that promote critical literacy and praxis. This project adopts a political and cultural stance consistent with Black Aesthetic philosophy, African American rhetorical-intellectual-activist tradition, and the assumptions of critical literacy and culturally responsive pedagogy.

The numerous personal and professional highways crisscrossing my multiple identities (father, poet, teaching-artist, student, political agent, culture worker, and Griot) directly inform my writings and exploration of Black Arts pedagogy as a worthwhile curricular paradigm for African American students. As a professional spoken word artist and committed Black educator, my pedagogic orientation is always influenced by African/African American culture, Black Aesthetic philosophy, and my critical responsibility to both. To this project I am proud to bring over a decade's worth of curriculum design experience coupled with invaluable aesthetic and critical literacy interventions with African American students in urban contexts. As an alternative curricular paradigm, the contours and cultural implications of Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy are complex and detailed. This project represents a humble beginning. More exploration and consideration is necessary.

The next evolution of this project is to engage an interrogation of the Black Arts literary genealogy in order to design a full school curriculum. During this phase of the project I will identify and develop a breadth of Black Arts curriculum components including (but not limited

to): poems, poets, proponents (theorists and aestheticians) motifs/themes, instructional outcomes, related literature (ex., books, articles, audio, video, essays, signage), classroom exercises, community engagement activities, digital literacy engagement practices, oral histories, and developmental suggestions for building and sustaining Black Arts Culture Circles (within and beyond classrooms).

To expand, enrich, and authenticate the project, I have secured the personal assistance of numerous Black Arts pioneers including Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Eugene Redmond, and Sonia Sanchez. A few of them have already been instrumental in helping bring the project to its current stage of development. The resulting Black Arts curriculum will optimally leverage African American cultural knowledge and sync with assumptions and social obligations tied to Black Aesthetic philosophy and critical literacy.

My hope is that teachers, students, and others will find cultural, academic, and epistemological value with the *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum* and utilize it as a major instructional tool to improve outcomes for African American students and the African American community. Indeed, my pedagogic hope and epistemic aspirations square with the ancient (2140 B.C.E), indefatigable spiritual wisdom of the great African philosopher-poet, Kheti (1989):

Follow in the footsteps of your ancestors for the mind is trained through knowledge.
Behold their words endure in books. Open and read them and follow their wise counsel.
(p. 50)

CHAPTER 4. BEYOND NOMMO: A BLACK ARTS CURRICULAR DESIGN

BUILDING A CRITICAL, CULTURAL LITERACY OF BLACKNESS

Developing a critical, cultural literacy of blackness calls for a conscious, committed, and consistent interrogation and [classroom/academic] integration of the collective Black Diasporan experience. This includes the nuanced curricularization of Black cultural voices, realities, political language, creative expression, history, perspectives, and psychosocial phenomena. Such a literacy of blackness is culturally responsive and immediately recognizes and affirms the strategic value of African American epistemology and ways of knowing. More, it intentionally functions to interrupt and dismantle inequality, cultural hegemony, and white supremacy. Even a cursory glance reveals that these worthwhile efforts are rooted in resistance, struggle, and transcendence and therefore broadly and acutely reflect the historical and social experiences of African Americans.

The literary genealogy and aesthetic philosophy of the Black Arts Movement comprises a source of immense pedagogical and theoretical value. A worthwhile model of critical inquiry and pedagogy built on an examination of the Black Arts Movement (an African American cultural referent) promotes critical literacy and expansive discourse among African American students. In large measure, the Black struggle for self-definition (freedom) and self-determination (liberation) within education is a strategic method of reclaiming and recasting history and culture, reshaping curriculum, and instituting revolutionary social transformation. Thus, the *Beyond Nommo* curriculum, both in form and orientation, acknowledges and supports a recurring notion that regards the educational destiny of the black child as revolutionary.

In many ways, developing a critical, cultural literacy of blackness mirrors the three foundational artistic and ideological goals espoused by the architects of the Black Arts

Movement (an art that is identifiably and culturally black; an art that is functional, visible, and publicly accessible; an art that will fight). All one need but do is substitute (or situate) the word *pedagogy* or *curriculum* for *art*. This approach also jibes with theories and learning principles associated with culturally responsive pedagogy including: learning within the context of one's culture, cultural sensitivity, reshaping the curriculum, student-centered instruction, and teacher as facilitator (Jali/Griot). Sadly we find ourselves in an intentional situation where either *poor quality, unskilled practitioners*, or the profound *lack* of culturally relevant education(al) experiences undergirds policy decisions within public education and ultimately (mis)shapes the academic life of black students. Deep, critical investigations of lived *blackness* serve to effectively combat the viciousness of cultural illiteracy and ignorance that has been imposed on black children. Thus, developing a literacy of blackness represents a unique cultural approach to a unique cultural problem.

Specifically, for Black Arts criticalists and pedagogues, building a cultural literacy of blackness may begin by compiling a critical bibliography of texts that are didactic, pedagogical, insightful, cultural, revolutionary, methodological, interpretive, creative and grounded. Such texts must necessarily be anti-colonial, resistive, transformative, and insistent if they are to speak to/on behalf of the most fundamental strivings of oppressed and disenfranchised African American peoples. Also, to be effective, these texts should engage in vivisection of the ongoing social and political complexities affecting black life. Ideally, these texts must take the form of culturally responsive curricula that makes worthwhile use of transcendent African American cultural traditions and unique ways of knowing and meaning making. To be sure, these worthwhile traditions hold the most promise for serving the best interests of African American students and must therefore be rescued, reclaimed, recast, and routinely enacted through

conscious, continuous reflection and culturally grounded practices. Developing a critical literacy of blackness also comes to mean encouraging and equipping students with the analytical skills to discern and filter reality.

POETS AND POEMS FOR A BLACK ARTS CURRICULUM

The *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum* leverages the committed black poetry of the era (1965-1976) as a way of framing and contextualizing Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy. These poems (and many, many others) are included in the curriculum owing to their immense pedagogical and epistemological value, connection to the African American literary genealogy, and adherence to the assumptions and obligations of Black Aesthetic critical literacy and the criticalist tradition. The aesthetic and educational benefits of the poems selected for the *Beyond Nommo* curriculum are outlined in detail in previous sections of this document (*Educational and Aesthetic Benefits of Implementing a Black Arts Curriculum* and *Pedagogical Possibilities of the Black Arts Literary Genealogy*).

The *Beyond Nommo* curriculum is grounded in critical literacy, cultural empowerment, and the radical thought traditions of African American intellectuals, activists, and creative artists seeking to raise awareness, transform society, and improve the lives of African Americans. The curriculum is a deliberate statement of cultural affirmation and intended to be leveraged as a vehicle for critical literacy, consciousness-raising, and cultural empowerment.

Poems utilized within the curriculum represent a small sampling of creative works by Black Arts poets. As an alternative paradigm that is modular, this curriculum actively encourages teachers and students to vigorously explore the diverse contours of Black Arts poetics. Hence, by necessity and design, teachers and students should seek to [thoughtfully] expand this curriculum, which, in turn, will deepen the educational and aesthetic experience.

The works listed below represent a functional beginning point for *Beyond Nommo* facilitators seeking to engage participants in Black Arts poetics, history, and inquiry.

Poet	Poem	Potential theme(s) to explore
Amiri Baraka	<i>Black Art</i>	Art not for art's sake but for revolution and transformation; justice; black community empowerment; ancestral connections; generational responsibility
Barbara Chase-Riboud	<i>Africa Rising</i>	Historical memory as pedagogy; relationship between art (culture) and reality (sanity); creating centrality and dialogue through culture; informing the present by interrogating the past
Amiri Baraka	<i>Ka'Ba</i>	Historical memory as pedagogy; connection between past and present ("correspondence with ourselves and our black family"); critique of cultural hegemony and displacement
Abiodun Oyewole	<i>My People</i>	Heterogeneity of African people (cultural diversity); honoring black unity, black pride, and selflessness; negotiating the complexity of reality by acknowledging common circumstances
Dudley Randall	<i>On Getting a Natural</i>	Aesthetics of black beauty; honoring black women
Dudley Randall	<i>Ballad of Birmingham</i>	Political activism, black liberation; pedagogy of critical cultural memory; critical literacy; struggle against hegemony and oppression
Devorah Major	<i>Nommo: How We Come to Speak</i>	Importance of cultural memory; sustaining culture, generational responsibility; relationship with culture, language, and memory
Carolyn M. Rogers	<i>Poem for Some Black Women</i>	Politics of personal space and loneliness; constructing and maintaining identity
Etheridge Knight	<i>The Idea of Ancestry</i>	Maintaining family, kinship, community; personal struggle against compensatory influences; politics of incarceration, violation of personal freedom; historical memory as a tool for liberation
Gwendolyn Brooks	<i>Paul Robeson</i>	Sustaining community
Gwendolyn Bennett	<i>To a Dark Girl</i>	Personal aesthetics; politics of pigmentation among blacks; personal psychology; historical memory as a tool for liberation
Frances Watkins Harper	<i>Bury Me in a Free Land</i>	African enslavement and physical oppression; criticism of American democratic institutions
Fisk Jubilee Singers	<i>No More Auction Block for Me</i>	Enslavement and oppression of Blacks; personal liberation and transcendence
Felipe Luciano	<i>Puerto Rican Rhythms</i>	Historical memory and culture; aesthetic fusion of art and politics; roots and cultural unity (African, Latino); interpreting and interrogating space and place
Gwendolyn Brooks	<i>Primer for Blacks</i>	Cultural heterogeneity; black political and cultural unity; politics of black diaspora; cultural denial and identity politics
Haki Madhubuti	<i>Big Momma</i>	Family kinship bonds, motherhood; black vernacular speech; cultural linguistics
Keorapetse Kgotsile	<i>Mandela's Sermon</i>	Apartheid, militarization, social protest

Jayne Cortez	<i>Talking About New Orleans</i>	Critique of American policy and social systems; politics of black displacement and community disruption; critique of corporate and military excess; industrialism
Henry Dumas	<i>Son of Msippi</i>	Historical memory; consciousness; interrogating the Black American experience; Black enslavement
Haki Madhubuti	<i>For the Consideration of Poets</i>	Intersection of art and activism; critique of artistic and cultural complacency
H.T. Johnson	<i>The Black Man's Burden</i>	Critique of empire and American global hegemony
Keorapetse Kgotsile	<i>The Gods Wrote</i>	Cultural connections with Africa; diaspora consciousness; personal empowerment via reflections on culture; pursuit of purpose and identity
Keorapetse Kgotsile	<i>Random Notes to My Son</i>	Critical exploration of history and cultural identity; generational inheritances; connection between past and present
Lucille Clifton	<i>My Dream About Being White</i>	Negotiating the complexity of Black identity; cultural hegemony
Langston Hughes	<i>Mississippi 1955</i>	Racial terrorism; civil rights and southern jurisprudence
Phillipa Ya De Villiers	<i>The Rain Children</i>	Criticism of poverty and American democracy
Rita Dove	<i>Lady Freedom Among Us</i>	Criticism of American democracy; negotiating complex politics of freedom; critique of the democratic ideal in the United States
Lucille Clifton	<i>Slaveship</i>	Black enslavement; opposition of religion and western politics; criticism of America democratic institutions
Margaret Danner	<i>A Home in Dakar</i>	Cultural definition and displacement
Mari Evans	<i>I Am a Black Woman</i>	Political affirmation; declaration of identity and personal truths; enslavement of black people; personal and collective transcendence
Robert Hayden	<i>Runagate Runagate</i>	The Great migration; industrialism; enslavement and emancipation of Blacks
Sterling Brown	<i>Strong Men</i>	Connection with the African history; critique of racism and urban industrialism
Askia M. Toure	<i>Dawnsong!</i>	Ancestry, pedagogy of memory, cultural remembrance
Walt Delegall	<i>Psalm for Sonny Rollins</i>	
The Last Poets	<i>Black Is...</i>	Aesthetics/beauty, epistemology, cultural solidarity,
The Last Poets	<i>New York, New York</i>	Urbanization, dislocation, political corruption, identity
The Last Poets	<i>Related to What</i>	Black masculinity, urbanization, racism

BLACK ARTS CULTURAL THEORISTS AND AESTHETICIANS

In ways both insistent and consistent, architects of the Black Arts Movement strove to maximally develop and articulate an ideological and theoretical framework for their ideas. One key distinction emphasized by Black Arts theorists is the philosophical rejection of the idea of art for art's sake. Instead, it was argued, the Black Aesthetic should be necessarily political and should instantaneously draw from and be linked to the ideological ancestry of black history, black culture, and black social life (Wright, 1997). Another overarching concern was to make such a framework functional, expansive, coherent, and accessible. Thus, for those seeking to leverage Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy, it is imperative to become familiar with the foundational ideas, motivations, and intentions of Black Arts theorists and aestheticians.

The *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum* encourages teachers and students to investigate the writings of key individuals including:

Writer	Publication(s)	Type
Addison Gayle, Jr.	<i>The Black Aesthetic</i> <i>The Black Situation</i>	Book Book
Larry Neal	<i>Visions of a Liberated Future</i> <i>The Black Arts Movement</i>	Book Essay
Hoyt Fuller	<i>Towards a Black Aesthetic</i>	Essay
Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal	<i>Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing</i>	Book
Nathaniel Norment, Jr. and Addison Gayle, Jr.	<i>The Addison Gayle, Jr. Reader</i>	Book
Haki Madhubuti	<i>Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties (After Leroi Jones)</i>	Essay
Lorenzo Thomas	<i>The Shadow World: New York's Umbra Workshop & Origins of the Black Arts Movement</i>	Essay
Howard Ransby	<i>The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry</i>	Book
Lindsay Barrett	<i>The Tide Inside, It Rages</i>	Essay
Stephen Henderson	<i>Understanding the New Black Poetry; The Blues as Black Poetry</i>	Book, Essay
Kalamu ya Salaam	<i>Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement</i>	Essay

William D. Wright	<i>Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and a Black Aesthetic</i>	Book
Askia Muhammad Toure	<i>Dawnsong! The Epic of Memory; Juju: Magic Songs for the Black Nation</i>	Book
James T. Stewart	<i>The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist</i>	Essay
W.E.B. DuBois	<i>Criteria of Negro Art</i>	Essay
Richard Wright	<i>Blueprint for Negro Writing</i>	Essay
Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford	<i>New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement</i>	Book
Eugene Redmond	<i>Drumvoices</i>	Book

BEYOND NOMMO: SHAPING THE JALI (GRIOT) ROLE AND IDENTITY

NOTE: For cultural clarity, respect for African traditions, and to realize some measure of consistency, I shall henceforth substitute the French term 'Griot' for the indigenous West African (Gambia) term 'Jali' ('Jalolu' pl.). The term 'Jaliya' refers to all aspects of the activities of Jalolu. For consistency, I shall henceforth employ the term 'Jali' throughout the Beyond Nommo Black Arts curriculum. Owing to different interpretations and the widespread use of orature throughout West Africa, there are multiple spellings for the word Jali. (Jeli, Jelli, Yali, etc.). If we are to achieve and urge cultural competence and diversity then it is critical that we model what we want to see practiced.

Earlier in this work I attempted to locate and describe Jalolu (conceptually and historically) as an ancient West African cultural asset, which, along with other cultural assets (both obvious and obscure), was transported out of Africa and across the Atlantic during the European Slave Trade. More, I have discussed the Jali tradition owing to the African Diasporan existential experience and the subsequent transformation of African people into African Americans. As was mentioned, Jalolu functioned as professional oral historians and storytellers whose role in the African community was indispensable. Hale (2007) offers an elaborate "job description" for the Jali: historian, genealogist, advisor, spokesperson, diplomat, mediator, praise-singer, interpreter/translator, musician/composer, teacher, warrior, witness, and exhorter. Traditionally, a Jali operated in the service of royalty and was frequently tasked with recounting (via singing, praise poetry, etc.) events important to the ruling class. However, owing to historical changes over time (esp. enslavement, colonization, African Diaspora, industrialization,

urbanization), Jalolu took on more of a populist mission as their storytelling role expanded (from performance to service) to other strata within the larger community. In fact, one of the critical skills of a Jali is her/his ability to improvise. The role itself has undergone a dramatic social evolution and critical, political revisioning by [mostly] creative artists and cultural theorists emerging from the African Diaspora. As such, the Jali identity and function has come to be popularly linked with cultural ideas and approaches appertaining to African Diasporic consciousness, Pan-African Nationalism, political activism, historical memory/remembrance, cultural genealogy, and cultural continuity.

Today, the critical presence and function of the Jali takes on expanded cultural, political, and ethical significance when considered alongside contemporary social and academic challenges confronting urban schools, literacy educators, African American students, and the wider Black community. To be sure, our present reality is thick with challenges that complicate the identity and functional role for those identifying themselves as Jalolu. In light of pressing issues of the current age, we can (and should) creatively reimagine and restructure the role in order to broaden possibilities and increase the capacity for Jalolu to serve society and to effect positive transformation. Thus, with regard to the historical context, how might a Jali situate herself/himself to function in the present day? What potential (internal/external) factors inform the formation and cultivation of the Jali identity in a contemporary urban classroom of African American students? What is (or could be) a possible present-day role and function for Jalolu vis-à-vis Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy? What are some ways to critically access, leverage, and sustain the apprentice tradition of Jalolu? What and where are the tensions, conflictions, and/or contradictions connected to the role and function of Jalolu? What are the critical assumptions, social obligations, and codes/modes of conduct for Jalolu? The formations and conjunctions

borne by these (and other) important questions provide new potential pathways for reflection and action.

Specifically, this section of my dissertation broadly discusses the importance and function of the Jali identity relative to the implementation of the *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum*. Also, this section offers practical suggestions for developing, sustaining, and refining a *functional* Jali identity to serve the cultural, intellectual, and psychological needs of Black students and the wider black community (especially younger generations). In exploring the vital historical function of Jalolu, Watta (1986) maintains that the

role of the [Jali's] Griot's mediation is to bring about a passionate commitment to action of some sort, that is to break away from passivity and nonchalance, penny pinching and cowardice, monotony and non-productivity. (p. 94)

At the most fundamental and functional level, Jalolu function as professional oral historians and storytellers. They “work” as keepers, interpreters, and conveyors of historical memory and cultural consciousness. The basic Jali identity, however, is an inescapable and culturally insistent identifier that immediately distinguishes and classifies Jali within a broader hierarchy of social and cultural actors. As such, Jalolu are the inheritors of an elaborate, ethical, and long-distance legacy of resistance, struggle, and cultural interpretation/representation shaped, characterized, and bordered on all sides by the historical/topical implications and ongoing psychosocial challenges inherent within and posed by the African Diaspora.

Quite naturally, the effectiveness and impressiveness of Jalolu differ qualitatively owing to such formative factors as their particular social experiences, external/internal influences, quantity/quality of indigenous cultural knowledge, artistic skillset/creative style, overall psychocultural development, intentionality, and worldview. When considered alongside DuBoisian critical social theory, criticalist assumptions, and the demands of critical literacy, the

contemporary role of Jalolu is not altogether different from their historical role. I have identified four critical assumptions for Jalolu that resonate altruistically across both (past and present) contexts. These assumptions are in no particular order and include: 1) consistent adherence to appropriately represent, interpret, and sustain the cultural genealogy and folk traditions of people of African descent; 2) consistent adherence to appropriately interpret reality (phenomena) affecting black political and social life; 3) encourage all people of African descent to reflect on and act productively and responsibly on their own behalf; 4) obligate oneself to serve humanity (particularly the vulnerable and the afflicted) productively and responsibly.

Watta (1986) describes Jalolu as “products of culture” and the sentient memory of their people. In historical African society, the role and social responsibility of Jalolu was ever expanding and shifting. At the same time, however, an essential function of the Jali is to internalize, interpret, convey, and keep salient the cultural memory of the community. Thus, as Jalolu, we are personally and socially obligated (in the modern context) to critically engage the world, transmit the word, and operate within the apprentice tradition to relate, represent, and [ultimately] build upon the expansive and complex cultural epistemology of people of African descent. Thus, in our modern context and with respect to the strategic leveraging Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy as an alternative curricular paradigm, Jalolu may operate (most directly) as teachers, artists, or teaching-artists. Physical sites of inquiry and engagement may be housed in traditional classrooms or other appropriated learning spaces including community centers, public libraries, theaters, etc. Virtual sites of inquiry and engagement may include online spaces such as blogs/vlogs or web portals.

To properly represent, interpret, and convey any tradition, it is imperative for one to become (and remain) versed in the tradition which one lays claim to. There are practical ways for

one to begin to cultivate and sustain a Jali identity. To approach understanding of the Jali tradition and extrapolate its [possible] contemporary function vis-à-vis the education of African American students, it is first necessary to critically investigate its cultural origins, social texture, organizing principles, and ethical obligations. Some key texts offering critical insights into oral history and the role and function of Jalolu include: *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* (M. K. Asante and K. W. Asante, 1989); *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (M. Gomez, 1998); *The African Diaspora: A History Through Culture* (P. Manning, 2010); *Epic Traditions of Africa* (S. Belcher, 1999); and *In Search of Sunjata: The Mande Oral Epic as History, Literature, and Performance* (R. A. Austen, 1999).

Another practical suggestion for developing and sustaining a modern Jali identity is to develop Jalolu Culture Circles. Ideally, these constructivist circles consist of people who are actively interested in and committed to: 1) the formal study and cultivation of Jali tradition; 2) theorizing, problematizing, and leveraging a functional Jali identity concurrent and with regard to ongoing social, cultural, and psychological challenges; 3) implementing culturally responsive and culturally relevant pedagogy; 4) operating within the seven basic criticalist assumptions; 5) the formal study of African American transcendent epistemological traditions; 6) the formal study of the African American rhetorical tradition and Black Aesthetic philosophy. Jalolu Culture Circles may also function as emergent sites for professional (ex. artistic, pedagogic) and cultural development, knowledge-sharing, creative solidarity, and for the establishment of independent Black institutions committed to the intellectual, physical, social, commercial, and artistic improvement of the Black community.

Another way of sustaining the tradition is for a Jali to develop herself/himself as a teaching artist committed to the educating and uplifting (specifically) of African American students. At once, this reflective role requires that one develop grounded knowledge of the black rhetorical and black protest traditions. Another suggested requirement for [contemporary] Jalolu to sustain tradition is for them to develop a nuanced analysis and language for criticizing and challenging the current public educational system that claims to represent and serve black children. Indeed, I maintain that the position is best maintained owing to its ability to retain its critical, questioning nature.

CHAPTER 5. BEYOND NOMMO: DESIGNING BLACK ARTS LEARNING SPACES

BUILDING A BLACK ARTS CULTURE CIRCLE

Black Arts Culture Circles (BACCs) serve as a functional means of exploring, sharing, and transmitting knowledge about the historical, cultural, political, and aesthetic significance of the Black Arts Movement. As unique literacy communities and heritage spaces, BACCs also encourage students to investigate and develop appreciable awareness of salient issues related to African/African American culture, identity, remembrance (ethics of memory). Indeed, developing and implementing BACCs comprise a critical component of the *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum*.

As indicated earlier, four basic emphases differentiate BACCs from other types of literacy communities: 1) Black Arts inquiry and Black Aesthetic philosophy comprise the core framework; 2) emphasis is student-centered/driven and focuses on (reading, writing, performing, discussing, critiquing) committed black poetry and encouraging students to become *criticalists* and co-constructors; 3) critical literacy approaches drive inquiry, instruction, and community

building; 4) BACCs function as Black cultural institutions committed to the preservation and promotion of the black literary genealogy (which includes the Black Arts Movement) and a critical, cultural literacy of blackness.

BACC Structure – Developing and sustaining a BACC is part of the *Beyond Nommo* curriculum and is the work of committed students, teachers, and other stakeholders. One practical suggestion is to establish (consistent) weekly (during or after school) meetings with participants in a designated space. Ideally, the session should last between 60-75 minutes however this will vary from group to group. The gathering time, space, and structure for the Black Arts Culture Circle should be (as much as possible) consistent. To create maximum psychological buy-in among the participants, teachers should encourage (and set the stage for) students to develop a profound sense of ownership/stewardship for the Culture Circle.

BACC Physical Space – A recent (2011) Chicago Tribune article disclosed that more than half of Chicago Public Schools enroll fewer students than their classroom space allows and are therefore underutilized. In short, of the city's 662 public schools, only 249 are making efficient use of the abundance space. The majority of these public schools, therefore, have more unused physical space than the school knows what to do with. Such a phenomenon holds interesting potential for stakeholders interested in developing a Black Arts Culture Circle within a public school setting.

The design and aesthetic appeal of the physical space for the Culture Circle helps to promote ownership, participation, pride, and a special sense of belonging among participants. As a strategic mode of co-construction and curriculum design, all participants (teachers and students) should help design the physical space for the Black Arts Culture Circle. Material design assets may include (but are not limited to) wall posters, display boards, mobiles, pictures,

and wall borders. Such items can be changed, rotated, and updated periodically or in keeping with key cultural observances (i.e, National Poetry Month, Kwanzaa, Black History Month, African Liberation Day, Women’s History Month, poet birthdays). In addition, Culture Circle participants can adorn the space with poems, inspirational quotes, meditations, and cultural artifacts such as sculpture, decorative pottery, or instruments. “Hard” items may include several computer workstations, wooden furniture such as chairs and round meeting/writing tables, floor lamps, decorative rugs, and a small reference library (music, books, movies, articles).

Ideally, the aesthetic appeal of the BACC could also extend beyond the classroom (hallway bulletin board or wall space). In this way, the BACC can come to be seen and regarded as a cultural statement made on behalf of *Beyond Nommo* participants and the wider school community. Thus, the active process of developing the physical space can serve as a form of community building practice. Toward this end, a BACC (by its practical design) can elicit a particular aesthetic and communicate a unique cultural message for/to all who visit and inhabit the space. In a sense, the physical space of the BACC is, itself, a powerful cultural statement on behalf of The Black Arts Movement, the Black Aesthetic, and the African American rhetorical tradition.

BACC Activities – Some fundamental objectives for participants (students and teachers) of Black Arts Culture Circles include: 1) learning about the historical and cultural significance of the Black Arts Movement; 2) applying a critical literacy framework to examine the Movement, its historical and contemporary social impact, its pedagogic and educative value, and its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings; 3) increasing academic and cultural literacy by challenging students to interact with and develop creative content that builds on and extends the rich tradition of the Black Arts literary genealogy; 4) encouraging sustained and critical

appreciation for the arts, critical inquiry, content analysis, and the educational uses of technology; 5) fostering community, collaboration, and aesthetic awareness by organizing and aggregating Black Arts-related activities.

Co-constructed activities occurring within BACCs may include creative writing, spoken word performances, creative projects, research, and rich media presentations. BACC participants may plan and develop [print or electronic] publications (newsletters, literary anthologies, oral histories, school displays, poster series, informational data sheets, etc.). Relatedly, BACC stakeholders may sponsor annual presentations, performances, observances, literary competitions, pageants, and the like that are designed to educate, inform, entertain, and raise the public interest concerning the historical and cultural significance of the Black Arts Movement.

RADICAL LISTENING: MUSIC + SPOKEN WORD POETRY OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

One of the outstanding aspects of the Black Arts Movement is the immense influence of jazz and other creative music on the artistic lives of Black Arts poets. This influence resonated across multiple channels including spiritual, artistic, communal, and political. Indeed, much of the jazz (free jazz or avant-garde) music and spoken word poem-songs issued during the Black Arts era (1965-1976) squared with the aesthetic and political sentiments of Black creative artists and theorists. Certain musicians (such as Sun Ra, Phil Cohran, Abbey Lincoln, Art Ensemble of Chicago) even went so far as to use their music to actively incorporate and promote the ideological and aesthetic aims of the Black Arts Movement – of which they were a key part. As such, music of the Black Arts era encouraged Black Arts cultural theorists and writers to engage an intellectually and spiritually sophisticated relationship with [the creative and transformative power of] words, their usage, and their meanings.

Akin to their musical siblings, Black Arts writers sought a radical break from Eurocentric literary expressionist modes to produce a complex, functional art influenced by Black history, experiences, and traditions, political activism, a return to African roots, and revolutionary resistance to the established order. The *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum* encourages teachers and students to practice critical listening in order to experience first-hand the music of key artists* including:

Musician	Recording(s)	Year
John Coltrane	<i>A Love Supreme</i>	1964
Miles Davis	<i>Kinda Blue</i> ; <i>Nefertiti</i>	1959, 1967
Archie Shepp	<i>The Magic of Ju-Ju</i> ; <i>Attica Blues</i> ; <i>Fire Music</i> , <i>The Cry of My People</i>	1965, 1967, 1972
Ornette Coleman	<i>Chappaqua Suite</i> ; <i>Forms and Sounds</i>	1965, 1967
Nina Simone	<i>Silk & Soul</i> ; <i>Nuff Said</i>	1967, 1968
Mtume & The Umoja Ensemble	<i>Alkebu Lan (Land of the Blacks)</i>	1972
Art Ensemble of Chicago	<i>Message to Our Folks</i> ; <i>Certain Blacks'</i>	1969, 1970
Phil Cohran	<i>Malcolm X Memorial</i>	1968
Pharaoh Sanders	<i>Karma</i>	1969
Sun Ra	NOTE: Sun Ra's discography is far too vast for any one album to stand out. Sun Ra's musical impact on the Black Arts Movement was most prolific in post-1965 recordings.	1965-1976
Eric Dolphy	<i>Naima</i>	1964
Roland Kirk	<i>Blacknuss</i>	1972
Max Roach	<i>We Insist! Freedom Now Suite</i>	1960
Abbey Lincoln	<i>People In Me</i>	1973
Albert Ayler	<i>Spiritual Unity</i> ; <i>Spirits Rejoice</i>	1964, 1965
Babatunde Olatunji	<i>Flaming Drums</i>	1962
Lloyd McNeil	<i>Asha</i>	1969
McCoy Tyner	<i>Time for Tyner</i> ; <i>Extensions</i> ; <i>Asante</i>	1968, 1970, 1970
Spoken Word Artist		
New York Art Quartet	<i>New York Art Quartet</i>	1964
The Last Poets The Original Last Poets	<i>The Last Poets, This is Madness</i> <i>Right On!</i>	1970, 1971 1971
The Watts Prophets	<i>The Black Voices on the Streets in Watts</i> ; <i>Rappin' Black in a White World</i>	1969, 1971
Gil Scott-Heron	<i>Small Talk at 125th and Lenox</i> , <i>Pieces of a Man</i> , <i>Winter in America</i> , <i>From South Africa to South Carolina</i>	1970, 1971, 1974, 1976

*NOTE: This is only a partial listing.

RADICAL VIEWING: IMAGES OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The visual art of the Black Art Movement helped to frame and contextualize the cultural, political and aesthetic statements of Black Arts theorists and writers. Like the writers and musicians, Black Arts visual artists sought to represent, participate in, and elevate the Black and Pan-African struggle for artistic and physical liberation. Black visual artists such as:

David Hammons, Melvin Edwards, Elizabeth Catlett, Dana Chandler, and others exemplify the richness and diversity of the Black Arts Movement during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s. Newly independent African countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s inspired a tremendous solidarity among artists of African descent in the United States. The rise of a modern post-colonial African art, which encompasses a new visual vocabulary and symbols rooted in the African experience, has its cross influences among artists of the Black Arts Movement. The African continent became a home and a place of pilgrimage to which several African American artists embarked on a journey to study and reclaim their rich African heritage. Participation in major Pan-African forums such as First World Art Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar 1966 and FESTAC'77 in Lagos, Nigeria exposed African American artists to African masters like Skunder Boghossian, Malangatana, Papa Ibra Tall, Ibrahim El-Salahi, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Also influential were artists such as Cuban Wifredo Lam, whose work creatively synthesizes African and western imagery within a Caribbean perspective. All of these Pan-African artists have impacted the style and aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement. (from Cornell University *Blackness in Color* online exhibition)

Experiencing the art of the era provides an effective and creative means of expanding and extending the *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum*. The following online sources are available and recommended for teachers and students.

1	<p>Perceptions of Black: African American Visual Art and the Black Arts Movement The University of Virginia http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug01/hughes/blackart.html “A resource for further study of the cultural and political dynamics of BAM through the lens of African American art's historically "invisible" creators--African American visual artists. These artists, most specifically charged with visualizing an empowered Black identity during BAM, held a unique position in the 1960s art world--one that was, in parts, alienated from both white and black America.” (from the website) KEY FEATURES: <i>Galleries, bibliography, timeline, artist biographies</i></p>
2	<p>African American Art: Black Arts Movement, Abstraction, and Beyond Artlex Art Directory http://www.artlex.com/ Online database containing thousands of images and other handy references. KEY FEATURES: <i>Galleries, bibliography, artist biographies, search</i></p>

3	<p>Verso: An Insider's Look at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art Ogden Museum of New Orleans (blog)</p> <p>http://omsablog.blogspot.com/2010/05/purvis-young-february-4-1943-april-20.html</p> <p>Features background and images from Black Arts visual artist Purvis Young.</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Biography, images, video of the artist</i></p>
4	<p>AfriCOBRA: Art for the People Monsters and Critics</p> <p>http://www.monstersandcritics.com/arts/news/article_1617436.php/AfriCOBRA-Art-For-the-People-on-TV-Land-Feb-7</p> <p>Brief background on Black Arts visual artist Jeff Donaldson.</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Background data, images</i></p>
5	<p>Art of SSCAC South Side Community Art Center of Chicago</p> <p>http://www.artofsscac.org/Home/</p> <p>Welcome to the "Art of SSCAC" website, an exploration of selected works from the permanent collection at the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago. Developed by a class of Art Education graduate students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, this site provides a space to engage with artworks through guided "looking questions" and reflection. (from the website)</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Gallery slideshow, artist biographies, search</i></p>
6	<p>MoMA: The Collection of David Hammons Museum of Modern Art</p> <p>http://www.moma.org/collection/artist.php?artist_id=2486</p> <p>Write a description</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Gallery slideshow, artist biographies, search</i></p>
7	<p>Melvin Edwards: Lynch Fragments Melvin Edwards</p> <p>http://www.meledwards08.com/gallery_lynchfragments_main.php</p> <p>Write a description</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Gallery slideshow, artist biographies, search</i></p>
8	<p>Power, Politics & Pride: AfriCOBRA WTTW</p> <p>http://www.wttw.com/main.taf?p=76,4,5,9</p> <p>Write a description</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Video, Black Arts retrospective, gallery slideshow</i></p>
8	<p>Blackness in Color: Expressions of the Black Arts Movement (1960-Present) Cornell University</p> <p>http://asrc.cornell.edu/blacknessincolor/galleries/galleryfs.html</p> <p>An online symposium of visual expressions of the Black Arts Movement in the United States from the 1960s to the present. However, this topic will serve as a springboard for an intellectual exchange on current issues related to African American and African Diaspora art and visual cultures. The symposium will take a critical look at the role of art in activism and the community as spearheaded by the Black Arts Movement in the aftermath of the Black Power and civil rights movements. (from the website)</p> <p>KEY FEATURES: <i>Gallery slideshow, artist biographies, search</i></p>

List of must view visual art pieces:

Artist	Title
Jeff Donaldson	<i>Wives of Shango; Aunt Jemima and the Pillsbury Dough Boy</i>
Barbara Chase-Riboud	<i>Africa Rising; Malcolm X</i>
Faith Ringgold	<i>The Flag;</i>
Michael Bailey	<i>Separate But Equal</i>
Dana Chandler	<i>Memorial to Fred Hampton</i>
David Hammon	<i>Injustice Case; Betty Scar; Liberation of Aunt Jemima</i>
Elizabeth Catlett	<i>Homage to My Young Black Sisters; Homage to the Panthers</i>
Melvin Edwards	<i>Lynch Fragments</i>
Jacob Lawrence	<i>Migrants Arrive and Cast Their Ballots</i>
Napoleon Jones-Henderson	<i>Lady Day from the Diva Series</i>
Romare Bearden	<i>Conjure Woman, She-Ba</i>
Nelson Stevens	<i>Spirit Sister</i>
Kay Brown	<i>Black Soldier</i>
Abdul Rahman	<i>From the Bottom of the Barrel</i>

BLACK ARTS AND EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Educational technology and project-based learning coalesce to comprise a critical 21st century pedagogical approach to teaching and learning about the Black Arts Movement as well as improving student engagement. This approach seeks to orient online learning and consumption to promote worthwhile engagement, critical literacy, creative production, and responsible social action among students and teachers. Another key benefit of fusing technology with Black Arts inquiry and pedagogy is that it affords students and teachers an opportunity to co-create the curriculum and engage in educational experiences that are dynamic, scalable, collaborative, and ubiquitous. In this way, Internet communications technologies may be strategically leveraged to augment student learning, teacher practice, and the educational

experience itself. The *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum* offers the following suggestive list of digital literacy and project-based learning activities:

Activity	Description
<i>Student Poetry Anthology</i>	Online collection of student writings, reflections, etc. reflecting the creative expression of the Black Arts era. Can be compiled and maintained by students and shared with the world.
<i>Black Arts E-Newsletter</i>	E-newsletter developed and maintained by students. Provides a means of promoting awareness of the Black Arts era, editorializing, and advertising literary events sponsored by the Black Arts Culture Circle.
<i>Black Arts Website/Blog</i>	Students design and maintain a site that promotes awareness and understanding of the Black Arts Movement. A Black Arts blog offers a way for students to aggregate and share creative content.
<i>Black Arts Video Channel</i>	Students research and compile video/audio clips of Black Arts-era poetry, presentations, music, documentaries, etc. Students design, control, and share the channel's content. Available platforms include Vimeo and YouTube.
<i>Social Media</i>	Popular social media platforms (Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, etc.) can be used to promote awareness and upcoming events.
<i>Student Performances</i>	Students (especially BACC participants) can plan and shoot short films of student performances, infomercials, etc. to promote awareness and understanding of the Black Arts Movement.
<i>Black Arts Culture Circle</i>	BACC meetings can take place online and between schools. Also, participants can share resources, creative content, and ideas.
<i>Black Arts Reference Database</i>	Students compile a digital database of Black Arts-related materials including bookmarks, articles, books, audio/video assets, essays, etc. Students may also access and conduct research using electronic primary sources (i.e., digitized versions of <i>The Black World</i> found on Google Books).
<i>Podcast/Audio Archive</i>	Students access and/or create an archive of audio materials. This can mean trawling the web for existing sources or (for example) using Apple's Garageband to create and share original spoken word recordings. These student-produced recordings can be organized and uploaded to music-sharing websites such as Jamendo.com or TeacherTube.com.

BEYOND NOMMO BLACK ARTS CURRICULUM

Description: The *Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum* is a critical literacy immersion that introduces participants to the history and development of the Black Arts Movement. Participants learn about the historical and cultural significance of the movement by interfacing with the content, ideology, aesthetics, politics, and cultural philosophy undergirding Black Arts (poetry, essays, visual art, music). Participants are encouraged to develop a Black Arts Culture

Circle (BACCs) as a critical social space for learning, engagement, and facilitating activities to promote awareness and understanding of the Black Arts Movement. As a critical literacy and reflective orientation, *Beyond Nommo* seeks to promote and enhance academic and cultural literacy among participants.

Instructional Objectives: Participants will become familiar with the:

- historical and cultural significance of the Black Arts Movement;
- writers and artists (esp. poets and theoreticians) whose collective ideas and activities contributed to the formation of the Black Arts Movement;
- aesthetic and philosophical concept of The Black Aesthetic;
- artistic, cultural, and political objectives of the Black Arts Movement;
- historical and cultural significance of the Black Arts literary genealogy and its relationship to the wider African American literary genealogy;
- connection between Black Arts-era poetics and contemporary forms of cultural expression including spoken word poetry and hip-hop;
- cultural themes, creative ideas, and political messages contained within the “committed” poetry of the Black Arts Movement;

Supplies:

- Journal notebooks
- Computers with internet access
- Dedicated physical space

Extensions: *Beyond Nommo* is a constructivist, open-ended approach that encourages participants to extend their understanding by:

- collaborating with other participants to develop a Black Arts Culture Circle; organizing the cultural circle as a critical social space for learning, transaction, and transformation;
- researching the lives and careers of creative artists of the Black Arts Movement and compiling artist folios;

- generating content (poems, essays, etc.) and aggregating creative activities to promote and sustain the cultural legacy of the Black Arts Movement.

Critical Sources (partial):

Books:

- **The Black Aesthetic** – Addison Gayle, Jr.
- **The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s** – James E. Smethurst (2005)
- **New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement** - Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, Eds. (2006)
- **Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro American Writing** – Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, Eds. (2007)
- **Understanding the New Black Poetry** – Stephen Henderson (1973)
- **Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic** – Amy Abugo Ongiri (2009)
- **Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings** – Larry Neal (1989)

Reflective Essays:

- **Towards the Black Aesthetic** – Hoyt Fuller (1967)
- **The Black Arts Movement** – Larry Neal (1968)
- **Towards a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties (after LeRoi Jones)** – Haki R. Madhubuti (1972)
- **Blueprint for Negro Writing** – Richard Wright (1937)
- **The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain** – Langston Hughes (1926)
- **Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement** – Kalamu ya Salaam (1997)
- **The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist** – James T. Stewart (2007)
- **The Tide Inside, It Rages** – Lindsay Barrett from *Black Fire* (2007)

Media:

- *Background on Nommo* (slide presentation)
- *Voices of the Black Arts Movement* (slide presentation)
- *Institution-building during the Black Arts Movement* (slide presentation)
- *Background on BAM Spoken Word Artists* (slide presentation)
- **Black Arts-era Music: The Last Poets, Roland Kirk, Pharaoh Sanders, Gil Scott-Heron, Max Roach & Abbey Lincoln, John Coltrane, Clifford Jordan, Kelan Phil Cohran, Nina Simone, Archie Shepp, Sun Ra, and others**

Web:

- **Blackness in Color: Expressions of the Black Arts Movement (1960-Present)**
<http://asrc.cornell.edu/blacknessincolor/galleries/galleryfs.html>
- **Perceptions of Black: African American Visual Art and the Black Arts Movement**
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug01/hughes/blackart.html>

Following is an outline of the *Beyond Nommo Black Arts* curriculum based on a 12-session model that meets weekly for one hour. Media (audio, essays, poems, etc.) listed in this outline is merely suggestive.

Week	Topics	Exercises/Direction
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introductions and program description • Define program outcomes • Synopsis of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay: <i>The Black Arts Movement</i> by Larry Neal • Handout: Distribute Black Arts Timeline • Distribute participant journals
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the artistic and political goals of BAM • Introduce and review the 7 Basic Criticalist Assumptions • Describe goals for critical literacy • Introduce the concept of Black Arts Culture Circle (BACC)* <p><i>*NOTE: BACC activities should be participant-driven and may include projects such as a poetry anthology, newsletter, website, performances, reference database, podcasts, etc.</i></p> <p><i>Ideally, the BACC will serve as the mediating space for the Beyond Nommo Black Arts curriculum. Activities should be planned with respect to the 12-week format and/or the nature of the activity.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handouts: Artistic & Political Goals of BAM; 7 Basic Criticalist Assumptions; What is Critical Literacy? • Poetry: <i>Black Art</i> by Amiri Baraka (handout) • Audio: <i>Black Is...</i> by The Last Poets • Freewriting
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and discussion of previous session • BAM Background: Political and social climate of the 1960s; Civil Rights to Black Power • Pedagogy of the Streets: Historical analysis of Chicago street names • Introduce and describe <i>The Black Aesthetic</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay: <i>Towards the Black Aesthetic</i> by Hoyt Fuller; <i>Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties</i> by Haki R. Madhubuti (handouts) • Handout: <i>Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic</i> by Larry Neal • Poetry: <i>Nommo: How We Come to Speak</i> by Deborah Major (handouts) • Audio: <i>Blacknuss</i> by Roland Kirk; <i>The Creator Has a Master Plan</i> by Pharaoh Sanders

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework: Writing assignment (poem)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce and describe the concept of <i>Nommo</i> • BAM Background: The Black Aesthetic • Develop BACC structure and organizing principles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slide Presentation: <i>Nommo</i> tradition • Handout: What is Nommo? • Poetry: <i>Ka'Ba</i> by Amiri Baraka; <i>On Getting a Natural</i> by Dudley Randall (handouts) • Homework: Writing assignment (poetry)
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and discussion of previous session • BAM Background: Overview and reviews of the Black Arts Movement • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay: <i>Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement</i> by Kalamu ya Salaam (handout) • Audio: <i>Puerto Rican Rhythms</i> by The Last Poets; <i>Winter in America</i> by Gil Scott Heron • Video: <i>Our History Was Destroyed by Slavery</i> by Malcolm X • Poetry: <i>I Am a Black Woman</i> by Mari Evans; <i>A Home in Dakar</i> by Margaret Danner (handouts) • Homework: Writing assignment (reflection essay)
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAM Background: Voices of the Black Arts Movement (including: <i>Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubit, Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, Jr., Gwendolyn Brooks, Askia M. Toure, Margaret Danner, Jayne Cortez</i>) • Review and discussion of previous session • Radical viewing: visual art of the BAM • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slide Presentation: <i>Voices of the Black Arts Movement</i> • Visual: <i>Perception of Black: African American Visual Art and the Black Arts Movement</i> (online gallery) • Audio: <i>A Love Supreme</i> by John Coltrane; <i>Africa</i> by Abbey Lincoln; <i>The Idea of Ancestry</i> by Etheridge Knight • Video: <i>Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace</i> by Max Roach & Abbey Lincoln • Poetry: <i>The Idea of Ancestry</i> by Etheridge Knight; <i>Africa Rising</i> by Barbara Chase-Riboud (handouts) • Homework: Writing assignment (write a toast poem reflecting ancestry; genealogy)
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and discussion of previous session • Short Review: Artistic and political goals of the BAM • BAM Background: Institution building • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation and Class Discussion: <i>Institution-building During the BAM (presses, journals, buildings, conferences, etc.)</i> • Poetry: <i>Random Notes to My Son</i> by Keorapetse Kgotsile; <i>Runagate, Runagate</i> by Robert Hayden (handouts) • Homework: Writing assignment (poetry)
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAM Background: The revolutionary Black artist • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay: <i>The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist</i> by James T. Stewart (handout) • Audio: <i>Malcolm X Memorial</i> by Kelan Phil Cohran; <i>John Coltrane</i> by Clifford Jordan • Poetry: <i>Son of Msippi</i> by Henry Dumas; <i>The</i>

		<i>Black Man's Burden</i> by H. T. Johnson (handouts)
9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAM Background: Critical urban literacy and the seeds of Hip Hop • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation and Class Discussion: <i>Background on BAM Spoken Word Artists (The Last Poets, Watts Prophets, Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters, etc.)</i> • Homework: Writing assignment (poetry)
10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAM Background: • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visual: <i>Blackness in Color: Expressions of the Black Arts Movement, 1960-Present</i> (online gallery) • Audio: <i>Four Women</i> by Nina Simone; <i>Message From the Nile</i> by McCoy Tyner • Poetry: <i>Son of Msippi</i> by Henry Dumas; <i>The Black Man's Burden</i> by H. T. Johnson (handouts)
11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAM Background: Review of BAM artistic and political goals; black aesthetic philosophy • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essay: <i>The Tide Inside, It Rages</i> by Lindsay Barrett (handout) • Audio: <i>The Cry of My People</i> by Archie Shepp; <i>The Shalimar</i> by The Last Poets; <i>Angels and Demons</i> by Sun Ra • Poetry: <i>Big Momma</i> by Haki Madhubuti; <i>Poem for Some Black Women</i> by Carolyn M. Rodgers (handouts)
12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAM Background: Review of BAM development • BACC: Organizing activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation of participant writings • Post-assessment; participant reflections (oral or written) • Planning of future BACC activities; Refining the curriculum

Critical Questions

The following questions are designed to extend thinking and discussion of the Beyond Nommo Black Arts Curriculum. They are merely suggestive. Teachers and participants in the Black Arts Culture Circle are encouraged to use these questions and/or devise new ones structured on Black Arts inquiry.

Question 1. Individually and collectively, the artists and cultural theorists of the Black Arts Movement contributed to defining and refining Black Arts philosophy. The Black Aesthetic was developed as an all-encompassing term to describe this orientation. What are your thoughts concerning the notion of the Black Aesthetic? Do you see any reverberations of the Black Aesthetic on display among black artists of the current age? Why/why not?

- Question 2.** We have learned about and explored the importance of the Jalolu (griots) to African culture. What are your thoughts about the contemporary importance of the Jali identity? What, if anything, should this role consist of?
- Question 3.** Organizing a Black Arts Culture Circle (BACC) offers an opportunity for *Beyond Nommo* participants to extend their learning and promote increased awareness and understanding of the Black Arts Movement. What plans do you have for your BACC? Specifically, what projects or initiatives is your BACC planning to undertake?
- Question 4.** Creative artists of the Black Arts Movement placed critical emphasis on accessing and building on the “functional past” of African/African Americans? What do you think is meant by the term “functional past?” Do you feel such a thing is still necessary today?

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Lasana Kazembe - Curriculum Vitae

Education

Ph.D., Education (Curriculum Studies), University of Illinois at Chicago, 2012.

M.A., English (Technical Communication), Bowling Green State University, Ohio, 1994.

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Dissertation

Beyond Nommo: Contextualizing the Literary Genealogy of the Black Arts Movement: Possibilities for Practice

Research Interests

The Black Arts Movement, African American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Black Protest Thought, Africana Philosophy, Urban Education, Black Aesthetic Philosophy, African American Epistemology, Critical Literacy, Race and Ethnicity, Poetry/Poetics.

Teaching Experience

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| 2012-Present | Adjunct Lecturer, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL.
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Course taught: <i>SCED 304 Secondary Education Clinic</i> . |
| 2010-Present | Adjunct Instructor, St. Leonard's Adult High School, Chicago, IL.
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| 2006-2010 | Academic Professional, University of Illinois Extension, Chicago, IL.
Subjects taught: <i>Educational Technology, Arts and Media Literacy</i> . |

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| 2012-Present | Educational Consultant in Literacy, Hamdard Community Center, Chicago, IL. Developed and facilitated a literary arts workshop for international students emphasizing the history and poetics of the Black Arts Movement. |
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| 2003-Present | Educational Consultant, Chicago Public Schools (various sites). |

Developed and facilitated educational programs and workshops involving such topics as African American history, cultural literacy, literature, and social studies.

2005-2006 Presenter, Cultural Literacy & Youth Engagement, Early Outreach Saturday College, University of Illinois at Chicago.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Spiritwork And Conjurefolk: Unpacking Nommo, Griot, And The Role Of The Black Arts Movement In The Development Of Africana Studies. Kent State University, Kent, OH. April 2012.

From Tarzan to Tea Party: Corporate Media's Construction of Blackness. Young Chicago Authors Conference. Chicago, IL. December 2010.

African American Epistemology and the Global African Community. Critical Race Studies in Education Conference. University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL. May 2009.

The African Diaspora: Reclaiming Cultural Memory. National Council for Black Studies 2009 Conference. Atlanta, GA. March 2009.

Giving Voice: Black Poetry and the Power of the Spoken Word. Northwestern University/TIZ Media Group. Evanston, IL. June 2009.

Writing Sexuality in and of the South (panelist). 8th Annual Oxford Conference for the Book, University of Mississippi. Spring 2001.

Research in Progress

Pedagogies that Challenged History: Black Schooling in the 20th Century (book chapter), Saint Joseph's University

Black Pioneers in the Pacific Northwest (research paper). Association for African American Historical Research and Preservation 2013 Conference

Awards, Prizes, and Grants

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Cook County Mobile Science Center Development Grant, University of Illinois Extension, Chicago, IL 2008

University Service

Graduate Student Council, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2009-2011

Project Director, Cook County Extension Mobile Science Center, University of Illinois Extension, Chicago, IL 2007-2010

Committee Chair, Field Staff Executive Advisory Committee, University of Illinois Extension, 2006-2007

Committee Chair, Cook County Educators' Professional Development Retreat, University of Illinois Extension, 2005

Community Service

Honor Roll Breakfast Keynote, Perspectives Charter High School, 2012

Steering Committee, Speak Truth to the People: Honoring Mari Evans and Lerone Bennett, Jr, Third World Press and the DuSable Museum of African American History, 2011

Digital Journaling: African American Genealogy, AARP and Harold Washington Elementary School, 2011

Words Free Creative Writing Project, Cook County Juvenile Detention Center, Chicago, IL, 2006

Professional Affiliations

- AERA (American Educational Research Association); Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH)
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