

Black Art Matters! Art and Politics in the Age of Trump

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The political slogan at the heart of the reawakening of the Black Freedom Movement in the 21st century is “Black Lives Matter” (2013). This emerged out of the current wave of police and vigilante killings of Black people in virtually every part of the country. For example Oscar Grant in California (2009), Trayvon Martin in Florida (2012), Eric Gardner in New York (2014), and Michael Brown in Missouri (2014). This slogan touched a fundamental political need and led to a spontaneous surge of Black resistance. Much like what happened with the slogan “Black is Beautiful,” a crisis of consciousness reached a volatile level and was captured by an affirmation that profoundly affirmed the Black experience. It combined politics, philosophy, and aesthetics in such a way that Black people embraced the message as a command to unite and resist all forms of oppression.

In the 1960’s Black people experienced the political rough ride of the successive presidential administrations of John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. This was a time of great mass mobilization as well. Breaking the neo-fascist strangle hold of McCarthyism in the 1950’s Black people began a surge of the Civil Rights Movement. This diverted the freedom impulse into the regulatory and administrative context of the US state and made it a process of governmental reform. By the 1960’s this emphasis on civil rights escalated to a mass movement for Black liberation. Martin Luther King was joined by Malcolm X as key individuals symbolic of this transformation. Kennedy was a liberal from the elite East coast ranks of Franklin D Roosevelt style politicians and Johnson was a down home style Southern politician who knew how to work politics as a network of interests and reciprocal obligations. But they were replaced by the machinations of a right wing conservative manipulator and conspirator Nixon who was forced out of office in disgrace.

The political culture of the 1960’s freedom movement was proclaimed by two fundamental slogans: “Freedom Now” and “Black is Beautiful.” The politics of resistance was accompanied by a cultural revolution. The Black Arts Movement was born as a result of a mass out pouring of cultural creativity at the heart of which were individual artists who entered the ranks of those who will never be forgotten, such as Amiri Baraka, Gil Scott Heron, Oscar Brown Jr., Askia Toure, Jayne Cortez, and Terry Callier, and many others. Larry Neal summed up the meaning of the Black Arts Movement born in the 1960’s:

The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic. It proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. The Black Arts and the Black Power concept both relate broadly to the Afro-American’s desire for self-determination and nationhood. Both concepts are nationalistic. One is concerned with the relationship between art and politics; the other with the art of politics. (Drama Review, Summer 1968)

Neal summed up the movement, especially events that took place one year earlier during the summer of 1967. In Newark New Jersey a major Black Power Conference was convened ((July 20 to 23). The National Conference on Black Power was a gathering of more than 1,000 delegates representing 286 organizations and institutions from 126 cities in 26 states. This conference took place just days after a major Black insurrection hit the city. The fighting lasted 6 days and cost 26 lives and hundreds of injuries (July 12 to 17). This led to the major uprising in Detroit (July 23 to 27) during which there were 43 dead, 1,189 injured, over 7,200 arrests, and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed. These insurrections were a negation of American racism, while the Black Power conference was an affirmation of Black resistance.

Also during this summer there was a major cultural initiative bursting out in Chicago that led to a national movement of painters and photographers, first in the African American community and then everywhere. Militant public mural painting was reborn when ‘The Wall of Respect’ was painted during August 1967. The concept of respect was in the air as Aretha Franklin had released her famous tune by that name in April 1967. Over a dozen artists collaborated on the project to produce a mural that was dedicated to Black heroes and sheroes. Leadership of this effort was shared by Jeff Donaldson and William Walker. It was painted deep in the Black working class community on 43rd Street in Chicago that had been renamed “Muddy Waters Drive.” It was an act of Black self-determination in that the artists planned the project based on a political unity, and they did it with their own self-funding.

(INSERT PHOTO OF THE WALL OF RESPECT HERE

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wall_of_Respect)

The Wall of respect was a project of the Visual Arts Workshop of the Chicago based Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC). This organization was founded by Hoyt Fuller (editor of Negro Digest magazine), Conrad Kent Rivers (poet, high school teacher), and Gerald McWorter (aka Abdul Alkalimat, graduate student in Sociology at the University of Chicago). They represented two generations and combined the vision of an artist, an art critic, and a social activist, all steeped in the historical dynamics of the Black radical tradition. Another major workshop pulled the writers together including Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti), Carolyn Rodgers, Sterling Plumpp, Sam Greenlee, Ebon Dooley, Walter Bradford, Alicia Johnson, and James *Yaki* Sayles. The Wall of Respect became a location for the performance of Black political culture where one could get the latest politics and poetry. Frequently music performed by artists of the Chicago based Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM).

2017 is the 50th anniversary of the Wall. Since 1967 there have been at least 1500 murals inspired by the OBAC “Wall of Respect” project.

The cultural activity of the 1960’s rose to the level of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920’s and the Chicago Renaissance of the 1940’s. In each case politics was the foundation for artistic creativity. Out of the Reagan and Bush presidential administrations we got hip hop and the poetry of rap. This began as the politics of poverty and protest with the inner city voices of Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five and African Bambaata. It is now clear that the market

forces tore the movement apart and what emerged as protest became a farce of cooptation. The rapper Ice T was famous for saying “fuck the police,” but then gets recruited to a high paying TV starring role as a policeman. Ice Cube, formerly a member of the rebellious group NWA (Niggers with Attitudes), ends up as a comic film star of movies aimed at teenage white youth. Kanye West has subordinated his militancy into a fawning outreach to President Trump making his appeal to power more important than maintain any level of Black autonomy. The power of the capitalist market place to commodify cultural production has turned a large portion of rap artists into an art of the absurd. On the other hand there does remain a tendency of Black authenticity in rap. This includes the voices of Capital D and All Natural Records, Mos Def, Dead Prez, and many others.

Mainstream political dialectics take a new twist when Barack Obama (2008 – 2016) was elected as the first Black US president followed by political maverick Donald Trump (2016 -). Just as the Kennedy-Johnson administrations were followed by Nixon, so Obama was followed by Trump, a political pendulum swing from the right to the left. In this later case Obama was no standard bearer of progressive politics, but the very fact that he was a Black man fueled the flames of racist resentment among white people facing economic hard times. Moreover while he had bailed out the banks (too big to fail) there was little trickle down impact on the working class and those trapped in poverty. This opened the door for the right wing populism of Trump, something the media and political establishment totally underestimated.

We now face a surface appearance of chaos ripping apart what most consider as mainstream normalcy. They just say Trump is a disrupter, get over it. But there are two fundamental processes at work that must be regarded as the basis for any political analysis of what is going on. First is that the top positions in government are overwhelmingly being given over to billionaires and military generals. The program being implemented is the final destruction of the remnants of the welfare state initiated by Franklin D Roosevelt in the New Deal and the liberal policies of the Kennedy-Johnson era of the New Frontier of the Great Society. The final plan for Trump is for the elimination of the “public” to be replaced by the market driven “private” commodification of all of social life. This would be the ultimate victory for a wild and unrestrained capitalism. The icing on their cake is turning the national budget even more over to military expansion in order to continue the US policy of global permanent war.

A second Trump reality is that the truth or facts are being challenged with what have been called “alternative facts” or truth by declaration without evidence. This is especially important since this has pitted President Trump against the media and most scholars. This follows the challenge to scientific evidence by the climate change deniers. This brings us chillingly close to the “Big lie” propaganda arsenal of the fascist Nazi regime of Hitler. This quote from Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*:

“...in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods.

It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Even though the facts which prove this to be so may be brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some other explanation. For the grossly impudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down, a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world and to all who conspire together in the art of lying. The task of Black Art is to pull the mask off all illusion and make a reality check, and by so doing create a tension between good and evil, between right and wrong. Art is both necessarily combined with science as well as ethics.” (1925)

In contrast to the 1960’s Black people are no longer barred from media but now have found a place there for all to see. But much of the time performance is reverting back to Blacks as clowns, comic spectacles whether in movies or TV, to be Black is not the “Black is Beautiful” representation that is full of pride, but almost a return to vaudeville stereotyping. Big time millionaire professional athletes play a role in this as well.

Even when serious art is put forward the Trump era has a plan that gets implemented. We can reflect on two recent movies to clarify this point, *Fences* and *Hidden Figures*. Both of these films were discussed in the recent competition for the Oscars from the film industry. *Fences* is based on a play originally scripted and also turned into a movie by August Wilson. The movie is about the family and friends of Troy Maxson. He is a working Black man who faces four demons: his past, his job, his family, and his friends. This brother explains his lack of past success (never making it to the majors even though he was an outstanding baseball player) as the price of growing up and living in a cold blooded racist society. He continues to face this racism on his job. He has a younger brother who faces a mental health challenge, and two sons. One is a musician who struggles and is constantly in need of money causing Troy to have little respect for someone who does not uphold the working class ethic of getting a job to take of one self and family. Troy has another son who is a good enough football player to get a possible college scholarship, but Troy refuses to let him leave his job to take the chance at a more upwardly mobile future because he believes it is an illusion and that racism will never let his son be successful. Troy seeks comfort in drinking with a friend and taking up with another woman that leads to her pregnancy. This outside woman bearing his son leads Troy to break relations with his longtime friend and weaken his marriage of two decades. The movie ends with both sons reflecting a future, the musician in prison, but still play music, while the other son has a new career by joining the Marine Corps.

Hidden figures is about the struggles of Black women fighting to be accepted as middle class professionals, in this case as mathematicians. These Black women were working as part of the initial space program with NASA. They were working in segregated quarters, including the use of spaces segregated by color for eating and going to the toilet. As computers were being introduced these Black woman took the initiative to learn programming and prepare to make the transition in the modernization of space technology. They were successful and were a vital part of launching the space program of the US military.

Both of these two films admit the fact of racism in American life, and that is the positive aspect of each film, transparency for all to see the forms of racist oppression Black people face. This admission opens us up for their negative. This is the response of Hollywood to the political moment in which the slogan “Black Lives Matter” is heard all across the land. The Black male fails his family and friends while the future is really based on the one son joining the US military. Black women are able to overcome the racism by serving the technological progress of the US military. In both cases the answer for Black people is to become agents of the military arm of the US state.

This fits the current political climate. Many would say that the New Deal led people into the war against fascism in Europe so why is this current media push not the same. One answer is that WW II was a necessary war against a fascist threat while the current wars are aggressive wars of aggression against third world countries. Moreover the militarization of local police forces might pit Blacks in the military against their own community in the US.

Today Black Lives Matter as an international slogan requires international consciousness. The white nationalism of the Trump forces, including Breitbart news, must be combatted by a positive movement. If Black lives really do matter then as always in US history when programs focus on that then everyone benefits. After the Civil War, Black lives mattered enough for people to fight for free universal public education and that was the first time that white people got it as well. In the 1960’s the Black freedom movement open the way for the women’s movement, the LGBTQ movement, and many others.

The particularity of Black art in the political era of Trump is critical for the entire country. When progress is made for Black people, then everyone benefits. So now is the time for the Black Arts Movement of the 1960’s to be embraced, learned from, and be the inspiration for a movement to respond to the negation of Trump with a new affirmation, one that goes past Freedom Now and Black is Beautiful to the full transformation of society into one based on love and sharing in which the evils of the market are replaced with an ethic for new global prosperity.