I – IS THE TOTAL BLACK:
AUDRE LORDE AND RADICALIZING THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The Black Arts Movement is part of a rich African American literary tradition that attempts to use art as a tool to advocate for black liberation. This thesis explores the ideology and methodology of some of the Black Arts Movement’s most notable writers, and how their desire to continue this literary tradition caused the movement’s infamous disposition towards violence and misogyny. Furthermore this thesis explains how the poetry of Audre Lorde is an example of Black Arts writing that advances the literary tradition of black liberation without reproducing ideologies that oppress other groups. The result of such a discovery is the possibility of group identities centered around a mutual desire for human freedom as opposed to merely race.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me along the way. I thank my professors, friends, and family for providing me with insights, sounding boards, an undue amount of time, as well as the confidence I needed to persevere. Your efforts are greatly appreciated.

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Introduction

All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda, for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent. (Du Bois “Criteria of Negro Art” 103)

If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive. (Lorde *Sister Outsider* 137)

In his 1926 critical essay, “Criteria of Negro Art,” W.E.B. Du Bois explains that the creative work of black people must be, first and foremost, a political argument: an argument opposing the racist ideologies and social policies of Europe and the United States (“Criteria of Negro Art” 103). Refining his ideas from *The Souls of Black Folk*—a seminal work written two decades earlier—Du Bois proposes that the American Negro purchase humanity by way of artistic recognition. As Du Bois explains in the sixth chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, he is able to “move across the color-line” with the help of Shakespeare, Balzac, and Dumas (*The Souls of Black Folk* 67). Du Bois understood, as early as 1903, that understanding (and eventually mastering) European cultural aesthetics would be crucial for the social uplift of black Americans. Specifically, Du Bois would later claim that while “the art coming from black folk is...just as beautiful...as the art that comes from white folk...until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 104). This attempt to codify black art as an extension of black advocacy, what Du Bois shamelessly considers propaganda, is nothing less than the articulation of an oppositional poetics, that is to say, an artistic framework in which cultural products like novels, plays, and poems help a marginalized group to resist oppression.
In truth, Du Bois does not invent a new poetics as much as he fully embraces the one already in use. As Henry Louis Gates observed, “black people [have long] tried to write [themselves] out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than physical bondage” (Gates 12). Unfortunately, Du Bois could not fully escape the essentialist ideals of his era and unintentionally reproduced some of the same dogma that he tried to circumvent (Dubois Souls of Black Folk 112 -113).

Two generations later, in the mid-1960s, Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal revitalized the idea of oppositional poetics in the Black Arts Movement. Unlike Du Bois, however, Baraka and Neal did not propose that black writers use their medium to gain recognition from white authorities. Instead they used art to promote a romanticized black narrative, instill collective responsibility, and politically mobilize black people across the country. The purpose behind this ideology, grounded in the teachings of Malcolm X and Black Power advocates, was to forge a unified black community with the political consciousness to recognize covert racism, and the political power to blast overt racism out of existence. Although these social aspirations were laudable goals, they were unfortunately housed within absolutist rhetoric and Black Nationalist narratives that imposed a rigid group identity counterproductive (if not antithetical) to black liberation (Neal 30).

Consequently, the Black Arts Movement (in retrospect) can be easily derided, by critics like Cherise Pollard, as a sexist, rhetorically superficial movement that “articulated black manhood through the pen, the gun, and the penis” (Collins 173). And, as a result, the Black Arts Movement did little to progress the politics of human freedom inherent in the African American literary tradition. Even advocates of the Black Arts Movement, like
Daniel Lionel Smith, admit that “too often [Black Arts writing] is marred by the swaggering rhetoric of ethnic and gender chauvinism” (Smith 93).

Despite the poor reputation of the Black Arts Movement (which, at times, is entirely justified), I believe that the ideological heart of the movement can and should be salvaged. Specifically, I think it is possible for art to politically mobilize oppressed communities as well as subvert oppressive constructs without framing one’s poetics in essentialist terms.

The key to my assertion is derived from Erica Hunt’s 1990 article “Notes for an Oppositional Poetics.” In this article Hunt argues that the language of dominant culture functions as an extension of socio-political power because the ability to label and separate people into categories mirrors the mechanics of social control. The language of dominant culture is meant to contain, limit, and “abbreviate the human in order to fit us into structures of production”; so by accepting the labels assigned to us we legitimize the authority of the status quo (Hunt 200). Conventional poetics, therefore, can be “construed as the way [this ideology of containment is] threaded into the text” (Hunt 199).

Conversely, oppositional poetics take an “active stance against domination…cutting across class, race, and gender” (Hunt 198). According to Hunt, oppositional poetics is when the “critical focus of a text extends beyond the psychology of individual writers” and have at its core “the liberation of oppressed communities” (Hunt 203). I wish to take Hunt’s idea of oppositional poetics a step further and suggest that an active stance must also constitute the expansion of the human, or (less abstractly) that diverse experiences are threaded throughout the text (Hunt 199). In other words, a poetics that opposes the language of dominant culture subverts the impulse to contain,
categorize, or limit people to a single voice. Thus, instead of an ideology of containment, oppositional poetics represent an ideology of diversity: a diversity that mirrors the mechanics of social liberation.

This idea of liberty via diversity has several implications. Firstly, it provides a more specific understanding of oppositional poetics, allowing critics to reexamine the Black Arts Movement and hopefully come to view it as something other than a failure. Secondly, this idea of diversity gives the concept of humanity fixed perimeters. With Hunt’s framework, to be human does not simply mean to be part of a particular species, but to have the power of agency. In other words, only objects can be limited, categorized, and contained within a single voice. But a human being has the ability to define himself and can simultaneously exist as a black, German, bisexual woman without being reduced by any one category. Essentially, humanity’s sign is the “will to be” whatever we choose to be (Wright 55). Lastly, diversity demands a radical type of inclusion that provides a wedge against re-inscribing the language of dominant culture as one opposes it. While this idea may seem counter-intuitive, Erica Hunt explains below how quickly the language of opposition can reproduce the “old codes” of containment:

In communities of color...long treatment as an undifferentiated mass of others by the dominant class fosters collective identity and forms of resistance. In a sense, then, oppositional groupings, be they based on class, race, gender, or critical outlook, have traditionally been dependent, in part, on external definition by the dominant group—the perceived hostility of the dominant class shapes the bonds of opposition. And that quasi-dependent quality extends even further: we get stuck with the old codes even as we try to negate them...The simple negations that form the borders of opposition...stand as prison walls as much as they suggest shelter...constraining the new languages that must be made for resistance.... We judge then as we have been judged, sanctioning the differences that are our common property. We reiterate codes that negate our humanity by denying human differences among us. (Hunt 199-200)
Hunt’s point, as it relates to the African American experience, is that because of the ubiquity of racist violence—the horrors of the Middle Passage, the brutality of enslavement, and the terrorism following Reconstruction—black people have been conditioned to accept racial signifiers as the only meaningful way to organize communities of resistance. But to build a community solely upon the pillars of race, even if that community has oppositional intentions, reaffirms the language of dominant culture: emphasizing exclusion over inclusion and giving rise to the notion of a singular black identity. Thus, it appears that one of the enduring legacies of American racism is the creation and maintenance of blackness: a singular identity that is socially and linguistically dependent on whiteness. This philosophical dependence is what leads Hunt to suggest that black oppositional movements can “get stuck with the old codes [of containment] even as [they] try to negate them” (Hunt 199). The Black Arts Movement is not immune to this dynamic and is a prime example of how the language of opposition can reproduce the same ideology that it resists.

While Baraka and Neal ultimately desire to oppose racism (in all its forms) by advocating political unity among African Americans, their understanding of blackness is inherently exclusive and “[abbreviates] the human” in order to foster a racial revolution (Hunt 199). By denying a diverse set of black experiences to inform their work, Baraka and Neal effectively limit African Americans to one authentic voice and reproduce the language of dominant culture. Consequently, the oppositional poetics of the Black Arts Movement (as defined by Baraka and Neal) are negated because it fails to further the cause of human freedom and diversity.

But the failure of Baraka and Neal is in their methodology rather than their
motivation. Specifically, they relied on the artificial cohesion of race to forge the bonds of opposition. And these bonds “stand as prison walls as much as they suggest shelter” (Hunt 199). Yet the question remains: how can black people ever be free from the language of race, if our survival is dependent on the strength of a community founded in race?

Certainly, in moments throughout history, it seemed rational that in the face of physical harm (from southern, domestic terrorist groups like the Ku Klux Klan or government sanctioned mutilation like the Tuskegee Experiment) that the need for political unity outweighed the need for diversity. We must remember that all of our political victories, including The Civil Rights Movement (arguably the most heroic era of the African American experience), were predicated on the notion of a socially and politically unified community. Black people have inched ever closer towards equality through boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and voter registration. Only via community could we have ever survived going from cargo to niggers to men: a transformation worthy of Kafka. But, alas, our greatest strength—community—has come at the expense of our human freedom: a freedom neither from slavery nor Jim Crow, but a freedom from the very discourse (the very reductive categorization) that fostered those institutions.

In order to fully resist the language of domination we need a new “language of resistance,” a new “non-dominative basis of belonging,” a new oppositional poetics; because, in the words of Audre Lorde, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Hunt 200; *Sister Outsider* 112). I claim that such an oppositional poetics already exists and can be seen throughout the work of the black/mother/lesbian/feminist/activist/poet Audre Lorde. Through a thorough
examination of her poetry, I will demonstrate how Lorde’s expansion of blackness radicalizes the oppositional poetics of the Black Arts Movement, allowing for a more accurate and full expression of black people that opposes the language of domination while maintaining communal solidarity.
Art as a form of opposition sets African-American poetics apart from less confrontational literary aesthetics. Neo-romanticists, who follow in the footsteps of Oscar Wilde, believe art is an unsuitable medium for strong political statements, let alone political opposition, because to burden art with such responsibility sullies pristine expression with the sin of utility; art should not be a means to an end, but rather an end unto itself (Richter 476). In addition, poststructuralists, who follow in the footsteps of Roland Barthes, question the efficacy of artistic propaganda and the ability of any artist to prevent multilateral interpretations; the meaning behind a work of art is not only what the artist envisions, but also what the critic imagines (Richter 877).

For the first African American writers, however, the very act of creation carried a political charge whether their work was explicitly political or not. Furthermore, given their history of objectification (as victims of American social policy), it would be disingenuous to expect anything from African American writers other than a preoccupation with declaring their humanity. The nature of this artistic reclamation was both rhetorical and symbolic as explained by Henry Louis Gates:

Why was the creative writing of [Negroes] of such importance to the eighteenth century’s debate over slavery? [Because] writing was taken to be the visible sign of reason. Blacks were ‘reasonable’ and hence ‘men’ if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of …writing…[Hence] writing, for these slaves, was not an activity of the mind; rather, it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity… Ironically, Anglo-African writing arose as a response to allegations of its absence…Text created author; and black authors, it was hoped, would create, or recreate, the image of the race in European discourse. (Gates 8 - 11)
As Gates explains in his essay “‘Race,’ Writing, and Difference,” the very existence of ‘black writing’ threatened the idea of racial hierarchy because writing was seen as the physical sign of reason; and, in the eighteenth century, the ability to reason was characterized as the noblest of human features (Gates 8). Gates further explains that in eighteenth-century racial discourse, the lack of black writing was cited as one of the principal factors whites used to justify the subjugation of Negroes (8 - 9). Despite the fact that African Americans like Jupiter Hammon or Benjamin Banneker were published authors, the myth of the illiterate Negro persisted, because to acknowledge the literary skill of black people would call into question the validity of white supremacy, as well as undermine any institution built upon this concept—like American slavery. Therefore black writing was often dismissed (by critics like Thomas Jefferson) as nothing more than mimicry, or desperate forgeries manufactured by northern abolitionists (Wright 57).

Black writing was so contrary with American society’s basic assumptions about the capabilities of black people that nineteenth-century authors like Frederick Douglass made certain to emphasize the authorship of their work rather than remain anonymous or have their words transcribed (Gates and McKay 159). For example, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, was prefaced by William Lloyd Garrison, a notable abolitionist and journalist, to help inform the readership that this memoir was “entirely [Douglass’s] own production” (Douglass 7).

Slaves, former slaves, and free blacks would often use the public credibility of white people or traditionally white institutions to, as Gates aptly characterized, “recreate the image of the race in European discourse” (Gates 11). This type of humanity by
association can be found in the work of the eighteenth-century, African American poet Phillis Wheatley:

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (Gates and McKay 219)

In Wheatley’s short poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” the speaker rejoices in being brought from her “pagan land,” to a land where she gained knowledge of the one true god. Due to Wheatley’s unequivocal acceptance of Christian doctrine, a common facet of eighteenth-century American poetry, many have misread this poem as a passive approval, if not an outright validation, of slavery. The reason for the speaker’s joyfulness, however, is not because of the institution of slavery, but because of the promise of spiritual redemption. For if “Negroes black as Cain” can be “refined” in the eyes of God, then they must also be accepted by the laws of man. This subtle, but intensely potent argument quietly opposes the contemporary ideology that rendered black people inert objects, by suggesting that they could change and grow.

As the first published African American female poet Wheatley did her best to, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, “recreate the image of [black people] in European discourse,” but the reality of her circumstances, living as a Bostonian slave in the late 1700s probably limited her radical disposition (Gates 11; Carretta 1). These limitations become more apparent when analyzing her poetry through Hunt’s framework of oppositional poetics. While Wheatley’s poem “On Being Brought from Africa to
America” does focus on the liberation of an oppressed community, she does not combat the notion of black inferiority, but simply has this inferiority annulled by the Christian god. Beyond the inherent problem of viewing blackness as a flaw, Wheatley does not free black people from the ideology of containment and instead reduces them to a singular category of race. Thus, according to Hunt’s framework, black people are not fully human because in Wheatley’s poem Negroes do not express any type of agency. In addition, Wheatley’s god does not destroy American society’s racial hierarchy, but rather “refin[es]” it, by making “Negroes black as Cain,” as white as snow. Wheatley’s poetics, therefore, re-inscribe racist discourse. The persistent problem is the Negro’s need for credibility or humanity by association. Negroes can only be seen as more than their race with the help of an outside force. Wheatley used the Christian god; Douglass used a white lawyer; and at the beginning of the twentieth century Du Bois would use European culture to give black people the credibility they would need to be viewed as equals.

And like Wheatley, W.E.B. Du Bois’s attempt to prove that the Negro could change and grow resulted in maintaining the same ideology that deems blacks inferior: specifically a racialized reading of cultural production that ended in the privileging of Europe. The danger of such an approach is evident: how can the conquered think of himself in the terms of the conqueror and be better for it? One would imagine that the defined must cast out the definitions of the definers and forge a new path with himself as the center, as the standard.

Yet in the early twentieth century Du Bois was not interested in replacing Eurocentric definitions of humanity; he was interested in getting black people to fulfill them or proving that they already had. I do not mean to oversimplify Du Bois, however it
seems difficult to accept *The Souls of Black Folk* as anything less than an answer to, as well as a validation of the question: “How does it feel to be a Problem” (*Souls of Black Folk* 1)? Du Bois attempts to explain (and eventually to cure) black inferiority rather than dismiss the notion altogether:

[The Negro feels] the weight of his ignorance, —not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; [but] the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries [of slavery] shackled his hands and feet. (*Souls of Black Folk* 5)

Although Du Bois recognizes that the Negro’s ignorance is a consequence of slavery, he still corroborates, if only temporarily, the notion of black cultural inferiority in comparison to whites. Du Bois, however, has no interest in maligning the Negro for his faults, but rather is acknowledging the areas that must improve in order for racial progress to occur. Within this framework, cultural production and racial uplift are interconnected. By accepting this premise, Du Bois unwittingly places the burden on black people to prove they are worthy of social equality and cements European culture as the unquestioned standard. The logical byproduct of this line of reasoning is the literary philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance outlined by Du Bois in the “Criteria of Negro Art”:

We approve of [black artists] because London, Paris, and Berlin approve of [them] and not simply because [they are great artists]…Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of beauty…Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists… And then do you know what will be said? It is already saying. Just as soon as true Art emerges; just as soon as the black artist appears, someone touches the race on the shoulder and says, "He did that because he was an American, not because he was a Negro; he was born here; he was trained here; he is not a Negro -- what is a Negro anyhow? He is just human; it is the kind of thing you ought to expect (Du Bois “Criteria of Negro Art” 103 - 104).
Du Bois views art as a means to an end, and the end he is trying to achieve is nothing short of black liberation from oppression. Du Bois understands that black oppression is partially a result of fear, ignorance, and outright lies on the part of white Americans and that these vices are carried on the backs of narratives that verify racist presuppositions (Souls of Black Folk 6). Correspondingly, Du Bois is unsettled by the possibility that “the only Negro who [could] survive some centuries hence [could be] the Negro painted by white Americans” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 101). As a result, Du Bois views art as a form of propaganda meant to counter the “racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 104). Furthermore, Dubois claims that “until the art of black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 104). Unfortunately Du Bois’s usage of the word *human*, in this context, is less about proving that black people have internal agency and more about appealing to the agency of white people. Ironically, one could claim that Du Bois’s obsession with the creation of artistic propaganda is “a peculiar sensation, of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others” (Souls of Black Folk 2). Although his intention is to improve the lives of black people, by using the international acclaim that black artists’ receive as a way to disprove racist stereotypes and alter racist policies, Du Bois’s oppositional poetics is hopelessly dependent on white approval. Thus, when Du Bois concludes that the creation of art would cause white people to view the Negro as “human…the kind of thing you ought to expect,” what he is actually saying is that art would cause white people to view the Negro as a trans-racial being: or someone who has “been refin'd, and join th' angelic train” (Gates and McKay 219).
Such an approach has several flaws. Chiefly, Du Bois’s method presumes that white people (be they European or American) will honor the idea of equating artistic genius with humanity (or agency). As Michelle Wright demonstrates, through her critique of Thomas Jefferson, such a presumption underestimates how invested white people were in maintaining the social order (Wright 57). Wright thoroughly explains how the Enlightenment philosophy, that influenced founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson, “stressed man’s ability to change his world and [create] new customs, ideas, and nations” (55). This ability was one of primary differences between man and nature, “the former was viewed as dynamic and the latter static” (56). Given this paradigm, the work and lives of notable black writers like Phillis Wheatley and Benjamin Banneker should have garnered praise and respect from Jefferson as well as demonstrated unequivocally the Negro’s humanity or agency. As Wright unveils, however, Jefferson characterizes Wheatley and Banneker’s work as “mimicking human actions [and] divides the act from the intentionality” (57). Correspondingly, in Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson maintains the idea of black inhumanity (or lack of agency) and concludes that the institution of slavery is the logical result of black people’s inertia (57). If the primary author of the Declaration of Independence could not see the intentionality in the writings of Wheatley and Banneker, then the efficacy of Du Bois’s strategy and the faith he placed in the white establishment appear to be misguided at best.

Secondly, by accepting Eurocentric definitions of what the Negro is, Du Bois reiterates the language of dominant culture. It appears that Du Bois views humanity (or the will to be) as something that can be earned through good works, rather than proclaimed as a matter of fact. Consequently, art for Du Bois functions the same way
cotton did in the antebellum South: black people are valued by what they can produce. Such an ideology mirrors Erica Hunt’s critique of the language dominant culture as an oppressive discourse that “abbreviates the human in order to fit us into structures of production” (Hunt 200).

Lastly, Du Bois’s inability to allow for diversity in his conceptualization of black people hinders the liberating power behind his poetics. The underlying argument in *The Souls of Black Folk* is not that blacks are equal to whites, but that black elites are equal to white elites. In the ninth chapter in the *Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois says, “when, by prejudice, [elite Negroes like Phillis Wheatley] are classed with and treated like the lowest of their people [like Sam Hose], simply because they are Negroes, such a policy discourages thrift and intelligence” (*Souls of Black Folk* 112-113). While Du Bois believes color prejudice is the primary cause of black people’s social condition, he seems comfortable maintaining power dynamics that privilege people of his social standing. In other words, it appears that the bonds of class and education are far stronger than the precarious bonds of color. For Du Bois it is a virtual crime for color prejudice to “separate natural friends and co-workers” (110). Even his designation of the Talented Tenth is based on the premise that some Negroes “by nature and training are the aristocracy and leaders of the blacks” (110).

Although such an ideology may seem bizarre coming from Du Bois, who enjoys a reputation as a lover of human freedom, one must remember that in the early twentieth century, as an educated male, whose lineage was over a hundred years removed from servitude, with two generations of doctors, and a complexion that erred on the side of
white, Du Bois was by any measure elite, and wanted to be treated as such (Richter 565-566).

Therefore, it is easier to understand why he does not dispose with some of the more problematic ideas of European discourse such as racial essentialism, classism, and patriarchy. Unfortunately, Du Bois’s inability to purge himself of these concepts is the ultimate weakness in his oppositional poetics. Essentially, to re-invoke Erica Hunt, Du Bois is unable to shake the “old codes” and re-creates a discourse of humanity based in exclusion (Hunt 200). Although his ideology did not fully dismantle racist constructs, Du Bois’s idea of artistic propaganda would have a long legacy and inspire young black radicals who also believed that the “problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color-line” (Souls of Black Folk 9).
CHAPTER II: THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

In the late 1960s the United States was at war, not just in Vietnam where American forces had already fought and died for more than a decade to halt the growth of communism, but also domestically, in the cities of New York, Chicago, Montgomery, Selma, Jackson, and Washington D.C., where a growing black militancy was being forged by a generation of African Americans for whom the hard-won victories of the Civil Rights Movement were not fast or radical enough (Joseph 69). The simmer of an existence ripe with wanton acts of racial terrorism, political disenfranchisement, and social alienation had finally come to a boil, and Stokely Carmichael, after being imprisoned for the twenty-seventh time, would capture the frustrations of this new generation of African Americans through the slogan of “Black Power” (Joseph 2).

Black Power signified the essence of black liberation: the ability to determine and forge our own destinies through political gain. Thus, the Black Power Movement was nothing more than an attempt to create a world where African Americans could control every aspect of their lives. The ambitious scope of this movement, however, had a artistic dimension—for in order to create this brave new world (with free black people in it) black power advocates had to awaken the sleeping black masses and remind them that they were not the embodiment of cultural absence, but human beings with the power to create and to destroy.

This battle was not one that could be waged with guns or the ballot box, but required artistic propaganda. Consequently, the Black Arts Movement arose as the “spiritual sister of the Black Power Movement because one is concerned with the relationship between art and politics and the other with the art of politics” (Neal 29). The
framework for this artistic ideology can be traced back to 1964, when Malcolm X, after returning from Mecca, gave his most famous speech, at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). In this speech Malcolm X expressed how art could be used as a weapon not only to unify the black community, but also to heal the historical trauma of being reduced and categorized exclusively by race:

We must launch a cultural revolution to un-brainwash an entire people…It must begin in the community and be based on community participation. Afro-American [artists] will be free to create only when they can depend on the Afro-American community for support, and Afro-American artists must realize that they depend on the Afro-American community for inspiration…We have artists who are geniuses... but as long as the black artist has to sing and dance to please the white man, he'll be a clown…this cultural revolution will be the journey to our rediscovery of ourselves…When you have no knowledge of your history, you're just another animal; in fact, you're a Negro; something that's nothing…Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle. We must take hold of it and forge the future with the past…We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being…which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary. (X 35-67)

Malcolm X, while outlining the mission of the OAAU, embraced the idea of cultural production as a facet of the black resistance movement. Unlike the earlier trends in African American literature (epitomized by the poetics of Du Bois) where black writing would be traded for white approval, Malcolm X did not need the white establishment to approve of him. The purpose behind his oppositional poetics, therefore, was to bring black people together so they could understand this reality as well. Humanity, or the will to be whatever you want, is not something that can be earned but demanded. Malcolm X advocated a poetics of revelation and believed that black liberation could only be achieved when black Americans realized that the United States was their enemy: an
enemy that had not only denied them full citizenship, but had also destroyed their African heritage.

But the heritage that Malcolm X wanted black Americans to embrace “destroy[ed] a truth and invent[ed] a history,” a history that, in James Baldwin’s estimation, gave black people a false sense of racial superiority (Baldwin, YouTube Interview). As James Baldwin explains in his 1963 interview with Kenneth Clark, Malcolm X’s desire to advocate racial pride in black Americans, while laudable, oftentimes promotes prejudice (Baldwin, YouTube Interview). Hence the truth that was destroyed is the notion of racial equality and the history that was invented is the notion of black infallibility. Baldwin probably feared that such an ideology, unrestrained, could reproduce the same dogma it claims to resist. Despite the flaws within Malcolm X’s ideology, he championed art as a fundamental component of black resistance movements. Consequently, the cultural mission of the OAAU would be adopted by the founders of the Black Arts Movement—an adoption that would naturally follow the death of its father.

The assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, coupled with the 1960s shootings of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Fred Hampton, and Martin Luther King Jr. as well as the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, in Mississippi, planted the seeds of this cultural revolution. The killing of so many people invested in black empowerment fostered the belief of an upcoming race war in America. So in preparation for this conflict the political wings of black America were stratified accordingly: Black Power advocates would supply black people with the means to wage revolution (i.e. breakfast and bullets), while Black Arts writers would supply black people with the reasons for waging revolution (i.e. purpose).
The loss of Malcolm X directly corresponded with Leroi Jones’s (aka Amiri Baraka’s) creation of the Black Arts Repository Theater School (BARTS) in Harlem in 1965, where he encouraged playwrights to channel the crisis of the age (Joseph 5). The theatrical beginnings of the Black Arts Movement should not be surprising because the philosophy of the movement was centered on public outreach; therefore, any artistic medium that possessed the fewest socio-economic barriers to understanding (such as literacy and class) were privileged. This desire to reach all black people everywhere, not just the ones in the ivory tower (or, more precisely, especially not the ones in the ivory tower) is what led Baraka and other Black Arts writers to incorporate theatrical elements into their poetry; because whether their medium was drama or verse, the Black Arts writers performed their work like a sixteenth century morality play, with images just as poignant and visceral as the crucified Christ:

[We] will show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are victims, and that they themselves are blood brothers. And what we show must cause the blood to rush, so that pre-revolutionary temperaments will be bathed in this blood, and it will cause their deepest souls to move, and they will find themselves tensed and clenched, even ready to die, at what the soul has been taught. We will scream and cry, murder, run through the streets in agony, if it means some soul will be moved, moved to actual life understanding of what the world is, and what it ought to be. (Neal 29)

The excerpt above from Larry Neal describes the type of emotional and political response that Baraka wanted Black Arts writing to instill. Neal, a contemporary of Baraka, expected black writers to kindle the fire of racial unity by emphasizing the role of violence in black communities. It is important to note, however, that Neal did not want the bonds of black opposition to be shaped exclusively from the violence of collective victimization, but also from the violence of collective revolution (Neal 29).
The Black Arts Movement, consistent with the trend of African American literature, would use art as the site of activism. Unlike Du Bois, however, who believed that cultural production made black elites the equals of white elites, the Black Arts writers, as explained by the movement’s most influential theorist, Larry Neal, were “radically opposed to any concept of the artist that [alienated] him from his community, and [envisioned] an art that [spoke] directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America” (Neal 29). And the most pressing need for African-Americans in the mid-1960s was to be recognized as human beings with agency.

But given the unlikelihood (within the contemporary political environment) that black people could expect to gain recognition as human beings from a racist government, the writers of the Black Arts Movement urged black people “to fight…for palpable shifts in the power structure” (Collins 175). Thus the world as it ought to be was a black world, because the ideals of Malcolm X were rooted in a Black Nationalism “that stressed racial separatism, sovereignty, and revolution” (Collins 275). Although the idea of a black nation would remain merely aspirational, Black Arts writers (in the spirit of Malcolm X) attempted to bring this nation into existence by any means necessary.

The artistic means by which this Black Nationalism would be achieved would be through violent, overtly masculine rhetoric that would, in effect, erase black women from revolutionary black discourses. As Emily Bernard observes, “virtually all crises in African American culture have been historically portrayed as crises in black heterosexual male authority” (Collins 264). Bernard suggests that since slavery the physical and metaphysical degradation of black people has always been characterized as a form of feminization (such as castration, impotence, and rape), which suggests that black identity
is socially, politically, and intellectually masculine (Collins 264 -265). Consequently, elevating the status of black men elevates the status of all black people and helps to free African Americans from racist constructs.

The Black Power and Black Arts Movements were not immune to this paradigm; even the familial appellation of “spiritual sister” to describe the relationship between black arts and black power (a phrase coined by Larry Neal) is a loaded term assigning weakness and passivity to the black arts (Neal 29). As a way of counteracting the decidedly passive qualities that writing poetry is imbued with (at least as it relates to Black Nationalists) the male writers of the Black Arts Movement mirrored the physical violence of their spiritual brothers. One can see this idea demonstrated in Amiri Baraka’s signature poem entitled “Black Art”:

We want poems
like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
of the owner-jews. Black poems to
smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches
whose brains are red jelly stuck
between ’elizabeth Taylor’s toes. Stinking Whores! We want “poems that kill.”
Assassin poems, poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. (Gates and McKay 1943)

In “Black Art” Amiri Baraka reveals that black poems are not simply a collection of words, but rather a call to action. Baraka wants poems that can “beat,” “stab,” “smear,” “kill,” “shoot,” “pull,” “wrestle,” and “send tongues to Ireland” (1943). In other words, Baraka wants poems that can start a racial revolution. The utilitarian function that Baraka demands of poetry is part and parcel of the African American literary tradition: a tradition that uses art to perpetuate the cause of black liberation. Unlike Wheatley and Du Bois,
however, Baraka does not want to use art to appeal to white people, but to fight them. Thus the violent imagery of “Black Art” is meant to instill revolutionary temperaments in the victimized black masses, and foster a sense of communal solidarity. Unfortunately, this community mirrors the exclusivity of dominant culture because the revolutionary violence that holds it together is both implicitly and explicitly gendered.

In “Black Art” violent rhetoric is oftentimes reserved to denounce women, which suggests that the revolutionary community Baraka invokes is both exclusively black and masculine. Baraka is using black poems to “smear on girdlemama mulatto bitches” and shame “stinking whores” (1943). Despite the fact that these particular lines are more derogatory than physically violent, the use of these gendered epithets corresponds to the violence displayed toward women throughout the poem. In the first five lines of “Black Art” Baraka claims that “poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step. Or black ladies dying / of men leaving nickel hearts / beating them down” (1943). While these lines are primarily meant to emphasize how poetry should have a concrete social function like “teeth or trees or lemons,” the fact that Baraka chose to include an image of black women being beaten to death as a functional example of black art implies that gendered violence is either an acceptable or necessary part of Black Arts poetry (and the revolution as a whole). Towards the end of “Black Art” Baraka’s violent rhetoric becomes much more explicit as he describes how poems should “[crack] steel knuckles in a jewlady's mouth” (1943).

What is noteworthy in each of these examples is that the women in question are racialized as either mulatto, black, or Jewish which suggests that it is their gender rather than their race that is truly threatening to the black community. Whether deliberately or
inadvertently, Baraka devalues women in “Black Art” and by extension devalues their role in the revolution. The last lines of the first stanza bolster this concept because Baraka defines black people as either “the sons of lovers” or “the sons of warriors” (1943). The exclusivity of “sons” not only underscores male primacy, but the functional distinction between “lovers” and “warriors” implies a gendered hierarchy as well. For if you believe a race war is imminent, what is a “lover” good for other than making more “warriors.” In the words of Michelle Wright such a poetics “exclude[s] women from anything but the most superficial consideration …[casting them as] mothers and lovers…essentially making black women passive or invisible” (Wright 138).

According to Cherise Pollard, in “Sexual Subversions, Political Inversions,” black arts poetry often “articulated black manhood through the pen, the gun, the penis, and the microphone” (Collins 173). These phallic symbols were meant to symbolize the “black warrior’s revolutionary power” because within the Black Arts Movement powerlessness was associated with femininity and homosexuality (Collins 176). Male violence therefore became the dominant symbol in the writing of the Black Arts Movement. This normalization of black male violence caused many black women in the Black Arts Movement to experience a form of “Dubiosian two-ness: not between race and nation, but race and gender” (Collins 179). For if the purpose of poetry is to help foster a black revolution, but this revolution is described in misogynistic terms, how do black women fit into the oppositional poetics of the Black Arts Movement?

The problems of black women, however, were dismissed as secondary to collective black liberation, a continual theme in oppressed groups that only seem capable of having one revolution at a time. Although female poets, such as Sonia Sanchez and
Nikki Giovanni, were aware of the Black Arts Movement’s sexist pronouncements, and through their work attempted to criticize the violent use of male power, they still tacitly accepted the most problematic aspect of the Black Arts Movement—the black aesthetic (De Veaux 92).

The literary prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement required a radical break from all things white. Thus the *black aesthetic* (a term coined by Larry Neal) was, more or less, an artistic rubric (similar to Du Bois’s notion of propaganda) that demanded that the artist emphasize the *blackness* of black art. This concept is described by Larry Neal below:

> The motive behind the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours, or the white oppressors”? ...National and international affairs [have made it clear]…that the question of human survival is at the core of contemporary experience...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 [BAM] is an ethical movement. Ethical, that is, from the viewpoint of the oppressed. (Neal 30)

In the attempt to free black people from racism, the black aesthetic reproduces some of the same constructs. The black aesthetic is not about liberation but annihilation. It represents a poetics of destruction, seeking to obliterate the ambiguous white thing in hopes of supplanting rather than dismantling the philosophical power of race. Thus, I would argue, the black aesthetic limits rather than expands human freedom.

Similar to Du Bois, Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal create an oppositional poetics based in exclusion. Baraka’s claim that those black people “who are Mozart freaks or Rolling Stones, or hypnotized by Joyce or Hemingway or Frank Sinatra are representatives…of white culture and can never therefore signify black power,” is a
perfect example of how the black aesthetic is an artistic rubric that is designed to privilege some black people over others (Collins 258).

In effect, the black aesthetic reproduces the language of dominant culture because blackness is viewed as a fixed thing, grounded in biological, national, and cultural platitudes that contain, limit, and “abbreviate the human in order to fit us into structures of production” (Hunt 200). The failure of the oppositional poetics of the Black Arts Movement, therefore, can be summed up by the inability to comprehend diversity, and conceive of multiple black aesthetics rather than one. In addition, the movement’s dependency on the essential characteristics of race continues the cycle of oppression, by characterizing all other forms of discrimination as trivial in comparison to the epic struggle between black and white.

Yet despite these problems, I believe that the ideological heart of the Black Arts Movement can be salvaged. While Baraka’s sexist rhetoric and Larry Neal’s preoccupation with the black aesthetic are counterproductive to diversity, one should not throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. Rather than completely discard the ideology of the Black Arts, I suggest that one simply reinterpret what is already there. This reinterpretation does not require one to be intellectually dishonest and turn a blind eye to the Black Arts Movement’s excesses, but merely to widen his or her gaze beyond the usual suspects.

Too often, the work of Audre Lorde is categorized as belonging exclusively to either feminist or lesbian critical traditions, which in effect dismisses her contributions to the Black Arts Movement or reduces her influence to marginal significance (Hussain 64-65). The critical and literary work of Audre Lorde cannot be reduced to a singular
perspective and any attempt to do so fundamentally alters the spirit of her theories and art. Rather than mirroring this error and exclusively categorizing Lorde as only part of the African-American critical tradition, I intend to embrace the intersectionality of her work and show how it enriches and diversifies the Black Arts Movement.

In addition, given that the chronological parameters of the Black Arts Movement are generally considered to be between 1965 and 1975, one could argue that the critical work of Audre Lorde is far too modern to be in poetic conversation with the work of Larry Neal or Amiri Baraka (Collins 173). While it is true that the majority of Lorde’s influential essays and speeches are products of the 1980s, the framework of her later ideology can be seen in her poetry of the mid 1960s and 70s. Thus her work is both a critique and a progression of Black Arts ideology that must be given its due attention.

Furthermore, beyond providing the Black Arts Movement with an extra layer of contextualization, Lorde’s work also attempts to answer the question that I posed at the beginning of this investigation: how can black people ever be free from the confines of race, if our survival is dependent on the strength of a community founded in race?

According to the work of Audre Lorde the answer to this question is to fundamentally change the basis of belonging, and forge communities in diversity rather than uniformity. Such an approach requires a complete re-conceptualization of human differences because, as Lorde observed, “we have no positive language for difference” (I Am Your Sister 202). By understanding variation as a bridge rather than as a barrier, Lorde creates an oppositional poetics that maintains the political strength of a community without sacrificing diversity; a poetics that allows one to fight oppression without
oppressing Others; a poetics that affirms the worth of all those who exist outside of the “mythical norm” (*Sister Outsider* 116).
CHAPTER III: AUDRE LORDE AND A POETICS OF DIFFERENCE

As a black / mother / lesbian / feminist / socialist / activist / poet in the 1960s, “there was usually some part of [Audre Lorde] guaranteed to offend [someone’s] comfortable prejudices” (De Veaux 64). Her refusal to be reduced by any one of her many (and sometimes contradictory) identities made her a strange contemporary of the Black Arts writers. While Amiri Baraka divorced his white wife in 1965 to solidify his Black Nationalist credentials, Audre Lorde was not only married to a white man, but a bisexual white man to boot (Axelrod 279; De Veaux 85). Lorde’s tendency of inhabiting a space that put her at odds with societal expectations would be a continuous theme throughout her life and her work.

Although it would be relatively easy to paint Lorde as a wholesale contrarian, her relationship to the Black Arts Movement was not solely based in opposition. During the Black Arts era Audre Lorde published eight books with Broadside Press, a press founded in 1965 that primarily published Black Arts writers such as Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Nikki Giovanni (De Veaux 93). In addition, Lorde accepted several literary conventions of the Black Arts Movement. Specifically, she used art to encourage social opposition to both racist ideologies and racist institutions.

Where Lorde departed from the mission of the Black Arts Movement, however, was in her desire to combat more than merely racism. Lorde recognized that she had several sources of oppression and that her gender, sexuality, and class made her just as vulnerable to prejudice as her race did. Lorde characterized this connection between racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia as the “dehumanization of difference” a process in which human difference—a term that Lorde liberally understood as either a
genetically or socially constructed quality—is used to separate people because of a perceived inferiority (I Am Your Sister 202). Consequently, Audre Lorde’s oppositional poetics begin as an attempt to conceive of difference in a positive light, a point she crystallizes in her famous address at Hunter College:

It is within our differences that we are both most powerful and most vulnerable…[because] unclaimed, our differences are used against us in the service of separation and confusion, for we view them only in opposition to each other, dominant/subordinate, good/bad, superior/inferior. And of course, so long as the existence of human differences means one must be inferior, the recognition of those differences will be fraught with guilt and danger. (I Am Your Sister 201-202)

What Lorde reveals in the passage above is the groundwork for her re-conceptualization of difference. She fundamentally rejects the binary framework that often characterizes the relationship between human differences; a framework based in value judgments, and predicated on exclusion. When one applies Lorde’s ideology of difference to the concept of race, her point becomes less obscure. Since whiteness is an identity that has been historically defined by what it is not, the creation of an Other is fundamental to identity formation. Racial difference, therefore, develops Manichean characteristics: a signifier of either racial superiority or racial inferiority.

In order to prevent this dehumanization of difference, Lorde suggests that we must reclaim our differences and define them in ways that expand rather than limit us. Essentially then, one’s difference is the site of creation: a place where a source of shame can transform into a source of pride. Lorde’s poem, “Coal,” is one of the best examples of how she expands racial difference by challenging the rigid notions of blackness advocated by Baraka and Neal:

I
Is the total black, being spoken
From the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open.
How a diamond comes into a knot of flame
How a sound comes into a word, coloured
By who pays what for speaking. (The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde 6)

In “Coal” the essence of Audre Lorde’s poetic style is revealed in both content and syntax. Rhetorically, Lorde is attempting to re-conceptualize blackness, as it relates to the ideology of Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, by subverting the racial essentialism of the black aesthetic and the misogynistic disposition of “Black Art.” This re-conceptualization is accomplished by associating blackness with the power to create rather than to destroy.

The speaker in this poem implicitly compares herself to coal, which typically has a negative racial connotation because to be black as coal is to be exceptionally dark, putting the speaker in conflict with Eurocentric aesthetics. As the “darkest daughter of a white-looking black woman who made it known that ‘you [shouldn’t] trust anybody whose face is black, because their heart is black,’” Lorde was fully aware of how stigmatized blackness was as a human difference both inside and outside of the African American community (De Veaux 18-19). Yet the speaker in “Coal” does not express shame or anger at the comparison, but hope. There is hope because coal, and the racial difference it signifies, is not a fixed thing, but capable of evolving. In the most basic sense coal has the potential to transform into a diamond. This symbolic mutability, however, has less to do with actual skin color than with the idea of blackness itself. While Baraka primarily describes black people on the physical plane, demonstrated by his use of “lovers,” “warriors,” and “sons” in his poem “Black Art,” Lorde describes black people on the metaphysical plane as “being spoken from the earth’s inside” (Collected Poems 6). This spiritual understanding of blackness lacks a national, cultural, or
phenotypical essence, putting Lorde in direct conflict with one of the theoretical premises of the Black Arts Movement—the black aesthetic.

The black aesthetic is based in racial essentialism seeking above all to “destroy the white thing” (Neal 30). For Lorde, however, the enemy is not the white thing, but racial essentialism itself. As demonstrated by the traditionally negative racial connotation of coal, to exclusively rely on racial difference as the basis of individual identity or communal solidarity is to passively accept the inherent limitation of an external definition: a definition rooted in racist histories. Although the black aesthetic is an attempt to redefine blackness positively, “when self-definition is [founded] in limitation rather than expansion, no true face can emerge” (I Am Your Sister 157). Lorde’s penchant for referring to as many of her identities as possible is indicative of this desire to continually expand beyond her limiting social categories. This idea of expansion is the method by which Lorde threaded diversity throughout her life: a method built upon the idea of creation, not destruction.

What truly separates “Coal” from Baraka’s “Black Art,” however, is its subtlety. “Coal” does not scream at the reader with pedantic notions of black superiority, or rely on berating the white oppressor, or attempt to masculinize revolution by “kill[ing], shoot[ing] guns, or wrestl[ing] cops into alleyways” (Gates and McKay 1943). Instead Lorde reminds the reader of the truth: that coal is a fuel or, less abstractly, that your racial difference is a source of power. This power is not the ability to destroy the oppressor, but the power to expand yourself. Lorde hints at this notion in the first two lines of the poem: “I / Is the total black” (Collected Poems 6).
The use of “I” (the first person singular subject) with “is” (the third person singular verb) is more than merely a break in subject-verb agreement. According to Michelle Wright, since Lorde wrote almost exclusively in Standard English, one cannot dismiss this poetic device as a stylistic attempt to sound black or “conform to the slam style” (Wright 162). I propose that this I-is construction relates to the idea of expansion. I claim that an ever-expanding definition of oneself, free from binary hindrances and social constructs, is symbolized by Lorde’s rejection of non-standard grammatical syntax. According to Margaret Morris this “decidedly Modernist style was purposely elusive and fragmented in order to problematize every comfortable assumption generated by essentialism” (Morris 100). This point becomes even more persuasive when one examines the spacing of this I-is construction.

Since the “I” occupies a line by itself, and is immediately followed by the phrase “is the total black,” Lorde physically distances racial categorization from the speaker. In addition, the use of “is” rather than the grammatically correct “am” further exacerbates this distance. But more important than the conceptual distance between the speaker and her race is the actual space (on the page) that this distance creates. Specifically, the empty space after the “I” suggests that the speaker is more than simply the aggregate of her racial features. This space suggests infinite possibilities and symbolizes a diverse way of self-identifying that is not limited to a single voice. If one examines the use of this space in conjunction with Lorde’s term “total black,” then a new understanding of blackness emerges: a blackness without limits.

Semantically, to say I am black, is to be categorized and contained within the historical reference of race. But when the speaker identifies as the “total black” that
singular historical reference is problematized and expanded because the “total black” is not a reductive category inherited from slaveholders. The “total black” is a primal, spiritual, all-inclusive association without a perceivable limit, or in other words the total black is “spoken from the earth’s inside.” While Baraka’s understanding of blackness is narrow and signified by sameness, Lorde’s understanding of blackness is open to diversity and “there are many kinds of open.” Thus, in “Coal” Lorde effectively subverts the violent misogyny of “Black Art,” the racial essentialism of the black aesthetic, and the ideology of containment by expanding the concept of blackness.

Race, however, no matter how much it is expanded, is not sufficient to fully express Lorde’s identity. Lorde’s humanity, “her will to be,” demanded the full recognition of her gender (Wright 55). In her poem “Black Unicorn” Lorde continues to subvert the ideology of containment by directly challenging Amiri Baraka’s sexist construction of black people. While Baraka privileges male power in “Black Art,” Lorde diversifies the black experience by making black women the central focus in “Black Unicorn”:

The black unicorn is greedy.  
The black unicorn is impatient.  
The black unicorn was mistaken  
for a shadow or symbol  
and taken  
through a cold country  
where mist painted mockeries  
of my fury.  
It is not on her lap where the horn rests  
but deep in her moonpit growing.  
The black unicorn is restless  
the black unicorn is unrelenting  
the black unicorn is not free. (Collected Poems 233).
Similar to “Coal” Lorde once again demonstrates her poetic subtly and mastery of conceit; however, unlike the image of coal, the black unicorn does not represent the mutability of blackness but is a placeholder for black women. With a “horn” growing from “deep in her moonpit” rather than in “her lap,” the speaker explicitly genders the black unicorn as female. In conjunction with this gendering, Lorde alludes to elements of the African-American experience when characterizing the black unicorn. For example, the idea of a black body being “taken / through a cold country / where mist painted mockeries / of…fury” evokes the horrors of the Middle Passage. The history of being kidnapped from one’s home and taken to an alien country, where even the climate comes to represent all that you have lost, is the same history that has shaped (and continues to shape) the African American literary tradition. The combination of these gendered and racial signifiers, suggests that the black unicorn functions as a poetic symbol for African American women.

But the “Black Unicorn” is less about the brutality of African American history than it is about one’s emotional reaction to that brutality. Lorde’s continual use of emotive language throughout the poem helps create a feeling of unease and anger. These feelings are signified by words such as “fury” and are accentuated by the strategic use of slant rhyme and alliteration. Collectively, Lorde describes the black unicorn as: “greedy,” “impatient,” “mistaken,” “a shadow or symbol,” “taken,” “cold country,” “restless,” “growing,” and “unrelenting.” The slant rhyme of the a sound with the words “impatient,” “mistaken,” and “taken,” the repetition of the ing sound with the words “growing” and “unrelenting,” the alliteration of the c sound with the words “cold country,” and the repetition of the s sound with the words “shadow or symbol” and
“restless” gives this poem a kind of momentum which suggests that all of these competing emotions cannot and will not be contained. The rage and agitation expressed through the form and function of this poem begs the reader to ask: Why is the black unicorn so restless? Lorde answers this implied question at the very end of the poem: “[because] the black unicorn is not free.”

The last line of the “Black Unicorn” is of particular importance because freedom is the only attribute assigned to the black unicorn that is negated. Throughout the poem the speaker tells us that the black unicorn is greedy, is impatient, is mistaken, is restless, and is unrelenting. In every case these traits are explicitly affirmed, while freedom is the only trait that is explicitly denied. The significance of freedom’s negation lies in the fact that despite all the words used to describe the black unicorn, its freedom to be whatever it wants to be is the most important, and the most at risk. The primacy of freedom is the central idea at play in the “Black Unicorn” and the primary way Lorde critiques the poetics of the Black Arts Movement because the lack of freedom does not simply allude to the crime of slavery, but also to the crime of patriarchy.

According to Cherise Pollard, Black Arts poetry often used phallic symbols to “idealize black warrior’s revolutionary power” because within the Black Arts Movement powerlessness was associated with femininity and homosexuality (Collins 173 176). Consequently, Lorde’s gendering of the black unicorn cannot be overstated because Black Nationalism, a fundamental tenet of the Black Arts Movement, is dependent on a male-centered perspective. Men fight revolutions; men build nations; thus blackness must be conceptually masculine. By expanding blackness to include black women in “Black
Unicorn,” Lorde rejects the idea that femininity connotes powerlessness and diversifies the understanding of the black revolutionary.

This diverse portrayal stands in stark contrast with Baraka’s portrayal of women in “Black Art,” where black women are passively the victims, the mothers, or the lovers of male warriors. In “Black Art” Baraka repeatedly characterizes blackness in masculine terms, either by outright male gendering or through violence that symbolizes male power. Such an act suggests that the fight against racism is an exclusively masculine struggle. Not only does Baraka use violence to symbolize male dominance in “Black Art,” but women are the primary victims of this violence. As a result, Baraka effectively uses the female body as an unwitting foil. Black men are made powerful by making black women powerless. Essentially, Baraka’s attempt at oppositional poetics fails because his understanding of revolution relies on a retaliatory form of masculinity. In the words of Erica Hunt, “we get stuck with the old codes even as we try to negate them” (Hunt 199).

However if one reads Lorde’s “Black Unicorn” (first published in 1978) as a literary response to Baraka’s “Black Art” (first published in 1966), then the spirit of Baraka’s poetics can be salvaged. It is important to remember that Baraka’s (and other Black Arts writers’) preoccupation with violence was a result of his desire to instill black people with political agency, counter the discourse of absence surrounding black people, and to meet physical violence with metaphorical violence. Lorde is attempting to do the same thing. While Amiri Baraka outwardly describes what he thinks black art should do (in comparison to white art), Lorde relies on a much more subtle literary vehicle: the idea of the unicorn itself.
A unicorn is a mythical animal traditionally pictured as a horse with a single horn. Beyond being understood as exceedingly rare, a traditional unicorn is always pictured as white in color and imbued with mystical yet (always) positive characteristics because a unicorn is special—different—from all the other horses. Ironically enough, the idea of the unicorn is similar to the idea of whiteness itself: an imaginary construct whose difference connotes beauty, and whose majesty comes at the expense of Others. Given that Lorde rejects the use of difference to perpetuate hierarchy, she attempts to critique the unicorn’s apparent stranglehold on beauty by altering its appearance. Thus, Lorde’s unicorn is a “black unicorn with a horn growing deep in her moonpit.” But rather than simply offering a racial or gendered construction of the unicorn, Lorde goes a step further by offering an understated yet powerful analogy. The black unicorn, like black people and women, is used as a foil to help glorify some mythical norm. The traditional unicorn stands on the shoulders of the black unicorn, white people stand on the shoulders of black people, and men stand on the shoulders of women. In masterful fashion, Lorde once again argues that the real problem is not merely racism, but the inability to comprehend diversity without hierarchy.

In addition, unlike Baraka, Lorde does not use violence to fight her battle against the mythical norm. The revolutionary dimension of Lorde’s “Black Unicorn” is not the destruction of the white thing or the male thing for that matter. Instead Lorde counters absence with presence by focusing exclusively on the black unicorn. Her feelings are given primacy, her pain is expressed, and her un-freedom is qualified. The black unicorn does not need a foil to be powerful; it simply needs radical presence. By making the central figure in “Black Unicorn” female Lorde challenges both of Baraka’s tacit
presuppositions: firstly, that racism is the singular threat facing black people and, secondly, that male violence is the only appropriate way to combat this threat. Essentially, Lorde suggests, through the gendering of the black unicorn, that privileging race over gender “paint[s] mockeries of [female] fury” (Collected Poems 233).

What further distinguishes “Black Unicorn” from the ideology of Baraka and Neal is that the speaker in “Black Unicorn” evokes a feeling that is not easily categorized as either good or bad, revolutionary or counterrevolutionary. The description of the black unicorn is not one dimensional, but multifaceted. The black unicorn is “greedy,” “impatient,” “restless,” and “unrelenting” (Collected Poems 233). Michelle Wright posits that because Lorde “does not ideally construct the unicorn,” her poem complicates the narrow stereotypes of the long-suffering narrative of the black nation (Wright 164). The qualities of the black unicorn (which are either pejorative or ambiguous) undermine Larry Neal’s and Amiri Baraka’s desire to romanticize black people by constructing them as either victims or victors, and allows for black women to be viewed as complete human beings. For Lorde, such complexities are the hallmarks of humanity: representing expansion rather than limitation and signifying the desire to re-create oneself rather than destroy Others. Essentially, in the “Black Unicorn” Lorde diversifies revolutionary black identity.

Although Lorde’s uncompromising desire for racial and gender diversity is well represented by “Coal” and “Black Unicorn,” any detailed analysis about Lorde’s poetics would be incomplete without a poem that explores sexual diversity. Critiquing the Black Arts Movement’s often heterosexist disposition, “Love Poem” exalts a lesbian love that demands radical inclusion. In “Love Poem” Lorde once again subverts the ideology of
containment, by embracing a sexual identity that cannot be readily defined:

    Speak earth and bless me with what is richest
    make sky flow honey out of my hips
    rigid mountains
    spread over a valley
    carved out by the mouth of rain.

    And I knew when I entered her I was
    high wind in her forests hollow
    fingers whispering sound
    honey flowed
    from the split cup
    impaled on a lance of tongues
    on the tips of her breasts on her navel
    and my breath
    howling into her entrances
    through lungs of pain. (Collected Poems 127).

As in “Coal” and “Black Unicorn” Lorde’s “Love Poem” is buoyed by an abundance of natural imagery, but unlike the image of coal or the mythical black unicorn Lorde utilizes pastoral images in “Love Poem” to glorify sex in all its forms. Lorde describes the lovers’ bodies and their sexual pleasure with words like “earth,” “honey,” “mountains,” “valleys,” “rain,” and “forests.” Such primordial language, in juxtaposition to bodily descriptors like “hips,” “mouth,” “fingers,” “tongues,” and “breasts,” suggests that the love portrayed is as natural as nature itself. Just as there is diversity in the world (such as peaks and valleys) so there is also diversity in human sexuality. Furthermore the speaker in the poem directly addresses the “earth” which is reminiscent of Lorde’s poem “Coal” and how she views the earth as the spiritual mother of all things: blackness as well as sex. But the sex that Lorde describes is not simply any kind of sex, it is lesbian sex.

    While a queer reading of “Love Poem” may appear unwarranted since the speaker in this poem is not explicitly gendered, all of the sexual scenes described exclusively symbolize and emphasize the female body. The fact that “honey flows out of hips,” that
“valleys [are] carved out by [a] mouth,” that “fingers enter her to make honey flow,” that a “split cup is impaled on [a] tongue,” and that “breath [is being] howled into entrances” suggests that the love portrayed is a love of women and of the feminine form—specifically female genitalia. The body parts, bodily functions, and sexual acts alluded to in “Love Poem” are unapologetically sexual and unapologetically female-centered. The absence of the male form in such a poem suggests (at the very least) that the love described does not involve the male body.

Furthermore the absence of a definitive male or female voice accentuates (rather than diminishes) Lorde’s idea of sexual diversity. Rather than simply relying on a strictly heterosexual or homosexual construction of the lovers, Lorde leaves the relationship open. Lorde does not restrict sexuality by defining its terms or limits—there are many kinds of love (just like there are many kinds of open). Essentially, Lorde avoids getting stuck in the old codes by trying to negate them. She views a fixed heterosexual construction of the lovers just as limiting as a strict lesbian construction of the lovers. This rhetorical ambiguity denies the reader the solid ground to make value judgments and results in a sexual identity that is neither fully homosexual nor heterosexual; neither fully masculine nor feminine. Lorde admits in her autobiography that she “always wanted to be both man and woman…to share valleys and mountains upon [her] body…to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time” (Zami: A New Spelling of My Name Prologue). The observable facts of Lorde’s personal life also “reveal a sexual personality that was [both] lesbian and bisexual” (De Veaux 60).

It is this type of multifaceted sexuality that is being described in “Love Poem.” Such a fluid identity formation is what allows Lorde to subvert the ideology of
containment. Not simply because these complex (and sometimes contradictory) labels are
closer to Lorde’s personal truth, but also because its very specificity, its undeniable
difference, guards against the metaphysical trauma of limitation and allows one to
circumvent the prison of binary oppositions (such as straight versus gay, white versus
black, or good versus bad). Despite the openness that Lorde reveals this poem does not
advocate diversity via a blind post-racial/post-sexual humanism that minimizes difference
for the sake of unity. This is diversity via radical inclusion. “Love Poem” cannot be
straightened to appeal to a heterosexual disposition. Moreover “Love Poem” does not
perpetuate the dehumanization of difference by claiming that homosexual love is
somehow superior to heterosexual love. They are simply equals “acknowledged and
different” (Sister Outsider 111).

A work such as “Love Poem” uproots the comfortable heterosexism of the Black
Arts Movement. As I have previously stated, given the violent history of the African
American experience it is impossible to separate the political realities of black authors
from their art. Consequently Audre Lorde, following in the footsteps of the African
American literary tradition, was well aware that “poetry is not a luxury,” but a means of
survival (I Am Your Sister 185). And within the Black Arts subculture of the 1960s,
survival was made all the more difficult for those who were not heterosexual. More than
any other single piece, “Love Poem” establishes Lorde’s public political persona as a
lesbian: a persona that was in direct conflict with the sexual prescriptions of Black
Nationalism and most of her Black Arts contemporaries.

The heterosexism and homophobia of the Black Arts Movement has been
thoroughly investigated by several critics. According to Charles Nero homosexuals were
often objects of ridicule in the Black Power Movement because black manhood became a metaphor for black militancy (Nero 412). As a result “images of pathetic homosexuals were often used to show what black manhood was not or to what it could degenerate” (Nero 412). While Nero is exclusively describing the treatment of gay men in the Black Power Movement, this concept of equating black male strength with sexual dominance is part of the ideological heritage of the Black Arts Movement.

According to James Smethurst, while the prejudices of the Black Arts Movement were certainly not atypical given the rampant heterosexism present in 1960s American culture, “it is fair to say that a normative heterosexual vision of the African American community was a powerful current in Black Arts ideology” (Smethurst 87). Smethurst goes on to claim that the “cultural fall of a prehistoric Africa [was understood] as a loss of masculinity. Consequently, “the figure of the gay male as a sign of cultural decay and the use of the epithet ‘faggot’ as a free-floating slur became common in the work of quite a few Black Arts activists” (Smethurst 87 – 88).

Yet it is important to note that Smethurst also claims that while heterosexism and homophobia represented a powerful strain of the Black Arts Movement, it did not represent the entire movement. Black Arts writers like Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Gwendolyn Brooks “often did contest expressions of misogyny and male supremacy within the movement from the inside” (Smethurst 85). Consequently, Smethurst warns against using Baraka’s poem “Black Art” as a placeholder for all Black Arts writing (Smethurst 85 – 86). Despite this fact, Baraka’s “Black Art” does seem to accurately express the underlying ideology of the movement, if not the prevailing attitudes of most
Black Arts writers, because even Nikki Giovanni “generally operated within a frame of normative heterosexuality” (Smethurst 88).

It seems clear from the work of Nero, Smethurst, and others that the Black Arts Movement (as well as American society at large) viewed sexual diversity as an existential threat. Whether the basis of this threat was political or ideological is unclear. Perhaps black nationalists feared that any support for homosexuality would endanger black people’s already precarious support system and create an insurmountable two-front war with white America, where black oppositional groups would be increasingly isolated. Maybe lesbianism undermined the implied patriarchy of Black Nationalism because black progress was equated with black male progress. There is even the possibility that the desire for an idyllic black nation politicized sexual reproduction to such an extent that black people (especially black women) were expected to produce more warriors for the revolution. Therefore, any black person who misused his or her body in pursuit of homosexual relationships could have been considered counter-revolutionary. Whatever the reason for homosexual marginalization, one can fairly surmise that the existence of black homosexuals both complicated black identity and threatened male privilege in black opposition movements. This heterosexist strain of Black Nationalism was so prevalent in the Black Arts Movement that Lorde’s “Love Poem” was nearly denied its very publication.

The stalled publication of “Love Poem” with the Broadside Press is a prime example of how sexual diversity was marginalized within the Black Arts Movement (De Veaux 141). Dudley Randall, the publisher of Broadside Press, was so concerned about the raw lesbian sexuality of “Love Poem” and how his black readers would react that he
asked Lorde to exclude the poem from her third book of poetry, The Land Where Other People Live in 1973 (De Veaux 131). The inherent power dynamic between poet and publisher caused Lorde to begrudgingly acquiesce to Randall’s request. Although Randall appreciated Lorde’s “fresh language and lack of [rhetorical] stridency,” most of “the ‘Broadside Press poets’ that Randall promoted wrote within a prescribed blackness, which was nationalist and heterosexual” (De Veaux 99, 129). Consequently, Randall was not prepared to risk financial and political ruin by publishing “a poet whose work showed signs of lesbian engagement” (De Veaux 130). Lorde, however, would not passively sit by and allow her lesbianism to silence her. In 1973 Lorde read “Love Poem” aloud during a coffee shop reading and publicly revealed her love for women (De Veaux 139). Given that the proverbial cat was now out of the bag, Randall eventually allowed “Love Poem” to be published in Lorde’s fourth book of poetry, New York Head Shop and Museum, in 1974 (De Veaux 141).

Beyond its immediate political significance for lesbians, “Love Poem” continues Lorde’s trend of radicalizing the oppositional poetics of the Black Arts Movement by expanding black identity in an effort to be truly free. Essentially, by blurring the rigid lines of human sexuality, “Love Poem” embodies Lorde’s poetics of difference: a poetics where identity extends beyond race, gender, or sexuality; beyond nationality; beyond the stigma of the margins, and fulfills the first will of the slave: the “will to be” whatever he wanted (Wright 55).

Human agency, or the “will to be,” is the ultimate power described in Lorde’s poetry (55). This sign of humanity posits that individuals have the ability and the right to decide who and what they are. This type of identity formation is repeatedly demonstrated
in “Coal,” “Black Unicorn,” and “Love Poem.” The human agency that allows Lorde to re-conceptualize blackness, femininity, and sexuality suggests that all people have the inherent creative power to expand the notion of themselves beyond the limits of their assigned categories. Essentially, Lorde’s work argues for liberty via diversity.

Contrastingly, the Black Arts Movement’s obsessive longing for sameness reproduces the ideology of containment. Ever preoccupied with the destruction of the white thing, the Black Arts Movement freezes blackness within a violent binary struggle, a struggle Lorde believed was detrimental to liberation. In her poem “Power” Audre Lorde explores this violent struggle further and explains how the revolution cannot be won with a poetics of destruction.

“Power” provides a scathing critique of Black Arts ideology by unveiling the ugly consequences of advocating violent revolution. Similar to the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement was rooted in the teachings of Malcolm X and poetically symbolized this connection through violent rhetoric. The purpose behind this rhetoric was to forge communal solidarity by emphasizing black victimhood and romanticizing revolution. In this regard the distinction between the Black Arts writers and Audre Lorde could not have been greater. Whereas Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal saw poetry as the means to destroy the white thing, Lorde saw poetry as something inherently creative because “true poetry…births thought as dreams birth concepts, as feeling births ideas, as knowledge births understanding” (I Am Your Sister 185). Lorde alludes to these divergent visions in the first stanza of “Power” through the juxtaposition of poetry and rhetoric:

The difference between poetry and rhetoric is being ready to kill
Poetry represents an almost religious form of sacrifice in which one must be “ready to kill [herself], instead of [her] children” (Collected Poems 215). While the image that Lorde paints is ominous, this poem is less a promotion of suicide than it is a re-conceptualization of black power. Rather than simply inverting traditional power dynamics (dynamics that are symbolized by the power to destroy), Lorde re-conceives of black power as something that produces an emotional, conceptual, or intellectual legacy. Contrastingly, any form of expression that destroys a legacy is deemed rhetoric. The rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement unwittingly leaves black people vulnerable to the judgments of their oppressors. This conflict between creative and destructive forces is a conceit that Lorde maintains throughout the entire poem and helps to clarify the poem’s narrative elements which begin in the third stanza:

A policeman who shot down a ten year old in Queens stood over the boy with his cop shoes in childish blood and a voice said “Die you little motherfucker” and there are tapes to prove it. (Collected Poems 215)

This mostly narrative poem describes a black woman who (along with 11 white male jurors) frees an openly racist police officer responsible for the death of a ten-year-old black boy. Consistent with the ideology of the Black Arts Movement, “Power” addresses the ubiquity of American racism by dramatizing a contemporary tragedy. Specifically, Lorde alludes to the controversial 1973 case where Thomas Shea, a white police officer, killed Clifford Oliver, a ten-year-old black boy (Blau 84). The racial tension created by this case only intensified after Shea was acquitted of murdering Clifford, despite the fact that a police walkie-talkie recorded Shea cursing Oliver upon his death (Blau 84).
Although Lorde is most likely invoking this terrible event in “Power” to highlight the banality of white racist violence, this poem also questions how black people should respond to such violence. The speaker, noticeably upset about this verdict, accuses the black juror of being deceived “by four centuries of white male approval / until she let go / [of] the first real power she ever had” (Collected Poems 215). What the speaker finds just as disturbing as the senselessness of racist violence is the cowardice displayed by the black juror’s lack of action. If the juror had killed herself instead of her children, that is to say, if she had sacrificed her status and shouldered the burden of her convictions rather than cower beneath the approval of white men, then she could have provided justice for the ten-year-old victim; and helped protect the physical legacy of black people.

The critical moment in this poem occurs once the speaker has a philosophical revelation. Initially, after the speaker describes the bloody scene in the second stanza, the reader is left with the impression that the only way to successfully combat the violence of American racism is to “[try] to make power out of hatred and destruction” (Collected Poems 215). But in the last stanza, there is a fundamental shift in ideology:

I have not been able to touch the destruction within me.
But unless I learn to use
the difference between poetry and rhetoric
my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
and one day I will take my teenaged plug
and connect it to the nearest socket
raping an 85 year old white woman
who is somebody's mother
and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed
a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time
“Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are.” (Collected Poems 215)

In the last stanza of “Power” Lorde reveals that revolutionary violence will not grant
black people liberation, but will justify long-held racist stereotypes of black savagery. Lorde suggests that power based in violence “[runs] corrupt as poisonous mold,” and ultimately leads to the dehumanization of difference like the “raping of an 85 year-old white woman / who is somebody’s mother” (Collected Poems 215). This critique of masculine violence is a blatant indictment of the poetics of the Black Arts Movement. Specifically, Lorde calls into question the logic of subverting racism with sexism: a constant trend throughout Black Arts poetry that equated masculine virility with black liberation. In addition, Lorde argues that simply “destroying the white thing” does not effectively challenge the racist maxim of black savagery or deconstruct the stereotype of black cultural absence, but rather provides fodder for the oppressor (Neal 30). Because after this destructive, self-indulgent blood lust is exposed in verse “a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time…‘What beasts they are’” (Collected Poems 215).

Lorde claims that the violent poetics of the Black Arts Movement allows the white power structure to dismiss the legitimate political concerns of Black Arts writing and helps ensure the survival of racist discourse. The only way to escape this trap is to “learn to use the difference between poetry and rhetoric” (Collected Poems 215). And the difference between poetry and rhetoric is not human sacrifice, but the power to give life: the creative force of legacy. Essentially, in “Power” the black child is the symbol for the future of black people and just like blackness itself, the future exists somewhere beyond the shoreline, free to be defined. But a poetics of destruction as described by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal robs black people of the very thing the Black Arts Movement was supposed to instill: the freedom to define ourselves; the “will to be” (Wright 55). Not only does this masculine violence strip the Black Arts Movement of its moral authority
and allow anyone with a grudge and a pen to co-opt the appellation of freedom fighter 
(i.e. Eldridge Cleaver), but more importantly this rhetoric traps black identity within a
violent binary struggle. To be black therefore, one must actively destroy the white thing.
Similar to white racist discourse blackness is defined by what it is not. This type of
combative, fixed identity is antithetical to Lorde’s (and Hunt’s) understanding of
humanity. Rather than being the source of black people’s liberation, Baraka’s ideology
ironically mirrors the social death of slavery by forcing black people to build their bonds
within the limiting construct of race. And racial identity (like all binary identities) can
only exist in the presence of its opposite. Essentially, Audre Lorde wants to radicalize the
easy binary identity of the Black Arts writers by showing that real “Power” is not the
power to destroy the oppressor, but the power to re-create yourself.
CONCLUSION

The impact of Audre Lorde’s poetics on the Black Arts Movement as well as on theories centered on the oppressed is immeasurable. In “Coal” Lorde advocates for a blackness that is not rooted in the physical world, but the metaphysical world; a blackness that can expand. In the “Black Unicorn” Lorde explains how forging an identity in opposition to ‘other’ identities undermines one’s freedom. In “Love Poem” Lorde creates a sexual identity free from binary opposition. And in “Power” Lorde tells the reader that the revolution is about creation not destruction. All of these poems react to the ideological weaknesses of the Black Arts Movement and help radicalize a poetics rooted in the African American literary tradition of liberation. Lorde, however, did not fully abandon the community-centered principles of the Black Arts Movement and differed in terms of rhetoric not methodology.

Lorde accepted a pan-African outlook and understood that “without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression” (*Sister Outsider* 112). But Lorde did not believe that community required one to “accept the pathetic pretense that differences do not exist” (*Sister Outsider* 112). Consequently, Lorde’s work is not a protest against the Black Arts Movement, but a progression of it. She simply tries to remind the Black Arts writers who the real enemy is. The real enemy is not white people or even racism; the real enemy is defining difference as deviance. Lorde wants to free black people from existing as unwilling foils to white supremacy (as victim or victor), so we can define ourselves for ourselves.

But how (to invoke Erica Hunt) can black people ever be free to define
themselves beyond race, if our survival is dependent on the strength of a community founded in race? The answer is deceptively simple. The survival of black people is not dependent on a community founded in race; it is dependent on community. “There is no separate survival” (I Am Your Sister 204). By fundamentally altering the basis of belonging from racial similarity to human difference, Lorde lights the path toward liberation. A path that takes the collective power of marginalized people and creates a super majority from minorities. A humanism that is inclusive without being reductive. A collective critical outlook that allows for the agency of the individual. A resistance that does not lead to vengeance or dogma, but to “a now that can breed / futures / like bread in our children's mouths” (Collected Poems 255).

While the concepts discussed in my investigation are firmly centered in a literary tradition, the impact of Lorde’s ideas (and the underlying purpose of African American art) is political. In the aftermath of Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Aiyana Jones, the rise of Black Lives Matter, and the election of Donald Trump the unique challenges facing the African American community (and all marginalized communities) are as relevant as ever. In the face of racial terrorism, white nationalist resurgence, political alienation, and what appears to be extermination one gunshot at a time, black people are once again being compressed by racist systems to forge an oppositional community. As always black people’s survival is dependent on the strength of this community. And we are stronger together.

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