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“It is Time for Artists to be heard:” Artists and Writers for Freedom, 1963-1964”

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In *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, James Smethurst writes that “Black arts cultural nationalism draws on a long history.” He describes the cultural nationalist stance we associate with Black Arts as involving a concept of liberation and self-determination that entails some notion of the development or recovery of a “true” national culture,” conveying “an already existing folk or popular culture,” often relying on recognizable African elements.¹ Black arts cultural nationalism expressed the linkages between Black Arts and Black Power even before they were specifically named and identified. In particular, Black arts cultural nationalism was visible in some of the ways 1940s and 1950s Black leftists engaged with commitments to Black nationhood, Black leadership, and Black liberation. Many Black leftists from the 1940s and 1950s were part of the writing and organizing which laid some of the groundwork for the movements commonly identified with Black Arts after 1965. Looking more closely at one formation of Black artists and writers from the early 1960s, the Association of Artists for Freedom, illuminates one kind of precedent for the emerging Black Arts movement.²

¹ Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005), 17

² In *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), Harold Cruse wrote disdainfully of the Association of Artists for Freedom as “intellectual prisoners” of “middle-class left-tinged conformity” and capable of accomplishing “nothing of importance,” 206-7. For a challenge to Cruse’s dismissal, see Smethurst, *Black Arts*, 53-55, 126-127.

Some Black leftists wrestled with how to reconcile a focus on “the Black nation” with class analysis, internationalism, and the left-wing commitment to non-racialism, or principled practice of interracialism. In one example, the actress and playwright Alice Childress wrote in 1951 about being challenged to abandon prevailing practices of consciously interracial left-wing collaboration in order to dedicate her efforts to an all-Black theater. She worked her way into supporting the idea of an all-Black theater on the grounds that the Black freedom struggle might be able to “inspire, lift, and eventually create a desire for the liberation of all oppressed peoples.” Still, she cautioned that “we must never be guilty of understanding only ourselves.” Childress continued to work with the left-wing majority Black but interracial Committee for the Negro in the Arts theater committee in the early 1950s. She wrote plays with rich parts for Black actors that dramatized various forms of Black resistance in the face of white supremacy, including the dramatic review, *Gold Through the Trees*, staged by the CNA, and paying its actors Equity salaries. This production explored key moments of resistance in the history of the African diaspora, with scenes set in the US, Haiti, the British West Indies, and South Africa, its performances timed to co-ordinate with the South African antiapartheid “Defiance of Unjust Laws” campaign in April, 1952.³

By the mid 1950s, several historical shifts created new obstacles and new possibilities for left wing Black artists and writers. The left-supported Black arts

³ Alice Childress, “For a Negro Theatre,” *Masses and Mainsteam* 4 (February 1951), 63. Lorraine Hansberry reviewed *Gold Through the Trees* for Paul Robeson’s *Freedom* newspaper; May, 1952, 2; for the existing incomplete script, see Kathy A. Perkins, *Alice Childress: Selected Plays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 23-46.

organizations like CNA disbanded in the face of anti-communist scrutiny and blacklisting, as did public 1940s left-wing alternative formations associated with the third party political challenge. But at the same moment, new civil rights challenges to racial segregation seemed to indicate serious potential for new Black mass movement. At this point, the actor and writer Julian Mayfield described his and others' withdrawal from interracial left wing collaboration: "many of us felt simply the need to talk to each other alone." ⁴ In an undated letter to Harry Belafonte probably written in 1958, the left-affiliated Black actor Ossie Davis also traced a new turn toward Black-led resistance beginning in 1955, noting the unprecedented (and unexpected) mass Black working-class support for the bus boycott and its new-to-town minister leader ("this young black tornado from the sidewalks of Montgomery, Alabama"). Davis did not deny the significance of left leadership after WWII in opposing white supremacy and especially white police and terrorist violence against Black vets, but insisted that "our commitment then as now was to the cause of Negro liberation...the Left was merely the instrument by which we fought." Davis argued that because of the discrediting of the Communist-affiliated left resulting from new knowledge of Stalin's various crimes and Soviet aggression, and the new momentum from the legal desegregation cases, the Brown decision, and the bus boycott, "Negro nationalism" was "the only vehicle of revolution and

⁴ Mayfield in "Eddies and Dreams," Box 15, Folder 9 (autobiography), in Julian Mayfield papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), cited by Rebeccah E. Welch, "Black Arts and Activism in Postwar New York, 1950-1965," (PhD Dissertation, NYU, 2002), 156

change possible in this country.”⁵ In his 1958 manifesto, *I’ll Take my Stand*, Paul Robeson made a similar argument for the power of mass Black action and the necessity for a Negro people’s movement to be led by Negro leadership.⁶ Neither Davis or Robeson saw these articulations of Black nationalism as separatist, and both continued to work alongside white radical allies.

The Nation of Islam’s form of Black nationalism was the most prominent expression of nationalism, especially after its debut on national television in 1959. Numerous cultural workers turned to other formulations of Black nationalism in the late 1950s and in the early 1960s that were distinct from the religious usage of the Nation of Islam, and in some cases distinct from the masculinist framework often associated with nationalism. In addition to the performances of Black women entertainers enacting new stances intertwining women’s liberation and Black liberation analyzed by Ruth Feldstein, some also engaged in political action. Two of the women Feldstein writes about, South African singer Miriam Makeba and Abbey Lincoln were involved in an explicitly political formation initiated by Black women performers. In October, 1960, the *Amsterdam News* reported on a new “black women’s cultural association” organized by a group that included also singers Maya Angelou and Odetta and dancer Syvilla Fort. Their mission statement, drawn up by

⁵ “None of us owes anything now to Marx, to the left, or to communism: our supreme obligation is to Negro liberation...whatever the red flag stood for yesterday; it is the black flag under which mankind will take its next step forward.” Undated letter addressing “Harry” starting on p.2, In Box 1, Folder 2, “Communist influences/CBS” statements, Davis Dee Collection, SCRBC

⁶ Paul Robeson, with Lloyd Brown, *I’ll Take My Stand* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958 rev 1988), 90-108. See also Peniel Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (NY: Henry Holt/Owl, 2007), 20.

Harlem Writers Guild member Sarah Wright and signed by all the members, expressed their oppositional stance: “Since the entire power of the United States was arrayed in fury against the very existence of the Afro-Americans, we members of the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH) offer ourselves to raise money got, promote, and publicize any gathering sincerely engaged in developing a just society.”⁷

The women cultural workers in this group helped to organize and take part in an important and unexpectedly fierce demonstration that provided a public articulation of a Black nationalism explicitly connected to African independence movements. On February 15, 1961, demonstrators broke into a Security Council meeting at the UN headquarters in NYC, many dressed in mourning veils and black armbands fashioned at Abbey Lincoln’s apartment, to protest the recent assassination of Patrice Lumumba. Not surprisingly, the mainstream coverage missed the contributions of CAWAH; Angelou and Lincoln’s friend Rosa Guy was the only women protestor reported as present at the “mourning demonstration,” and she was identified as the head of the group On Guard for Freedom, which the *Times* described as part of the Harlem Writers Guild. Although reporters puzzled over how to identify the protestors at the event they termed a “riot,” they clearly described the various participating groups as “apparently of nationalist and anti-colonialist hue, although they noted with some surprise that “Communist agitation is doubted.” Chants from UN picketers the following day protesting the

⁷ Feldstein, *How It feels to be Free; Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2013); *New York Amsterdam News*, October 15, 1960,17; Welch, “Black Arts and Activism in Postwar New York,” 310

assassination of Lumumba made explicit connections between foreign policy and domestic protest, shouting that “the word Negro has got to go,” yelling to reporters that “We’re Afro-Americans,” and also identifying themselves as Black men.⁸

Writing in the *New York Times*, James Baldwin’s reading of the UN protest, and “the rise of Africa in world affairs,” emphasized two dimensions of this new political and cultural nationalism: first, that “the time is forever behind us when Negroes could be expected to “wait,” and second, adding also “that the American Negro can no longer, nor will he ever again, be controlled by white America’s image of him.”⁹

Harlem writer and Africanist John Henrik Clarke’s article in the left-supported *Freedomways* in the fall of 1961 fully credited the UN protests with publicly introducing a “New Afro-American Nationalism.” Reminding readers that Harlem had long been the “incubator” for Black nationalism in the US, Clarke catalogued the major contemporary nationalist groups, beginning with the Nation of Islam. Although he didn’t include CAWAH among the most “active of the new nationalist groups,” he did acknowledge the women’s organization’s militant presence at the UN, quoting Abbey Lincoln as saying “We Afro-Americans will be

⁸ Maya Angelou, *The Heart of a Woman*, (1981: NY: Random House, 2009)177-209; “Riot in Gallery Halts U.N. debate,” *NYT*, Feb 16, 1961, 1; “U.N. Rioting Laid to Pro-Africans: Observers Blame Backers of Nationalists—Communist Agitation is Doubted,” *NYT*, February 16, 1961, 11; James Feron, “U.N. Takes Steps to Prevent Riots,” *NYT*, February 17, 1961, 1, 3. See discussion of this protest in Welch, “Back Arts,” 310-314; Joseph, *Waiting ‘Till the Midnight Hour*, 39-42. One main group of picketers refused the participation of Benjamin Davis, the New York Communist who represented Harlem on the Manhattan City Council between 1943 and 1949.

⁹ Baldwin, “A Negro Assays the Negro Mood,” *New York Times*, March 12, 1961, SM25 ff, and Lorraine Hansberry’s ringing endorsement of the protests and Baldwin’s essay in her letter to the Editor, “Congolese Patriot,” *New York Times*, March 26, 1961, SM 4.

heard by any means you make it necessary for us to use,” and denouncing those who condemned the UN protest as “crumb-crunching, cocktail sipping Uncle Tom leadership paid by colonialists.” Clarke linked the achievement of complete citizenship for Afro-Americans with the ending of colonialism in Africa and the power of reclaiming the African heritage of history and culture. He identified a new Black stance in the fight for “national liberation and personal liberation” as turning from “begging and pleading” to “insisting and demanding.”¹⁰

The outrageous Birmingham church bombing in September, 1963 spurred multiple expressions of political and cultural nationalism. Occurring only three weeks after the surprisingly uneventful and peaceful majority Black March for Jobs and Freedom August 28, 1963, Klansmen attacked with seeming immunity at the heart of the Black resistance movement, brutally bombing the Sixteenth Street Church that had been the meeting ground for Birmingham mass marchers. On September 15, fifteen sticks of dynamite killed four young girls getting ready for Sunday School, injured others, and damaged the church, an office building across the street, and a home nearby. Two more young Black men were killed amidst the resulting street rage of angry Black Birmingham residents who poured into the streets after the explosion, one shot in the back by the police.

The heinous attack on children at Sunday school was a sharp and painful reminder of the persistence of institutionalized white supremacy in confrontation with the intensifying pace of disciplined direct action challenges in the sit-ins, the

¹⁰ Clarke, “The new Afro-American Nationalism,” *Freedomways*, Fall, 1961 285-95; Lincoln quoted on 287; Clarke quotation on 295.

Freedom Rides, and the intensified coordinated local desegregation campaigns. Those demanding changes in racist practice had to contend with the aggressive mobilization of economic and terrorist retaliation through Citizens Councils and reactivated Klan groups, and the caution, silence, and inaction of the white establishment.

The church was the fourth bombing site in Birmingham in four weeks, and even in the first articles covering the bombings, articulation of Black rage broke through: an AP wire service story quoted one Birmingham Black resident, “O, My God! They’ve killed our children” and a grandparent of one of the girls, “You know how I feel? I feel like blowing up the whole town.” The same report quoted a young Black man’s taunt to the news media: “What are y’all going to do about this bombing? Looks like it’s up to the colored folks to do something.”¹¹ The public statements of Alabama Governor Wallace, that the bombers could be “white, black or Mexican,” and Birmingham Mayor Albert Boutwell, that “All of us are victims, and most of us are innocent victims,” generated additional outrage. At a Manhattan protest rally, James Baldwin termed President Kennedy’s appointment of an “investigating” committee an “insult to the Negro race.”¹²

Part of the initial response was a public challenge to the philosophy of non-violence. The day after the bombings were reported, the *New York Times* reported that “Negroes who have long been participants in the racial struggle, found it

¹¹ “O, My God! They’ve Killed Our Children,” *Boston Globe*, September 16, 1963, 7

¹² Wallace quoted in “Bomb Rips Negro Church: Four Girls Die in Birmingham,” *Boston Globe*, September 16, p. 1; Boutwell and Baldwin quoted in Karl Fleming, “Birmingham: My God, You’re Not Even safe in Church,” *Newsweek*, September 30, 1963

difficult to express optimism,” observing the bitterness and anger of Harlem residents, and enumerating Harlem-based and city-wide protesters’ demands: “Federal intervention in Alabama, the impeachment of Governor George Wallace, and in some cases, abandonment of the philosophy of non-violence.” The article also announced two different protest marches to the UN implicitly demanding full US civil rights as UN-supported international human rights -- a presumably noisy one called by SNCC and a silent minister-led vigil to coincide with the funerals in Birmingham. Leon Davis, the president of 1199, the Hospital Workers Union, called for massive protests organized by labor, civil rights, and community leaders.¹³

A hastily convened group of Black arts radicals, naming themselves as “The Committee of Artists and Writers for Justice,” planned a public action to express their outrage. The group, convened by the black writers John O. Killens, Louis Lomax, and James Baldwin, and the black performers Odetta, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis, incorrectly identified as “interracial,” quickly planned a New York memorial service to raise money for gravestones for all the bombing victims, the four girls who died in the church and the two other boys who were shot to death in the “subsequent racial rioting.” (Baldwin also promised to lead a protest march of

¹³ Fred Powledge, “Alabama Bombings Protested Here: City Angered by 6 Deaths, Demonstrations Planned,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1963, 27. In the previous month, the *Times* had run two long front page articles covering tense and angry protests of housing and employment discrimination in NYC : Laymond Robinson, “New York’s Racial Unrest: Negroes’ Anger Mounting,” August 12, 1963, 1, 10 and Charles Grutzner, “New York’s Racial Unrest: Whites are of Two Minds,” August 13, 1963, 1, 20.

“writers, artists and intellectuals.”)¹⁴ Collectively these writers and artists had years of prior experience, loudly protesting against racialist exclusions and experimenting with new forms of journalistic, literary, dramatic, and musical racial representations.¹⁵

The artists pressed the case for immediate action at all levels of American society to dismantle the system of segregation and to stop the attacks on black lives. The September 20 Writers and Artists for Justice memorial service was attended by the parents of one of the bombing victims, and what the *Times* described as a “biracial” audience. Speaking at the victims’ Birmingham funeral earlier that week, John O. Killens had argued that that “the Birmingham tragedies raised doubts about the efficacy of non-violence in the black freedom movement: Negroes must be prepared to protect themselves with guns.”¹⁶ Here he made the case that “legitimate self-defense was an undeniable right,” and that, for himself, he could no longer be asked to “love” those who persecuted and killed Negroes. Supporting non-violence as a tactic, not as a way of life, Killens again asserted the right of the Negro people to defend themselves against their enemies. The *New York Times* coverage noted that James Baldwin caused a “stir” in the audience when he offered “a bitter indictment

¹⁴ Powledge, “Alabama Bombings Protested Here”

¹⁵ For background, consult Keith Gilyard, *John O. Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010); James C. Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby: In This Life Together* (NY: Morrow, 1998); Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (NY: Harper, 1962). On Odetta, see LaShonda K. Barnett, *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters on Their Craft* (NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2007); and Lea Gilmore’s 2000 interview with Odetta , <http://girlthang.net/Odetta.html>.

¹⁶ Gilyard, *John O. Killens*, 184

of American society, which he said was engaged in a conspiracy of silence while Negroes were being persecuted.” Baldwin argued that if the American people remained silent in the face of “the persecution of Negroes”, they shared collective guilt for it “much as Germans did because of their silence during the Nazi persecution.” And he warned that unless the federal government acted swiftly and energetically, “future slaughter would make Birmingham seem like a rehearsal.”¹⁷

The Writers and Artists’ formulation of nationalism was aimed at ramping up grass roots political pressure on the US government. When journalist Louis Lomax announced the NY memorial service at a protest rally in Harlem called by the James Lawson’s United African Nationalists and made an appeal for “Negroes to fight for a role in American society” rather than to focus on Africa, he was booed off the

¹⁷ M. S. Handler, “Negro Passivity Is Held Outdated: Speakers At Memorial Urge Action for Rights,” *New York Times*, September 21, 1963, 8. Killens, Lomax and Baldwin spoke at the service: the folk singers Odetta and Leon Bibb and the jazz musician Don Shirley performed, and Ruby Dee took a collection for the families of the slain children: Gilyard, *Killens*, 185. In his draft for this speech, Killens argued that because of the terrorist backlash against the Negro revolt represented in the bombing, and because black people could not depend on law enforcement, from the federal to the local, to enforce black rights, “we must assert and affirm the right of the Negro people to defend themselves against their enemies, to defend their lives, their homes, their families, their churches, and all of their institutions, the right of self-defense being the most universal right recognized by all mankind. Who will defend us if we do not defend ourselves? We must then assert the inalienable right of manhood, of womanhood, of selfhood. We must assert the right to fight fire with fire...Let us pledge together, as black artists and writers and as Americans, to never let our anger cool... to dedicate our lives to creating a cultural image not predicated on the Western man’s fatal addiction to things...to the color of skin,..and to join the new world aborning out there in Africa and Asia;” in John O. Killens papers, Box 107, Folder 14, “Association of Artists for Freedom, Fliers and Press releases, 1963-1964,” Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL), Emory University.

speaker's podium.¹⁸ Killens and the others repeated calls to impeach Governor Wallace, to abolish President Kennedy's phony investigation committee, and to immediately arrest and punish those responsible for the bombing. The speakers also announced a call to boycott Christmas shopping, because as Killens wrote, "to celebrate Christmas 'as usual' this year would be a mockery to the memory of Jesus." Borrowing the idea from Martin Luther King's Christmas shopping boycott to support of the Montgomery bus boycott eight years earlier, the Artists group encouraged Christmas shopping funds to be redirected to civil rights organizations in support of continuing actions to demand "Freedom Now." A Harlem rally organized by Killens and Lomax, joined by entertainer Dick Gregory and former Manhattan Borough president Hulan Jack to advertise the boycott drew a significant crowd. Within a week, King and the SCLC signed on in support of a nation-wide boycott of Christmas shopping as a protest against the Birmingham church bombing, but the NAACP declined to follow suit.¹⁹

The artists and writers who organized the NY memorial service aspired to constitute an "artistic adjunct" to civil rights organizing. Meeting in Odetta's and then Baldwin's apartments, they renamed themselves as The Association of Artists for Freedom. They continued to publicize the boycott, in early December adding the assassination of Medgar Evers in Mississippi and that of President Kennedy in Dallas

¹⁸ "Author is Booed at Harem Rally: Nationalists Heckle Lomax as Too Moderate," *New York Times*, September 20, 1963, 21; Killens in draft speech, Box 107, Folder 14, Killens papers, MARBL, Emory.

¹⁹ Gilyard, *Killens*, 185; "Strike Against Santa Claus," *New York Times*, September 28, 1963, 18; Theodore Jones, "N.A.A.C.P. Rejects Boycott on Gifts," *New York Times*, October 4, 1963, 18

to argue for redirecting Christmas shopping to contribute to civil rights organization in order to highlight the national shame of the political violence.

The artists' formulations of black nationalism was part of a broader conversation about nationalism and civil rights strategies. Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis had been in some contact with the charismatic leader of Harlem's Mosque No. 7, Malcolm X since sometime in 1961. Louis Lomax had assisted Malcolm X in the production of the monthly tabloid, *Muhammad Speaks*, published out of Malcolm's basement between 1960 and 1962.²⁰ By December 1963 or January 1964, Malcolm X was moving away from the Nation and envisioning a new Black nationalist political formation, the Organization of African American Unity, and John O. Killens was part of the planning discussions for this organization.²¹ In March, 1964, Nina Simone performed the furious song she had written out of her rage after the Birmingham bombings, "Mississippi Goddam," on the stage at Carnegie Hall, recording it soon after.²² In April, 1964, Malcolm X, now formally separated from the Nation, publicly introduced this new vision of Black nationalism as a political,

²⁰ Davis and Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby*, 293-299, 307-9; Malcolm admired Davis's 1961 play *Purlie Victorious*. On Lomax, see Jane Rhodes, "The Black Press and Radical Print Culture," in *A History of the Book in America: The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America* (Vol 5), ed. by David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin and Michael Schudson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 295. After Elijah Muhammad took control of the newspaper and moved it to Chicago, it was edited by a succession of non-Muslim journalists, first Dan Burley, and then Richard Durham and John Woodford, the latter two with ties to the Communist left; Rhodes, "The Black Press," 296-7 and Smethurst, *Black Arts*, 181-2.

²¹ Gilyard, *Killens*, 188-9. Killens began to work with him in December, 1963 or January 1964 in the first planning meetings for OAAU.

²² Simone recorded this song in late March or early April 1964, and brought it to television's mass audience when she performed it on The Steve Allen Show, September 10, 1964. On the song, see Feldstein, *How It feels*, 84-5.

economic and social philosophy in a major address on “The Black Revolution” at a labor forum convened at a big New York midtown venue.²³

The artists’ group also began to imagine other kinds of critical cultural work. An invitation from John Killens and Ossie Davis in April 1964 issued a “Call to Creative Artists” to help contribute to “a cultural revolution” that “is needed to unbrainwash the thinking of the entire nation.” The question of who was included in the “entire nation” remained unsettled. When this same phrase appeared in the OAAU charter, it referred to the entire nation of African Americans. When Killens used it in his own essays, he addressed the entire nation as “American people, black and white.” In this call, the artists’ group announced the planning of a “writers’ symposium at Town Hall “on the topic of “The Artist and the Negro Revolt.” The “summit” meeting between Malcolm X, civil rights leaders, and Black artists convened by Ruby Dee and Juanita Poitier at the Poitiers’ house in Pleasantville, NY, an occasion for spirited political discussion, would take place just two days before the Town Hall symposium.²⁴

²³ Malcolm left the Nation publicly on March 8, 1964; he spoke on “The Black Revolution” on April 8, 1964 to a largely white audience at a labor forum organized by the Socialist Workers Party’s newspaper, *The Militant*, in Palm Gardens, New York City; see George Breitman, ed, *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (NY: Pathfinder, 1989) and online at <http://malcolmxfiles.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-black-revolution-april-8-1964.html>

²⁴ John O. Killens papers, Box 107, Folder 14, “Association of Artists for Freedom, Fliers and Press releases,, 1963-1964,” Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. Gilyard identified multiple uses and meanings of this phrase in *Killens*, 200. See also Davis’s description of the Association of Artists for Freedom in a front page *New York Times* article published the day of the Forum: Milton Esterow, “The Role of Negroes in Theater Reflects Ferment of Integration,” June 15, 1964, 1, 35; “We meet from time to time to talk and argue...It grew out of the Birmingham bombings. We talk of what we as artists can do, how we can

The “writers’ symposium” became the well attended and controversial June 15, 1964 forum on “The Black Revolution and the White Backlash.” The letters announcing the event asked directly and provocatively: “Where is the Black revolt going and does the white liberal have a place in it?” The program for the event added: “Who Speaks for the Negro...and Who Listens?”²⁵ The Association’s invited Black panelists --three women, Ruby Dee, Paule Marshall, and Lorraine Hansberry, and three men , LeRoi Jones, Ossie Davis, and John O. Killens-- were all associated with postwar black left cultural work, black theater and literary production, and the new iterations of black nationalism emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s.²⁶ The white panelists were the *Fortune* writer Charles Silberman, whose soon to be best-selling book, *Crisis in Black and White*, had just been published by Random

express the anguish for the moral situation we find ourselves in this country, but not as civil rights pleaders.”(emphasis added). Esterow describes the Association as a loosely-formed aggregation,” listing members as “Mr. Davis, Mr. Baldwin, the Negro writers Louis Lomax and John O. Killens, Odetta, and Ruby Dee (Mr. Davis’s wife)...” Attendees at the meeting with Malcolm X included John O. Killens, Clarence Jones, A. Philip Randolph, Dorothy Height, Whitney Young and Ossie Davis, as well as Sidney Poitier, then separated from his wife; see Gilyard, *Killens*, 193; Taylor Branch, *Pillars of Fire*, 345-6; Adam Goudsouzian, *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor , Icon*, 222.

²⁵ Invitation in Killens Papers, Box 107, Folder 12, “AAF Correspondence, 1963-1979; mailing list in Box 108, Folder 1, AAF, “Black revolution and the White Backlash Forum,” financial records and notes, 1964. Program for the event in AAF vertical file, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.

²⁶ Davis and Dee, *With Ossie and Ruby*, 293-299, 307-9; Lisa D. McGill, *Constructing Black Selves: Caribbean American Narratives and the Second Generation* (NY: NYU Press, 2005), 77-98; Smith, *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar democracy, 1940-1960* (NY: Columbia University press, 2004), 289-310;; Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 44-56; Gilyard, *Killens*, 188-9; Josephs, *Midnight Hour*, 9-102. In 1952-9153. John Killens and Paule Marshall had served on the editorial board of a short-lived left-wing journal, *The Contemporary Reader*, along with Julian Mayfield, Ellsworth Wright, Millard Lampell, Ring Lardner, Jr and Lester Cole; Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner, *A Very dangerous citizen: Abraham Lincoln Polonsky and the Hollywood Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 167-8.

House, and James Wechsler, the crusading anti-Communist liberal editor of the *New York Post*, who had attended and provocatively interrupted Malcolm X's April speech on "The Black Revolution." The panel was moderated by David Susskind, a talent agent who hosted a widely syndicated television news talk show, beginning in 1958.

The forum turned out to be a particularly heated and confrontational exchange, marking a unusual moment of direct engagement and straight talk between Black radicals and white liberals and it anticipated many of the themes of the coming Black Arts movement. The final title for the forum, and some of the formulations of the black panelists seemed to reiterate some of the ideas in Malcolm X's April speech on "The Black Revolution." All Black panelists seized the time to demand that white liberals abandon calls for gradualism, recognize Black anger and the limitations of non-violence in response to the violent state and vigilante backlash directed at civil rights protesters (Hansberry: "the whole idea of debating whether or not Negroes should defend themselves is an insult. If somebody comes and does ill in your home and your community, you try your best to kill them"). They linked Black liberation with radical transformation, insisting that that the problems of Black people in Harlem and Mississippi were embedded in American society, especially the economic system which disadvantaged Black people and the political system which excluded them. Paule Marshall dismissed the 1964 Civil Rights Act as having been "amended to death." Their ideas of fundamental, not

incremental, forms of change included Davis's call to put "person over property," and Dee's vision of socialism.²⁷

In several different heated exchanges, the panelists addressed the issue of white people in the struggle for Black liberation. The first panelist to call out the norms of white superiority was Charles Silberman, questioning the reliance on white leadership to head national civil rights organizations and warning that racial equality would require white Americans to relinquish "privilege or advantage." James Wechsler furiously disagreed, tellingly reformulating Silberman's position (and revealing his own racist presumptions) as "the white has the role of waterboy in the freedom movement and he damned well better accept that." Later Ossie Davis proposed an alternate labor-based formulation: "in our struggle for freedom and equality, we welcome the white man as an ally, as a friend, as a brother, but not as a boss."²⁸

The substance of Hansberry's call for "white liberals to become American radicals" was her insistence on "total identification...a merger on the basis of true and genuine equality." According to Paule Marshall, "For the Negro to participate fully in American life, he, the white man will have to relinquish some part of his comfort, and the system which has permitted him a privileged place at the expense

²⁷ The forum was recorded, and it was broadcast on the non-commercial station WBAI in New York in the fall of 1964. Hansberry's statements were also released on a posthumous recording, *Lorraine Hansberry Speaks Out on Art and the Black Revolution* (Caedmon Records, 1972). A full transcript of the forum was published as "What is the White Liberal's Role: A Report on the N.Y. Confrontation," *National Guardian*, July 4, 1964, p. 5-9

²⁸ "What is the White Liberal's Role," 5-9.

of the Negro will have to undergo fundamental change.” Marshall then redefined Blackness not as color but as a principled political refusal: “the willingness to question and reject the old established institutions, once they are proven obsolete and unjust. Black is to seek a new way.” Marshall argued that “our full energies in this struggle have to be directed toward bringing together the mass of the Negro people, because there is no point in looking for support and help from the white liberal or from the white man. Period.” Her suggestion for whites who could recognize her definition of Blackness as refusal was to form an organization and go “into the white community and there try to change them, to bring them around.”²⁹

In the end, the varied stances of the Black panelists on the possibilities for white liberals to become American radicals resonate with the continuing cross currents and debates about the parameters of the nation within the cultural politics of what would become known as the Black Arts movement. Several of the Black panelists took care to name white people who played critical roles in the Black freedom struggle: Dee mentioned the two white anti-apartheid activists prosecuted with Nelson Mandela; Hansberry praised “the tradition of white radicalism in America, specifying the historical John Brown as well as “the white kids on the firing line in Mississippi as we’re sitting here.”³⁰

In contrast, the fierce poet LeRoi Jones ceded nothing. Jones’s recent off-Broadway play, *Dutchman*, dramatized a heated and then fatal subway encounter between a Black man and a white woman, whom Jones imagined as a metaphor for

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

America, later commenting that “she represented temptation and seduction, but also death, if not of the flesh, then of the spirit.”³¹ His opening statement in the forum questioned its basic premise, had there ever been and could there be now “honest dialogue” between white Americans and Black Americans? Later he described Silberman and Wechsler as “people sitting at the table with me that abstractly I despise” because their publications represent “the same kind of unrealistic understanding of the world that only leads to debasing human beings, lying to people...so much static and lies, and the mass media in the hands of thieves and fools.” Although he backed Hansberry’s praise for the young people in Mississippi, he questioned their non-violence; as he saw it, “getting knocked in the head” showed that “the method is wrong.” He observed the distance between the violence that was an “every day fact of a lot of Negroes’ lives” and the white panelists’ concern about incendiary civil rights violence, which he read as worry about violence to “white men, and maybe violence to social, economic, and political structure” – these, he assumed, were inevitable if Black people were to achieve their rights.³²

³¹ *Dutchman* opened at the Cherry Lane Theater on March 24, 1964. Amiri Baraka quoted in Celia McGee, “A Return to Rage, Played Out in Black and White,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2007

³² “What is the White Liberal’s Role,” 5-9. Just a month later, when incendiary violence did break out in Harlem, following a police shooting of an African American teenager, AAF’s position was that riots, violence and looting were “the inevitable result of the violence perpetrated against our people every day of their lives.” They argued that the responsibility for violence rested on “squalid slums and the callous and indifferent men of wealth and influence who profit from them; on inadequate schooling; on a high rate of unemployment; and on flagrant abuse of police authority.” Letter from AAF to mainstream civil rights leaders James Farmer, MLK, Jr, John Lewis, A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, July 29, 1964, in Killens papers, Box 107, Folder 12, MARBL, Emory University.

Many of these left-wing AAF artists would actively support Black Arts initiatives, sustaining and extending connections between the postwar left-wing black arts world and the emerging Black Arts movement. Not surprisingly, it would be the provocateur LeRoi Jones, soon renaming himself Amiri Baraka, who carried the flag for Black Arts as a radical break from the past, something entirely new.