“... Black People, come in, wherever you are ...”

Pan-Africanism and Black internationalism in the Black arts movement

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Calling black people
Calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling you, calling all black people
Calling all black people, come in, black people, come on

Issuing this “SOS” in 1965, shortly after the assassination of Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones) anticipates the urgency of the Black Arts and Black Power movements, which began to coalesce both nationally and internationally among radical political and cultural activists in the mid-1960s. He also situates the struggle for Black North American liberation beyond the parameters of the United States, into a global context. By constructing this seven-line free verse poem as a radio broadcast or global distress signal, Baraka articulates a collective and international call-to-action for people of African descent. His political shift from the bohemian-jazz inspired Beat poetry to Black nationalism initially began by his travels to Revolutionary Cuba in 1960 and his participation in the Black nationalist literary group On Guard for Freedom founded by Sarah Wright and Calvin Hicks. The following year, the poet would be involved in a militant Pan-Africanist protest at the United Nations after Patrice Lumumba’s kidnapping and eventual assassination at the hands of his rivals and imperialist backers in the former Belgian Congo.

Between 1961 and 1965, Baraka published a number of important literary works that anticipated the burgeoning cultural movement. These pieces include, “The Myth of Negro Literature” (1962), Blues People: Negro Music in White America (1963), the plays The Toilet (1963), The Slave and Dutchman (1964) and his polemical essay “The Revolutionary Theater”
(1964). However, it was his move uptown to Harlem in March 1965 following Malcolm X’s death and the founding of the Black Arts Repertoire Theatre/School (BARTS), with Larry Neal and other cultural workers, that disparate Black nationalist artistic and political tendencies in Harlem merged into what would become known as the Black Arts Movement. As one of the first poems Baraka wrote after launching BARTS, “SOS” illustrates that from the outset, the Black Arts Movement had an internationalist consciousness developed from earlier Black nationalist and Pan-Africanist legacies. Literary critic Phillip Brian Harper suggests that the poem “embraces all members of the African diaspora, as it is directed explicitly and repeatedly to ‘all black people,’ thereby invoking a political Pan-Africanism posited as characteristic of the Black Arts project.”

The poem’s Pan-African linkages become even more apparent when one reads Baraka’s “SOS” in relation to Léon-Gontran Damas’s “SOS” or global distress signal published in his first volume of poetry Pigments (1937). Born in French Guyana in 1912, Damas is recognized as one of the “founding fathers” of Négritude, along with Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. He issued his “SOS” in response to the brutal treatment of African descendant colonial subjects living in France. It decries how white Frenchmen were “coldly/beating up/knocking down/laying out/the blacks and cutting oﬀ their genitals/to make candles for their churches.” This poem speciﬁcally illustrates the horrors of racial lynching as well as the complicity of European religious institutions to such actions. In contrast to Baraka’s poem, which speaks directly to people of African descent, Damas’s speaker appears to be making a protest to the colonial authorities. Nonetheless, taken together, both pieces begin to highlight the global consciousness and continual evolution of politico-cultural movements for African and African diasporic unity: from the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the Négritude movement of the 1930s and 1940s, through the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In this article, I seek to demonstrate the widening international consciousness among Black creative intellectuals affiliated with the Black Arts Movement. This, I argue, was partially evidenced by the increased expression of Pan-African and Third World solidarity in the pages of radical Black “little magazines.” Indeed, there had been a long lineage of Black North Americans who recognized the relationship between Black people in the U.S. and those in the diaspora and African continent, from Martin Delany and Marcus Garvey to W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Alphaeus Hunton and the radicals associated with the Council of African Affairs (1937–1955). However, the Cold War and anti-communist witch-hunts of the 1950s succeeded in marginalizing the most radical advocates of Pan-Africanism. In fact, on the eve of the world-historic Bandung (Afro-Asian) Conference in Indonesia in 1955, Du Bois argued that most Black North American leaders had traded “equal status [in America] … for the slavery of the majority of men.” Clearly, the post–World War II civil rights social movement gained momentum in 1955 with the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but Du Bois felt that the focus of integration into the U.S. society as the government intensiﬁed its imperialist domination of Third World countries in the Cold War was a dead end.

It is true that during the McCarthy Era there existed a handful of organizations in the U.S. that sought to maintain connections between Black North Americans and Africans. For example, two “Pan-African” groups that started in the 1950s are the American Committee on Africa (founded in 1953) and the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC founded in 1957). However, as historian Penny Von Eschen (1997) notes, in the case of AMSAC, it emphasized cultural exchange at the expense of advocating political solidarity and liberation. For some Black radical intellectuals, such as Du Bois and his wife Shirley Graham, Hunton, Julian Mayfield, Maya Angelou and others, they chose to expatriate to Ghana after its
The movement from the local, regional, and Pan-Africanism and Black internationalism independence in 1957 to escape the repression and help actualize Kwame Nkrumah’s project of continental Pan-African solidarity. However, as I suggest in this article, it was in the 1960s that a new generation of Black North American creative intellectuals aligned with the Black Arts/Power movements—namely Askia Muhammad Touré, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Hoyt Fuller, Sarah Webster Fabio, S.E. Anderson, Alicia Johnson, among others—began to direct their cultural and intellectual production toward the prospects of Pan-African/Third World solidarity and liberation.

A number of these cultural workers published pieces in pre-Black Arts Movement literary and political magazines that established important publishing networks for the nascent politico-cultural movement. Many of these newspapers and magazines began publication in 1961, such as Calvin Hick’s On Guard, Esther Jackson’s Freedomways, Dan Watts’ Liberator, and the Nation of Islam’s Muhammad Speaks, while the Umbra Writers Workshop initiated Umbra in 1962. Though the Negro Digest began in 1942 and Hoyt Fuller assumed editorship in 1961 and would change the name to The African World in 1969, Kalamu ya Salaam writes that it would remain one of the few pre-BAM little magazines directly aligned with the Black Arts Movement. In fact, most of the creative intellectuals I discuss in this article published either in the Negro Digest/Black World, or one of the other little magazines and Black publishing houses founded in the mid-1960s: Soulbook, Black Dialogue, the Journal of Black Poetry, Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press or Haki Madhubuti’s (then Don L. Lee) Third World Press.10

“And by the way, the major BAM theorists ... were rev. nationalists/third world socialists—not backwards ‘racialists’”

A common misrepresentation of the Black Arts Movement is that its participants were all cultural nationalists; an assumption often made by leaders of the Black Panther Party.11 While many well-known BAM activists such as Amiri Baraka and Haki Madhubuti were at one time affiliated with Karenga and openly advocated Black cultural nationalism, other writers such as Askia Touré and Larry Neal were aligned with the revolutionary nationalist formation RAM. Equally problematic, however, is the reduction of all cultural production from the Black Arts era to cultural nationalism. This tendency neglects the influence of RAM, the Black Panther Party, and other avowedly revolutionary (inter)nationalist organizations on the cultural front. For instance, one can find clear revolutionary nationalist sentiments and sympathies in the literary expression of Sam E. Anderson, Charlie Cobb, Nikki Giovanni, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Carol Freeman, Mae Jackson, Alicia Johnson to cite a few. There are also examples of revolutionary poetry and visual art in the pages of the Liberator, Black America, Soulbook, Black Dialogue, Negro Digest/Black World, and The Black Panther among others. Moreover, in a recent interview, Askia Touré specifically attempts to correct the historical record about the movement: “And by the way, the major BAM theorists—Larry Neal, Carolyn Fowler, Sarah Fabio, Ernie Allen, Askia Touré—were Rev. Nationalists/Third World Socialists—not backwards ‘racialists!’”12

Few Black Arts Movement scholars other than James Smethurst and Kalamu ya Salaam identify RAM as an important ideological influence on the foundation of the Black Arts Movement.13 This is partially due to the clandestine nature in which cadre members “infiltrated” organizations and because, as I mentioned previously, there is a tendency among scholars to associate Black Arts solely within the parameters of cultural nationalism. However, my interest in exploring RAM’s ideological and politico-cultural impact on the Black Arts Movement is not to duplicate the important work done by Smethurst and Salaam. Rather, I hope to extend the discourse around the movement from the local, regional, and
national manifestations they discuss into the broader international arena, where RAM and other revolutionary nationalists often situated their intellectual and cultural production. While RAM’s internationalist tendencies were ideologically inspired by Maoism, the Mau Mau uprising, the Bandung movement, the Cuban Revolution and Vietnamese national liberation struggle, according to Muhammad Ahmad, the organization had direct links to radical Black North American internationalists Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams, and Queen Mother Audley Moore.14

At the same time, though RAM maintained an international approach to revolutionary Black nationalism it did not negate the importance of Black North American cultural expression. Thus, in counter-distinction to Karenga, who assumed that vernacular Black America lacked viable cultural vocabularies, labeling musical forms such as the blues as counterrevolutionary and incapable of mobilizing the masses,15 RAM theorists observed a revolutionary possibility in Black North American culture, specifically “the Afro-American music of modernists such as Bird, Miles, Trane, etc.” By making this claim, Ahmad suggested that it was the responsibility of revolutionary Black Americans to translate “the dynamism embodied in Afro-American music” into “Bandung Humanism” or “Revolutionary Black Internationalism,”16 a point that Askia Toure further developed in his 1965 essay, “Keep on Pushin: Rhythm & Blues as a Weapon.”17 In actuality, this notion was recognized early on by cultural workers of the Black Arts Movement, who not only crafted literary pieces in tribute to the denizens of jazz, blues, and Black popular music, but also reinterpreted ideas of content, form, and functionality from those musical expressions into their cultural production.18 What is equally important to consider about the relationship of jazz to the Black Arts Movement is that “New Thing” jazz musicians, such as John Coltrane, Archie Shepp, Yusef Lateef, and Pharoah Sanders, to name a few, explored Pan-African and Third World musical themes and aesthetic forms during the early 1960s, which subsequently raised the international consciousness of other Black cultural workers.19

Though identifying a dialectical relationship of the Black North American liberation struggle to the Bandung Revolution, RAM nevertheless exclaimed, “America is the Blackman’s Battleground!” In a programmatic essay of the same name, Ahmad synthesizes the theories of cultural revolution posited by Mao Zedong, Harold Cruse and Malcolm X’s OAAU charter, with the call for armed struggle, which he explicated in eight themes of the “Black Cultural Revolution.” For Ahmad, the Black Cultural Revolution was not merely an attempt at internally rediscovering lost “African” values and customs. But rather, it was a formulated plan of action that included political and cultural education, national collective consciousness building, the development of Black cultural committees and propaganda organs, and most importantly, a “shock force” or “Black Guard,” whose “dual role is to organize resistance against the war in Vietnam, while simultaneously organizing guerrilla units, prepared, trained and fit to take our people to a new level.” This is one of the clearest attempts of fusing revolutionary nationalism with a cogent cultural analysis that located the basis of revolutionary identity and struggle within the politico-cultural milieu of Black America. Moreover, his conceptualization worked toward harmonizing RAM theory and praxis with Third World revolutionary thinkers, such as Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Frantz Fanon, who viewed culture as nationally bound, but imperative for the dialectical development of national and international consciousness.20 While “America is the Black Man’s Battleground” did not articulate any special role for writers, in a message to the Black Writers Congress in Montreal, Canada, in 1968, Ahmad specifically posited that “Black writers must see themselves as part of the vanguard of a revolutionary nationalist elite,” and
they “must unite nationally and then unite with black writers internationally to become part of a world black congress or black internationale dedicated to World Black Power.”

With the objective of influencing the perspective of the Black liberation movement, RAM intellectual-activists Ahmad, Larry Neal, Askia Touré, and Don Freeman took their revolutionary nationalist ideals about political and cultural struggle to the pages of the *Liberator* and other little magazines. Having been developed by Dan Watts following the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo and subsequent protests at the United Nations by Black radicals of various stripes, the Liberation Committee for Africa began publishing the *Liberator* in 1961. In addition to its early focus on African independence movements, the *Liberator* constituted an important synthesis between Old and New Left Marxism, Black nationalism, civil rights issues, and Pan-African unity. What is more, it featured many early pronouncements on Black arts, politics and culture by RAM functionaries, with Larry Neal serving as the magazine’s arts editor from 1964–1966, helping to orient aspiring writers and artists to the insurgent politico-cultural movement. Neal also contributed such pieces for the *Liberator* as “The Cultural Front” (June 1965); “A Reply to Bayard Rustin” (July 1965); “Black Revolution in Music: A Talk with Drummer Milford Graves” (September 1965); “The Black Revolution in Art: A Conversation with Joe Overstreet” (October 1965); and “A Conversation with Archie Shepp” (November 1965).

First announcing the arrival of “The New Afro-American Writer” in the *Liberator*, Askia Touré described the militant generation of “new nationalist”/“Africanist” writers who were challenging the integrationist tendencies of “named” writers such as Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Clearly one of the earliest essays to anticipate the emergent Black Arts Movement, Touré traced the roots of “new” nationalism back to Marcus Garvey and the Nation of Islam (NOI). At the same time, he was critical of the NOI’s embracing of “Arab culture” instead of “black African culture.” Interestingly enough, in subsequent years, Touré and a number of other BAM activists would convert to Islam, envisioning it as a counter to Eurocentric political and religious hegemony. Amiri Baraka’s play *Black Mass* (1965) is an early example of the “Islamification” of some Black Arts Movement cultural production, which Melani McAlister details in her study “One Black Allah.” She writes that “from at least 1965 until 1973, [Baraka] and others saw Islam as a primary nationalist cultural resource an authentically black religion that would be central to the requisite development of an alternative black culture and a liberated spirituality.” Nonetheless, in 1963, Touré maintained that while many new Black nationalists had sympathy for the Nation of Islam, they remained distant from its “religious doctrine and rigid discipline.” He concluded the essay by echoing Cruse’s postulation about Black North Americans signifying domestic colonial subjects and suggesting that revolutionary Black nationalism was the most cogent ideology to link North American Blacks with the oppressed masses of the world.

Building upon this line of reasoning, Touré published four additional essays in the *Liberator* in 1964 and 1965 on the potential for Black revolutionary struggle. The first piece entitled “Unchain the Lion” identified the Black exploited masses, whom he called “Mose” (similar to Fanon’s *lumpenproletariat*), as the “lifeblood” of the Black North American struggle, suggesting that “they’ll NEVER rally to a basically suicidal, masochistic movement such as non-violence in a police state.” A few months later, the *Liberator* published “Toward Repudiating Western Values,” in which Touré criticized the race and class allegiances of bourgeois nationalists and “Negro Liberals” for assimilating Eurocentric cultural values and “white middle-class ideals.” He specifically challenged the belief that
integration into a capitalist system would somehow liberate the masses of Afro-descendants:

I would remind Bourgeois Nationalists that this exploitative system has enslaved three-quarters of mankind (our Asian, African, and Latin American brothers), so that for black America to take its (capitalist) place in white America’s mainstream helps to perpetuate this evil system.26

In order to counter this, Touré argues that Black revolutionary nationalists had to “strive to develop a revolutionary soul—total psychic unity with the masses of our people.” Furthermore, it was imperative to “hitch the wagon of Black America” to “the Universal Age of Bandung (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), [which was] bringing with it new values and ideals of Universal Humanism and Justice.”27 Touré translated these political ideals into a poem entitled “Song of Fire,” published in RAM’s journal Black America in 1964 and later in the anthology Black Fire (1968), which was one of the first poems to depict urban rebellions in North America as a part of the struggle for national liberation and related to “the Universal Age of Bandung:”

Tears that weep for shattered Sunday schools
are lost
like diamonds leaving ebon hands—among the dark
South African sands: lost-lost...and never found!
Save your tears! Save your anguished cries!
Save your prayers to barren, silent skies:
Wait-wait awhile!
For soon the Dawn will come to men once more—
and Buddha’s eyes will smile from burning
saffron robes and charred pagodas—
Shango
will shout his rumbling song to
joyous Congo tom-toms...in the night.
Allah
will send his flaming sword a whistling
through the “chosen land”...and bellow:
Free-dom! Free-dom!
Here comes the Rising Sun!
And HERE...my twenty-million, tortured,
chosen children:
your day will come!

This poem invokes the imagery of Eastern deities such as Buddha, Shango, and Allah responding joyously to the revolutionary “Rising Sun” of anti-colonial liberation. Employing occasional internal and end rhyme couplets, Touré locates emancipation not in “prayers to barren, silent skies,” but in the self-determination of the oppressed masses. There is little question that the narrator embraces outright revolutionary violence, especially in response to the violent bombings that “shattered Sunday schools,” killing four black girls (Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Roberston, and Cynthia Wesley) in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963.28 Moreover, Touré identifies the Black North American freedom struggle, and its
growing radicalization evidenced by urban rebellions, as a component part of the Third World revolution, a point he raised in the adjacent essay “Long Hot Summer.”

In February 1965, the Liberator featured another of Touré’s essays entitled “Afro American Youth and the Bandung World,” which synthesized his previous criticisms of bourgeois reformism/nationalism, with assertions that Black Americans were subjects of domestic colonialism, support for armed self-defense, and advocacy of anti-imperialist Third World struggles. Similar to other theoretical essays written by RAM cadre at this time, Touré now envisioned Black youth as the vanguard of revolutionary movements. Referring to Black North American youth as “new people,” he argues “they have developed new attitudes and outlooks concerning the future role of Black America in world society.” Touré continued by suggesting that young Black North American revolutionaries were repudiating both the bourgeois reformism of civil rights leaders as well as the “escapist” bourgeois nationalist “Back to Africa” or “separate states” schemes, “to embrace the ‘Bandung’ world, and link up Black America’s struggle with the former colonial peoples.”

A major theoretical shift in this essay from his previous three was the fact that he specifically identified U.S. imperialism—“in the form of gigantic corporations, gigantic banks, trusts, and mining interests”—as the main threat against Black North Americans and Third World peoples. Touré noted that the present state of “Bourgeois Democracy” was merely a façade and that the forces behind monopoly-capitalism, with the support of the military-industrial complex, would soon implement a Fascist dictatorship. Therefore, “Black America must not wait!” he concludes. “She must link her struggle with those of her former colonial brothers, and led by the emerging vanguard of militant youth—rooted in the people: organize and prepare to survive the Final War: Armageddon!” While his final essay published in the Liberator in 1965 entitled “Keep on Pushin’” focused more particularly on Black North American music as revolutionary praxis, it nevertheless maintained his signature tone and international perspective. Through his essays, revolutionary poetry, politico-cultural activism, and later co-editorship at Black Dialogue and The Journal of Black Poetry, Askia Muhammad Touré remained an important advocate of situating the Black Arts Movement as an aspect of the anti-imperialist Bandung World.

RAM cadre in California also helped influence the shape and international perspective of the Black Arts Movement with their production of Soulbook. Self-described as the “quarterly journal of revolutionary Afroamerica,” Donald Freeman and his brother Kenn Freeman, Isaac Moore, Ernest Allen, Jr., Carroll Holmes, and Bobb Hamilton began the publication in winter 1964. By its second issue in spring 1965, Bobby Seale, future co-founder of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense had become Soulbook’s printer and distribution manager. During its run, Soulbook was one of the first Black journals in North America to publish translations of Frantz Fanon’s major works on anti-colonialism and Third World revolution, as well as communiqués by Robert F. Williams in-exile and theoretical essays by former Black Communist Party stalwart Harry Haywood on revolutionary nationalism. These ideas were also incorporated into the published essays on anti-imperialism, economics, jazz, and literature featured in the journal. Moreover, each issue of the little magazine featured a section entitled “Reject Notes,” which published poetry by many BAM cultural workers, such as Ernie Allen, Ed Bullins, Carol Freeman, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Clarence Major, Larry Neal, Patricia Parker, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Touré, Shirley A. Williams, and Marvin X among others.

Having assembled while members of the Bay Area’s Afro-American Association (AAA), the editors addressed the premier volume “To the Peoples of Afroamerica, Africa, and to all the Peoples of the World:”
We the Editors of SOULBOOK subscribe to the view expressed by the great Black martyr Patrice Lumumba that, ‘...without dignity there is no liberty, without justice there is no dignity, and without independence there are no free men.’ Furthermore, we adhere to the view that it will take a radical socio-economic transformation within the United States before the freedom of the Black man in the U.S., the Congo, and anywhere else the victims of racial discrimination have been maimed...Thus to further the cause of the liberation of Black peoples we feel that this Journal and all ensuing issues of it must be produced, controlled, published and edited by people who are sons and daughters of Africa.\textsuperscript{34}

By recognizing the interconnectedness of Black North American and Pan-African/Third World liberation struggles, the need to combat the common enemy of U.S. capitalist-imperialism, while also insuring that the journal remain completely produced by Afro-descendants, the editors of Soulbook expressed a revolutionary nationalist tendency similar to RAM’s core philosophies.\textsuperscript{35} Additionally, in the first issue alone five of the eight pieces explored the national liberation movements occurring in Africa, specifically the Congolese “civil war,” in a section of the journal entitled “Africana.”\textsuperscript{36} Continuing its focus on Pan-African solidarity, ensuing issues featured articles about the African National Congress (Spring 1965), “Africa, China and the U.S.” by Cheikh-anta Diop (Fall 1965), African liberation movements in the Portuguese colonies (Winter 1965/66), and the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah (Summer 1966). The editors also introduced their readership to political and cultural issues of the broader African Diaspora with a series of bilingual essays about the Puerto Rican nationalist movement by Alfredo Peña (Fall 1965 & Winter 1965–66), translated poetry by Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire (Fall 1965), an analysis of revolutionary activists in Haiti by Paul Lantimo (Summer 1966), and Carlos Moore’s “Cuba: The Untold Story, part 1” (Summer/Fall 1968).\textsuperscript{37}

Though not ideologically bound to revolutionary nationalism, the editors of Black Dialogue were nonetheless committed to international Black solidarity and politico-cultural struggle. Founded in 1965 by Arthur Sheridan, Abdul Karim, Edward Spriggs and members of the Black Students Union at San Francisco State College, the little magazine was developed as “a meeting place for voices of the Black community—wherever that community may exist.” According to Abby A. Johnson and Ronald M. Johnson (1979), Black Dialogue embodied a more “dialogic” philosophy toward Black liberation than Soulbook, by publishing a diverse array of political, literary, and cultural perspectives, even though there was considerable overlap in contributors.\textsuperscript{38} Between 1965 and 1968—prior to its relocation to New York City—Black Dialogue featured political pieces about Malcolm X (April 1965 and Winter 1967/68); the Us Organization (Autumn 1966); the Black Panther Party’s “Free Huey” Newton campaign (Winter 1967/68); and Aski Touré’s “Letter to Ed Spriggs,” criticizing what he saw as Amiri Baraka’s “Reactionary Super-Blackism” (Winter 1967/68). The little magazine also maintained a Third World outlook with essays on the prospects of economic unity in Africa (July-August 1965); Frantz Fanon’s ideological influence on Black North Americans (Winter 1966); the Arab-Israel conflict (Winter 1967/68); and U.S. militarism in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam (July-August 1965). Furthermore, by Winter 1966, the journal had also established an international presence designating Joseph Seward as its first African editor.\textsuperscript{39}

At the same time, Black Dialogue remained an indispensable cultural conduit for the Black Arts Movement. It included many of the era’s foremost cultural workers in essays on jazz, theater, and visual arts; plays by Ed Bullins, Marvin X, and Dorothy Ahmad; as well as
a poetry section entitled “Soul Street...New Black Poets,” edited by Joe Goncalves, who in 1966 developed *The Journal of Black Poetry*. A few of the BAM poets published in *Black Dialogue* were Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, De Leon Harrison, Welton Smith, Patricia Bullins, Rudy Bee Graham, Joe Goncalves, Marvin X, Ed Spriggs, Clarence Major, and Ahmed Legraham Alhamisi. What is more, the little magazine extended the scope of BAM internationally in its printing of essays about Négritude, as well as works by a number of African and African Diasporic poets, such as Alphonse Ngoma’s “Tom-Tom: on the death of Patrice Lumumba” (July–August 1965), David Diop’s “The Vultures” and “The Renegade” (Winter 1966), Aimé Césaire’s “The Tornado” (Autumn 1966), and Keorapetse Kgositsile’s “Bleached Callouses, Africa, 1966” (Winter 1967/68).

Through his poetry and essays in *Black Dialogue, Soulbook*, and elsewhere, Kgositsile, an exiled South African poet-activist aligned with the African National Congress (ANC), represented a direct connection between Afro-North America and African liberation movements. He identified the Pan-Africanist implications of poetry as “movement. Force. Creative power. The walk of the Sophiatown tsotsi or my Harlem brothers on Lenox Avenue. Field hollers. The Blues. A Trane riff. Marvin Gaye or mbaqandga.” Referring more specifically to the motivation for his poetry, which was the yearning for freedom held by oppressed Black masses globally, Kgositsile declared, Mine is an international black language summoning the power of millions of indignant black people for the final destruction (symbolic or real) of any agency that denies the world love. This is the rumbling of the inevitable fury of millions of black people sick and tired of the role European refugees made them play for centuries.

His poems “Carbon Copy Whiteman,” “Inherent and Inherited Mistrusts,” “For Afroamerica,” “Flirtation,” and the aforementioned “Bleached Callouses” featured in *Soulbook* and *Black Dialogue*, between 1965 and 1967, respectively, contemplate African and Black North American history, memory, and political struggle. “For Afroamerica” written in commemoration of the Watts Rebellion in 1965, Kgositsile envisions “Patrice and Malcolm/in your step as you/dance near the sun/your hand outstretched/to embrace that long/deferred day so close.” Here, he references the martyred Pan-African freedom fighters Patrice Lumumba and Malcolm X as inspirations for the radicalized Black North American movement. He also alludes to Langston Hughes’ earlier poem “A Dream Deferred” in the lines “Now/there will be no ifs/red-lipped dreams too/damned long deferred/explode.” Though Hughes’ poem holds out some hope that the racial situation in the U.S. could change before the “dream” exploded, writing after the Watts Rebellion, Kgositsile suggests that the explosion already symbolized emergent “volcanoes” that would ultimately overrun North America.

**Black arts cultural workers envision the black liberation struggle**

Numerous poets affiliated with the Black Arts Movement shared the opinion that Watts and the ensuing urban rebellions of the mid–1960s represented a burgeoning Black revolutionary consciousness among the masses. They envisioned that the “long hot summers” of 1965 through 1968, where hundreds of urban rebellions disrupted most major cities in the U.S. illustrated the emergence of a protracted war of national liberation and foretold of the impending demise of the modern empire known as the United States of America. Moreover, RAM theorists specifically believed that the uprisings were the domestic manifestation of the Bandung Revolution, directly connecting them to the national liberation struggles in Vietnam and Africa, and that millions of Black North Americans would study the lessons of
Watts and elsewhere, to “develop a more comprehensive and formidable Paramilitary Strategy and Tactics.” The U.S. government also felt that the urban rebellions signified a “calculated design of agitators, militants organizations, or lawless elements” with the intent of overthrowing the system. Subsequently, numerous state and national commissions, poverty programs, congressional hearings, and counterintelligence measures, such as the FBI’s “Ghetto Informant Program” were instituted in the late 1960s to quell what the government believed was an impending revolution.

This assertion intensified following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, while he supported striking Black sanitation workers. As news spread about Dr. King’s murder, urban rebellions erupted in over 100 cities throughout North America, which poet Johnie Scott, of the Watts Writers Workshop, describes as “World War 3” with “the burning of modern Romes: Harlem/Watts/Detroit/Philadelphia/Chicago/Newark/Washington, D.C.” Also, Quincy Troupe, who was a comrade of Scott’s in the Watts Writer’s Workshop, pondered the revolutionary impact of inner-city uprisings. His composition “White Weekend,” which like Scott’s “The American Dream” was published in Clarence Major’s anthology The New Black Poetry (1969), recalls the unrest following Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, where over “76 cities [were] in flames on the landscape/and the bearer of peace/lying still in Atlanta … /Lamentations! Lamentations!/Worldwide!/But in New York, on Wall Street/the stock market went up 18 points …” As influential members of the Watts Writers Workshop, which itself had been organized “From the Ashes” of the Watts Rebellion in 1965, Scott, Troupe, and other writers in the workshop sought to redirect the rage of young Blacks in Los Angeles into local and national struggles for racial and economic justice.

Askia Touré’s aforementioned poem “Song of Fire,” published prior to the rebellions in Harlem (1964), Watts (1965) and the hundreds in the wake of Dr. King’s assassination, is important because it anticipates many of the tropes that radical cultural workers would continue to revisit about the revolutionary nationalist potential of urban rebellions. For instance, his assertion that the unrest illustrated the complete repudiation of nonviolent integration and a turn toward Third World liberation was a theme in many poems about ghetto uprisings. Another metaphor that Askia Touré utilized to describe ghetto uprisings is a “Rising Sun,” which in addition to symbolizing the epistemological shift toward the East, it connotes the awakening of the people as a burning mass.

The portrayal of rebellions as burning masses was reinterpreted as “volcanoes,” as Kgositsele depicts them, or more commonly as “fire.” Sam E. Anderson, for example, a poet and founding member of the Black Panther Party in Harlem, wrote “A New Dance,” about urban rebellions and the “cleansing fire” of revolution that “spreads from city to city/to country to country/to world,” admonishing the reader to “dance the Black flame dance.” Also, a popular phrase attributed to the Watts and other rebellions invoking the trope of “fire” is “Burn, Baby, Burn,” which was a catchphrase coined by the Magnificent Montague, a disk jockey from Chicago who was based in Watts at the time of the rebellion. Though his initial utilization of the term described the moment “when I’m playing the record and I am snapping my fingers and I’m talking my talk, I have reached the epitome, the height,” it more than any other statement came to signify the uprisings of the late 1960s. In the fall 1965 issue, Soulbook published Marvin X’s (then Marvin Jackmon) poem “Burn, Baby, Burn,” where the speaker explicates many of the causations of the unrest, such as enslavement, both physical and mental, external economic exploitation, and police brutality. He also references other popular phrases of the day, from Fannie Lou Hamer’s “Sick an Tired,/Tired of being/Sick and Tired,” to Elijah Muhammad’s assertion that Black North
Americans were “Lost in the/wilderness/Of white america.” Throughout much of the poem, the narrator employs lyrical Black American Vernacular English and end-rhyme couplets, such as

Git all dat motherfuckin pluck,
Git dem guns too, we ‘on’t give
a fuck!
…Burn, baby, burn
In time
He
will learn."^{49}

These lines anticipate what Carolyn Rodgers of OBAC describes as rap-
"poems emblematic of Gil Scott Heron, the Last Poets, the Watts Prophets, and others who are widely recognized as precursors to contemporary Hip-Hop emcees."^{50} Worth Long, a SNCC activist and poet from Atlanta, revisits the trope “Burn Baby Burn” in his “Arson and Cold Lace (or how i yearn to Burn Baby Burn)” first published in the Umbra Anthology in 1967 and reprinted in Major’s The New Black Poetry. As with Marvin X’s piece, Long envisions urban rebellions as the beginning of revolutionary struggle. This poem speaks directly to “False faced America” (read: whites) informing it of its hypocrisy. He also employs alliteration and consonance throughout the poem to emphasize frustration and the urgency of the moment. Moreover, Long repeats a number of words and phrases, such as “False farmers” and “We have found you out” to highlight the consternation felt by Black North Americans due to the government’s continued oppression. However, the speaker defines urban rebellions as a form of retribution, which he calls “The sparks of suspicion/[that] Are melting your waters/and water can’t drown them/
These fires a-burning/and firemen can’t calm them … /Hot flames must devour/The kneeling and fleeing/and torture the masters …”^{51}

The notion that urban rebellions were preparation for future revolutionary violence found poetic voice in the pages of more commercial Black little magazines as well. Zach Gilbert published the first poem about the Watts Rebellion in Negro Digest in December 1965. Gilbert, a poet from Chicago better known for his verses about the civil rights movement, exemplifies the radical shift that events like Watts would have on many Black cultural workers.^{52} The speaker in his poem “For Watts” describes the rebellion as “[t]he day the volcano erupted,” in which “the volcano” serves as a metaphor of the repressed frustrations of working-class Blacks from Watts (and other cities) bursting in a “Bomb of blood/No more to be/Ignored.” Here, Gilbert’s notion that the Black masses in Watts (and elsewhere) asserted themselves onto the historical stage shares much in common with C.L.R. James’ postulation that “ordinary people” makes history.^{53}

Describing an Black North American revolutionary struggle as “The Long March” (1968), which alludes to Mao Zedong’s historic march across China, Chicago poet Alicia Johnson’s rebellion begins ten years in the future (1978) as the “black innocence marches/ left … /right … /left … /right …” raining destruction on “industrial urban cities/watts-slaughs-chicago … /throughout the north american continent,” and demanding reparations rather than food rations: “SAVE THE BEANS/GIVE US THE GREENS.” While the “50,000,000 strong marched/over/the atlantic/to europe … /across asia” the “children of the SUN-GOD” (Black North Americans) are joined by “the people of the moon-god” (Middle Easterners) and a host of Third World “poet-politicians,” reciting “poems of
freeman/CONFUCIUS’ analects,” such as Ho Chi Minh, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mao. Here, she links the desires for self-determination held by Black revolutionary nationalists with Bandung national liberation struggles, which she then extends to the wars for independence and against neo-colonialism in “M-O-T-H-E-R” Africa. It is at this point where the tone of Johnson’s poem shifts, meditating on the ontological sustenance that Black North Americans would receive once reconnected with Mother Africa as well as the reciprocal necessity of their contribution to armed struggle against the racist colonial regimes of Southern Africa:

we ran like a child we ran
standing with apron-land in hand
we ran to her
entering beneath her apron hem
smith’s front door:
beating brains
crushing nuts
of all the afrikaaners i hate
most is
vorster’s dutch guts.
up to the west
cameroon & ghana
to the east
uganda & kenya
to the north pass the sahara
WE RESTED
breathless WE RESTED

As “The Long March” reaches its apogee in 1988—ten years after its initiation—and the mass of militants has exponentially grown the speaker is able to die with the knowledge that the “SUN-GOD” has once again “set on MOTHER’S breast.” Similar to Touré’s “Song of Fire,” there is an embracing of Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, Confucius, Islam, and various African spiritual teachings, which serve as counter-measures to the hegemony of Western Christianity on Black North Americans. Then again, in both poems, reality and myth are inter-twined in revolutionary poetic verses that envision the transformation of modern societies through militant self-determination, as is signified in Johnson’s repetition of the motto “SAVE THE BEANS/GIVE US THE GREENS,” not by the intervention of supernatural entities.54

Contemporary struggles for Black and African descendant self-determination and liberation were waged within the liminal space between past, present, and future. Though returning to a mythic time before enslavement or colonialism was impossible, re-establishing some consciousness of past cultural and social concepts helped to challenge white supremacist notions that Africa and its descendants had no usable philosophies in which to base their modern nations/identities. At the same time, it was important to recognize the complexity of Africa and the African Diaspora by observing the specificities of their cultures. As Amiri Baraka, Frantz Fanon, Askia Touré, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Abbey Lincoln, Toni Cade Bambara, and other theorists posited, the basis for any viable revolutionary culture had to be located in the popular culture (consciousness) of the masses. Observing the national specificities and diversity of Black North American and African peoples was equally imperative if a viable movement for Pan-Africanism was going to take shape. With these ideas in mind and strengthened by the
imagination and possibilities engendered by newly independent African nation-states, a number of Afro-descendant cultural workers and intellectuals attended the First World Festival of Negro Arts and Culture in 1966 and the First Pan-African Cultural Festival in 1969 hoping to build an international and transformative Black Arts Movement.

Notes

7 Du Bois, “American Negroes and Africa,” National Guardian, February 14, 1955. As it appeared that most African Americans were distancing themselves from internationalism, the Bandung Conference in April 1955 signified the confluence of African and Asian anti-colonial movements and their desire to self-determination, which impressed Du Bois.
11 Not only did Bobby Seale refer to Amiri Baraka and artists around the Black House as cultural nationalists, but on numerous occasions in his memoir Seize the Time, he went further to describe the West Coast Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) as “cultural nationalists,” “bastards,” and “shits,” pp. 24–25, 31, 63, and 115. Also, Clarke, After Mecca, describes BAM solely within the context of “black cultural nationalism,” p. 14, as does Van DeBurg, New Day in Babylon, p. 181.
12 See, “Rudy Interviews Aksia Touré: On Dawnsong! And the Black Arts Movement, Part I,” Chickenbones: A Journal for Literary & Artistic African-American Themes. Other important poet-revolutionaries were Marcelino Dos Santos, vice president of FRELIMO; Mario de Andrade, founder of MLPA; Agostinho Neto, president of MLPA; Onesimo Silveira of PAIGC; Ho Chi Minh, president of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; and Sekou Touré, president of the Republic of Guinea.

14 In Muhammad Ahmad’s We Will Return in the Whirlwind: Black Radical Organizations, 1960–1975, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2007), he suggests that Malcolm X “agreed to become the spokesman of RAM but felt his role should remain secret because the United States intelligence apparatus would become alarmed about his connection with Robert Williams, who was in exile in Cuba,” p. 124.


16 Ahmad, “The Relationship of Revolutionary Afro-American Movement to the Bandung Revolution, Black America, Summer-Fall 1965. Though RAM generally closed their essays with “Unite or Perish,” throughout 1965, they ended some communiqués with the salutation “Keep on Pushin’, Change is Gonna Come,” riffing on the popular R&B songs from Curtis Mayfield’s The Impressions and Sam Cook, respectively. See, Black Power Papers III.

17 Askia Touré asserted, “Somewhere along the line, the ‘Keep On Pushin’ in song, in Rhythm and Blues is merging with the Revolutionary Dynamism of COLTRANE of ERIC DOLPHY of BROTHER MALCOLM of YOUNG BLACK GUERRILLAS STRIKING DEEP INTO THE HEARTLAND OF THE WESTERN EMPIRE. The Fire is spreading, the Fire is spreading, the Fire made from the merging of dynamic Black Music (Rhythm and Blues, Jazz, with politics (GUERRILLA WARFARE) is spreading like black oil flaring in Atlantic shipwrecks spreading like Black Fire...” See, “Keep on Pushin’: Rhythm & Blues as a Weapon,” Liberator, (October 1965): 7–8.


19 Jazz has historically been an important reservoir of Pan-African themes and forms. John Bracey notes that U.S.-based jazz musicians had begun working with Cuban and African musicians in the 1930s and 1940s specifically Cuban percussionists, such as Chano Pozo, Candido, Machito, Patato Valdez, and Mongo Santamaria. These and other Afro-Cuban musicians recorded with Black American jazz musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, Kenny Dorham and others. See, Smethurst, The Black Arts Movement, p. 272. In the 1940s, a handful of musicians began incorporating elements of African and Middle Eastern culture/music into jazz, influenced by Art Blakey’s “pilgrimage” to Nigeria where he converted to Islam, as well as the conversion of Ahmad Jamal, Yusef Lateef, and other Black North American musicians to the Muslim faith. See, Richard B. Turner, Islam in the African American Experience, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997/2003): xix–xx and 138–141.

20 Ahmad, “America is the Blackman’s Battle Ground!” (1967) in Black Power Papers III.


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30 For two articles by RAM theorists that envision Black youth as central to any revolutionary movement, see Don Freeman, “Nationalist Student Conference,” Liberator, (July 1964): 18; and Muhammad Ahmad’s “Revolutionary Nationalism and the Afroamerican Student,” Liberator, (January 1965): 13–15.
33 In addition to the essays and communiqués by and about Fanon and Williams, the Fall 1965 issue of the journal describes Fanon as the Nihil obstant, and Robert F. Williams (RAM) as the Imprimatur, which are terms associated with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, p. 150. Also, Harry Haywood’s first contribution to the journal was “The Two Epochs of Nation Development: Is Black Nationalism a form of Classical Nationalism,” Soulbook, (Winter 1965/66): 257–266.
34 See, (To the Peoples of Afroamerica, Africa, and to all the Peoples of the World,” Soulbook, (Winter 1964): 1. Moreover, the editorial made clear the journal’s political “commitment” in dedicating its publication to Felix Moumié, Medgar Evers, Reuben Um Nyobé, the six child-martyrs of the Birmingham bombings of 1963, Patrice Lumumba, Ronald Stokes, Antonio Maceo, the dead Freedom Fighters of Kenya and Algeria, and the endless number of other known and unknown Black Freedom Fighters who have been gunned down by the imperialist oppressors in Afroamerica, Africa, Latin America and Asia,” Ibid, p. 2.
36 “In each issue of SOULBOOK there will be a selection from the African press concerning some controversial subject in Africa,” (Winter 1964): 21–23. However, this section only seems to have been continued in the Spring 1965 issue with the article, “Apartheid is Doomed!” p. 143.
37 Soulbook did not publish part 2 of Moore’s essay on Cuba and racial problems until the Spring/Summer 1969 issue, after almost a year publication hiatus due to changes in editorial staff and direction. See, (Spring/Summer 1969): 319.
42 RAM theorists argued that the struggle of Afroamerican have-nots would aid and be aided by the Bandung struggles for national liberation. “This revolution will pose the supreme crisis for the United States Government (American Fascist State Power) because the American military establishment cannot subdue synchronized Bandung Wars of National Liberation and the African-american Struggle for National Liberation simultaneously. American military forces will be forced to withdraw from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to the United States. Then the Bandung revolutionaries can help immobilize the over-extended American military apparatus by following these forces in “hot pursuit.” See, Don Freeman and Muhammad Ahmad, “The Present Situation and the Struggle for Black State Power,” May 1965, in RAM Papers. Also see, Ahmed, We Will Return in the Whirlwind, p. 145.


52 In an April 1965 symposium published in *Negro Digest*, Gilbert maintained that the “individuality” of the Black writer was the most important aspect of his/her work. “Without art the protest is lost, the message unimportant.” See, “The Task of the Negro Writer as Artist,” *Negro Digest*, (April 1965): 56.
