

THE RHETORIC OF VIOLENCE IN THE POETRY OF DON L. LEE, NIKKI GIOVANNI AND SONIA SANCHEZ: A READING IN ETHNIC POETRY

Dr. Muhammad Moustafa Muhammad Abd-ur-Rahman

Al-Azhar University

ABSTRACT: *The 1960s in America witnessed an abundance of ethnic poetry authored by young black poets. Most of that poetry was devoted to the rejection of the American culture in favor of the consolidation of an African-American personality independent of White America. This new wave of black poetry of the 1960s and '70s was, thus, not only a literature of protest, which gradually turned into violence exercised against white Americans, but also an outcome of a psychological state encapsulated in the internal problems of black Americans. This new black poetry was primarily employed as a catalyst aiming at awakening the ethno-political consciousness of black people. It, therefore, incorporated elements of black culture and mythos, which were meant to enhance the values of the struggle and hence the revolution to be ignited against the American value system. Utilizing the socio-political events of the period as a setting and the "black aesthetic theory," originated in the same decade, the 1960s, as a critical framework, the present study explores the revolutionary poetry of black American poets, such as Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez. In this context, the study will argue that the black poetry of the 1960s is but an offshoot of the protest motif in Afro-American poetry first initiated by the black slave poets of the 18th century. So, consequently, the black poets, dealt with in this study, will be contended to make a breakthrough and to pursue, instead, a black literary nationalism, capable of reflecting the aspirations of the Blacks. Their poetic attempts will be argued to promulgate the "black aesthetic," to revitalize black values and to call for revolution.*

KEYWORDS: Rhetoric, Violence, Black Poetry, Revolutionary Poets of 1960s and 1970s, Catalyst, Ethno-Political Consciousness, the Black Aesthetic Theory, Don L. Lee, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Radical Development, Protest Motif, Afro-American Poetry

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, Stephen E. Henderson emphasizes that "black poetry in the United States (in the Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s) has been widely misunderstood, misinterpreted and underevaluated for a variety of reasons—aesthetic, cultural, and political—especially by white critics" (3). Henderson points out the importance and immediate necessity for black people to appreciate and enjoy black poetry since it is such an important aspect of their culture. He explains,

While there is a significant number of statements by the poets themselves regarding their intentions, these are often unknown to the critics or ignored or misinterpreted by them. Other problems arise from an impatience to translate ideological positions into aesthetic ones, even

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

when such translation is both possible and useful. This Black poetry deserves much more attention than it now receives. (4)

Similarly, in *Black Voices* Abraham Chapman asserts that “American literary criticism largely ignores most of the works by the Afro-American writers” (29):

Too much of American literary criticism is still not simply accepting the materials of the Negro writer—his subject matter and feelings and emotions, which are part of his material—and in violation of well-established critical principles, is arguing with the material rather than addressing itself to how the writer has made use of his particular material. (45-46)

Black writers often criticize American literary criticism for the diminutive and inadequate attention given to black writers and their literature. This issue became more problematic in the last decades of the twentieth century. The emergence of the contemporary black revolutionary poets who “dared to protest for change” added an even greater dimension to this problem; for, throughout literary history, “black writers have been torn between conflicting loyalties of race and art.” On one hand, the black writer sought to be a spokesperson for his people; on another, the reading public hoped to be accepted on their merits as artists. The revolutionary black poet disregarded that internal conflict in favour of a unified political, social, and moral aim of their race (Shouse 52).

As an intense period of political activity, including increased boycotts, riots, and racial violence triggered by a change in the black literary/cultural traditions, the 1960s were different from the 1920s. Seeking a radical “black aesthetic” and revolutionary ideology, the Black poets of the 1960s, unlike their “Harlem Renaissance” predecessors, determined to re-define themselves outside the context of the traditional Euro-American aesthetic perspective. Realising that the American dream was not to become a reality, they formed a new and separate dream for themselves, one based on an elaborate black mythos. Guided by the “black arts movements,” the “black power movement,” the revolutionary speeches of Malcolm X (the courageous advocate of the rights of the blacks) and by LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the black poets of the 1960s emphasized the uniqueness of the black man’s history. They stressed the black community’s need to repudiate the malign influence of the Euro-American literary, political and social estrangements.

Leading the aesthetic and cultural break with the Western-dominated tradition, the black poets of the 1960s, such as Lee, Giovanni, Sanchez and others, directed the attention of the black people towards a new ethnic consciousness in an attempt to liberate them from the economic, political, social and psychological ramifications of slavery and racism and to encourage them to give a voice to their own experiences. They felt the need to speak to their nation in line with Frantz Fanon’s words: “to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people and to become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action” (222). Taking the “black aesthetic theory” of the 1960s as an “ideological basis for their poetry,” they wrote militant and “controversial poems which explore[d] revolutionary themes” such as racial violence and armed resistance. As they disregarded the Euro-American concept of “art for art’s sake and using their poetry as a weapon in the white-black social conflict during the sixties,” they were accused of not only adopting but also promoting a philosophy of violence and hatred towards White America (Gohar 2). They felt

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

that “art [ought] to fight social battles and compensate social wrongs” (Locke 50). Irrespective of the popular success their poetry achieved in black circles, their efforts were condemned by orthodox white critics who deemed their poetry as merely a kind of political propaganda, or rather a form of racism-in-verse, in other words.

In response to the “black aesthetic theory” dedicated to the rejection of American standards of morality, education, politics and social behavior, the black poets of the 1960s created a new poetic language that not only reflected the exclusive feelings and needs of the black community but also enhanced the revolutionary dimensions of black struggle in general. They pursued a poetics based on polemics and political rhetoric, which was inconsistent with the Euro-American concepts of “art for art’s sake.”

Speaking about poetry that should have an impact on society and politics, Addison Gayle, one of the most famous and articulate proponents of a black critical theory, contrasts the black aesthetic with that of its white counterpart. He implies the nationalist impulse in his concept of the movement calling for a kind of poetics which aims to establish Afro-Americans as a nation of independent cultural inheritance. To Gayle, black poetry should correct the hostile policies of a racist society which dehumanized black people by stripping them of their history and traditions; it should protect them against “the polluted mainstream of Americanism” (xxii).

Such an aesthetic which later called for armed resistance against oppression was not available for black poets during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s), not to say before. It was associated with the ethnic awakening of the 1960s, which sprang from the socio-political repercussions of that era. Gayle argues that black poet of that period was engaged “in war with this nation (America)” which was to determine “the future of black art” (23). Hence the duty of the black artist/writer, according to him, was “to point out to black people the true extent of the control exercised upon them by the American society, in the hope that a process of de-Americanization will occur in every black community in the nation.” The black writer ought to “wage unlimited, continual warfare against American society—against its values, its morals, its ethics” (22), an issue which was underlined in ethnic black poetry particularly in the mid and late 1960s.

Despite the great differences between the black poetry of that time and that of any other time, the black poet was always involved in some form of protest or another not only against the racism of the white society but also against the white concept of black literature being an inferior form of writing. In this context, the black American literary tradition initially emerged as a response to 18th and 19th –century allegations that blacks could not create literature due to their inferiority.

Gohar is of the opinion that a basic task of the black poet and critic is to refute racial and philosophical allegations about black people. This task, according to him, constitutes a sub-text of the history of black American literature in general and poetry in particular. Gohar adds that it involves a revolutionary motive which stresses the evils of slavery and racism, running deep in black American poetry (4). This can be easily traced in the following lines by George Moses Horton, an eighteenth-century slave poet, who openly acknowledges the moral conditions of the black Americans:

Alas! And am I born for this,

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

To wear this slavish chain,

Deprived of all created bliss,

Through hardships, toil and pain. (Qtd. in Major: 11)

Horton's position as a black slave living in America does not, however, prevent him from voicing his objectifying feelings. The same attitude is traceable in the works of other antebellum black poets such as James Whitefield and E. Rogers as well as in the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, an apostle of interracial integration, particularly in "We Wear the Mask":

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask. (Qtd. in Barksdale: 157)

The tone of protest is not sharp or bitter in phrases like "let the world dream otherwise" and "wear the mask." However, this reflects the feelings of indignation towards a society which forced the slave to "wear the mask" of slavery and a world that turned its back on his plight. The black poet implicitly conveys his feelings of protest in a poetic style that takes the form of an undercurrent motif, indicative of deep anger.

In the twentieth century, the black poet's protest was deepened and broadened with the appearance of writers/poets such as W. E. B. Dubois, Fenton Johnson and Countée Cullen, who became leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance in the twenties. In "A Litany at Atlanta," written in 1906 after the dramatic consequences of a race riot in the city, Dubois deliberately asks:

Who made these devils? Who nursed them in crime and fed them on injustice? Who ravished and debauched their mothers and their grandmothers? Who bought and sold their crime, and waxed fat and rich on public iniquity? (Qtd. in King: 20)

In a similar vein, Fenton implies in "Tired" some of the despair of the black working class. The speaker begins, "I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody else's civilization." He suggests that both himself and his wife should stop working, letting civilization demolish by indulging themselves in excessive liquor: "Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many. It is better to die than to grow up and find that you are colored" (qtd. in Miller: 51-52). Cullen , in his turn, laments the positions of blacks in modern America: "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" (qtd. in Perry: 19). He admits, "In spite of myself ... I find that I am actuated by a strong sense of racial consciousness ... it colors my writing, I fear, in spite of everything I can do" (qtd. in Baker's *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams*: 29). Though, these poetic extracts reflect a protest attitude, they are different from the "black aesthetic" poetry of the 1960s in that they do not imply hatred or violence.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

Other poets as Ted Mckay, Sterling Brown and Joseph Cotter were not inclined to use racial hostility as a weapon in their poetry. In “White House,” Mckay rises above the level of vengeance and eye-for-an-eye retaliation: “I must keep my heart inviolate/ Against the potent poison of your hate.” In “Brother, Come” Cotter says: “And let us go into our God/ And when we stand before Him / I shall say —/ Lord, I do not hate / I am hated .../ And brother what shall you say?” (qtd. in Davis: 148).

Unlike Mckay, Cotter and Dubois, the black poets of the 1960s aimed to promulgate the “balck aesthetic,” give a new vigor to black values and call for revolution, to put an end to white supremacy, colonialism and oppression. As radical poets, Lee, Giovanni, Sanchez—not to say others—were different from their predecessors in that their poetry focused on black identity, reflecting a protest against racism. They meant their poetry to be an instrument of social change, a tendency reinforced by the social and political circumstances of the period.

The collapse of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the failure of Martin Luther King’s peaceful campaign and his assassination in 1968 indicated that America was determined to keep blacks in subjugation. As a corollary, this led to the emergence of the “black power movement” and the subsequent widespread revival of nationalist feelings among black Americans. Gohar noticed that these feelings were represented by advocates of the “black arts movement,” the cultural/literary counterpart of the “black power movement.” According to him, Poets such as Larry Neal, Lee and Askia Touré “gave expression to the socio-political phenomena around them, enhancing the ethnic consciousness of black people” (6). These poets watched the peaceful demonstrates of blacks spreading throughout America. They also saw the contorted faces of the mobs and the white officers committing crimes and breaking the law. Added to this, instead of recognizing the moral legitimacy and justice of black struggle for civil rights, white Americans used violence against non-violent demonstartors. Consequently, the white American opposition to the black struggle for civil rights led the revolutionary poets of the 1960s to dismiss Luther’s non-violent policy to achieve integration as futile. Lee, Sanchez and Giovanni rejected “the idea of integration with a racial society which sought the genocide of black people.” This alienation from white society resulted in a turning away from its values and its poetic heritage. The change was reflected in the black intellectual world by “a call for the rejection of the Western literary tradition and the establishment of a separatist black aesthetic” (Gohar 6-7).

The angry voices of black poets turned to folk poetry, street poetry and to jazz musicians. In his introduction to *The Black Poets*, Dudely Randall remarks: “this emancipation from white literary models and criticism free them (black poets) to create a new black poetry of their own. They write as black men not as black writers trying to be white. They tried to change language, to trun it around, to give new meanings and connotations to words” (16). With the new racial awareness, the form and style of black poetry changed. In “Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties,” Lee describes these changes in terms of language and style:

The language of the new writers seems to move in one direction; that is to say that the poets of the sixties are actually defining and legitimizing their own communicative medium. We will see that the language as a whole is not formal or proper Anglo-Saxon English. It carries its own syntax, which is not conventional, and by Western standards could be referred to as non-

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

communicative, obscene, profane, or vulgar. In short, it's the language of the street, changed so as to heighten the sensitivity level of the reader. (226)

To him, the radical poets were motivated by "black pride," "black dignity" and "self-determination," for which they "blacked" the language of poetry, using phrases and images that passed into the common speech of the black ghetto (226). As a result, they denounced the integration project of the Civil Rights coalition and called for a new strategy based on black control of the organizations, institutions and resources of the black community.

Motivated by the Black Power Movement, the black poets advocated a revolutionary poetic mechanism to promote black consciousness, cultural identity and self-assertion. This necessitated a demand for a black theory which could seek a "radical reordering," to use Neal's words, of the Euro-American Aesthetic ("Any Day Now" 55). Advocating "poetry for the people" motto, the poets not only attacked anti-black racist America, but also sought to "deconstruct Western literary traditions in order to free black poets from the necessity of mastering the master's language" (Gohar 7). Thus, the revolutionary poetry of Lee, Sanchez and Giovanni, therefore, denounced Dubois's concept of "double-consciousness" as part of the integration policy of the Harlem Renaissance. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois illustrated this concept as thus:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone kept it from being torn asunder. (3)

The destruction of this "double consciousness" is coupled with efforts aimed at "consolidating the Afro-American personality" in Neal's words ("And Shine Swam On," 647). This was but a threefold effort. Psychologically, it necessitated a revolution in the thinking and self-concept of black people; educationally, it required reconstruction and dissemination of the suppressed black historical and cultural experience; and sociologically, it involved the strengthening and unification of the black community (Bronstein 3). According to Mercer Cook,

A profound revolution is occurring in the minds of black people and [...] when that revolution is complete (and there is nothing to stop it save sheer annihilation)—when it is complete, when these Negroes have been turned into black people, conscious and whole and powerful and proud, the revolution will have become externalized, and the United States as a country will either be transformed or destroyed. (67)

The sixties were a time of pride for the black poet to liberate him/her self from the chains of the white literary canon and to create his/her own black aesthetic. Giovanni, for example, asserted her feelings of pride, saying: "I've always prided myself on being a child of the sixties" (qtd. in Bloom: 22). In *We Walk the Way of the New World* (1970), Lee symbolically speaks of a total revolution when he speaks of "a new beginning" for the entire world and the birth of a new nation. He also invokes the memories of the 1960s:

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

the sixties brought us black

at different levels, at different colors we searched

while some of us still pissed into the wind.

we tasted

and turned our heads into a greater vision. (P. 147)

The poets were then obsessed with the black dream of freedom and independence. Being polemical, they probed and investigated the historical conditions that paved the way for black victimization, affirming in the meantime their African roots. In *Dynamic Voices*, Lee characterizes these poets as seers and prophets:

The seers who say and spoke [...] quietly screaming to a Black world that needed a new music. Their voices, many, hit us sometimes unclear and insensitive, sometimes overloud and frightening, often raw and uninhibited but in most cases sincere and selfless, inflicting mental anguish in many of us. The poetry was read on street corners and in alleys, used in liberation schools and incorporated into the Black theatre. (P. 13)

Giovanni garnered initial fame in the late 1960s as one of the foremost authors of the black arts movement. Influenced by the Civil Rights movement and the “black aesthetic theory” of the period, she provided a strong, militant African-American perspective, leading Jane M. Barstow to dub her the “poet of the Black Revolution,” and “the princess of black poetry” (213). In *Gemini* (1976), Giovanni says: “I’m a revolutionary poet in a prerevolutionary world ... And dealing with Blackness as a cultural entity can only lead to revolution” (qtd. in Louis: 60). Giovanni’s strong language and rebellious stand ignited the fire and anger of the black revolution. Her militant poetry, according to B. A. Silliman, is centred on her “political activism and her philosophical stance on racism and the Black Civil Rights Movement” (145). Lee, on another score, proclaims that Giovanni’s poetry “reflects her awareness of the values of Black culture as well as her commitment to the revolution” (*Dynamite Voices*, p. 68). Commenting on herself as poet and black woman, Giovanni says: “I like all the militant poems that tell how we’re going to kill the honkies backside and purge our new system of all honkie things like white women, T.V., voting, and the rest of the ugly, bad things that have been oppressing us so long” (*My House*, p. 10). She calls for physical violence on white America and an overt black revolution capable of changing the status quo. In “My Poem” from *Black Judgment*, she affirms the occurrence of black revolution in the streets of the American cities:

the revolution

is in the streets

and if i stay on

the 5th floor

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

it will go on

if i never do

anything

it will go on

Giovanni points out that the black revolution will continue:

if my car is reclaimed

and my record player

won't play

and if i never see

a peaceful day

or do a meaningful

black thing

it won't stop

the revolution

Regardless of all obstacles and repression, the black revolution will inevitably prevail:

i have been robbed

it looked like they knew

that I was to be hit

they took my tv

my two rings

my piece of African print

and my two guns

if they take my life

it won't stop

the revolution.

During such an ethnic awakening, black poetry was geared towards an execution of violence on the part of the blacks. In line with this militant vision, Giovanni proceeds:

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

I am 25 years old
 black female poet
 wrote a poem asking
 nigger can you kill
 if they kill me
 it won't stop
 the revolution. (P. 35)

By so advocating the ideology of race first, then art, Lee, Giovanni and Sanchez were but following Richard Wright's artistic maxim expressed by John A. Williams' character, Harry Ames in *The Man Who Cried I Am*:

I'm the way I am, the kind of writer I am, and you may be too, because I'm a black man; therefore we're in rebellion; we've got to be. We have no other function as valid as that one. (45)

They were determined to introduce new values within the black community. For them, a "black aesthetic" explicitly required the black American poet to reject traditional Western values and the white aesthetic associated with American standards of morality, since those were indifferent to the realities of black life. These standards, in Nick Aaron Ford's words, included, "American justice, education, social behavior and beauty" (26). R. Roderick Palmer has this to say:

Literature by blacks which does not seek to achieve these standards is irrelevant to black people in these times. Although these standards fuse, they also have separate characteristics. Revolution must give definition to the nation. Revolution must call for and act to bring about an end to white supremacy, colonialism, and oppression embodied in Western ideas which affect and infect the existence of black people. The process of nationhood must conceptualize and structure the projections and possibilities of black existence. (Qtd. in Gibson: 136)

The "black aesthetic" called for a type of political poetry that enhanced the rhetoric of Black Nationalism, strongly defended by Lee in *Don't Cry, Scream* (1969):

I've often come across black artists who feel that they and their work should be apolitical; not realizing that to be apolitical is *to be* political in a negative way for blackfolks. There is *no* neutral blackart; either it *is* or it *isn't*. Blackpoetry will continue to define what *is* and what *isn't*. Will tell what *is* *to be* & how to *be* it (or bes it). Blackpoetry is and will continue to be an important factor in culture building. (P. 16)

Black poetry, as Lee sees it, ought to explore the black experience, using black expressions. It is a black art that strips itself away from the influence of the white's aesthetic world, drawing its material black-life style as well as from black traditions.

In "Blackrunners/Blackmen," Lee's entire message is oriented towards urging all black people to be engaged in an armed struggle against the white men:

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

u beat them

brothers;

at their own game

(out-ran the world-runners)

Whi-te boys

& others

had a dust meal.

u beat them

now

in this time in space

the rule-makers

are also

the vanquished.

anyhow/way

we can't eat gold medals

sportsmanship is racism

in three syllables.

u beat them brothers

and u/we

will beat them again.

they

just don't know

that

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

u've got friends

&

we know how to

fight dirty. (Don't Cry, Scream, P. 103)

The same message is furthered by Giovanni in "Revolutionary Dreams," a poem from *Re: Creation* volume (1970):

i used to dream militant
dreams of taking
over america to show
these white folks how it should be
done

i used to dream radical dreams
of blowing everyone away with my perceptive powers
of correct analysis

i even used to think i'd be the one
to stop the riot and negotiate peace
then i woke and dug
that if i dreamed natural
dreams of being a natural
woman doing what a woman
does when she's natural
i would have a revolution. (P. 20)

Giovanni proceeds to state that "someone said the only emotion/ black men show/ is rage or anger/ which is only partly true," and adds: "My people have suffered/ so much for so long/ we are pitiful/ in our misery." Giovanni attributes black anger not only to white racism but also to economic crises. Lamenting the miserable conditions of her folk, she says:

blacks are still rather cheap

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

to purchase

unemployment insurance

a grant for a program programmed to fail

enough seed money to insure bankruptcy

my people like magnificent race

horses have blinders

there is always talk

of the mighty past

but no plans. (Re: *Creation*, p. 49)

In another poem entitled “Revolution,” Giovanni asks:

how many times must i show that?

taking sides is identifying

and that is commitment

be committed to us

and don’t deal with them

as long as we chose one evil over another

(on some bull shit theory that its lesser)

we’ll have bullshit evil to deal with

let’s build for real black thing

classed revolution. (Black Judgment, p. 27)

Giovanni’s understanding of the function of “the poet” calls to mind the romantic definition made by Shelley:

the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

(“Defence of Poetry” 81)

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

Just like Shelley who intended his revolutionary poets to teach their readers how to empathize, to feel, or more precisely, to be human, Giovanni meant her poetry to be continually resistant both in style and idea, and to be for ever fighting for social justice.

In “Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle,” Le Roi Jones comments on the functional aspect of revolutionary literature saying: “The function of art was to teach and educate and move and unify and organize people, not to mystify them or offer dazzling support of the status-quo!” (8). About those who complain that this literature is not art but didactic politics, his simple reply is “we just argue that they have a bourgeois view of art” (qtd. in Hull: 149). Moreover, the artist in the Black Aesthetic theory is cast in the role of a committed revolutionary fighting for radical social change. Literary works become weapons in his hands against oppression and injustice. Major declares that “Our weapons are cultural, our poems,” and goes on to say that “black poets here are practically and magically involved in collecting efforts to trigger real social changes” (12).

Being used as a weapon against white racism, black poetry, according to Jones, “must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution” (*Home*, 112). In his poem “Black Art” (1969) from *Black Magic Poetry*, Jones further says that poems are “bullshit” unless they are used as weapons to fight not only the white establishment but to destroy also the middle class negroes who betray the cause of the black nation. He calls for “dagger poems to slay and ‘clutch the throats’ of the Jewish exploiters and poems to disarm and destroy the cops.” He says: “poems that wrestle cops into alleys/ and take their weapons leaving them dead/ with tongues pulled out...” (qtd. in Baker’s *Reading Black Essays*: 4-5). Lee writes that black poetry is “like daggers, broken brew bottles, bullets, swift razors from black hands cutting through slum landlords and Negro dope pushers” (qtd. in Major: 32).

Similarly, in “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro,” from the collection *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1970), Giovanni advocates and exhorts open violence against a racist society that seeks to eliminate the entire black race. She asks for the literal death of white America. Giovanni declares:

Nigger
Can you kill
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can a nigger kill a honkie
Can a nigger kill the Man
Can you kill nigger
Huh? nigger can you
kill

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

Do you know how to draw blood

Can you poison

Can you stab-a-jew

Can you kill huh?nigger

Can you kill

can you run a protestant down with you

'68 El Dorado

(that's all they're good for anyway)

Can you kill

Can you piss on a blond head

Can you cut it off

Can you kill

A nigger can die

We ain't got to prove we can die

We got to prove we can kill

They sent us to kill in

Japan and Africa

We policed europe

Can you kill

Can you kill a white man. (P. 12)

Whenever the poet is addressing a “nigger” audience, the purpose of the message is to force a positive change on them. Giovanni violently incites the blacks to be murderers and killers so as to survive in such a hostile society. To her, blacks should kill the white man and those who have helped him in his war against black people. She asks black revolutionaries to kill the American Jews who have participated in the economic exploitation of the black folks who live in a miserable conditions in black ghettos. Since black soldiers have been used by different American administrations in their wars against Japan and revolutionary African countries, blacks are licensed to kill their enemies inside the American societies. Blacks, in the poem, are authorized to cut the heads of whites “can you piss on a blond head” and stab Jewish traitors.

The poem reaches a climax as the poet legitimizes all possible means of killing, poisoning, strangling, cutting the heads, and using fire weapons:

Can you kill the nigger
in you
Can you make your nigger mind
die
Can you kill your nigger mind
And free your black hands to
strangle
Can you kill
Can a nigger kill
Can you shoot straight and
Fire for good measure
Can you splatter their brains in the street
Can you kill them
Can you lure them to bed to kill them. (P. 13)

Smitherman explains that Giovanni “bombards the audience with words, working a kind of hypnotic Black magic on their souls, and hitting the mind and heart in fresh, unexpected ways like good poetry does” (271). She urges blacks to use maximum violence against whites: “Can you splatter their brains in the street” and she encourages black women to “lure them to bed to kill them.” The racist / violent language of the poem and the resonance or repetition of lexical items like “kill,” “honkie,” “poison,” “piss,” “strangle” and “stab” reveal the radical position of the poet during the 1960s. The poem reveals the extreme militancy as it is intended to foment violence by asking for the literal death of white America. In using the abusive term “nigger” repeatedly, Giovanni tries to “demythologize it and take the racist venom injected by white people out of it” (Gohar 20). She also exploits the complex connotations of the term “nigger” by using it in the following lines to suggest the consciousness that wants to conform with white standards: “Can you kill the nigger/ in you/ Can you make your nigger mind/die.”

To kill the “nigger” is to transform consciousness. The poem’s short abrupt lines, repetition of phrases and use of the vernacular make it one of Giovanni’s oral poetry pieces. The entire poem is cast in the form of “a street chant and the rhythm is intended to drive the black masses into the streets, ready to fight.” It embodies not only the literal demand for the killing of whites but also the “symbolic need on the part of the blacks to kill their own white values” (Evans 221, 220).

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

The notion of becoming a black man involves killing “the nigger in you” and killing the enemy: ‘Can a nigger kill a honkie.’ Giovanni believed that violence is required to revolutionize a racist America, and that counter violence was necessary because blacks died everyday as the sixties became “a long funeral day.” Even in her “Love Poem,” Giovanni says:

it's so hard to love
people
who will die soon
the sixties have been one
long funeral day
the flag flew a half-mast
so frequently
seeing it up
i wondered what was wrong.

After the murder of Luther King and the election of Richard Nixon as president, America became dedicated to the death and destruction of black Americans. The speaker in the poem concluded that:

it's masochistic
(derived from colored
meaning sick to kiss massa)
to love honkies. (*Black Feeling*, p. 34)

The poem indicates that black people must recognize the self-destructiveness of choosing to love white people. Blacks “must not die / with America but must instead celebrate that death when it comes as “our first international holiday” (*Black Feeling*, p. 34). This radical standpoint made Giovanni deal with the act of killing as a sign of manhood. She considered violence as the only way out of suffering. Giovanni redefined the function of poetry, affirming that its pragmatic value and effect were more important than its expressive qualities. Major declares that “Our weapons are cultural, our poems,” affirming that “black poets are practically and magically involved in collective efforts to trigger real social change” (12). Giovanni invoked her fellow poets to write revolutionary black poems and not to imitate white poetry:

you should write and are capable of writing
a tall lean explosive poem / a blck poem

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

not just a quiet half white hating poem. (*Black Judgment*, p. 33)

In her “Poem for Black Boys,” she urged young black boys to carry weapons and be involved in the holy war against white American. She told them not to follow the peaceful and non-violent policy of Martin Luther King. Giovanni encouraged the young black generation to go into the streets and be engaged in violent action against the racist white police forces. According to her, they would be heroes only if they were indulged in the bloody revolution against the enemy of the black nation. She says:

DO NOT SIT IN DO NOT FOLLOW KING

GO DIRECTLY TO STREETS

This is a game you can win ...

And you will understand all too soon

That you, my children of battle, are you heroes

You must invent you own games and teach us old ones

how to play. (*Black Judgment*, p. 5)

In both *Black Judgment* (1968) and *Black Feeling, Black Talk*, Giovanni revealed herself as a revolutionary/ aggressive activist. She had little patience with slow change and she exhorts blacks to rise up and take arms against the enemy. In “A Litany for Peppe,” a poem from *Black Judgment*, Giovanni comments that “[t]hey had a rebellion in Washington this year” (P. 1). “Black Power” had consequences: “[J]ust about 200 white people died/ because they conspired to kill Martin Luther King” (pp. 5-6). Here, Giovanni legitimizes the revolutionary impulse to violence. “Blessed,” she asserts:

Blessed be machine guns in Black hands

All power to grenades that destroy our oppressor

Peace Peace, Black Peace at all costs. (P. 8)

Giovanni distorted Biblical text, adding an intertextual context instead:

And to you my Black boy

A Revolution

My gift of love

Blessed is he who kills

For he shall control this earth. (P. 9)

The irony here is that those who killed King are now controlling the earth. So, the poet stirs up angry black hands to retaliate for King's death. Here, the function of the poet and the notion of the poem are called into question by such events, which seem to demand the sword, not the pen as the speaker/ poet finds out. Giovanni finds salvation and redemption in violence, in "grenades" and "machine guns." She will "clean my gun/ and check my kerosene supply" because these are not poetic times (qtd. in Harper: 254). She affirms the significance of black revolution and struggle. Reiterating the necessity to kill, Giovanni concludes with this inversion of Christ's beatitudes: "Blessed is he who kills for he shall control the earth." Another illustration of Giovanni's strong revolutionary message is seen in "Records," from *Black Judgment* in which she motivates black people to participate in the destruction of the American racial system if they wish to survive in this evil society.

A negro needs to kill
something
trying to record
that this country must be
destroyed
if we are to live
must be destroyed if we are to live
must be destroyed if we are to live. (P. 17)

In the same poem, Giovanni blames blacks for their non-violent policy toward their oppressors, "black people haven't committed a major assassination." She stimulates them to commit acts of violence against the white forces that brutalize black folks everywhere. A rebel, Giovanni believes that there is no way to avoid being involved in the revolution and also blames negroes who prefer to stay away from violence:

trying to record
the feeling of shame
that we Black people
haven't yet
committed a
major assassination
which very desperately
must be

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

done

trying to record the

ignorance of the

voices

that say

i'm glad a negro

didn't do it. (P. 16)

Giovanni's 'For Saundra' provides the rationale for the new black poetry in that she argues that current conditions allow her only to write political poems that promote revolution. Ron Karenga insisted: "All art must reflect and support the Black revolution" (qtd. in Evans: 221). Giovanni discards love poems and directs her poems to support the black revolution. She says:

i wanted to write

a poem

that rhymes

but revolution doesn't lend

itself to be-bopping

maybe i shouldn't write

at all

but clean my gun. (*Black Judgment*, p. 31)

In the poems of her volume *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk*, Giovanni urges blacks to defend themselves against the racist policy of the white society. Black people were blackmailed by the white government, were trained to be killers and war criminals as they defended the white government's imperialist policy in Vietnam and in other places around the world. Now it is time to defend their dignity using violence:

We kill in Viet Nam

for them

We kill for UN & NATO & SEATO & US

And everywhere for all alphabet but

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

BLACK

Can we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK

Learn to kill niggers

Leran to be Black men. (P. 13)

In “Adulthood,” from the *Black Judgment*, Giovanni gives a logical explanation for a violent revolution. She tells her people that the white man has assassinated black leaders like Malcolm X and Luther King, in addition to other leaders like Patrice Lumumba. The white police have arrested many black American artists such as Le Roi Jones and forced others to leave the country. She says:

Hammarskjold was killed

and lumumba was killed

and diem was killed

and malcolm was killed

and evers was killed

and schwerner, chaney and Goodman were killed

and liuzzo was killed

and stokely fled the country

and le roi was arrested

and pollard, Thompson and cooper were killed

and king was killed. (P. 18)

The assassination is the theme of Giovanni’s famous revolutionary poems “Reflections on April 4, 1968,” the date of king’s assassination where she clearly states her revolutionary aim and preaches the destruction of America as a terrorist country, advocating the deliberate murdering of all free people in the world:

What can I, a poor Black Woman, do to destroy america? This is a question, with appropriate variations, being asked in every Black heart. There is one answer—I can kill. There is one compromise—I can protect those who kill. There is one cop-out—I can encourage others to kill. There are no other ways. (*Black Feeling*, p. 54)

Giovanni wonders how she can ever participate in the destruction of the evil American society: “What can I, a poor Black woman do to destroy America? ... There is one answer—I can kill.”

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

There is one compromise— “I can protect those who kill.” There is one cop-out—“I can encourage others to kill.” There are no other ways. The collapse of poetic structure in the poem parallels the collapse of everything in the American society in the 1960s. Giovanni considers King’s murder a declaration of war on the black nation, because King was a Civil Rights leader who called for peaceful negotiations with whites in order to get blacks assimilated in the fabric of the American mainstream society. Giovanni accuses the American president of murdering Luther King:

How can one hundred and fifty policemen allow a man to be shot? Police
were seen coming from the direction of the shots. And there was no
conspiracy? Just as there was no violent reaction to his death. And no city
official regretted his death but only that it occurred in Memphis. We heard
similar statement from Dallas … this country has too many large southern
cities. (*Black Feeling*, pp.5-6)

The reference to “southern cities” evokes the image of a pro-slavery South where blacks were killed and lynched to satisfy the psychotic ego of a racist society. Giovanni urges black warriors to go into the streets rioting, destroying shops and stealing guns. She asks white people to be silent and leave blacks to mourn their slain hero. She makes use of the murder and asks all blacks to begin the “Black Revolution.”

Lee is another revolutionary poet who laments the murder of Luther King. In his poem entitled, “Assassination” from his anthology *Don’t Cry, Scream*, Lee describes the crime scene:

it was wild
the
bullet hit high
(the throat-neck)

& from everywhere:

the motel, from under bushes and cars,
from around corners and across streets,
out of the garbage cans and from rat holes
in the earth
they came running.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

with

guns

drawn

they came running

toward the King—

all of them

fast and sure—

ask if

the King

was going to fire back.

they came running,

fast and sure,

in the

wrong

direction. (P. 99)

Here, Lee portrays the brutal murder in such a way as to urge blacks to commit counter crimes against whites. King was delineated as a hopeless victim in the hands of white professional criminals, who were sponsored by the white racial government: “It was wild, the bullet hit high/ (the throat-neck).” The poet affirms that King’s murder was a well-planned action, since the assassins came from everywhere: “From the motel, from under the bushes and cars/ from around corners and across streets/ out of the garbage cans and from rat holes they came running with guns drawn / they came running towards the King.”

This is how Lee portrays the horrible moment of King’s murder: “They came running toward the King/ all of them fast and sure.” Lee here presents a vivid image of white assassins carrying guns and coming from all directions to kill an innocent man in a coward and cold-blooded way. Although he advised his people to adopt Ghandi’s policy of peaceful struggle against British colonization, King was killed by the white “police dogs.”

In “One-Sided Shoot-Out,” Lee portrayed the murder of Hampton and Mark Clark, the black nationalists who were killed by Chicago police when sleeping. By displaying acts of white violence, Lee gave legitimacy to black counter revolt. According to him, blacks have been objects of violence in white America. Black people ought to be licensed to kill which is not terrorism but self-defence. Lee’s poetic message is created out of his desire to revolutionize the system of which his people are a part. He took the role of the militant activist, who moved his

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

people toward resisting white racism through violence: "React to white actions/ with real acts of black action/ BAM BAM BAM" (*Think Black*, p. 43). The connotations of the sound "BAM" were obvious; they were echoes of a machine-gun bullets penetrating white skulls. Lee concluded that violence should be the only way for blacks to confront the police dogs and the white police guerrillas. He accepted any acts of violence committed against whites: "U beat them brothers at their own game." Moreover, Lee emphasized that blacks could commit any terrorist acts because backs are violent by nature: "Killing is a game of dirt. Only black people play it fair." The poet also affirmed that only blacks "know how to fight dirty" (*We Walk the Way of the New World*, pp. 177, 103).

The use of violence as a way of self-defence was the only option left for black people. In "What Does Non-violence Mean?", an essay from *Home: Social Essays*, Jones argues that black Americans were subjected to white tyranny and oppression for centuries, simply because they remained non-violent in their resistance: "If one examines the history of black men in the West, and especially in the United States, one finds that they have most often been objects of violence rather than perpetrators" (144). In a country like America, built on oppression and racism, the militant could not but advocate non-violence or passive resistance as a means of struggle. Exploring a different alternative, the black poets strongly supported violence. In "For a Black Poet," Gerald Barrax illustrates some aspects of the violence culture of the 1960s:

The things we make as men
are guns triggered more efficiently than poems
and knives / and targets for the fires.

Men make revolutions

Poems will bring us to resurrection

There is prophecy in fire
and a beauty you cannot see
a sound you cannot hear
below the exploding level of your poems
dress to kill
shoot to kill
love to kill
if you will
but write to bring back
the dead. (P.358)

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

There is no difference between poetry and guns; both can be used as weapons during any given revolution. As the cycle of violence has no end, no limits as long as hate exists which means that all forms of violence can be exercised. Thomas Dooley says:

and we must be that hate
coiled about their hearts
like a striking cobra!
black poisons to fill their veins,
bringing bullet holes
and death
an apple pie! (P. 349)

In “The Wall,” a poem from his volume *Think Black*, Lee speaks of the need to create revolutionary poetry to achieve the goals of the black masses:

art for people’s sake
black people
the mighty black wall

black photographers
who take black pictures
can you dig,
black burn
le roi
muslim sisters,
black on gray it’s hip
they deal, black photographers deal blackness for
the mighty black wall

black artists paint,
du bois / gravey / gwen brooks

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

stokely / rap / james brown

trane / miracles / ray charles

Baldwin / killens / Muhammad ali

alcindor / blackness / revolution

our heroes, we pick them, for the wall

the mighty black wall / about our business, blackness

can you dig?

if you can't you ain't black / some other color

negro maybe?? (P. 67)

Lee's poem celebrate "Muslim sisters" in the black community as well as famous black figures who contribute to black struggle such as Dubois, Gravey, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rap Brown, Lee Roi Jones, James Baldwin, Muhammad Ali and the black musician Coltrane. Lee seeks to underline the revolutionary dimensions of black poetry and its peculiarity as an expression of collective black consciousness. He is convinced that black pride must be developed through black identity, and hence, there can be no assimilation with "whiteness." Black poetry is antithetical to white poetic standards and white critical theories:

whi-te people can't stand

the wall,

killed their eyes, (they cry)

black beauty hurts them—

they thought black beauty was a horse—

stupid muthafuckas, they run from

the mighty black wall

brothers & sisters screaming,

"Picasso ain't got shit on us.

send him back to art aschool"

we got black artists

who paint black art

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

the mighty black wall
 negroes from south shore &
 hyde part coming to check out
 a black creation
 black art, of the people
 for the people,
 art for people's sake. (*Black Pride*, p. 66)

One of the functions of black poetry is “to undermine the white poetic concepts, associated with a racist system, in order to build a new black aesthetic based on the humanity of black people” (Gohar 37). In “The Black Arts Movement,” Neal argues that the black revolutionary poet’s task is to revise or even destroy “the Western aesthetics” in order to revitalize their own aesthetic. The Black Aesthetic, Neal asserts, must uphold and revere Black culture, Black folk traditions, and incite Black people to radical revolutionary action and change. Neal says:

It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structure. We advocate a cultural evolution in art and ideas. The cultural value inherent in Western history must either be radicalised or destroyed, and we will probably find that even radicalization is impossible. In fact, what is needed is a whole new system of ideas. (268)

Since the white aesthetic was not suitable for the revolutionary goals of black people, a black aesthetic had to be adopted to fulfill the spiritual needs of the black masses in America. Jones calls for poems that are capable of killing “assassin poems,” poems that “shoot guns” (*Black Magic*, p. 202). Giovanni asks for “explosive poems” but Lee goes beyond this literal poetic violence. In “Two Poems” from *Black Pride* (1968), Lee demonstrates that radical poetry is not enough to force the enemy to give up his racist policy. Unlike Jones and Giovanni, Lee is dissatisfied with a poetics which is used as “a weapon in the holy war against oppression.” He believes that “revolutionary poetic rhetoric, though essential, is not sufficient to destroy the enemy” (Gohar 38). He urges black people, including poets and writers, to turn into real fighters against oppression. He calls for the use of concrete acts of violence against the enemy, instead of writing ethno-political poetry:

i ain't seen no poems stop a. 38,
 i ain't seen no stanzas break a honkie's head,
 i ain't seen no metaphors stop a tank,
 i ain't seen no words kill
 & if the word was mightier than the sword

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

pushkin wouldn't be fertilizing Russian soil /
 & until my similies can protect me from a night stick
 i guess i'll keep my razor
 & buy me some more bullets. (*Black Pride*, p. 53)

The references to "razor," "bullets," "tanks" in addition to other allusions to "murder," "killing" and the racist language that describes the white man as "a honkie" reflect what Baker describes as a discourse of "hate," a "racism-in-reverse" (*Afro-American Poetics* 161), which characterizes the black poetry of the time. The reference to violence and to guerilla warfare tactics, as in "I'll keep my razor / and buy me some more bullets," is not only integral to the socio-political situation in the 1960s but also echoes the consequences of a long-time policy advocated by the American society. Barrett Watten emphasized that black violence was a part of the reaction against a state-sponsored violence, extending from the Jim Crow laws to the Vietnam war:

The violence was state sponsored: from the Jim Crow laws the civil rights movement fought to overturn, to the massive bombing of North Vietnam. This violence had many forms: from the 1960s Cold War paranoia that was still a factor in the 1960s culture, to police oppression of blacks, leading to urban riots beginning in Detroit in 1967, to assassinations and war. (173)

Within this context, Lee's poetry reflects the violence and militancy of the period or, rather, the "rejection of current American standards of morality, justice, education, social behavior, beauty and aesthetic and their replacement by black standards tailored to fit the exclusive needs of the black American sub-culture" (Ford 303). Lee believed that poets ought not to limit themselves to writing poetry, but they ought to be physically involved in revolution. He urged all black poets to turn their pens into guns and swords because no stanzas could ever be able to break "a honkie's head" and "no metaphors [could] stop a tank." The poet himself kept "a razor" and would buy "more bullets" for his machine gun. Lee developed a revolutionary rhetoric of black opposition to be used in the face of an oppressive system, his technique of extensive use of offensive language and abrasive expressions aiming at insulting the white American society.

Lee developed a strategy or an ideology of violence as a reaction only to become a dominant motif in his poetry. He believed in violence as a way of resistance because the killing instinct in the white man's psyche would inevitably lead him to exterminate the black people. In *Think Black*, the white man is depicted as a wild beast, a savage that must be controlled by the use of violence: "Re-act now niggers ... React to animals: cage them in zoos" (p. 43). Violence continues in "One Sided Shoot-out," from *We Walk the Way of the New World*, as Lee encourages his folks to wipe out the white race in order to be able to live in peace:

it won't be yr/mamas or yr/brothers & sisters or even me,
 we all think that we do but we don't.
 it's not new and
 under all the rhetoric the seriousness is still no serious.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

The national rap deliberately continues, “wipe them niggers out.” (no talk do it, no talk do it, no talk do it, notalk notalknotalk do it). (P. 176)

The use of violence against whites, according to Lee, is a form of revolution that should not cease unless its aims are finally realized:

the question will be asked & the answers will be the new clichés.
but may be,
just maybe we'll finally realize that “revolution” to the real-world
is international 24hours a day and that 4:30 AM is like
12:00 noon,
it's just darker.

But the evil can be seen if u look in the right direction.

In such an atmosphere, the black poet is not a creative artist anymore; he turns into a gangster, who gives orders to his fellow gunmen, during their battle with the white “pigs” and “muthafuckas.” Lee says:

were the street lights out?
did they darken their faces in combat?
did they remove their shoes to *creep* softer?
could u not see the whi-te of their eyes,
the whi-te of their deathfaces?
didn't yr.look-out man see them coming, coming, coming?
or did they turn into a ghostdust and join the nights' fog?
it was mean.
& we continue to call them “pigs” and “muthafuckas.” (P. 177)

The vulgar expressions betray the trace of street language—an honest vocal portrayal of black America. The black poet advises the black revolutionists to “sleep when there is a watching eye”

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

and to “remember the bobby button.” This is not a traditional revolution but a guerilla warfare, i.e. “a game of dirt / only black people play it fair,” in Lee’s words.

For Lee, the black revolution aims to change the political and social status quo of the black community. In his introduction to *We Walk the Way of the New World*, Lee claims that the black revolution is a pattern of “human protest” to achieve that change:

We need innovators and producers of positive change. The older generation’s resistance to change is natural; so how do we change without alienating them? How can we reduce if not completely eliminate all the negativism, pettiness and cliquishness that exist and are so damaging? How can we create a common consciousness, based on a proven humanism—as we stop trying to prove our humanism to those who are inhuman? (P. 136)

The concept of human protest that leads to change apparently clashes with Lee’s call for change through violence. In his poem “A Poem to Complement Other Poems,” Lee claims that the only way of change is to give every black man “a license to kill,” simply because negroes were “licensed to be killed”:

change

change nigger.

saw a nigger hippy, him wanted to be different. changed.

saw a nigger liberal, him wanted to be different. changed.

saw a nigger conservative, him wanted to be different.

changed.

niggers don’t u know that niggers are different. change.

a doublechange. nigger wanted a double zero in front of

his name; a license to kill,

niggers are licensed to be killed. change. a negro: something pigs eat.

change i say change into a realblack righteous aim. (*Dynamite Voices*, p. 30)

Towards the end of the poem, the word “change” is used with increasing frequency to emphasize the revolutionary message. The poem’s prose style and unembellished ghetto idiomatic language make it apprehensible to mass audience. Lee asks blacks to change by becoming rebels who reject the dictates of a racist society: “stop being an instant yes machine;” “change into a necessary blackself” and “change like a blues song talking about a righteous tomorrow.” To him, change takes place only when blacks identify their real enemy and kill him:

know the realenemy, change, know the realenemy. change

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

yr/enemy change the real

change know the realenemy change, change, know the

realenemy, the realenemy, the real

realenemy change you're the enemies/ change your change

your change your enemy change

your enemy. know the realenemy, the world's enemy.

know them know them know them the

realenemy change your enemy change your change

change change your enemy change change

change change your change change change.

Yours truly, mind nigger. (*Don't Cry, Scream*, p. 38)

The same culture of hate which turns Lee's poems into weapons or daggers is echoed in Giovanni's poetry. Giovanni herself said: "My poems be talking about blk/people and the kind of trickology the devil [white man] done devised of us" (qtd. in Major: 22).

Through his poetry Lee enhances the black identity, the black pride, and the positive black values which are the major constituents of a strong black consciousness. His poetic message is that a strong black consciousness will force black people to see the need for inevitable black revolution in America. But, Lee's revolutionary message calls for an end to white supremacy and to all those oppressive ideas, which prevailed in America. He asks his black folk to disavow any white social, political, economic, aesthetic, or religious systems. Believing that with this rejection black people will move towards full liberation as a race and nationhood. As a result, Lee's poetic revolutionary movement becomes a new established order, wherein the black race may richly receive the benefits of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In spite of the "obscene and vulgar characteristics of this kind of poetry," black poets, Gohar remarks, claim that "they create poems which are believed to be a symbol of black pride, a source of collective identity and an expression of the unique culture of the black ghetto" (41). In "The Literature of Black," Carolyn Rodgers argues that the use of black English is integral to the "black aesthetic theory" as "it becomes a means of deconstructing the language of the colonizers: to start sentences with capital letters, to end sentences with periods/ to use commas etc etc etc to seek the colonizers' language, correctness, learnedness and subtle more destructive order" (12). These distinguishing features became major forms of expression in defining the black aesthetic poetry as well as in emphasizing the unique qualities of the black man's style, his traditions, and his/ her innate creativity.

The rejection of the colonizers' language is part of a process in which the advocates of the Black Aesthetic attempt to undermine the historical literary images and metaphors of whiteness which

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

connote white as pure and good. In *Dynamite Voices*, Lee points out that “a black poem is written not to be read and put aside, but to actually become a part of the giver and receiver. It simply makes an act” (p. 23). Lee refuses to use white poetic devices because “blackwriting to Afro-Americans is the antithesis of a decadent culture that over the centuries has systematically neglected and dehumanized us.” Hence, the black poets used black language patterns: the slow rate of speech, the short phrases, the incorrect phonetic spellings, the dropping of the word endings, the slashed words and four-letter expletives in order to scream death to the white man. They also attempted to shape words into “sophisticated bullets” (p. 22) to indoctrinate the minds of black people and to produce a collective black consciousness through their poetry.

Sanchez was also a product of the black revolutionary movement. She dedicated herself to upholding the tenets of the militant black aesthetic. Much like Lee’s message, Sanchez’s poetic task was to write poetry totally concerned with the destruction of the white American social, political, and moral system. Poetry for her was a means of resistance and survival, a means to express “the totality of the self;” i.e. a black woman’s reality and view of the world, one that is neither marginalized, nor objectified by racist governments (Christian 172). Dyed with black culture, Sanchez’s poetry raises the consciousness of the folk, as it speaks directly to the spiritual needs of the black people. Sanchez’s poetry lays a fierce legacy of struggle, which is rooted in what Patricia Hill Collins calls a “Black woman’s culture of resistance” (10).

Bold and direct, Sanchez begins her revolutionary message in her first volume of poems, *Home Coming* (1969), with an overall theme of black pride and identity. Overtly political, Sanchez does not only seek to implant the seeds of revolution in her own people, but also to attack white racism, employing sharp, direct, explosive lines that shoot like guns. She links art with politics, speaking directly to a Black audience, choosing themes that “center on race or the idea of liberation” (Joyce 207). She demands her black folk to elevate their realization that they are black, employing irony to ignite their will towards “self-determination and nationhood” (Neal 187). In a poem that bears the title of the collection, Sanchez maintains her pride in blackness, saying directly upon closing the poem:

this is for real.

black.

niggers

my beauty.

baby.

i have learned it

ain’t like they say

in the newspapers. (*Home Coming*, p. 9)

The speaker turns to a very forceful revolutionary image:

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

on my face
 is malcolm
 spitting his metal seeds
 on a country of sheep;
 on my face
 are young eyes
 breathing in black crusts
 we are black
 beautiful and our black
 ness sings out.

(P. 23)

The overall message content of Sanchez's second volume, *We A BaddDDD People* (1970), is militant. It is oriented towards a stronger message of revolution. Sanchez directs her own attention to the rejection of white ideas and directs black people's attention towards liberation and black nationhood. Like Lee's approach, she adopts the destruction of white false values, beliefs, and behaviour which negatively affect black people. But unlike Giovanni, Sanchez does not directly adopt physical destruction of a white race. She speaks of "warriors" and "killing" in three of her poems in this collection ("life/poem," "listen to big black at s.f state," and "To Fanon, culture meant only one thing – an environment shaped to help us & our children grow, shaped by ourselves in action against the system that enslaves us").

We A BaddDDD People is divided into three sections. The first is "Survival Poems." The dominant theme in this section is the destruction of passive ideas of Western civilization which oppressed black people. Illustrative of this theme is the message in a poem entitled "blk/rhetoric." The speaker asks:

who's gonna make all
 that beautiful blk/ rhetoric
 mean something. (*We A BaddDDD People*, p. 15)

Later, the same speaker points out the destructive hang-ups, of which the black people must rid themselves to survive as a race:

who's gonna give our young
 blk / people new heroes
 (instead of catch / phrases)

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

(instead of cad / ill / acs)

(instead of pimps)

(instead of wite / whores)

(instead of drugs)

(instead of new dances)

(instead of chit / ter / lings)

(instead of quick / fucks in the hall / way

of wite / america's mind). (P. 16)

In a poem entitled “there are blk/puritans” (of the same collection), Sanchez persuades her black audience to realize that there are blacks who must destroy their mental oppression, which white America bestowed upon them. She develops this message as she concludes the poem:

there

are blk / puritans among us

who must be told that

WITE / AMERICA

is the

only original sin. (P.17)

In the more militant poems in the final section of this Collection, the poems entitled “TCB-en Poems,” Sanchez’s message is the strongest and most aggressive of all her published poetry. TCB involves a strident war cry for power and a call to arms with amusement at how “real/bad” we “bees.” Sanchez predicts an imminent revolution. Similar to Lee’s message in his volume *Don’t Cry, Scream*, Sanchez exhorts black people to begin the “real work” of building nationhood. She begins this section with a message, clearly stating her revolutionary position. The poem is entitled “listen to big black at a.f. state.” Sanchez forcefully declares:

no mo meetings

where u talk about

whitey. the cracker

who done u wrong

(like some sad / bitch

who split in the middle of yo / comen)

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

just. gitting. stroNNnger.

maken warriors

outa boys.

blk/ wooooomen

outa girls.

no mo tellen the man he is

a dead/ die/ en/ moth

fucka.

just a sound of drums.

the sonnnnnNNG of chiefs

pouren outa our blk/ sections.

(*We A BaddDDD People*, p. 48)

Now the revolutionary poet tells what is needed and she concludes:

aree-um-doo-doo-doooooo-WORK

aree-um-doo-doo-doooooo-LOVE

arem-doooo-UNITY

arem-doooo-LAND

arem-doooo-WAR

arem-doooo-Builden

aree-um-doo-doo-doooooo. MalcolMmmm

aree-um-doo-doo-doooooo. ElijahHHH

aree-um-doo-doo-doooooo. Imamuuuu

just the sonnnng of chiefs.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

loud with blk/ nationhood

bullden. (P. 49)

“To Fanon, culture meant only one thing – an environment shaped to help us & our children grow, shaped by ourselves in action against the system that enslaves us” is a poem that directly speaks out against white people in America. The poet explains the evils of the white man to her black audience in a language that is direct and common to them:

the cracker is not to be played with

he is the

enslaver/

master. we the slaves

the evillllll he does is not new

cannot be resolved

thru rhetoric

hate/

poems/

loooooven more than one

woooooooman. (*We A BaddDDD People*, p.50)

Then, Sanchez re-inforces the needs of black people and nationhood. First, the speaker says:

destruction and cannot be destroyed with only:

long dresses – sawhili – curses – soul food –

fervor – dashikis – naturrals – poems –

SOUL – rage – leather jackets – slogans –

polygamy – yoruba.

Then the speaker adds:

NO. WE NEED.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

WAR. DISCIPLINE. LEARNEN.

LAND. PLANNEN. LOVE. AND

POWER. POWER. (P. 51)

“Let us begin the real work (for Elijah Muhammad who has begun)” is a poem that informs black people of the real task of the revolution. The poet instructs her audience to unify:

let us take back our children from

vista/

workers. ywca/s

sunday/ schools.

boys/

girl/ scouts of wite/amurica. (*We Are A BaddDDD People*, p. 65)

Sanchez fully understands the importance of stimulating her people to pursue a true revolution, defining what must promptly be accomplished:

let us begin the work of

centuries. untold.

let us teach our

children

what is to be learnnnnned

bout themselves.

us. let us

honestlee begin

nation/hood

bulden.

for our children.

with our

minds/hands/souls. (P. 65)

In her collection, *It's A New Day* (1971), Sanchez reaches her overall aim as a revolutionary black poet. She discloses her concern for and dedication to the task of rebuilding positive values

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

and a new system for her people to live in peace, love, and unity. In the introduction, Sanchez dedicates the book to the “young brothas and sistuh.” The use of *sistuh* in Black English is a positive label of black identity. It refers to the kinship black sisters acquired in their struggle for recognition and against discrimination. Sanchez begins on a very direct and positive level, as she speaks of the future:

the world
awaits yo/young/blackness
sun/children
of our tomorrow.
Here is my hand
black/ warriors of
our dreams.
it is soft as the
blue/ nite that covered yo/
blackness

it's a new new new day

It's A NEW DAY! (P. 7)

The revolutionary poet knows that a prophet cannot leave the people without a vision about and a belief in the future. Sanchez concludes her prophetic message with total failure in the future that will surely come about as a result of the black revolution. In a very calm manner, she asserts:

and if we listen. ahhh yes. and
if we listen. we new people
in this new land will be the rulers.
and it will be ours. and it will be ours. (*New Day*, p. 29)

Nonetheless, Sanchez understands that her poetic message is completed only when black nationalism becomes a living reality for the black race in America. She endeavours to put an end to white supremacy and colonialism deeply rooted in American ideas, only to help black people out of the polluted and racist mainstream of Americanism. Many of her poems “show the side of Sanchez as a poet and activist thrilled with Black Arts and feminism; they also convey her idea

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

of black aesthetic" (Zheng xi), which was ultimately geared towards an establishment of a black nationhood.

CONCLUSION

During the late twentieth century in America, the black poets created a significant and radical change in the nature and function of black literature. Addressing their folk, they employed their work to promote black consciousness, unity, and hence nationalism. By so doing, they were regarded by some critics as didactic, but they were indifferent to such a label. They knew too well that asserting blackness in America was considered militant and subversive. However, they never changed their attitude which was basically antiwhite.

Unlike their predecessors, the modern black poets deliberately made their literary art political, directly relating it to the lives and aspirations of black people. They sought black aesthetics in their poetry in the form of distinctive features, styles, and verbal rhythms of the black ghettos. The language and structure of the poems of Giovanni, Lee and Sanchez clearly manifested the black aesthetic instigated by the black experience.

However, the black aesthetic of the 1960s failed to give birth to a revolutionary poetics capable of changing the miserable conditions of black people. It was mostly based on polemics and political propaganda, not on real understanding of the needs of the black masses. Consequently, the black community of the 1970s became less interested in the racial issues, especially when the white American government responded to the needs of the blacks as a result of the Vietnam War. Moreover, radical organizations such as the black power movement gradually collapsed which still made the black people more and more indifferent to the white-black conflict. The rise of white civil organizations defending black rights widened the gap between the black aestheticians and the black masses all over the American society.

The black poetic tradition which reached its climax during the 1960s, with the call for violence and destruction of America lost much of its power in the 1970s, which was generally a period of frustration. That is why the poets who started with a highly challenging spirit suddenly changed their attitude, declaring a rejection of all radical ideologies and started, instead, to ponder over more personal—if not feminist—issues. This applies to both Giovanni and especially Sanchez who gave up her revolutionary ideas and shifted to love poems with obscene connotations. Even Le Roi Jones, the most militant advocate of the black aesthetic theory, changed his perspective and allegiance.

As amateur poets, the black poets believed that poetry was able to change society while ignoring that politics was the most inclusive way of change, hence, their failure in unifying both. Such a failure suggested that poetics and aesthetics were no longer viable means of influencing the masses or instigating a decisive action on their part. The black poets were thus unable to faithfully portray the innermost thoughts and feelings of their readers—their excitement, romance, suffering and frustration. They only sought to communicate their poetry to those who believed in the radicality of their theory, without drawing upon the genuine historical, sociological and psychological experiences of black people. It is true that their poetry was

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org) committed to the liberation of the black gender, but it is doubtful whether it represented the spirit of the whole nation.

REFERENCES

- Baker, Houston A. (Ed.). *Reading Black Essays in the Criticism of African, Caribbean and Black American Literature*. NY: Cornell UP, 1976.
- _____. *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams*. Detroit, Michigan: Broadside P, 1974.
- _____. *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic*. Madison: Wisconsin, 1988.
- Barksdale, K. Richard. "Humanist Protest in Recent Black Poetry." *Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Donald B. Gibson (Ed.). Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Barrax, Gerald. "For a Black Poet." *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Stephen E. Henderson (Ed.). NY: William Morrow, 1973.
- Barstow, Jane M. "Nikki Giovanni." *Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers*. Yoland Williams Page (Ed.), London: Greenwood P, (2007): 213-217.
- Bloom, Harold (Ed.). *African-American Poets: Volume 2*. New edn. NY: Infobase Publishing, 2010.
- Bronstein, Rita. *Revolutionary Black Poetry, 1960-1970*. Florida: Atlantic UP, 1971.
- Chapman, Abraham (Ed.). *Black Voices*. NY: New American library, 1968.
- Christian, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*. NY: Pergamon P, (1985):172.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. NY: Routledge, 2000.
- Cook, Mercer (et al.). *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and the United States*. Madison: UP of Wisconsin, 1969.
- Davis, Arthur P. and Redding J. Saunders (Eds.). *Cavalcade: Negro Writing From 1760 to the Present*. NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.
- Dooley, Thomas. "The Prophet's Warning or Shoot to Kill." *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. Stephen E. Henderson (Ed.). NY: William Morrow, 1973.
- Dubois, William E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961.
- Evans, Mari (Ed.). *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Garden city, NY: Anchor P/ Doubleday, 1984.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. NY: Grove P, 1963.
- Ford, Nick Aaron. *Black Insights: Significant Literature by Afro-Americans, 1760 to the Present*. Waltham: Ginn and Co.,1971.
- Gayle, Addison Jr. *The Black Aesthetic*. NY: Doubleday, 1972.
- Gibson, Donald B. (Ed.). *Modern Black Poets*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hll, 1973.
- Giovanni, Nikki. *Black Feeling, Black Talk*. Detroit, Michigan: Broadside P, 1970.
- _____. *Black Judgment*. Detroit, Michigan: Broadside P, 1968.
- _____. *Re: Creation*. Detroit, Michigan: Broadside P, 1970.
- _____. *My House*. NY: William Morrow, 1972.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

- Gohar, Saddik M. "The Revolutionary Black Poets of the 1960s." *Journal of the Faculty of Arts*, Egypt: Menoufiya U, (2002): 1-79.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. "Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 19, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 234-255.
- Henderson, Stephen E. (Ed.). *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*. NY: William Morrow, 1973.
- Hull, Gloria T. "Notes on a Marxist Interpretation of Black Literature." *Black American Literature Forum*, 12 (1978): 148-153.
- Jones, LeRoi. *Black Magic: Selected Poetry (1961-1969)*. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merill Co., 1969.
- _____. (Ed). *Home: Social Essays*. NY: William Morrow, 1966.
- _____. "Why I Changed My Ideology." *Black World*, 24 (July 1975):30-42.
- _____. "Afro-American Literature and Class Struggle." *Daggers and Javelins; Essays 1974-1979*. NY: William Morrow, 1984.
- Joyce, Joyce Ann. "The Development of Sonia Sanchez," *Poetry Criticism*, Vol. 9. Madison: Gale Research, Inc., 1992.
- King, Woodie (Ed.). *Black Spirits: A Festival of New Black Poets in America*. NY: Vintage Books, 1972.
- Lee, Don L. *Think Black*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1967.
- _____. *Black Pride*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1968.
- _____. *Don't Cry, Scream*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1969.
- _____. *Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960s*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1971.
- _____. *We Walk the Way of the New World*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1971.
- _____. "Toward a Definition: Black Poetry of the Sixties (after LeRoi Jones)." *The Black Aesthetic*. Addison Jr. Gayle (Ed.). NY: Doubleday, (1972): 222-32.
- Locke, Alain. *The New Negro*. NY: Touchstone, 1992.
- Louis, Abney. *Four Women: An Analysis of the Artistry of Black Women in the Black Arts Movement, 1960s-1980s*. Florida: U of South Florida, 2014. Print
- Major, Clarence (Ed.). *The New Black Poetry*. NY: International Publishers, 1969.
- Miller, D. Quentin. *The Routledge Introduction to African American Literature*. 1st edn. NY: Routledge, 2016. Print.
- Neal, Larry. "And Shine Swam On," in *Black Fire*, Le Roi Jones and Larry Neal (Eds.). NY: William Morrow, (1968): 647.
- _____. "Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation." *Ebony* (August 1969): 54-62.
- _____. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Black Aesthetic*. Addison Gayle Jr. (Ed.). NY: Doubleday, 1972.
- Perry, Margaret. *A Bio-Bibliography of Countée P. Cullen 1903-1946*. Connecticut: Greenwood, 1971.
- Randall, Dudley (Ed.). *The Black Poets*. NY: Bantam Books, 1971.
- Rodgers, Carolyn. "The Literature of Black." *Black World*. Vol. 19 (1970): 5-11.
- Sanchez, Sonia. *Home Coming*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1969.
- _____. *We A BaddDDD People*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1970.
- _____. *It's A New Day*. Detroit: Broadside P, 1971.
- Shelley, Percy. "The Defence of Poetry." *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Seventh edn. M. H. Abrams (Ed.). NY: W. W. Norton, 2001. Print.

Published by European Centre for Research Training and Development UK (www.eajournals.org)

- Shouse, Elaine Marie. *An Analysis of the Poetry of Three Revolutionary Poets: Don L. Lee, Nikki Giovanni, and Sonia Sanchez*. Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois, Disst., 1976.
- Silliman, B. A. "Review of Conversation With Nikki Giovanni." *Melus*, 19 (1994): 144-146.
- Smitherman, Geneva. "The Power of the Rap: The Black Idiom and The New Black Poetry." *Twentieth Century Literature* (October 1973): 259-274.
- Watten, Barrett. "The Turn to Language and the 1960s." *Critical Inquiry*, 29 (2002): 139-183.
- Williams, John A. *The Man Who Cried I am*. NY: The American Library, 1967.
- Zheng, John (Ed.). *Sonia Sanchez's Poetic Spirit through Haiku*. Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017. Print.