"The Poet, the Poem, and the People": Etheridge Knight's American Counterpoetics

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-724z-sn13

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"THE POET, THE POEM, AND THE PEOPLE":
ETHERIDGE KNIGHT'S AMERICAN COUNTERPOETICS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Samuel Spelman Chaltain
1999
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Approved, November 1999

Hermine Pinson

Jacquelyn Mclendon

Kenneth Price
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professors Hermine Pinson, Jacquelyn McLendon, and Kenneth Price for their willingness to keep working with me even though I was no longer on campus. I am also indebted to Professor Craig Werner, for his continued support, and Reg Gibbons, who never met a red pen he didn’t like.
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the poetry of Etheridge Knight, and try to place him in a more appropriate historical context.

The Black Arts movement, to which Knight’s work has most often been attributed, was explored in depth as a way to better understand what pressures Knight would have felt from the larger African-American artistic community. Leading artists of the movement and prominent members of the African-American community were shown to overwhelmingly support a rejection of any European-derived aesthetic in writing. It is then suggested that this philosophy was myopic, and prevented artists from embracing a more humanist form of poetics.

Knight’s poetry is then looked at in greater detail. As a result of Knight’s creolized form of poetry, he is presented as an artist whose populist aesthetic defines an American “counterpoetics.” Knight’s “counterpoetics”, by relying equally on African and European-derived art forms, challenge the assumption that there is a monolithic “Western aesthetic.” By doing so, Knight’s poetry represents a populist form of art which is designed to provide a multicultural perspective on American traditions, which in the past have been too narrowly defined as separate because of social constructions of race and ethnicity.

Knight’s poetry suggests that there is a common language in existence which Americans can use to begin bridging the gaps between us because of racial and cultural difference.
ETHERIDGE KNIGHT’S AMERICAN COUNTERPOETICS
INTRODUCTION

What, then, is the future of the Negro writing poetry in America? Now, what is the promise? Is there hope that it will be fulfilled? Is the Negro as a poet doomed to annihilation because he is a part of a doomed western world, or is that Western culture really doomed? Is our culture a fascist society? If it is, what hope has our literature?

— Margaret Walker, 1969

I see the Art of Poetry as the logos (“In the beginning was the Word”), as a Trinity: the Poet, the Poem and the People. When the three come together, the communion, the communication, the Art happens.

— Etheridge Knight, 1986

In an 1846 speech, the Unitarian clergyman Theodore Parker lamented the fact that he had yet to see a distinctly American form of literature. Instead, Parker claimed that “our scholarly books are only an imitation of a foreign type; they do not reflect our morals, manners, politics, or religion, not even our rivers, mountains, sky.”

Similarly, in 1871 Walt Whitman felt,

with dejection and amazement, that among our geniuses and talented writers and speakers, few or none have really spoken to this people, created a single image-making work for them, or absorbed the central spirit and the idiosyncracies which are theirs --and which, thus, in highest ranges, so far remain entirely uncelebrated, unexpressed.”

Both Parker and Whitman believed that the central challenge for American artists was to construct an American aesthetic which could resist relying on European norms and standards of critical excellence.


Updating their nineteenth century predecessors, twentieth century American writers have continued to search for ways to describe what it means to be an American. Echoing Robert Frost's words of a generation earlier, critic Terrence Des Pres believes that writers have a special function in this search, because "right language can help us, as it always helps in hard moments, with our private struggles to keep whole, can be a stay against confusion, can start the healing fountains."\(^5\) DesPres goes on to say that the type of writing which can make us "whole" again "helps us repossess our humanity, [and] frees us for work in the world."\(^6\)

My central interest in this project began when I started trying to identify examples of American writing from this century which could "free" me for work in the world. I felt that much of American literature failed to achieve this aim, either because of the writer's refusal to confront the hypocrisy of so many aspects of the American experience, or because of the writer's exaggerated attempt to identify and condemn the most flawed aspects of American culture. Consequently, I have looked artists whose work can provide proper models on which to base an American aesthetic which can inspire a whole new humanism and populist visions of a more liberated future.

I realized I was looking for writers who could construct a "counterpoetics," to borrow Patricia Liggins-Hill's term, of the American experience. Liggins-Hill says that the aesthetic function of counterpoetics is to "reconstitute the wholeness of being. Its


\(^6\) Ibid.
controlling principles—rhythm and the natural flow of human emotions—challenge the traditions of form and rationality which underlie the Western aesthetic."7 I agree with Hill and the many artists and scholars like her, each of whom believes that our country's historic reliance on the notion of a monolithic "Western aesthetic" is myopic and prevents us from fully embracing the multilayered American society of the late twentieth century.

This does not mean that the ideas of the Western aesthetic need to be eliminated, however, but simply expanded and updated so that our notions of aesthetic beauty and truth can be more in line with the world in which we live. Paul Gilroy, for example, has noted that "the especially crude and reductive notions of culture that form the substance of racial politics today are clearly associated with an older discourse of racial and ethnic difference which is everywhere entangled in the history of the idea of culture in the modern West."8 Echoing Gilroy, Henry Louis Gates categorizes modern American culture as being "profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender."9 The fissures Gilroy and Gates point out reflect the continuing struggles we as a people face in overcoming our learned racial and cultural biases toward each other, making W.E.B. Du Bois's prediction of almost a century ago—"the

7 Patricia Liggins Hill, "The new Black Aesthetic as a Counterpoetics" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1977), viii.
9 Gates xv.
problem of the twentieth century will be the problem of the color line”\textsuperscript{10} -- even more prescient.

Consequently, the question, it seems, is simply this: From where will we get our new forms, our “counterpoetics,” and how can we begin to address our lack of a common language on issues of race and identity, so that a more populist approach to art, culture, and each other can begin to take form? Obviously, there is no simple answer to this question, but it may be possible to identify a “quintessential American experience,” which I would define as an experience revolutionary enough in spirit to radically alter our ways of “seeing” the world.

By that criterion, I suggest that the revolutionary foundations of black music and literature provide a vital perspective on the current and past state of American society.\textsuperscript{11} But within that tradition, which artists can best offer the vision of “wholeness” called for by Des Pres, by Whitman, by Gates? In my own search, I have looked for artists who articulate a vision of America that does not isolate people along the lines of race, class, gender, etc., yet who also write from a specific, honest, personal perspective which acknowledges America at both its best and worst. Believing that the artist must avoid elevating him or herself as a “poet-priest,” I have looked for writers who can break through barriers of individual consciousness, and achieve a narrative voice more

\textsuperscript{10} W.E.B. Du Bois, \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} (New York, 1990), 3.

\textsuperscript{11} Amiri Baraka — in his 1970 play \textit{Jello}— expresses this awareness sardonically when Rochester says to Jack Benny, “You don’t know nothin’ about my life. But I know all about yours.”
representative of our nation's complex and repressed "collective unconscious." This is what I have found:

I believe, first of all, that the rhythmic and antiphonal structure of the blues offers an ideal model for this type of art. In his seminal study *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Narrative*, Houston Baker states that the blues serve as a "matrix" for African-American culture, and that "rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation-- a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation-- of species experience." Baker believes that blues artists are ideal "translators" for the American experience, since blues music comprises "a meditational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding." This emphasis on the placeless, faceless artist promotes an antiphonal mode of communication with no clear hierarchy, an ideal (but not sole) model for a revised, more inclusive American aesthetic.

Looking for the rhythms of the blues in the writing of American artists, I have discovered how universally the blues idiom has been applied. In discussing the history of American literature, for example, Albert Murray says that "the improvisation that is the ancestral imperative of blues procedure is completely consistent with and appropriate to those of the frontiersman, the fugitive slave, and the picaresque hero."
My interest, however, has been to find writers who write about the American experience, resisting idealized notions of the past while refusing to be compromised by myopic racial and ethnic classifications and the strident racial rhetoric of their time. With these models as my guide, I am offering one voice in particular that represents American humanism and should, I feel, be a part of the new curriculum Gates calls for in *Loose Canons*, which he believes can help foster an "education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture."

Born in Corinth, Mississippi, on April 19, 1931, into a large family of seven children, and able to complete only a ninth grade education, Etheridge Knight became a writer while in prison. Convicted in 1960 of armed robbery, Knight was sentenced to serve a ten-to-twenty-five-year term in the Indiana State prison. While in prison, Knight discovered poetry as a way to connect both to himself and his community. As he put it, "I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life." Often identified solely with the Black Arts movement, Knight's poetry reflects a less strident approach than the racial rhetoric of other poets of the period, and tends to exhibit wider, deeper ranges of personal feelings and human experiences. As Richard Barksdale points out, "in Knight's poetry, one finds more private reflection and more emotion, recollected


16 Powers 95.

17 Etheridge Knight, *Poems from Prison* (Detroit, 1968), back cover.
not in tranquility but recollected with that tortured perturbation of heart and soul which is the stuff of good poetry."\textsuperscript{18} Knight’s work is able to bring the 1960s notion of the Black Aesthetic into full maturation, by creating poetry specific in its subject yet universal in its power. As Knight has said, “there are feelings and ideas common to all people. The poet addresses these generalizations by being specific.”\textsuperscript{19} Discussing the relevance of Knight’s prison experience to his work, Patricia Liggins-Hill believes that “Knight has brought a prison consciousness, a consciousness in which the individual sense is institutionally destroyed and a consciousness in which the self is merely one number among many, to the verbal structure of his verse.”\textsuperscript{20}

Constructing a counterpoetics in which the blues provide a model for non-hierarchical communication, Knight resists defining himself as a “poet-priest,” and offers instead a populist trinity between “the poet, the poem, and the people.” His refusal to elevate himself above his audience makes him an ideal representative for a revised American aesthetic which can promote a deeper and more honest form of interpersonal communication.

In this project I will begin by providing a more expansive cultural and historical framework of the Black Arts movement, as a way to better understand how the central tenets of the movement both motivated and hindered Knight’s creative development in


\textsuperscript{19} Price 173.

\textsuperscript{20} Hill 195.
emerging from the "black hole" of prison to sing America's song; then, I will discuss
Knight's work in detail --making use of Baker's model of the blues matrix and Liggins-
Hill's conceptualization of an American counterpoetics-- and try to place him in an
appropriate historical and cultural context, while also demonstrating how his work
serves as a model for a true American aesthetic. I hope that in doing so I will be able
to insist, as has George Hutchinson, on recognizing that our more "creolized" aspects
of American traditions can and should "coexist with and continually revitalize
[America's] cultural distinctiveness."21 Ultimately, my hope is that future analyses of
Knight and other American artists can begin to go beyond simple ideological
interrogation, and toward a more diverse historical contextualizing and understanding
of the "complex, productive, and often ironic or scandalous interrelations between
ostensibly separate 'racial'/cultural traditions in the United States."22

21 George Hutchinson, "The Whitman Legacy and the Harlem Renaissance,"

22 Ibid.
CHAPTER ONE:
“SETTING FIRE AND DEATH TO WHITIE’S ASS”

At the same time Etheridge Knight began writing poetry, America was experiencing the biggest challenge to its moral and legal foundations since the Civil War. Knight’s development as a poet therefore parallels the rise of Black Power, and in most African-American anthologies of which he is a part, he is grouped with the writers of the Black Arts movement. In this chapter, I will look more closely at the central principles of the Black Arts movement, as a way to assess its influence on Knight’s own work. In doing so, I will provide a foundation which will allow me, in chapter Two, to show that Knight’s work represents a counterpoetics which, in Craig Werner’s words, “expresses both the political and cultural currents of black nationalism and readjusts the position of the black aesthetic movement in the populist tradition.”

BLACK ART IS

Black art, like everything else in the black community, must respond positively to the reality of revolution.

--Ron Karenga, “Black Cultural Nationalism”

We have to resist the tendency to “program” our art, to set unnatural limitations upon it. To do so implies that we ultimately don’t trust the intelligence of the national laity, and consequently feel that we must paternally guide them down the course of righteous blackness. So very often we defuse the art by shaping it primarily on the basis of fashionable political attitudes. There is a tendency to respond to work simply from the situation it creates. If black art is to survive in the national sense, it’s gonna need more supporting than a cluster of cliches.

--Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement”

Throughout its short life, which began in 1964 and lasted approximately ten years, the Black Arts movement was searching for tangible, identifiable parameters for

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23 Craig Hansen Werner, Playing the Changes: Afro-Modernism to the Jazz Impulse (Champaign, IL, 1995), 123.
use in defining its artists’ central purpose(s). What all artists from the period wanted to accomplish was the production of art work that could serve as a “spiritual sister” to the Black Power movement. The motivation behind Black Arts was therefore imbued with a nationalistic flavor, responding to Malcolm X’s call to “launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people.” However, the statements made above by Neal and Karenga show that the primary obstacle to a conclusive and defining central credo of the movement was having the artists themselves agree on which direction the movement should follow.

The Black Arts movement began in the Spring of 1964, when Leroi Jones, Charles Patterson, William Patterson, Clarence Reed, Johnny Moore, and a number of other black artists opened the Black Arts Repertory School, or BARTS. BARTS staged a number of progressive plays, poetry readings and concerts, in an attempt to heighten the consciousness of the black community in Harlem. The functional message of the program was enhanced by street performances, so that the art itself could be “taken to the people.” The theater came under almost immediate attack by the grant-determining bodies of New York, and was soon stripped of any future funding. The

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25 Jones would later change his name to Amiri Baraka; to avoid confusion, I will refer to him as Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka for the rest of this paper.


27 Neal 68.
match had been lit, however, and the voices who wanted to be heard began a more active dialogue regarding what Black Art was, is, and would be.

Black Arts leaders consciously looked to the past to find models on which to base a new, functional Black Aesthetic. One of their greatest role models was W.E.B. Du Bois. In his essay “Criteria of Negro Art,” Du Bois outlines a functional approach to black artistic production that precedes similar ideas associated with the Black Arts movement by nearly half a century. Du Bois called for black artists to recognize that it is the “bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before.” Du Bois felt that the inability to determine one’s own image was a central impediment to the physical and emotional emancipation of black people. He saw the notepads and canvases of black artists as the ideal stage for creating new, truthful images of African-Americans. For Du Bois, truth was “the highest hand-maid of imagination, the one great vehicle of universal understanding.” His central concern was in utilizing the historical “truths” of black America to help alleviate the psychological strain of double consciousness. African-American history had suffered from “a lack of clarity” that could be attributed to this emotional ambivalence. Du Bois felt that


29 Paschall 90.

the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge (the) double self into a better and truer self. ... This, then, is the end of his striving; to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius.31

Du Bois contended that black art should serve a singular purpose, stating that “all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailings of the purists.”32 In fact, Du Bois did not “care a damn” for any art that was not directed toward gaining the “right of black folk to love and enjoy” life in America.33 He saw the cathartic and enabling possibilities associated with black people’s ability to define themselves rather than to be defined by whites. Self-definition was the essential first step to decolonizing the minds of black Americans, for “until the art of black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human.”34 Du Bois’ grounding in nationalism helped open up the possibilities for others to echo his concerns. A contemporary of his who was equally committed to the struggle was Marcus Garvey.

Marcus Garvey was perhaps more responsible than any other leader for redirecting the focus of black America towards a more diasporic perspective, and his words are vital when considering the development of the Black Arts movement. Garvey’s organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), urged black Americans to be proud of their race and return to Africa, their ancestral

31 Du Bois 215.
32 Paschall 90.
33 Ibid.
34 Paschall 93.
homeland. Although Garvey’s attempts to repatriate black people via the Black Star Line were ultimately undone by financial difficulties, his direct method of black nationalism had a huge influence on the artists of the 1960s. In his 1968 play *The Rise*, Charles H. Fuller Jr. says of Garvey:

> Sometimes, I think of somethin I want to tell ‘em myself, and before I can say it, Mr. Marcus done got it out, and is shouting it from the stage! It’s like he says what we all been waiting’ so long to say, and jest couldn’t git out! He’s like all of us put together--and when you follow a man like that, you follow yourself.36

Baraka also felt that the concept of blackness and the concept of a national consciousness were philosophies “given to us by Garvey.”37

> Whereas Dubois and Garvey helped to articulate a political consciousness, Richard Wright identified how such an awareness could be utilized in black writing. Wright’s essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” makes a strong appeal--through a Marxist ideology--to a nationalistic approach to black literature. Wright felt that Negro writing had historically gravitated towards two general trends:

1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of “achievement.” 2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice. Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself.38

Wright advocated a move away from the “protest” novel, and towards literary works that properly centered black people as the main audience. He felt that the folk tradition


of black America was the site that artists could illuminate in their work to help empower their audience:

In the absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture, the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom. Not yet caught in paint or stone, and as yet but feebly depicted in the poem and novel, the Negroes' most powerful images of hope and despair still remain in the fluid state of daily speech.\(^{39}\)

Wright saw a need for black artists to adopt a nationalistic approach to their work as aesthetes. He felt that all black writers who "seek to function within [their] race as purposeful agents have a serious responsibility."\(^{40}\) The black artist was "being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die."\(^{41}\) Black writers therefore needed to accept the concept of nationalism because "in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it."\(^{42}\)

Wright's influence on the Black Arts movement was made very clear in an essay published by Larry Neal in 1965. In "The Black Writer's Role, I: Richard Wright," Neal credits Wright with calling for an approach to black literature which reconciled nationalism with the revolutionary aspirations of black society. According to Neal, the black writer's problem really grows out of a confusion about function, rather than a confusion about form. Once he has understood the concrete relationship between himself and society, then the question of form can be seen differently. He will then be forced to question the validity of the forms that have been

\(^{39}\) Cited in Gayle 318.

\(^{40}\) Cited in Gayle 320.

\(^{41}\) Cited in Gayle 321.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
forced upon him by society, and construct new ones.\textsuperscript{43}

Neal’s and Wright’s emphasis on reinterpreting the meaning of form foreshadows Liggins-Hill’s belief that one of the central purposes of a counterpoetics is to “challenge the form and rationality” inherent in Western cultural traditions. By calling explicitly for a literature that would no longer concern itself with the appeasement of its white audience, Richard Wright gave voice to a sentiment that would later be at the very center of the Black Arts credo.

Perhaps the one figure more than any other who influenced the motives and concepts behind the Black Arts movement was Malcolm X. Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka felt that what separated Malcolm from other leaders was a profound difference in what each believes the history [of black America] to be. Finally, the success of one leader over another depends upon which one best understands and expresses the emotional realities of a given historical epoch. Hence, we feel a Malcolm in a way that a Roy Wilkins, a King, and a Whitney Young can never be felt. Because a Malcolm, finally, interprets the emotional history of his people better than the others.\textsuperscript{44}

The emotional history that Malcolm recognized was a call for black national consciousness. Saying “We do not want a nation, we are a nation,”\textsuperscript{45} Malcolm called for an inner strengthening and formalizing of black thought and activism, so that black Americans could galvanize their forces together to collectively determine a new path, for themselves and by themselves. His message stressed practicality as the key first step in revolution:

\textsuperscript{43} Neal 25.

\textsuperscript{44} Neal & Jones 639.

\textsuperscript{45} Cited in Breitman 78.
Malcolm said many times that when you speak about revolution you’re talking about land—changing the ownership or usership of some specific land which you think is yours. But any talk of nationalism also must take this concept of land and its primary importance into consideration because, finally, any nationalism which is not intent on restoring or seeking autonomous space for a people, i.e., a nation, is at the very least shortsighted.  

What Malcolm X provided was clarity in a time of chaos. His death in 1965 helped usher in the “call to arms” that would further crystallize the Black Arts movement. Although his assassination was a devastating blow—particularly because it was carried out by fellow black Americans—there were two central facts that all factions of the movement came to understand: “that the struggle for black self-determination had entered a serious, more profound stage; and that for most of us, nonviolence as a viable technique of social change had died with Malcolm on the stage of the Audubon.”

As the decade of the 1960's approached its second half, the ideas and concerns of a previous generation were synthesized into a definitive call for cultural production. Ed Bullins, one of the most promising playwrights of the Black Arts movement, said in a 1965 interview that the purpose of the movement was to create institutions that would provide

a medium for communication to raise the consciousness throughout the nation for Black artistic, political, and cultural consciousness. It would keep a hell of a lot of people working. . . . And it would be an institution for the Black people in America who are a nation within a nation.

Bullins, like other artists of the period, utilized black suffering as a springboard to greater racial awareness. The artists, however, were not interested in promoting self-

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46 Cited in Harris 163.
47 Neal 128-9.
48 Cited in Werner 108.
pity. Rather, they would help their people reconstruct and “reexperience” some of the horrors of black life in the United States, to awaken their community to the necessity for unified action in the present.⁴⁹ Recognizing that many in their audience had to experience the revolution vicariously before they could agree to its practicality, Black Arts writers utilized the notion of “creative violence. . .cleansing violence” as a way to move beyond the psychological past and redirect the political future.⁵⁰

As they worked to revise their version of a historical and literary canon, the voices of the movement were able to posit four major requisites to a correct understanding of the past: making the Pan-American connection, venerating black heroes, celebrating the beauty of black life-styles, and acknowledging the importance of black culture.⁵¹ Ron Karenga further outlined what he felt were the seven criteria for black culture: Mythology, History, Social Organization, Political Organization, Economic Organization, Creative Motif, and Ethos.⁵²

For almost all participants in the movement, celebrating the Afro-American myths provided the driving impulse of the Black Arts movement, echoing Wright’s sentiments from a quarter-century before. Black Arts writers were therefore concerned

⁴⁹ Van Deburg 273.
⁵⁰ Van Deburg 284.
⁵¹ Van Deburg 274.
with using their “African imaginations” to create literary heroes, past and present. The idea was to inspire their audience to similar acts of heroism, acts that would ultimately help lead to the success of the revolution. If black Americans could be alerted to the presence of a living “Afro-soul” connecting Harlem and Addis Ababa via “the drums of mental telepathy,” the strength that could be gained from the ancestors would make the revolution unstoppable. The central image to represent the struggle was the Black Warrior, a male “Superblack” who would help ensure the end of whitey’s reign while uplifting the black community.

The idea of a functional black aesthetic was also central to the Black Arts movement. Believing that white society could never be trusted to portray realistic images of black men and women, black artists decided that “we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history.” A Black aesthetic was also necessary because Western culture was thought to be “a dying creature, totally bereft of spirituality.” Consequently, black leaders like Jones/Baraka felt that if black people could not identify themselves as separate, and understand what that meant, “we will perish along with Western Culture and the white man.”

53 Van Deburg 275.
54 Van Deburg 88.
55 Gayle xvii.
56 Neal 15.
57 Cited in Harris 166.
The Black Arts movement was radically opposed to any concept of the artist being alienated from his/her community. It sought an art that could speak directly to the black community, so that the revolution for black liberation could be successful. By proposing a reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic, the Black Arts movement proposed a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology. A spiritual sister to the Black Power concept, Black Arts, too, was nationalistic. Whereas one was concerned with the relationship between art and politics, the other was concerned with the art of politics. The art work from the period was therefore multifaceted, controversial, and sometimes quite discrete.

Unfortunately, as a result of media misperception and manipulation of the Black Power message, artists like Etheridge Knight have been unfairly grouped with artists who were unable to truly capture the essence of a humanistic American counterpoetics. Part of what prevented several Black Arts leaders from embracing a more humanistic message was their capitulation to the urge to elevate themselves as “poet-priests.” Subscribing to this Du Boisian theory of ruling from above, Jones/Baraka, Neal, and others concerned themselves with providing this leadership. Their objective was to comprehend history “totally, and understand the myriad ways in which contemporary problems are affected by it.”58 In the process of “comprehending history,” however, many of the movement’s leaders began granting themselves and each other honorary

58 Jones & Neal 639.
membership in the pantheon of notables. Don Lee\(^5\text{9}\), for example, called fellow poet Ted Joans “a worldman, / a man of his world,” while Joans venerated Jones/Baraka as the “king” of the black movement: “LeRoi Vive le Roi.”\(^6\text{0}\) This monarchical elevation of each other above the “lumpenproletariat,” while ostensibly a celebration of black folk culture and brotherhood, prevented artists like Jones/Baraka and Joans from embracing a more humanist form of poetics.

Because Jones/Baraka’s work was so incendiary, though other, less controversial poets equally committed to the cause --like Knight-- became lost in the media frenzy that surrounded such volatile and divisive words. In “Black Art,” for example, Jones/Baraka exclaims that

\begin{quote}
Poems are bullshit unless they are
teeth or trees or lemons piled
on a step. Or black ladies dying
of men leaving nickel hearts
beating them down. Fuck poems
and they are useful\(^6\text{1}\)
\end{quote}

Jones/Baraka’s call for “live words of the hip world,” and ultimately for “poems that kill,” defined the rigid functionalist wings of the Black Arts movement. He had no interest in exploring any aspects of Euro-American culture, preferring instead to “set fire and death to whitie’s ass.”\(^6\text{2}\) What resulted was a conviction that black culture was

\(^5\text{9}\) Lee would later change his name to Haki Madhubuti, but in this paper I will only refer to him by his original name.

\(^6\text{0}\) Van Deburg 276.

\(^6\text{1}\) Cited in Harris 219.

\(^6\text{2}\) Ibid.
superior to white culture. Drawing their evidence from history, folklore, and everyday life, Black Arts writers sought to show that “black is best.” This binary treatment of American cultural complexity resulted in certain artists like Nikki Giovanni asking their audience

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 your ‘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?

Although the use of violent language was intended to do nothing more than wake up the black community to the impending revolution, the type of hatred that Giovanni and Jones/Baraka’s work expresses does not provide an ideal model on which to base a new form of cross-cultural communication. In addition, their words opened up all Black artists of the 1960s to a sometime sensationalistic, sometime focused critical attack. In his essay “Black Creativity in Quest of an Audience,” art critic Henri Ghent says that black artists

suffer doubly when they abandon an essential concern for aesthetic criteria for the sake of politicizing. What results are feeble works of art that fall far short of communicating their message, thereby rendering a gross disservice to their cause.

63 Van Deburg 279.


Ghent's comments sum up a majority of the art world's criticism. Another critic further endorsed the notion that the ideas behind the Black Arts movement were "attempting to strip art of its preciousness." Such critics inadvertently draw our attention to two important facts: first, that they lumped together all black artists of the period in one category, and suppressed the range of diversity in the movement; and second, that the decision by some black artists to abandon the aesthetic principles of the "dying West" opened them up to critical responses that made clear the levels of resistance to change within the art world. These responses contributed to a generally myopic view of the movement, and helped stifle many creative voices of the period.

The internal criticism of the Black Arts movement reflected the range of opinions and principles that Black artists brought to their work. As Henry Louis Gates has noted, however, the history of African-Americans has always been "marked not only by its noble demands for political tolerance from the larger society, but also by its paradoxical tendency to censure its own."67

One of the major internal criticisms of the Black Arts movement was its handling of black women. Simply, the central aesthetic image of the black revolutionary warrior led to a marginalization of the role of black women in the struggle. Craig Werner has said that "one of the most glaring deficiencies in


understanding the Black Arts movement involves the general failure to acknowledge the presence and importance of black women writers." Bell hooks further notes that the nationalism of the sixties and seventies was very different from the racial solidarity born of shared circumstances and not from theories of black power. Not that an articulation of black power was not important; it was. Only it did not deliver the goods; it was too informed by corrosive power relations, too mythic, to take the place of that concrete relational love that bonded black folks together in communities of hope and struggle.

The omission of feminist perspectives contributed in much of the artistic production to "skewed, black macho versions of James Bond." In Afro-American literature of previous decades, the strong black mother was the object of awe and respect. The strong masculine ideology of Black Power, however, eliminated black women. Larry Neal, one of the more influential and respected members of the movement, expressed this perspective in a 1964 essay:

> historically, Afro-American women have had to be the economic mainstays of the family. The oppressor allowed them to have jobs while at the same time limiting the economic mobility of the black man. Very often, therefore, the woman's aspirations and values are closely tied to those of the white power structure and not to those of her man.

By identifying black women with the white power structure, Neal and many other men of the movement did a disservice to women, thereby hindering development of an even greater period of community-based dialogue and cultural production.

Despite this glaring omission, however, the Black Arts movement was able to motivate a talented and hungry group of young artists towards the creation of work that

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68 Werner 135.

69 Cited in Werner 104.

70 Van Deburg 288.

71 Neal 76.
was about "the extension of the remembered and a resurrection of the unremembered." Etheridge Knight was one of these artists, and his ability to balance the nationalistic ideals of the Black Arts movement with a Whitmanesque populism makes him an ideal representative for a new American counterpoetics.

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72 Neal 52.
CHAPTER TWO:
"THE POET, THE POEM AND THE PEOPLE"

The language of a people living on an island off the coast of France is constructed differently than this great big ol’ America. This is not a new thing. Whitman was saying this. Black poets address mainly black people because their language is so filled with nuances and inflections and meanings that come out of the special conditions of black history . . . Your address has got to be, first, to yourself. Any artist is going to struggle with his or her own self first. When you’re making a poem, your first address is to yourself. Then, you address other selves like you. And then, a third audience . . . and then it goes out to the universal. You don’t jump from the “I.” You got to go through the gears.

--Etheridge Knight

 Etheridge Knight grew up with the humblest of origins. He had little formal schooling, and cited his real education as the “various prisons and street corners throughout America.”73 As a young man, Knight spent some time in the military as a medical technician; he served in the U.S. Army in Korea, Guam and Hawaii. In Korea, however, Knight became addicted to various narcotics, an addiction which led to his 1960 conviction and prison sentence. While he was incarcerated at the Indiana State Penitentiary over the next eight years, Knight began to write, largely through the prison program of Gwendolyn Brooks. This artistic awakening resulted in four books of poetry: Poems from Prison (1968), Belly Song (1973), Born of a Woman (1979), and The Essential Etheridge Knight (1986), appearances in several contemporary anthologies, and a noted --albeit precarious-- place among the roster of the finest Black Arts poets. In her introduction to his 1968 debut, Poems from Prison, Brooks exclaimed that Knight’s work was

73 Leonard Pack Bailey, Broadside Authors and Artists (Detroit, 1974), 72.

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This poetry is a major announcement.
It is certainly male--with formidable austerities, dry grins,
and a dignity that is scrupulous even when lenient.
But there are centers of controlled softness too.
The warmth of this poet is abruptly robust. The music that seems effortless is exquisitely

carved.
Since Etheridge is not your stifled artiste, there is air in these poems.
And there is blackness, inclusive, possessed and given; freed and terrible and beautiful.74

Knight’s social position in America made him an ideal example of Walt

Whitman’s contention that the “genius of the United States is in its common people.”75

Disconnected from the comfortable world of academia or the privilege of either middle

or upper-class origins, Knight’s voice brought to life an aspect of American culture that

had historically remained invisible to the larger society. In fact, celebrated white poet

Robert Bly believed Knight’s message to be so significant that he proclaimed Knight to

be

the best Black poet in the country. I have no doubt about that at all... there’s some kind of
underlying heavy ground music in Etheridge’s work -- something connected with the ground.
So you feel yourself carried on some sort of tide of music, which is, at the same time, a
willingness to be a part of the human situation. There’s something a little bit of Chaucer that I
sense there and people like Georg Trakl -- who has this sense of unity -- the unity that’s in
Etheridge’s poems, in his best poems, in the center of his poems . . . . that’s a new sound that
the ear is not quite ready to pick up, but almost ready to pick up. On the growth of the ear,
Etheridge is ahead.76

Knight’s ability to produce poetry which seems “connected to the ground,” his

“willingness to be a part of the human system,” and his “new sound that the ear is not

quite ready to pick up” all make his work an ideal example of an American

74 Gwendolyn Brooks, introduction to Etheridge Knight, Poems from Prison (Detroit,
1968), 9.

75 Cited in Van Doren 23.

76 Cited in Hill 24.
counterpoetics.

Many of these characteristics, however, did not make him an ideal fit for the Black Arts movement, and as a result, Knight’s legacy has been obscured. In this chapter, I will look at much of Knight’s work, both in relation to the ideas of the Black Arts movement, and to the larger, more far-reaching ideas of an American counterpoetics. First, I will look at some of the first poems he produced while in prison, to gauge how he balanced the desires of the movement with his own developing desires as an artist; second, by examining selected poems from *Poems from Prison* and *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, I will show how Knight’s use of European-derived structures and influences put him at odds with other writers of the period, but that those poems represent some of his finest, most powerful work; finally, I will show how Knight relies on blues idioms to create an antiphonal, tragicomic treatment of the inherent hypocrisies in America. This vernacular approach provides an ideal artistic model for a counterpoetics and artistic trinity between the poet, poem and people. Knight’s ability to construct an artistic voice in the model of a singer, based on influences as far-ranging as Emily Dickinson and Stagolee, makes him a model for other examples of American counterpoetics which can provide a more honest, enlightening treatment both of ourselves and the peculiar society we share.

**CELL SONGS**

Etheridge Knight’s first book of poetry, *Poems from Prison*, was published in 1968, the same year as the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the rioting at the Democratic National Convention, the Tet Offensive, the last
of the Long Hot Summers, and the escalation of the conflict at home over the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{77} This confluence of catastrophic events makes 1968 one of the most important and challenging years in American history, and it is impossible to begin a discussion of Knight's earliest work without drawing attention to that connection. Of course, how these events reached Knight behind bars is impossible to ascertain, but it is clear that he was an active part of the debates which helped define the Black Arts movement, and that he was concerned with helping to outline a functional Black aesthetic.

At this early stage of his career, Knight was clearly struggling to reconcile the desires of the movement with his own creativity. For example, in a 1968 interview, Knight says that "unless the Black artist establishes a 'Black aesthetic' he will have no future at all. To accept the white aesthetic is to accept and validate a society that will not allow him to live."\textsuperscript{78} This culturally isolationist perspective is present in one of his first poems, "On Universalism":

\begin{verbatim}
I see no single thread
That binds me one to all;
Why even common dead
Men took the single fall.
No universal laws
Of human misery
Create a common cause
Or common history
That ease black people's pains
Nor break black people's chains.
\end{verbatim}

Despite his reliance on a traditional structure of rhymed couplets of iambic

\textsuperscript{77} The Tet Offensive was a surprise attack by the Vietcong on U.S. forces on the day of the Vietnamese new year; the long hot summers are a term for the racial rioting that plagued major U.S. cities between 1964 and 1968.

\textsuperscript{78} Cited in Neal 63-4.
trimeter, Knight’s tone reflects the current running through the black community at that time, which placed an emphasis on separating from white culture. Knight’s refusal to see a “single thread” which “binds” him to everyone else is intended to create distance between himself and white society, but in the end the absence of any “universal laws . . . [to create a] common cause or common history” leaves him as alone as any “common dead [man]” left to take “the single fall” on some anonymous battlefield. Here, Knight’s words may be an appropriate poem for the movement, and perhaps also for his life at that time, but his message of isolation offers nothing to an audience in search of a deeper humanism.

It seems that Knight was aware of these limitations being placed on his work, since several of his other poems from Poems from Prison contradict some of the most important “qualifications” being pressed on Black artists at that time. In fact, most of Knight’s early work reflects his refusal to fully capitulate to the movement’s demand that all forms of the Euro-American cultural tradition should be rejected. This synthetic approach slightly marginalized Knight from the Black Arts movement during his whole career. In fact, even while identifying Poems from Prison as a “major announcement,” Don L. Lee questioned the validity of Knight’s insistence on alluding to Euro-American culture.79

One of the more subtle treatments of Knight’s refusal to fully subscribe to Black Arts ideals is found in one of his first major poems, “Hard Rock Returns to Prison

79 Werner 124.
from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane.” Written in 1968 and included in *Poems from Prison*, the poem clearly reflects Knight’s concern with representing Hard Rock, a convicted criminal and a man “who was known not to take no shit,” as an example of the Black Arts ideal of the warrior figure. Hard Rock represents the struggle of all black people in the poem, and is made to seem larger in life and spirit than any of the other inmates. The other men boast of how Hard Rock “smacked the captain with his dinner tray,” and they swell with pride over “the jewel of a myth that Hard Rock had once bit a screw\footnote{Slang for prison guard.} on the thumb and poisoned him with syphilitic spit.” The “WORD,” however, is that Hard Rock has been lobotomized, and the men of the prison all wait, “like a herd of sheep, to see if the WORD was true.” When the men realize that Hard Rock has been lobotomized, they feel their symbolic defeat by the faceless greater powers of white racist society:

\begin{quote}
We turned away, our eyes on the ground. Crushed.
He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things
We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do,
The fears of years, like a biting whip,
Had cut deep bloody grooves
Across our backs.
\end{quote}

Hard Rock’s defeat magnifies the other prisoners’ feelings of helplessness, and prompts the final image of a whipping, suggesting that black people have never fully escaped from slavery.

According to H. Bruce Franklin, in an introduction to a taped reading of the poem, Knight jokes about several inmates who have “already told me that I was talking
about them—that is, that they all like to think of themselves as the baddest.” 81 Although
Knight does create a clear representation of the black warrior, he refuses to idealize
Hard Rock and uses his defeat to warn black men about their fate. Knight is telling his
audience to stop projecting their desires for resistance and rebellion onto some solitary
mythic figure, like Malcolm X or Martin Luther King. Knight recognizes the need to
veil his message, since the desire within the movement was to create “poems that kill”
the enemy, not each other. By trying to promote a greater sense of dependence on
oneself instead of a blind faith in leaders, Knight thus constructs a specific vision of
populism, with a message deeply grounded in the experiences of black people in
America.

Knight repeats this concern for the future of Black men in American society in

“For Freckle-faced Gerald:”

Take Gerald. Sixteen years hadn’t even done
a good job on his voice. He didn’t even know
how to talk tough, or how to hide the glow
of life before he was thrown in as “pigmeat”
for the buzzards to eat.

Gerald, who had no memory or hope of copper hot lips--
of firm upthrusting thighs
to reenforce his flow,
let tall walls and buzzards change the course
of his river from north to south. . . .

Gerald, sun-kissed a thousand times on the nose
and cheeks, didn’t stand a chance,
didn’t even know that the loss of his balls
had been plotted years in advance
by wiser and bigger buzzards than those
who now hover above his track

81 H. Bruce Franklin, Prison Literature in America (Westport, CT, 1978), 255.
and at night light upon his back.\textsuperscript{82}

The parallels between Gerald and Hard Rock are clear: both are presented as tragic figures, victims of an American society which banishes black men to prison and, in the process, takes away their sense of pride. Unlike the prison community in "Hard Rock," however, --which displays solidarity and deep caring for each other-- the prisoners in "Gerald" ruthlessly prey on an innocent young boy, allowing the oppressors to complete their goal of creating a community that will destroy itself. In his introduction to \textit{Black Voices from Prison}, Knight relates the prison experience in historical terms:

> From the time the first of our fathers were bound and shackled and herded into the dark hold of a "Christian" slaveship--right on up to the present day, the whole experience of the black man in America can be summed up in one word: prison.\textsuperscript{83}

Knight’s condemnation of the prison system in America put him in accord with leaders of the movement, but his failure to create infallible Black heroes was seen as irresponsible. Of course, most of the leaders of the Black Arts movement lacked Knight’s perspective on American society— Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, for example, had resided within the hallowed walls of academia since his Beat generation days. Still, the censuring power exhibited by Jones/Baraka, Don Lee and others must have been devastating to Knight, who was nonetheless producing work of extreme emotional

\textsuperscript{82} Knight, \textit{The Essential Etheridge Knight}, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{83} Knight’s words are based on a statement made by Malcolm X in his Autobiography, when he related his own prison background experience to American society in these terms: “Don’t be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You’re still in prison. That’s what America means: prison.”
power and depth. His experiences in prison compelled him to write despite the criticism but, as he said, "It is hard/ to make a poem in prison./ The air lends itself not/ to the singer."\textsuperscript{84}

Even at this early date, Knight had already begun denying that the figure of the singer, central to the aesthetic of artists like Whitman, Brooks, and Emerson, and the warrior, central to the aesthetic of the Black Arts movement, are or could be separate.\textsuperscript{85} This emphasis on both would lead him to employ a variety of forms in his writing, many of which further isolated him within his own artistic movement. Responding to his tenuous acceptance by other writers --both black and white-- of the 1960s, Knight said, "I pay attention only to the people in the audience. If they don't dig it, then it ain't nothing no way."\textsuperscript{86}

Overall, the merger of these two elements in Knight's work reflects the assertion of an Afro-American cultural identity within a Euro-American context. This creolized voice embodies the most realistic representation of the American present, and is best represented in Knight's poem "The Idea of Ancestry," also taken from \textit{The Essential Etheridge Knight}.

\textbf{I AM ME, THEY ARE THEE}

"The Idea of Ancestry" represents the ultimate synthesis of Knight, Western

\textsuperscript{84} This is an excerpt from Knight's poem, "To Make a Poem in Prison." Cited in \textit{Poems from Prison}, p. 19.

\textsuperscript{85} Werner 123.

\textsuperscript{86} Cited in Werner 125.
Taped to the wall of my cell are 47 pictures: 47 black faces: my mother, father, grandmothers (1 dead), grandfathers (both dead), brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins (1st and 2nd), nieces, and nephews. They stare across the space at me sprawling on my bunk. I know their dark eyes, they know mine. I know their style, they know mine. I am all of them, they are all of me; they are farmers, I am a thief, I am me, they are thee.

Knight establishes a visual connection that suggests a much larger brotherhood, which can be applied outside the realm of his family to include all people (“I am all of them, they are all of me”). Knight’s poetic style here is again strongly reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” although unlike Knight’s own “A Poem for Myself” (to be discussed later), this poem does not resituate the language of the poem into a distinctly “blues voice.” Instead, Knight adopts a clearly derived Whitmanesque style that employs the free structure and deeply personal, extensive use of the “I” to allow the narrator to express a far-reaching sense of oneness with everyone (“I am me, they are thee”).

By describing how the photos of his family “stare across the space at [him],” however, Knight changes Whitman’s populist vision of the boundlessness of America into a modern reflection of the black male experience in America, which is predicated on a distinct lack of space. Consequently, it is deeply significant that Whitman’s ideas are reworked in the future from a writer who finds his voice while behind bars. Knight recognized the need to reformulate Whitman’s more idealized vision of America, largely because he

recognized the nature of the larger, societal prison on the outside and used poetry to help free
himself from the inner restraints that prevented him from examining his relationship with his people and attempting to control his own destiny by expressing himself honestly and for the collective good.87

Later in the poem, Knight conlates nature and ancestry, as a way to suggest the healing powers of family. Knight says that

each fall the graves of my grandfathers call me, the brown hills and red gullies of mississippi send out their electric messages, galvanizing my genes. Last yr / like a salmon quitting the cold ocean--leaping and bucking up his birthstream / I hitchhiked my way from LA with 16 caps in my pocket and a monkey on my back. And I almost kicked it with the kinfolks. I walked barefooted in my grandmother's backyard / I smelled the old land and the woods / I sipped cornwhiskey from fruit jars with the men/
I flirted with the women / I had a ball till the caps ran out and my habit came down. That night I looked at my grandmother and split / my guts were screaming for junk / but I was almost contented / I had almost caught up with me.

Whereas Whitman was attempting to define a central voice for his audience at a time when such definitions were still nebulous, Knight's voice represents the further fragmentation of both individual and national identity on one hand, and the possibility of repairing that schism on the other. Knight realizes that the chief saving grace he possesses is the possibility of reconnecting to his extended family. As a result, even though the poem offers no ideal solutions, and Knight still goes out "the next day in Memphis [to] crack a croaker's88 crib for a fix," he recognizes that the "47 black faces [that stare] across the space" represent his community, and his time with them allows Knight to have "almost caught up with [himself]."

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88 "Croaker" is slang for a Doctor.
Knight establishes a metaphor for modern-day America, by suggesting that the greatest treasures we possess as individuals are our relationships with other people:

You got to stay in touch with people. As a poet, what’s going on inside you and what’s going on outside you--how it’s filtered--is going to make the difference. If I saw a car accident and I were a painter, I guess I’d notice the blood rushing and what color the car was. But as a poet, I’d probably be paying attention to what people were saying--the sounds, that’s what would be distilled in me. And that’s why I think the process of poetry is going on all the time. You can’t point to where it starts or where it will end. Art is revolutionary... because, as Jean-Paul Sartre said, it appeals to the freedom in the audience.89

Writing when American democracy was most threatened since the Civil War, Knight “merges musical rhythms with traditional metric devices”90 to create a voice that is specifically Afro-American, but is still able to represent the larger universal feelings of his audience while maintaining a culturally creolized poetic style. The fact that Knight discovers this voice while in prison only further underscores the inherent contradictions of the American Dream or, as Malcolm X would say, the “American nightmare.”

For a variety of reasons, Malcolm X was one of Knight’s greatest heroes. Both men had spent time in prison and reinvented themselves in the process, and X’s beliefs in Black self-determination and self-pride were extremely appealing to Knight. As a result, Knight wrote four poems about Malcolm X, one of which — “For Malcolm, A Year After”-- is considered one of his finest. Taken from his first book, Poems from Prison, “For Malcolm, A Year After” shows how Knight relies on a conventional, European-derived poetic structure to control his emotions:


90 Werner 123.
Compose for Red a proper verse;
Adhere to foot and strict iamb;
Control the burst of angry words
Or they might boil and break the dam.
Or they might boil and overflow
And drench me, drown me, drive me mad.
So swear no oath, so shed no tear,
And sing no song blue Baptist sad.
Evoke no image, stir no flame,
And spin no yarn across the air.
Make empty anglo tea lace words--
Make them dead white and dry bone bare.

Clearly, Knight is depending on the limitations of four-foot lines in quatrains rhymed xaxa, xbxb, xcxc to maintain his sanity, for without the structure his words “might boil and break the dam.” Within the stanza, there is also both a clear voice of protest against the type of language that results from such a tight structure (“Make empty anglo tea lace words--/ Make them dead white and dry bone bare”), and a more subtle protest against Malcolm’s death (the last words of lines two, four and six combine to form the statement “iamb dam mad”).

Knight comes to a resolution in the second and final stanza:

Compose a verse for Malcolm, man,
And make it rime and make it prim.
The verse will die — as all men do --
But not the memory of him!
Death might come singing sweet like C,
Or knocking like the old folk say,
The moon and stars may pass away,
But not the anger of that day.

Knight’s ability to merge different influences and voices into “For Malcolm, A Year After” makes it such an emotional poem. The mood is clear (“The moon and stars may pass away/ But not the anger of that day”), and Knight’s voice is still grounded in his
community and his experiences ("Death might come singing sweet like C,\(^91\) Or knocking like the old folk say), but his mastery of multiple art forms is what makes the poem even more impressive. In a review of *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, Reginald Gibbons said that

> Knight's work, for all its features that arise from black speech and song, remains open to so many other possibilities of language and therefore of poetry in English. His work is not narrow. And his utilization of poetic precedent is unusual—perhaps something that only a black American poet is likely to be able to do. That is, although he has taken freely what he has needed from that Anglo-American poetic tradition as we have it in our available texts, he has not suppressed the language of his own personal being.\(^92\)

"The Idea of Ancestry" and "For Malcolm, A Year After" both illustrate Knight's capacity to approach his subject from a place where the full range of language— from the extreme of preceded poetic possibilities to the extreme of vernacular and the unliterary— is available to him. This ability may have hindered his acceptance into the movement of which he was a part, but his "peculiar and amazing blend"\(^93\) of passion and skill are what makes his poetry an ideal example of an American counterpoetics.

**KNIGHT AND THE BLUES**

When asked what influence his home state of Mississippi had exerted on his work, Knight responded by saying "it's where I learned the American language. The stories and the music. Growing up in the South, especially in the country, the main forms of--entertainment is not the right word--recreating, was done mainly through

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\(^91\) This is a reference to the note of C, which is the most predominant note in the Blues.


\(^93\) Ibid.
music, songs and story-telling . . . [so] growing up in the South, the two main influences, naturally, were the blues and country and western."\(^9^4\)

As a result of these influences, Knight has always seen his poetry as being more linked to music than literature:

I really can’t understand why in the fuck that poetry is always linked to literature rather than to music, or to dance or to sculpture, etc. . . . It’s always linked to literature and there ain’t no reason why because, if you think about it, even the vernacular, the poetic terms are closer to music than to literature. Stanzas—lines, they’re not called sentences, they’re called lines; they’re not called paragraphs, they’re called stanzas. Rhyme, meter, rhythm — they’re all musical terms.\(^9^5\)

Knight’s verse, by associating itself so closely with a blues idiom connected to the entire past consciousness of his race,\(^9^6\) helps promote a timeless exchange of emotions broad enough to engender the rich and oral folk culture of black Americans. This folk culture, however, has significance for all Americans. As Houston Baker notes in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*,

with the birth of the blues, the vernacular realm of American culture acquired a music that had wide appeal because it expressed a toughness of spirit and resilience, a willingness to transcend difficulties which was strikingly familiar to those whites who remembered their own history. The signal expressive achievement of blues, then, lay in their translation of technological innovativeness, unsettling demographic fluidity, and boundless frontier energy into expression which attracted avid interest from the American masses.\(^9^7\)

Baker’s statement is ideal when considering the types of art that must provide new models of communication for our country. Serving as translators of the American

\(^9^4\) Tracy 8.

\(^9^5\) Cited in Hill 62.

\(^9^6\) On page five of Baker’s *Blues, Ideology*, he cites bluesman Booker White, who said that “the foundation of the blues is working behind a mule way back in slavery time.”

\(^9^7\) Baker 11.
experience, blues musicians help us, as Ralph Ellison has said, “transcend . . . the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in [our] aching consciousness . . . by squeezing from [them] a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”

Knight’s “A Poem for Myself (or Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy),” taken from *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, illustrates his belief in the connections between language and music, particularly the blues. The title of the poem offers a clear parallel to “Song of Myself,” and, like Whitman, Knight centers on the self as a way to represent his own poetic populism. More specifically, Knight writes a poem that, by representing the experience of just one man, attempts to alert his audience to the commonality of black and/or class struggle in America. Like Jean Toomer in *Cane*, Knight brings the black life experience in America full circle, back to its Southern ancestral roots. The poem is squarely centered within the black vernacular tradition of the blues, as Knight adopts the basic ballad form of the blues (ababcb):

I was born in Mississippi;  
I walked barefooted through the mud.  
Born Black in Mississippi,  
Walked barefooted through the mud.  
But, when I reached the age of twelve  
I left that place for good.

Knight’s use of a basic blues idiom (a stanza of three predominantly iambic lines in which the second couplet is the repetition and the third couplet is either a comment or a resolution) is strongly reminiscent of the work of Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, both of whom Knight lists as major influences. Like Hughes, Knight also uses a device

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of blues musicians called “worrying the line,” which means to slightly shorten or lengthen the lines, or vary the words. Knight does this, for example, with lines one and three, when he changes “I was born in Mississippi” to “Born Black in Mississippi.”

By writing a personal “song” in traditional blues structure, Knight again remolds Whitman’s idea of how “to celebrate myself, and sing myself” into a distinctly black voice. Whereas “Song of Myself” centers on the artist as a way to accentuate the commonality of all Americans, Knight’s voice in “A Poem for Myself” highlights the ubiquitous presence of white racism:

I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York City too.
I been to Detroit & Chicago
Been to New York City too.
Said I done strolled all those funky avenues
I’m still the same old black boy with the same old blues.

At the end of the poem, Knight expresses a resolution to his personal dilemma, as well as his race’s: a return to the South to reestablish roots and collective blood ties:

Going back to Mississippi
This time to stay for good
Going back to Mississippi
This time to stay for good--
Gonna be free in Mississippi
Or dead in the Mississippi mud.

Knight employs a variation of Robert Stepto’s ascent/immersion narrative to suggest the importance of community and family. By grounding the idea of the poet-as-singer in an explicitly musical poetic structure, Knight assures that both singer and song provide an expressive balance. In doing so, Knight serves as a “translator” of his own specific
American experience. This type of translation is an ideal example of a revised American aesthetic because “the singer’s product... constitutes a lively scene, a robust matrix, where endless antinomies are mediated and understanding and explanation find conditions of possibility” ["Gonna be free is Mississippi/ Or dead in the Mississippi mud"]. **Knight felt that his “main mission” was to “speak and sing as exactly as possible what it is I feel and think, and a few things that I know about me and my relationship with the world.”**

**Knight employs another quality of the blues —“laughing to keep from crying”** in his poem “The Warden Said to Me the Other Day,” which is taken from *The Essential Etheridge Knight*:

The warden said to me the other day
(innocently, I think), “Say, etheridge,
why come the black boys don’t run off
like the white boys do?”
I lowered my jaw and scratched my head
and said (innocently, I think), “Well, suh,
I ain’t for sure, but I reckon it’s ‘cause
we ain’t got nowheres to run to.”

Although the structure of “Warden” does not adhere to the musical patterns of the blues, the intent of the poem is a clear example of Ellison’s aforementioned definition of the “blues impulse” — transcending painful experiences by laughing at them instead of crying. **Knight’s conversation between himself and the warden is deliberately set up to parallel a conversation between a slave and his master.**

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99 Ibid.

100 Tracy 23.

101 This line is taken from the classic blues song, “Trouble in Mind.”
speech is reminiscent of past black stereotypes like Stepin Fetchit ("Well, suh, I ain't for sure"), and the warden fails to understand that the black experience, as Malcolm X had said, is predicated on a distinct lack of space. In fact, just as Knight had bemoaned his inability to fill up "the space between" him and his family in "The Idea of Ancestry," here again he draws attention to the lack of both physical and mental space available to black Americans. Knight does so, however, within the context of a blues tradition, one which believes that the act of sharing the pain of this experience can, as August Wilson’s character Toledo would say in the 1983 play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, "fill up the emptiness in a way ain’t nobody thought of doing before." This connection to past pain allows Knight to "establish a transcribed-oral art form which connects the Afro-American oral tradition to its African roots."

Knight also employs tragicomedy in another prison poem, “Rehabilitation & Treatment in the Prisons of America.” In prison, the concepts of “time” and “space” take on negative connotations. “Time” comes to mean “restriction” and “space” implies “confinement.” The one option that is available to inmates, then, is to take advantage of the “timelessness” of prison by rehabilitating themselves. Both Knight and Malcolm X are examples of this effort when it succeeds, but in “Rehabilitation,” Knight is clearly interested in suggesting that he and others who have been successfully


103 Hill 22.

104 Hill 64.
rehabilitated have done so in spite of the institution’s efforts to help:

The Convict strolled into the prison administration building to get assistance and counseling for his personal problems. Inside the main door were several doors proclaiming: Doctor, Lawyer, Teacher, Counselor, Therapist, etc. He chose the proper door, and was confronted with two more doors: Custody and Treatment. He chose Treatment, went in, and was confronted with two more doors: First Offender and Previous Offender. Again he chose the proper door and was confronted with two more doors: Adult and Juvenile. He was an adult, so he walked through that door and ran smack into two more doors: Democrat and Republican. He was democrat, so he rushed through that door and ran smack into two more doors: Black and White. He was Black, so he rushed—ran—through that door—and fell nine stories to the street.

The bitterly ironic ending of the poem is an excellent example of how the blues are designed to represent “personal catastrophe[s] expressed lyrically.” Knight’s perspective on American society as a former prisoner allows him to see clearly the shortcomings of the Rehabilitation system. As he says,

Prison is a very oppressive, painful, alienating world. You’ve been, not exiled, you’ve been in-ziled. You’ve been cut off from your community. And art, any art, the purpose of art, any poetry is for communication. To bring about a communion, a communication. So poetry, in that sense, got me back in touch with myself.

What Knight “communicates” is a message very similar to Ralph Ellison’s conclusion to Chapter one of Invisible Man, when the narrator dreams that white society keeps him “running” his whole life to prevent him from ever developing a social awareness. Both Ellison and Knight use their stories to call attention to the hypocrisies of American culture, fulfilling their roles as blues singers who “offer interpretations on the experiencing of experience.”

105 Taken from The Essential Etheridge Knight, p. 114.
106 Ellison 78.
107 Tracy 21.
108 Baker 7.
Because of his mastery of the blues idiom, Knight’s poetry is presented in a form which helps blur the line between artist and audience. Instead of being the sage on the stage, Knight remains the guide on the side, allowing his poetry “to bridge the gap between the races of men as well as the gap between oral and written modes of expression.”

This heightened sense of communal consciousness in Knight was observed by poet Robert Bly at a poetry reading:

And that reading was extremely interesting to one from the point of view that I never saw it happen before in a reading. And, that was that Etheridge, in some way, became transparent to the praise. Now, it’s very difficult in a reading, because the audience can get your ego involved in it — and I don’t know if it’s that whites are not that much used to oral poetry readings. So, therefore, I remember when I first started to read, I would make myself absolutely an impenetrable block, a skinny block of black granite. And, then, I would, in a terrified way, give what I had to give and that would be the end of it. And the more I read, the more I saw that I was unfair to the audience. So I tried to bring in the audience. But I’m just another amateur at it and I often get caught there in that ego response — longing for the applause, or responding to the applause, or taking account of it. But, what is amazing to me is that Etheridge, in some way — I’ve never see anyone do that — didn’t take any account of it and the image that I have was of the applause blowing right through him, through his body. And, evidently, that was because the major thing in there was not really his poetry or whether he wrote well, but in the terms . . . there was a previous union with the audience. Therefore, their praise blew right through him and out the other side. Because, if he had allowed it to remain in his body, he would have broken the union with the audience.

As Patricia Liggins Hill has noted, “other artists [of the period] believed they were the Talented Tenth, but Knight came from the folk and chose to stay there.”

Knight’s introduction to poetry brought him into contact with writers ranging

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109 Hill 114.

110 Cited in Hill 191.

from Dickinson and Whitman to Baraka and Dudley Randall,\textsuperscript{112} and he chose to honor both traditions in his writing. As Knight said,

\begin{quote}
I think a good poet understands the direct relationship between the poet, the poem and the people. I see the art of poetry as this trinity. You can’t have one without the other. The poet-person, the poem and the audience. And they’re equally important, and I never assume that an audience does not have feelings and sense just like I do . . . so I definitely believe that poetry should entertain and enlighten at the same time.\textsuperscript{113}
\end{quote}

By reworking the more standard definition of the “American Dream” into a less idealistic account of the country, one that is grounded in a sometimes stark but undeniable \textit{is-ness},\textsuperscript{114} Knight illustrates how the supposedly dominant Euro-American aesthetic framework is deeply dependant on the continually redirecting voices of black American literature. By representing a complex intertextual relationship that crosses cultural boundaries, Knight’s poetry represents a truly “creolized” form of art that is distinctly American. By doing so, he helps demonstrate both the value of an American counterpoetics, and the need to move towards a more holistic investigation of the complex interrelationship between different cultural traditions in the United States, in the search for a genuinely “American” poetics.

\textsuperscript{112} Hill, “The New Black Aesthetic as a Counterpoetics,” 47.

\textsuperscript{113} Tracy 23.

\textsuperscript{114} On pages 52-55 of \textit{Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture}, George Kent says that “from the animal tales to the hipsterish urban myth-making, the [Afro-American] folk tradition has \textit{is-ness}.” Kent felt this \textit{is-ness} represented a tendency within black culture to subvert the pastoral, idealized surface of Euro-American myths by pointing to the complex racial history that was and is central to the black experience.
Etheridge Knight’s deep commitment to a humanistic art is evident in his 1971 poem, “Green Grass and Yellow Balloons.” Knight dedicates the poem to Alexandria Keller, a four-year-old girl, and the poem itself is a conversation between the two:

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the garden we walked in
was dead / dying
and the fine / rain fell
you held / my hand
fine / rain falling
cold wind blowing
rain thru your hair
death world dying
re / born
by your words
warm and soft and brown
like your eyes
etheridge, you said, i’ve
composed a poem for you
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Despite the “death” and “dying” of the world around them, Keller is able to make everything “re / born” simply from the power behind the childlike altruism of her gift:

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“etheridge . . . i’ve composed a poem for you.” The poem Keller composes is about nothing more than green grass and yellow balloons, but the words are “warming” to Knight,
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and the sea rose in me
and your song sent me spinning
and I thought of e.e. cummings
mud puddles and colored marbles
and what the fuck was I doing
in this new / england / state--
then your eyes seemed sadder to me
and your words seemed warmer to me
and the sea rose higher in me
and suddenly
I was 4 and you were 40
and we were one
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Despite the seemingly unnavigable differences between the two -- Knight is 40,
Keller is 4, Knight is Southern, Keller is Northern, Knight is Black, Keller is white -- Knight's inability to ignore Keller's impact on his emotions makes him symbolically switch places with her ("I was 4 and you were 40") and they become "one." This union is tenuous at best, however, because both people are still in America, where "so soon so soon/ do yellow balloons / burst [because] demons stalk / this land / that smash / people and poets." Just as the protagonist in James Baldwin's Sonny's Blues warns immediately after the story's climax that "the world [still waits] outside, as hungry as a tiger," Knight recognizes that modern day America is not a welcoming place for people who value language and brotherhood.

Knight does believe in the power of words and feelings, though, and he concludes the poem with confidence that

so soon so soon
will your words
be eagles
that rise screaming
from the warmth of their nest
to soar
above this freeze and frigid land
and we
who walk in new ways
will hear you
we will hear you--
and sing too
of green grass, and yellow balloons. 115

Other artists and scholars have also recognized the inherent problems with American society, and believed that art can help chart a new path. For example, in the introduction to her critical study of Robert Hayden, Pontheolla Williams describes the

115 Taken from The Essential Etheridge Knight, p. 86-7.
unusual plight of American artists. To be born an American, she says, is
to be born without escape or remedy into a pluralistic society. Lacking an indigenous culture of
his own, the American paradoxically takes pride in what he considers his own fugitive and
individual character, a character fashioned primarily from a multitude of rudimentary
experiences and alien influences.\footnote{Pontheolla Williams, \textit{Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry} (Urbana &
Chicago, 1987), xv.}

Williams makes a further distinction, however, when she says that to be born American
\textit{and} black "is to be stubbornly aware of the complexity of the American experience. . .
. The black American believes himself uncompromisingly forced to accept some sort of
simplistic stance toward the paradoxical nature of his American character."\footnote{Ibid.} Williams
says that because of the peculiar position of black people in America, black writers
have been subjected to unfair expectations. On one hand, if a black writer rejects white
tradition in favor of a more "Africanized" aesthetic, s/he is labeled as a "limited and
inferior craftsman." If, however, s/he embraces white culture and its literary
influences, s/he could be condemned by revolutionary critics as a "slapstick pawn of a
racist society, a society intent upon the subjugation of a black consciousness in
America."\footnote{Williams xvi.}

Although Williams has in mind the experiences of Hayden, her words are
equally applicable to Knight. A part of the radical literary times of the 1960s, Knight's
work has always been somewhat obscured by his contemporaries. Knight's
"invisibility" became more pronounced during the 1970s and 1980s, when predominant
African-American cultural critics\textsuperscript{119} reacted against “what they saw as the Black Arts movement’s tendency to substitute political rhetoric for serious artistic engagement.”\textsuperscript{120} Although some critics -- Greg Tate for example -- continued to honor the Black Arts movement for producing a postliberated black aesthetic which has allowed black artists and intellectuals to feel themselves “heirs to a culture every bit as def as classical Western civilization,”\textsuperscript{121} the movement receded in prominence; that slide has continued up to today.

Still, we must return to an artist like Knight, who represents both the best of the Black Arts movement and a poetic voice so heterogeneous it could only be created in the United States. Perhaps one way to do so is through Michel Foucault’s theory of the “insurrection of subjugated knowledge,” which advocates an approach to knowledge that frees repressed experiences. Foucault believes we should undergo “the painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memories of their conflicts . . . . Genealogies that are the combined product of an erudite knowledge and a popular knowledge.”\textsuperscript{122}

What Foucault is describing is the basis of Liggins-Hill’s idea of an American

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item On page 103 of \textit{Playing the Changes}, Craig Werner talks about the flurry of new anthologies at that time, among them Stepto and Harper’s \textit{Chant of Saints}, Stepto and Fisher’s \textit{The Reconstruction of Instruction}, and Gates’ \textit{Black Literature and Literary Theory}, among others.
\item Foucault, Michel. \textit{Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings} (New York, 1980), 83. Cited in Werner 103.
\item Ibid. Cited in Werner 104.
\item Cited in Werner 105.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
counterpoetics. As Liggins-Hill states, “the work-songs, spirituals, blues and jazz constitute the basis of the counterpoetics indigenous to the American continent and subversive to its present social and economic systems.”\textsuperscript{123} Because of their unique perspective on American society, Liggins-Hill believes that “black culture today is offering American culture, and Western culture as a whole, a new humanism.”\textsuperscript{124}

Although he is by no means the only model -- and although there are certainly writers out there capable of representing American counterpoetics who are not African-American-- I believe Etheridge Knight embodies the type of work which should be part of a new, more culturally inclusive American canon. Knight proposes a version of universalism based on shared emotional experiences, rather than specific images or forms. Calling for an “integration of art into everyday life” by asserting the importance of an artistic trinity between “the poet, the poem, and the people,” Knight represents the best of an American counterpoetics that can remold our narrowly defined notions of artistic value into a more far-reaching, distinctly American brand of humanism. By doing so, Knight becomes one with his audience, and tells us, simply, that although

the skin
of my poems may be green, yes,
and sometimes
wrinkled
or worn . . .

Split my skin
with the rock
of love old
as the rock of Moses
my poems
love you.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{123} Hill, “The New Black Aesthetic as a Counterpoetics,” viii.

\textsuperscript{124} Hill, “The New Black Aesthetic as a Counterpoetics,” x.

\textsuperscript{125} This closing poem is appropriately, and dialectically, titled “Genesis.” Taken from The Essential Etheridge Knight, p. 3.
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**Articles**


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