

7-1-1976

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Recommended Citation

Fuller, Hoyt W. (1976) "From a Decade of Triumph to the Next Stage The Second Writers Conference," *New Directions*: Vol. 3: Iss. 3, Article 5.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol3/iss3/5>

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From A Decade of Triumph to The Next Stage

12 The Second Writers Conference

By Hoyt W. Fuller

There is more than one reason why it is appropriate to consider the theme of Howard University's Second National Conference of Afro-American Writers, "Beyond Survival: Two Centuries of Black Literature 1776-1976." The first reason is upbeat: There are victories to celebrate. Given the Black situation in America, it is often idle—if not plainly diversionary—to pause to mark small triumphs; the enemy is relentless, and struggle remains the essence of survival; but few incentives regenerate the spirit of combat like clear evidence of ground roughly gained.

The partisans of the Black Consciousness Movement in Literature, in 1976, can measure the distance Blacks have traveled, even as we recognize the remaining distances that must be conquered. In 1976, Blacks can point with more than a little pride, for example to landmark books which validate Black Literature by simply accepting it on its own terms and dealing with its special premises and predications with calm critical intelligence.

One such book is Dr. Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Poetry* which, four years after its publication, remains the most incisive analysis of the vigorous post-Fifties poetry of the Black sensibility yet produced, although its reach encompasses also the entire Black oral and musical traditions. Dr. Henderson's carefully non-polemical study cuts expertly through the mystique of European academic definitions, exposing the underlying presumptions. "Art . . . including literature, does not exist in a vacuum, and reflects—and helps to shape—the lives of those who produce it," he wrote. "It is able to do these things, moreover, because of the special heightening and refining of experience that is characteristic of art.

Literature, accordingly, is the verbal organization of experience into beautiful forms, but what is meant by 'beautiful' and

by 'forms' is to a significant degree dependent upon a people's way of life, their needs, their aspirations, their history—in short, their culture. Ultimately the 'beautiful' is bound up with the truth of a people's history, as they perceive it themselves, and if their vision is clear, its recording just, others may perceive that justness too; and, if they bring to it the proper sympathy and humility, they may even share in the general energy, if not in the specific content of that vision.

Since poetry is the most concentrated and the most allusive of the verbal arts, if there is such a commodity as 'blackness' in literature (and it is assumed here there is), it should somehow be found in concentrated or in residual form in the poetry."

Dr. Henderson proposed criteria by which he evaluated the new Black poetry, arranging it on a critical rack under categories of "Theme," "Structure" and "Saturation," the latter crucial category dealing with the work's quality of blackness, its "fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black experience." It was not entirely new ground, but nowhere else had such extensive and intensive attention been given to isolating the universe incubating the genius of distinctive Black literary creativity.

Another landmark book, less well known but also published in 1972, is Sherley Anne Williams' *Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature*. While Ms. Williams, like Dr. Henderson, looks back as far as the 19th century in developing her thesis, her focus is on the fiction of Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin and Ernest J. Gaines. And, as Dr. Henderson dwells on the language and the expression of the folk, with special emphasis on the role and pre-eminence of music, so Ms. Williams, in her examination of hero figures in the fiction of her authors, dwells on the struggle of ordinary Black male characters to hold onto—and to assert—their manhood in an inhospitable society organized to thwart that manhood. In other words, it is a function of Ms. Williams' study to illustrate, among other

points, how Black men survive by turning upside-down the values and assumptions intended to subjugate and destroy them. While her perceptions are not designed to court the sympathies of the middle class of whatever race or color, she touches a truth even some insightful white observers have recognized. Novelist-critic Cynthia Ozick, writing in *Midstream* magazine [September 1963] during the height of the civil rights movement, saw the light:

"It is a commonplace but curious law of the Outsider that the more he strives to fashion himself emotionally after the Insider, the more he proves himself Outside—and without benefitting his real condition. The Negro is not yet inside America. . . . Until he is, his good manners will be bad manners, his decency will be an indecency, and his sense of the proprieties will be the most shocking impropriety it is possible for him to commit against himself and against the idea of a human being."

Ms. Williams believes that "Black literature requires our deepest attention," and she tunnels through conventional chaff in articulating her critical credo: "In seeking to illuminate our literature, we must confront a crucial question which is all too often by-sided in our attempts to prove how 'revolutionary' or 'relevant' or 'serious' we are: What is our function as Black critics? Is it an adjective which denotes our racial origins, or a quantifier signifying revolutionary zeal? If 'Black' really has some definable and significant meaning when placed before 'critics,' then we must ask just how being 'Black' modifies or alters the way in which we fill our roles as critics. Are we merely to set up aesthetic criteria or describe developing criteria within Black literature, are we developing the philosophical rationales upon which a viable literature can be based; or do we seek to translate Black literature into terms which the Black masses can understand?

"It seems to me," Ms. Williams wrote, "that there is far more to the roles which

Black critics must fill than these traditional functions of the critic. I'm not even sure of how valid these functions are, whether we can really translate all of them into Black terms. There is an inherent rhyme and rhythm to Black life; we know it because we feel it in our blood and hear it in our ears. I have only seen it defined in art, art as diverse as the sculpture of John Torres, the paintings of Charles Sebree, the novels of Barry Beckham and Nathan Heard or the poetry of Michael Harper. These men are coming from different places, and when they reach that point where history intersects their heartbeats, they make unique comments which resound against and illuminate our own views of that history, that experience. And if critics impose aesthetic standards which are general enough to give freedom to these few, don't we also run the risk of cutting off the necessary resonance from other writers who have just as much to tell us, to show us, to give us? I don't know, I do know that criticism must deal with the infinite number of ways in which the Black artist tries to capture, to imitate, to replay the intricate collage of Black life and experience. This is, of course, self-evident. It seems further that this collage of experience must be our critical touchstone."

The books by Dr. Henderson and Ms. Williams—and others like Haki Madhubuti's *Dynamite Voices* and Addison Gayle's *The Way of the New World*, release us critically to ourselves, send us about our business as a whole people doing what we must to affirm ourselves—our right and our duty. But there remains a specter over our shoulders, haunting us, still unnerving too many of us, yet no longer causing panic in our psyches. Ms. Williams put it this way:

"White critics have only a miniscule place in Black literature. Sometimes, a white critic is perceptive enough to hit upon the outlines of Black literature, the universals which make literature, whether folk or formal, literature the world over. White critics have every right to comment

upon any literature. But they have neither the right nor the authority to proclaim themselves 'Experts' on Black literature. Their validity as critics of Black literature has still to be established in the same way we are establishing ours—through the acuteness of our insights and the clarity of our perceptions. With only the rarest exception, white critics have proved time and again that their perceptions are neither deep enough nor precise enough to give us the insights we need into our literature and our experience. As Black critics, we can make free use of the outlines and general perceptions which their writings may provide. But we must also remind them and the Black people to whom our work is addressed that their place in our literature is negligible."

That Ms. Williams can make that declaration, and that Blacks, finally, have accepted as normal a correlation of literature with the conditions under which it is created represents progress. It does not strain the memory to recall when such a declaration was less than respectable.

The Manhattan Conference

Exactly 11 years ago, in lower Manhattan, a very different group of writers came together for an occasion very similar in some ways to the gathering at Howard. Under the auspices of the Harlem Writers Guild and the New School for Social Research, the assembled authors considered the theme, "The Negro Writer's Vision for America." It developed that a radically changed America characterized the vision of the principal Black writers at the conference.

In his keynote address, James Baldwin told the packed New School auditorium that "the liberation of this country . . . depends on whether or not we are able to make a real confrontation with our history." He said that our history has been criminally falsified by "white, Anglo-Saxon Americans" who had imprisoned themselves in their own lies and myths; and he said that white writers, like Black ones, had "two options—to be immoral and up-

hold the *status quo* or to be moral and try to change the world."

Mr. Baldwin's perception coincided with that of John Oliver Killens who, as chairman then of the Harlem Writers Guild, had been largely responsible for organizing the conference. "Negro writers must save America, if it is to be saved," Mr. Killens said. LeRoi Jones, who had not moved on to a transformation of his name and politics at that time, declared that the America of 1965 was not merely beyond saving but that it was so hopeless that destruction and reconstruction were required. The poet-playwright added that it was the task of the Black artist to engineer that destruction, and read from a new poem dedicated to Malcolm Shabazz.

The 1965 conference was interracial, one of the last of that kind. The white panelists included novelist Harvey Swados, now deceased; David Boroff, also deceased; historian Herbert Aptheker; Gordon Rogoff, who then was drama critic for the *Tulane Review*; and Richard Gilman, who was then drama critic for *Newsweek* magazine. Mr. Rogoff and Mr. Gilman were the two white members of the otherwise Black panel on "What Negro Playwrights Are Saying," and they sat together at one end of the stage. The Black panelists were Mr. Jones, Lonne Elder, William Branch, Alice Childress and Loftin Mitchell.

After listening to several of the Black playwrights describing their problems in getting their plays produced, Mr. Rogoff reacted. He told the assembly that he had come to the conference to discuss drama, not to hear charges of racial prejudice in the American theater, and that he would refuse to sit there and serve as "effigy" for the attacks on white people, and so he chose to say nothing at all. However, Mr. Gilman, while agreeing with his colleague on his reasons for participating on the panel, refused to resort to silence. In fact, his contribution to the panel discussion became the most provocative of the three-day conference. He read from a prepared statement which dismissed as unimportant the work of the late Lorraine Hansberry—to whose memory the conference

14 was dedicated—and which said, in effect, that Black writers were not yet capable of producing good plays:

"Negro playwrighting, as I see it thus far, is in a preliminary stage. It could not be otherwise. It is in the stage of being an arm of Negro awakening, of Negro political action, of Negro insistence, not on rights, but on being. Yet drama, as an art, cannot be concerned with an insistence on the right to be, but on the nature of being. In this, it is totally democratic and totally aristocratic. Any white dramatist is compelled to place his head under the same guillotine when he writes, and it will fall off if what he writes is untrue—untrue, need I say, in aesthetic terms . . ."

It was noted at the time that only LeRoi Jones attempted a response to Mr. Gilman's remarkable indictment, and Mr. Jones mostly shrugged; he already had ceased trying to communicate with white people. And Mr. Gilman's performance had most eloquently demonstrated Mr. Jones' justification.

The Berkeley Conference

Less than a year earlier—in August 1964—the University of California at Berkeley had convened a writers conference at rustic Asilomar State Park and some of the country's most distinguished Black authors were scheduled to appear. While Baldwin and Ralph Ellison failed to show up, such literary luminaries as Gwendolyn Brooks, LeRoi Jones, Arna Bontemps, Horace Cayton, and Saunders Redding were accounted for. The conference on "The Negro Writer in the United States" had been organized under the leadership of Herbert Hill, the NAACP labor secretary who had seized advantage of the growing interest in Black literature to entrepreneur an anthology, *Soon, One Morning*.

Mr. Hill, who had very definite ideas of where Black Literature had been and of where it should go, also had invited a number of white literary figures involved as critics, interpreters or anthologizers of Black writing, chief among them Robert

ica and the leading white guru of Black Literature at that time. It was Mr. Hill's thesis that, "The greater part of contemporary American Negro writing is characterized by a determination to break through the limits of racial parochialism into the whole range of the modern writer's preoccupations." Thus, he had sought—unsuccessfully, to present to the 200 or so people who had come—at \$100 a head—writers and authors whose words and works would support his thesis. Mr. Hill, who was not yet ready to admit his role as a manipulative outsider, was aware of the altering sound and substance of Black Literature, but his rock-solid NAACP ideology directed his judgment wide of the mark. "The nature of this literature is changing rapidly as the writers both anticipate and effect the Negro breakthrough into the *mainstream* of American culture," he had written in urging communicants on to Asilomar.

However, apart from the elegant Saunders Redding, there were no Black authors at the conference who displayed any conscious interest in the American mainstream, and at least two of them—LeRoi Jones and Ossie Davis, who came as surrogate for Baldwin—made it very clear that the so-called *mainstream* loomed less like a Promised Land than it did a prison. Anatomizing Mr. Hill's theory of "the limits of racial parochialism," Ossie Davis said simply: "The Negro writer cannot accept the position in which he finds himself. He *has* to write protest. And the protest must be loud, bitter and haranguing, aimed at corrective action *now*."

Since those two conferences, Black writers have been coming together annually on college and university campuses across the country to hold workshops and to consider the state of their craft and the conditions under which they are required to create. Conferences at Fisk University, organized by Mr. Killens during his tenure there, and the annual conferences at Southern University, under the direction of Dr. Pinkie Gordon Lane, have helped to maintain the interest and excitement. The writers and the sponsors of the confer-

ences have responded to the outstanding mood of the Black community, and these conferences have been—for the most part—without the presence and the participation of white writers, critics and assorted "authorities."

Despite the misgivings of some of the more conservative of the Black commentators, the quiet exclusion of whites from these conferences has been both healthy and productive. It has been healthy, first, because Blacks needed to be free of the necessity of defending or proving the premises of Black Literature, on the one hand, and of indulging the subtle racism and sometimes aggressive neuroticism of many white critics, on the other hand. It has been healthy, also, because of the implicit denial that the perimeters of literature can be defined by the dictates of a single historic and cultural perspective. And needless to say, the simple fact of the total organization and control of the conferences by Blacks has been psychologically regenerative.

The conferences have been productive in similar ways: they have enabled the writers to come together and, insofar as the notoriously combative egos of writers will allow, to communicate; they have made it possible for the writers to debate such controversial issues as the Black aesthetic, Negritude, the African personality, the Black writer's role in the struggle against economic and political oppression, and whether the so-called *mainstream* is a legitimate goal toward which to strive. The conferences have revealed to writers the paucity of publishing outlets available to them and the severity of the problems and politics involved in increasing those outlets; and they have brought students and teachers, as well as the interested public, into close contact with writers who otherwise would remain simply a name on a book cover or the title page of a poem, essay or story.

In between the conferences, Black writers have been seriously about their business. Writers who were established early in the Sixties—Baraka, John A. Williams, Chester Himes, Paule Marshall, Gwendo-3

lyn Brooks and John Oliver Killens—have continued to produce works of substance and maturity; and the list of significant new literary talent continued to grow. And playwrights like Leslie Lee (*"The First Breeze of Summer"*), Joseph Walker, Ronald Milner and Ed Bullins have demonstrated the terrible slander of Richard Gilman's statement in 1965 that Black playwrights could not deal with "the nature of being." What those playwrights needed was the same freedom to create out of their vision and experience as other playwrights, without critics and "authorities" like Gilman standing in the theater doorway, trying to force the Black vision and experience through a white prism.

In a decade, then, we can see how and where we have moved. We have won the battle of Black Literature in the only way that matters—by affirming it, validating it, exploring and endearing it, for ourselves. If we accept it and deal with it on our own terms, approaching it with all the honesty and passion of our love, we can protect it against the worst assaults from its enemies.

The Realities of the Seventies

Now, having celebrated that small victory, it is necessary to turn to soberer things. Threats to Black Literature and to Black hegemony over that literature are growing on several fronts. Here are some of the most serious areas of concern:

First, Black apathy. The Seventies have been characterized by a decline in Black consciousness, a relaxation of vigilance and determination which Charles V. Hamilton, the political scientist, recently described [*New York Times*, April 18, 1976] as general depoliticalization. Black people have been "exhausted, like boxers on the ropes," he said. "They will neither vote nor revolt." Another spokesman, Eddie V. Williams, president of the Joint Center for Political Studies in Washington, D.C., calling Black people "Invisible again" in an article [*New York Times*, April 7, 1976] stated that "Blacks are being taken for granted by policy-makers and politicians who feel they do not have to please white

that don't squeak. Their perception is based not only on the absence of protests and demonstrations but also on low Black voter registration and turnout rates and the absence of public complaints."

The second serious area of concern is related directly to the first. In the vacuum created by Black apathy, the enemy again grows bolder and moves in. White critics and "experts," silenced during the late-Sixties and early-Seventies, are emerging to reassert their dominance over Black ideas and expression. Some examples: Magazines like *Commentary*, the organ of the American Jewish Committee, and *The Public Interest*, edited by Irving Kristol, are leading organs of the so-called neo-conservative movement which does battle—among other things—against Black studies programs, affirmative action and the theory that special educational and economic considerations are due those ethnic groups who have been restricted and victimized by institutional racism. Roger Rosenblatt, the literary critic for *The New Republic*, published a book through the Harvard University Press, "Black Fiction," which dredges up many of the old Southern-bred myths and myopic theories about Black Literature; and the *Saturday Review*, [November 15, 1975] in an all but unbelievably offensive special focus on Black creativity, "The Arts in Black America," summed-up the Black arts with this assessment: ". . . What Black artists need is not less exposure to white works but more; they could then integrate the lessons of the masters into their own visions instead of furtively pilfering a scrap here and there." The author of the article, Robert F. Moss, is, according to the *Saturday Review*, a Rutgers University "literary critic who has taught in Black-oriented English programs."

The third and final serious concern, which also is related to the other two, has to do with the crisis in Black publishing, a problem which, if unrelieved over any extended period, can nullify most of what was achieved during the past decade. The major white publishing houses which, in the heat of the Black revolt of the Sixties,

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rushed to cash in on the socio-political phenomenon by publishing and reprinting dozens of books, have since—quite expectedly—trimmed Black books from their schedules and the token Black editors from their staffs.

The handful of serious Black publishing houses, which surfaced in the Sixties and early-Seventies, are either all in serious financial trouble—in or near bankruptcy—or so strained that they have retrenched to issuing only two or three books a year.

The same dismal prospect applies to Black literary publications, whose number is steadily declining. Not only does the dearth of Black literary publications severely limit the exposure of Black poets, essayists and short-story writers, but the absence of platform dangerously restricts the development and availability of the critics so desperately needed—critics who in recent years have been gaining public attention.

Therefore, the struggle is not over. As Dr. Henderson once said: ". . . Behind any realistic drive to reach permanent solutions there must be a regeneration of the spirit. And this regeneration has been the historic role of art. It has always been the role of Black art, especially here in America. In our drive for economic and political liberation, then, we can avoid the mistakes of other people and other generations by drawing consciously from those deep wellsprings of Being which we call by so many names, especially now by the beautiful term Soul." □

Hoyt W. Fuller, formerly executive editor of the *Black World* magazine [defunct as of April 1976], keynoted the Black writers conference which was sponsored by the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard University, April 22-24, 1976.