

*Every house has its foundation; black America has its history. By looking at the sixties, we can perceive what to and what not to aim for in the seventies. For Neal, black consciousness is good if it allows more light and more understanding of the complex struggle ahead.*

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**Larry Neal**

## **New Space / The Growth of Black Consciousness in the Sixties**

It was a squeeze really. Sometimes, in some places, it looked like we weren't gonna make it. But we squeezed through, just like we have been squeezing through for decades. Only this time there was a little more light at the end of the tunnel. Some of us saw God, and seriously began the work of freeing ourselves. The benevolent demon imprisoned within us broke loose, and manifested himself. The Black Spirit asserted itself collectively, and with obvious effects everywhere throughout the country. We were forced, as never before, to make explicit our desire to determine the nature and course of our lives. In short, we demanded self-determination. What the full implications of this demand are, we do not know yet. One thing is clear, though. As we move into the seventies, many of the things that concerned us in the early sixties are no longer as important as we once thought they were. We fought for the right to eat a meal in some cracker restaurant in the deep South, but now that that right has been assured by the Federal Government, black people are no longer interested in such things. Perhaps it was the victory itself that turned us off. Perhaps it was the acute awareness that finally what we wanted was not the cup of coffee in the cracker restaurant, but something more substantive than that. If we could get it, we wanted the land that the restaurant was built on. We wanted reparations. We wanted power. We wanted Nationhood.

Power became the central issue. Essentially, it has always been the central issue; but for so long we were caught up in symbols.

We found ourselves reacting to the most obvious manifestations of white racism while failing very often, to penetrate the core of the problem. When we cut past the bullshit, it became evident that even though the victories of the civil rights movement were legitimate, noteworthy, and necessary, they did not address themselves to the central problem of the black man in America. We came to understand that the simple acquisition of those rights which abstractly belong to all citizens of the United States would in no fundamental manner alter the oppressive situation in which we found ourselves. And that situation is essentially one of powerlessness.

But we had to go through the civil rights movement to understand this. The integrationist cause championed by the NAACP, Urban League, early CORE, and SNCC represent significant watersheds in the history of the black liberation movement. I believe that this evaluation is indisputable even if their concerns were not necessarily the concerns of a broad segment of the black community. In spite of the short term goals of these organizations, they have contributed significantly to the growth of black consciousness. The freedom rides, sit-ins, bus boycotts, Selma March, Meredith March, Harlem rebellion, Watts rebellion, Newark rebellion, school take-overs, and the explosion of black culture all grow out of a conglomerate will towards black liberation.

It was in the midst of all of these activities that we learned the workings of the system that oppressed us. All of these struggles moved us a little closer to the goal of black self-determination which has got to be the end result of all of our labors.

The decade was one marked with fantastic changes in the concept of group leadership. New styles of leadership arose: Robert Williams, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Maulana Karenga, Rap Brown, LeRoi Jones, Huey Newton. . . . New heroes who, even in their diversities of style and contradictory methods, illuminate essential aspects of the struggle for national liberation. The point now is to perceive the whole, and glean out of this conglomerate a method that is appropriate for the tasks facing us.

For example, I was never an admirer of Rev. King. I felt that his philosophy of nonviolence was at times suicidal and detrimental

to the liberation of black people. But some aspects of King's philosophy are strategically and tactically valid. A case in point is James Forman's disruption of the church services at an upper-class Riverside Drive church. This action represents one of the high points of nonviolent action; and it was carried out by one man. The thrust of the act, its psychological and moral character, resulted in the fragmentation of the white liberal's sanctimonious smugness. It was beautiful. It revealed, in very graphic terms, just how psychologically and morally insecure the northern white establishment is. The church, the weakest link in America's mythic and cultural superstructure, was tested, and found lacking in moral stamina.

James Forman's act had ramifications throughout the entire church community. Black church men who had heretofore perceived the exact relationship between the church and other racist institutions in the society were free to consolidate around the issue of a relevant church.

All the major activities that were directed towards the question of liberation and Black Power spring from an ethos, a group spirit. What we have to understand, I think, is that somewhere in the maw of this ethos which continuously manifests itself, are the techniques and means of our liberation. It is not a question of falling into one bag, tenaciously holding on to it as if there were no other. That would be the route to suicide. Rather, what we should be about is a meaningful *synthesis* of the best that our struggles have taught us. This is a more difficult task than feeling secure in our own particular, and often narrow, endeavors. What we need, above all, is a widening of our perceptions, especially in terms of our own history.

For example, take the concept of "Black Consciousness." When the thing got really going, black people in different places developed unique and often contradictory attitudes towards it; they operated out of the principle along a variety of different styles. Some people joined the Muslims. Some people stopped eating certain foods. Other people, just as sincere as the first group, began to relish those very same tabooed foods. Some people put on African clothing. Most wore naturals. Some wore brighter colors. Some raised hell in school. Some left their white wives and hus-

bands. Some joined RAM or the Black Panther Party. Some dug B. B. King, and some dug Coltrane. But shit. *It was all good and on time.* It was collective motion/energy that could be harnessed and organized.

At times one would walk the streets and feel it in the air—black people asserting that they were each the bearers of an ethos. The beautiful became more beautiful; the black woman assumed more of her rightful place in the psyche of black artists; brothers greeted each other warmly. This was especially true after some catastrophic upheaval like Newark or Watts. Black people spoke to each other in strange tongues which they did not understand, but yet spoke well. Harlem, blighted and dope ridden, oozed an atmosphere of love and concrete spirituality. Black consciousness manifested itself collectively and resolutely upon large segments of the black community. What we are faced with now is the mature shaping of this consciousness. That is, we long to be comfortable with it, to gird ourselves for the long struggle that certainly lies ahead. Black consciousness is necessary and good only if it allows more light, more understanding of the complex struggles in which we find ourselves. But we must emphasize that it is impossible for a people to struggle and win without a sense of collective consciousness.

Let me clear something up here: the term "collective consciousness" is not meant to designate a sense of ourselves that is imposed from outside of a *usable* historical past, but indicates rather a sense of our psychic blood lines that are rooted in the *living* culture. The African past, on the other hand, is an archetypal memory. Unless that past can be shaped within the context of a living culture, it basically has no function. That is to say: we are *an* African people, but we are not Africans. We are slave ships, crammed together in putrid holds, the Mali dream, Dahomey magic transformed by the hougans of New Orleans. We are field hollering Buddy Bolden; the night's secret sermon; the memory of your own God and the transmutation of that God. You know cotton and lynching. You know cities of tenement cells. What we have got to do is to understand that there are no blues in Africa. That is to say, the world view that created the blues is not there. This is the immediate history that we are going to have to shape

and confront. Just as the blues confronts a specific emotional history, it is necessary, for us, to confront the folkloric as well as written past. The value system for whatever we will be must, if it is to be operational, spring first from readily available sources. *What we need to do, however, with African and other Third World references is to shape them into a new cosmological and philosophical framework. We need to shape, on the basis of our own historical imperatives, a life-centered concept of human existence that goes beyond the Western world view.* Along with the most overt forms of political and economic repression, the peoples of the Third World are dominated by the psychological attitudes of the West. Liberation for us and for them is inextricably bound up with a new set of national and global formulations, and with the erection of new moral and philosophical attitudes. These attitudes inform the following: the use of human and material resources; the idea of justice and human conduct; the relationship between Man and Nature; and the use of force as a means of national liberation.

Under the leadership of Dr. King, the civil rights struggle took place on an essentially moral plane. Black people tried to convince white people of the essentially ethical nature of the struggle. It was the ethical principle that informed the concept of non-violence. It was the young people of SNCC who de-emphasized the ethical aspects of the concept, and began to use it as a tactical weapon. But whether or not we agree with the philosophy of non-violence is not the question. What is important here is that this means of liberation was shaped out of the black man's spiritual legacy. Black people are the last remaining "Christians" in America. In the South, where the movement began, most of the black population are devout Christians. And the minister is very often the only form of leadership existing in many communities.

We know the historical reason for this. But we must understand that people can only work with the tools and the concepts that are available to them. Therefore, the expressive mode of the civil rights movement was spirituals, gospels, and folk songs. These modes of expression spring most immediately from southern black culture.

Had the struggle been born in the North, the modes of expres-

sion would have been quite different. In substance, the struggle would have been far more brutal and disruptive in its early phases. It would have been less concerned with the ethic preached by King and other black southern leaders. Where the black leadership in the South expressed itself in the language of Christianity, radical northern leaders expressed themselves in a quasi black nationalistic rhetoric.

King's rhetorical devices, poetic and chock full of imagery, grew primarily out of the symbology of the black church service. On the other hand, Adam Clayton Powell expressed himself in the rhetoric of the street corner speakers—speakers who were spawned by a long history of urban mass movements beginning with Marcus Garvey, and coming through to the labor movement of the thirties and forties.

In the South, the preachers have always been the leaders of a large segment of the black community. Often, they took political positions that were not always in the best interest of the community. But sometimes they were in the forefront of militant action, as it was then perceived. Many of them gave their churches over to civil rights activists, and suffered for it. Many of them were lynched or burned out for aiding in the struggle. The movement would have not been successful, on any terms, if it had not attempted to shape and utilize the living culture of the people. Those of us who are engaged in the current struggle for self-determination and for Nationhood must understand this, and move to make this consciousness of ourselves an integral part of everything that we do.

What is the point of these observations? It is simply this: that in spite of the failures of the civil rights movement and its peculiar lack of focus, it still managed to engage a great many people in the struggle. And further, unlike many of today's black organizations, it expressed itself in terms that could be easily embraced by broad segments of the black community. We say this even though we know that, in the main, the civil rights movement failed to address itself to some of the most fundamental problems confronting us. Organizations like the NAACP, Urban League, SCLC, early CORE, and SNCC were finally speaking to an individualized view of our predicament. Hence, when an NAACP official spoke in

terms of "qualifications" he spoke in white man's terms. When he spoke of integration, the term always seemed to imply the dissolution of the black community and of black culture. And finally the concept of integration strongly implied an uncritical acceptance of a white value system. You only had to look at the life-style of some of the more prominent leaders to recognize that they were pitifully enslaved to some of the worst aspects of American national life.

About 1962, many young blacks began to seek another direction, one that they believed would more militantly set about achieving true freedom for black people. These were primarily urban youth who had recognized the need for action, but were decidedly alienated from the movement in the South. Some had been involved with the radical white left where, in the process of reading Marx and Lenin, they came to realize that despite the importance of these theoreticians to late nineteenth and early twentieth century revolutionary thought, they were still confronted with the necessity of developing their own theories of social change. As a result of this observation, they found themselves squeezed between the pallid liberalism of the integrationists and the pseudo-scientific jargon of the white left. Therefore, they had to turn inward on their most immediate historical experiences in order to construct a meaningful concept of social change.

In doing so, they found that throughout Afro-American history there had always existed a persistent, though fragmented, sense of nationalism. They came to feel that somehow previous generations of black activists and radical thinkers had not fully utilized this feeling; this group ethos tugs at all black people regardless of their social standings. It was clear that, however you cut it, every person of African descent, living in America, had to at sometime come to grips with *Blackness*. And further, there was something metaphysical about it—this confrontation with ourselves.

And the questions, many questions: Who was this Marcus Garvey the old "race men" often spoke of? Why did he have so many followers? Why did his organization fail? Who was W. E. B. Du Bois? Why was he against Garvey? Why didn't Monroe Trotter join the NAACP? What is the NAACP? Who did they represent? What is Africa to me? What is my name? Why do our

women straighten their hair? Where are we going? Why William Delaney, Edward Blyden, Poppa Singleton, Malcolm X? How could they exist in America? If integration was not the answer, what is? There are millions of black people in the world; what is our relationship to them? Why our music, our dance, our talk, our attitudes?

When we asked these and other questions, it became exceedingly clear there were some black men who were trying to escape their blackness; men who were drowning themselves in the culture of the West. Men who, in effect, had made a pact with oppression. We came to learn what falsehood was, and why some members of the black community were cheap, imitation white men. And were not some of them the so-called leaders of the Negro community? It was shameful watching how we raised our children to hate themselves.

*Who's yo' pappy?*

*Yo' hair is nappy;*

*You sho' is a ugly child . . .*

Attacking lips, skin, hair, legs, attacking the self that we had been trained to hate. Not knowing then that the very assertion of Selfhood would engage us in the act of truly liberating ourselves.

But then there were other black men who had the vision. Men who had always upheld the sanctity of black people; men who had sought a large, profound concept of freedom, and had made no excuses for doing so. These were the men, too, that we had to reckon with.

I remember in 1961, coming to New York with a sharp, very revolutionary brother named Bill Davis. We had come up on a Saturday to go to the Muslim restaurant; to meet Jesse Gray who was organizing rent strikes; to meet Jim Houghton who was organizing black labor; to buy Marxist literature down on 12th street; and, finally, to go to Mr. Michaux's bookstore which, at that time, was located on 125th and Seventh avenue. It was Freedom Square, Garvey Square, Little Africa, Mecca, the University of Timbuctoo, the voice of Nat Turner, DuBois, Benjamin Davis, Duke Ellington, Eloise Moore, Queen Mother Moore, Charlie Parker, Shango, Black John the revelator, Buy Black, Carlos Cook Porkchop Davis (somebody oughta do a book on him), Malcolm X,

Mr. Michaux, James Lawson, Richard Wright, Kwame Nkrumah, and Ellison's Ras.

The square in front of the bookstore was a mind-blower. From here, one could feel emanating all of the necessary but conflicting strands of African-American nationalism. For more than thirty years, this corner had been the area for a community discussion on the Nature and Destiny of the Colored Peoples of the World. And behind those thirty years, this tradition reached back four hundred years. In the bars, the lodges, the Saturday morning kitchens, the church, on the job, between breaks; everywhere black people are/were/have been in the cotton fields, in the folklore, the spirituals, the dance; everywhere black people are/were, a group ethos is at work, trying to define the essential terms of our existence.

On that Saturday, after the speeches and the book buying, Mr. Michaux took us in the backroom of his store. It was a crowded room jammed with books and other artifacts. Photographs of Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth stared down at us. There was a heaviness about the room, as if it were crowded with ghosts. The spirit that drew the people to Harlem Square every day was being manifested in the room; ghosts emanated out of old books, photos, and the sounds and rhythms of Mr. Michaux's voice. A strength and perception was there that we had never before experienced. Michaux would make some heavy observation about the contemporary state of the race.

"The *Negro* is not a man; *it's* a thing to be used, abused, accused, and confused. He is a political tool, he's an economic stool, and he's a religious fool. His politicians are picked. His economy is fixed, and his preachers are tricked. The politician pacifies; the preacher sanctifies; and the white man crucifies!"

Now that's an interesting way of looking at the world, I thought, as we all cracked up laughing in the ghost-whispering room. Then he introduced us to an old man who said that he had been a conscious nationalist ever since he could remember. He said that he was a nationalist, too, and that the whole family was for the black man, "the Original Man," "the Black Sun," "the Black Holy Ghost." Then he went into a long parable about the Eagle who had always been taught that he was a chicken:

One day a naturalist said to the owner of this magnificent bird: "That bird is an eagle, not a chicken."

"I know," said the owner, "but I have programmed it to be a chicken. It is no longer an eagle, it is a chicken even though it measures fifteen feet from tip to tip of its wings."

"Naw," the natural man said, "it is an eagle still; it has the soul of an eagle, and I will make it fly."

"No," said the owner, "it is just a dumb chicken and it will never fly." So they agreed to test the eagle. The natural man picked up the eagle and *said* with all of his power: "Eagle, you are an eagle; you belong in the sky and not to this earth, go on and fly." Well the eagle dug the other chickens hopping around like chickens do and eating their food and he jumped out of the naturalists hand back to the ground.

Then he decided to take the eagle to the top of a house. He said the same words to the eagle as he had said before. The eagle jumped right back down to the other chickens pecking in the chicken coop.

So the next day, the naturalist rose very early and took the eagle to a high mountain. The sun was just easing up, coming over the mountain top, shining, lighting up the world. He tried to get that eagle to fly again. Way up high, like that the eagle was scared; heart throbbing mad. The natural man made it look directly at the sun. The hulk of the eagle expanded, the wings flared; he screeched and rose into the sky. It truly was an eagle, and not a chicken.

I asked the man where he had heard that story. He said that it was really a well-known story, but if I wanted to read it there was an account in a book by Edwin W. Smith's *Aggrey of Africa*.<sup>1</sup> Aggrey was an African educator and pastor; Nkrumah had been one of his pupils. On the way out of the store, the man said: "Whatever you do. Wherever you go. No matter who you may know, and what you may see. No matter what your beliefs. One thing is fundamental, son—don't forget your nationalism. Be a nationalist always; even when you're *pretending* otherwise. Think nationalist. Live nationalist. That's what you young people gonna really need soon. But don't be no tankhead though. Learn to be swift and flexible. And remember your ancestors, all of them."

Then we began to hear Malcolm, the black voice skating and bebopping like a righteous saxophone solo—mellow truths inspired by the Honorable Elijah Muhammand, but shaped out of Malcolm's own style, a style rooted in black folk memory, and the memory of his Garveyite father. We could dig Malcolm because the essential vectors of his style were more closely related to our own urban experiences. He was the first black leader, in our generation, to resurrect all of the strains of black nationalism lurking within us.

In the precise sense of the word, his stance was radical, rooted in a long strand of flesh-filled nights, and sea deaths, and cotton deaths, and revolutionary deaths; Malcolm was the Opener, the Son of the Word made flesh, and for the first time in our lives, we had a voice to offset the weaknesses and the temptations that we saw around us.

But we refuse to accentuate Malcolm's post-Nation-Of-Islam-period while ignoring the long years he was with the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. To do that would be improper. Malcolm definitely learned his nationalism from the Muslims, who provided him with the means of expressing the latent beliefs of all black people.

What timely combination of events led to the growth of the Nation of Islam are too complex to discuss here. One thing is certain, the rise of the Nation is a significant and concrete denial of the viability of contemporary Christianity. It especially denies to Christianity the ability to liberate black people. In spite of its Eastern origins, Christianity is clearly the religion of the oppressors. Its very symbology as projected in the West is anti-black. In the history of people of African descent it has played contradictory roles. On the one hand it has taught submission to slavery and oppression; on the other it has represented the only means by which black people could express themselves spiritually. Hence, we were in a trick: the Devil and The Black Spirit contended within us. And we were shattered by the continuing struggle. We longed for a point of focus, a concrete set of references that reflected *our* view of the world, and not a view imposed from without. It was, therefore, from out of the womb of the Nation of Islam that Malcolm called us.

Through Malcolm, the Nation of Islam effected a broader and more open discussion of identity—a subject that has always been a part of our ideological continuum. But not since Garvey had anyone proposed organizing around identity on a mass scale. And most important, no one in our generation had proposed this identity to be distinct and *separate*. It was the separation part that most annoyed most black people hearing it for the first time. It was the separation part that made the Negro leadership accelerate its demands for integration; that sent them scurrying like rats to any radio or television program. On these programs they would denounce Malcolm and the Nation, while themselves claiming unbounded loyalty to America and its ideals. Most of these Negroes were jive-ass leaders who seemed to be psychically wedded to the notion that niggers ain't shit. It was really impossible to understand where they were coming from. They seemed tied to dead options like: "There is no hope unless the Negro integrates"; "A black child cannot be truly educated in an all black learning situation." All assumptions that fail to address the central problems. This Negro leadership showed no concern for black people that went beyond the bounds set by white power. That they were concerned for the good of black people is not in question here. We know they were concerned, but they were concerned with the wrong things, and had been for quite some time. They seemed to have no concept of *group* priorities.

For example, let us take the famous Supreme Court decision of 1954. The NAACP legal division, under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, abstractly won the right to an education free of racial discrimination. But that right is implied already in the Constitution. What they failed to do was go beyond the Constitution to the question of human rights. If they had done that they would have had to demand reparations from the United States government in the form of land and other resources. Along with fighting for those rights which are supposed to be legitimate under the white man's law, they would have also demanded that discrimination in the allocation of funds to predominantly black schools be stopped. Achieving the integration of public schools could never be as important as building black institutions which address themselves specifically to the needs of black people. But the Negro

leadership had so essentially based its program on integration that it failed to deal with the issue of blacks controlling the institutions that affect our lives.

For a long while, it was impossible to understand what this leadership was about. Was it simply about copping out and begging for freedom, or was it that they just didn't know what to do? Or perhaps it was because they had been conned by the idea of the American dream, a dream that saw all of the country's national groups melted and submerged into a new, more humane entity. At one time, what these leaders demanded was radical; but by the middle of the sixties they were the new conservatives. Their thinking had calcified and ceased to be inventive. They had lost style, the easy manner people have who are engaged in an important struggle. True, they were for the race, as the saying goes, but finally what they demanded from the white establishment was often against our best interests. They rarely addressed us. They always spoke to us *through* white people. And since they had groomed themselves in the craft of addressing whites, whenever they did condescend to speak to us it was only in the terms that they had perfected. All of their models of what is known as "civilized" achievement were white. In retrospect, it is this aspect of their lives that is the most tragic.

Their generation was caught in a strange set of contradictions, foremost of which is: *in order to survive America one must understand the enemy*. But our history, in the West, indicates that understanding the enemy entails, in some respect, an internalization of his values. You hate the motherfucker, the beast, the pervert, the moneylender, the general, the president, the whore, the mayor, the police, the literary critic. You hate this historical raper of peoples and of nations, but to a certain extent, you feel dependent upon him for survival. He has taught you to believe that you need him, and that you always will. And since he is the one in power, he determines the mode of the relationship. His style, as corny as it is, exudes power. The secret nigger that is locked within you whispers persistently in your ear: "Get some power like the white man has, brother, this is your secret nigger talking." The problem for the Negro leadership is the phrase, "like the white man." Like the rest of us, they long for a place

that black people can control, something to call our own; but many of them have come to imitate the thing they despise. And it is at this point that they begin to be challenged by the "new" nationalism. For they are a fragmented lot of men. Except for Du Bois, who had come from among them, very few of them expressed themselves in a manner that spoke to our *collective* will for survival on our own terms. Those of us who had been filtered through Western academic culture knew that the white man would allow an occasional Negro to survive and "do his thing" individually; but we knew also that finally there is no real *sustaining* survival outside of the collective ethos. Therefore, we posited the idea that the struggle needed a nationalistic overview—an ideological construct that was based on our own emotional history. Our leaders seemed not to know or care about these things. They seemed to be perpetually caught up in a white solution to the problem; it wasn't a problem caused by us, but by white oppression. However, *we* are the ones most responsible for developing the means to our liberation.

America is in fact two nations, one Black, one White. That is what the nationalists began to say. Not only were there two nations, one was a colony:

The American Negro shares with colonial peoples many of the socio-economic factors which form the material basis for present day revolutionary nationalism. Like these peoples of the under-developed countries, the Negro suffers in varying degree from the hunger, illiteracy, disease, ties to the land, urban and semi-urban slums, cultural starvation, and the psychological reactions to being ruled over by others not of his kind. He experiences the tyranny imposed upon the lives of those who inhabit under-developed countries. In the words of a Mexican writer, Enrique Gonzales Pedrero, under-development creates a situation where that which exists "only half exists," where countries are almost countries, fifty per cent nations, and a man who inhabits these countries, is a dependent being, a sub-man. Such a man depends "not on himself but on other men and other outside worlds that order him around, counsel and guide him like a newly born infant."

These statements are found in a remarkable essay<sup>2</sup> written by Harold Cruse entitled, "Revolutionary Nationalism And The Afro-American." It is significant because it provided the young nationalists organizing in SNCC and RAM (Revolutionary Action Movement) with the first theoretical explanation of why they were nationalists, non-Marxist, and anti-integration.

Further, Cruse pinpointed the particular malaise affecting the Negro leadership:

large segments of the modern Negro bourgeoisie have played a continually regressive "non-national" role in Negro affairs. Thriving off the crumbs of integration, these bourgeois elements have become de-racialized and de-cultured, leaving the Negro working class without voice or leadership, while serving the negative role of class buffer between the deprived working class and the white ruling class elites. In this respect, such groups have become a social millstone around the necks of the Negro working class—a point which none of the militant phrases that accompany the racial integration movement down the road to "racial attrition" should be allowed to obscure.<sup>3</sup>

If what Cruse was saying is true, then any course to black liberation that is not nationalistically oriented is doomed to failure. It would have to imply also that the civil rights movement, so helplessly locked into the notion that America is a democracy, is finally leading black people down the path to ethnocide—leading them towards cultural annihilation. And since we had turned inward on ourselves, and glimpsed what we considered to be the inner potential of our people, we were frightened by the concepts of the integrationists. Not merely intellectually in disagreement with them but frightened, if you can dig it. So much so, that in order to preserve something of our private selves, many of us refused to even talk to white people. We had to withdraw to get this thing together that had risen before us in all of its truth:

*We want a nation controlled by black people. Yeah, that's what we want. Everything else is cool: no discrimination in housing, fair employment, more black teachers and schools, greater medical aid, more blacks on television and in films, black studies pro-*



grams; the whole fucking lot was all cool. But we want a *nation*. In spite of all the theories and the arguments against it. We want a nation. We want our children to see a place governed by the sensibilities and highest attitudes of black people. We don't want to rear them to utilize their blackness as a weapon against a death-centered and inhuman culture. We want them to be comfortable in the knowledge of themselves, and not a set of reactions to white people. Therefore nationalism, with all of its contradictions, proposed itself to us.

Many young black people in the sixties began to move from that point. The actions that they initiated throughout the country began to grow into what roughly constituted the "Black Power Movement," which was, in reality, a movement long before Brother Stokely shouted the words, "Black Power" on the James Meredith March. As a member of SNCC, Stokely had been an active participant in the civil rights movement. He had seen the established Negro leadership led by King compromise the movement. He, and others, remembered the deal that John Lewis had to make at the 1963 March On Washington; a deal that saw Lewis's speech censored by white leaders. Their attempts to use black and white organizers in the South proved unsuccessful. Intra-organizational strife, spiritual disunity, and operational co-option by white left wing youth were the result.

Here is Askia Muhammad Touré (Rolland Snellings) writing in the fall, 1964 issue of RAM organ, *Black America*:

Not only are the Civil Rights organizations faced with the crisis of emerging awareness and vengeful anger developing among the blacks; but now SNCC is being shaken with a new and deadly crisis within white-led offices—main and field. White liberals and radicals—it seems—have infiltrated and formed power-blocs within the decision-making structure of the group . . . thereby castrating and invalidating the potentials of this outspoken organization. The SNCC crisis now raging within the Deep South is another example of the deadliness of the astute "fifth column" of "liberal" and "radical" whites working to undermine and neutralize the black freedom struggle. . . .

Increasingly, the nationalist wing of the movement came to see the civil rights movement as one under the tight control of white liberals from the President to the American Jewish Congress. The March On Washington, for example, was almost totally co-opted and defused, with the help of white liberals. To an observer like Malcolm X, the whole thing had an unwarranted carnival atmosphere.

Therefore, one of our chief problems was that the organizations which claimed to represent us were not even finally controlled by us. The control was rooted in the white liberal establishment whose interests could not, ultimately, coincide with ours. After observing the impotence of the civil organizations, one highly significant thing the nationalists came to understand was that we needed to control our own institutions. So whites working in CORE, SNCC, and the Southern Freedom Movement were asked to leave and to organize in the white community.

Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21st, 1965, at the Audubon Ballroom in Upper Manhattan. It was a very un-February-like day; I recall a hot sun. The sister I was with was accompanied by her daughter, who was about ten or eleven years old. We each had a bundle of the magazine *Black America* under our arms. When we arrived at the Audubon there were no police cars parked in front of the place. This was quite unusual. Most of the time when Malcolm spoke at the ballroom there were policemen everywhere. But on this particular afternoon, nothing; just the weird February sun. Upstairs we walked into the Ballroom just as Brother Benjamin X was finishing his speech which, if I recall, was about the liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Then he said the following: "And now, without further remarks, I present to you one who is willing to put himself on the line for you, a man who would give his life for—I want you to hear, listen, to understand—one who is a *trojan* for the black man."<sup>4</sup>

We responded, "Wa-laikum salaam." We were sitting near the back on the left side of the aisle facing the stage; really not good seats, but we had come in late. It could have been church. There was such a very diverse grouping of black people; some

of the women were matronly, but tricked up real fine in their Sunday clothes. There were many young children there. The sun was shafting through the windows. The audience had quieted down in anticipation of Malcolm; and after what seemed like two or three long minutes Malcolm came out:

"As salaam alaikum, brothers and sisters"

"Wa-laikum salaam," we answered.

Count about ten beats, after the sound of the response dies down.

An obvious commotion had started down in the front rows. Malcolm was standing at a podium. He stepped from behind the podium to quiet the commotion. He said something like, "peace, be cool, brothers." The shots came rapid fire; Malcolm fell back, his arms stretched out like wings. After it happened there seemed to be a pause, then the fear was everywhere. People scrambled for cover on the floor under the tables in the back, shouting. Security guards were trying to reach Malcolm, trying to stop the assassins who now were safely escaping in the confusion. One of the assassins leaped over chairs, and fired at a knot of black men chasing him. He twisted and turned, firing shot after shot, until they caught him at the stairway leading out of the ballroom. The whole room was a wailing woman. Men cried openly.

Malcolm's death was an awesome psychological setback to the nationalists and civil rights radicals. The established Negro leadership lamented his death, but qualified their lamentations by asserting that he "preached by the sword, now he has died by the sword." The militants and the nationalists, on the other hand, felt guilty. They felt that they had not done enough to support Malcolm while he was alive. Hence, they had not protected him, and, somehow, they felt responsible for his assassination. After all, had Malcolm not said that his life was in danger? Had not the man's home been bombed only a week before his assassination? *How we gonna build anything if we let our leaders get shot down like dogs?* We were ready to retaliate, but everything was fuzzy. The assassins were Negroes, and we really couldn't get that together. Malcolm had broken with the Muslims, and had previously accused them of trying to kill him.

But we could not understand why the Muslims would want to kill Malcolm, considering that they would be the prime suspects. No, that didn't make sense.

We considered the CIA, the right wing, the zionists, and the mafia. Lacking facts and a clear orientation, we found these considerations merely led to interminable days of agonizing arguments, and charges, and countercharges.

But even though Malcolm's death—the manner of it—emotionally fractured young black radicals, there were two central facts that *all* factions of the movement came to understand. And they are: that the struggle for black self-determination had entered a serious, more profound stage; and that for most of us, non-violence as a viable technique of social change had died with Malcolm on the stage of the Audubon.

Some of us did not survive the assassination. Strain set in. Radical black organizations came under more and more *official scrutiny*, as the saying goes. The situation made everyone paranoid, and there were often good reasons for being so. People were being set-up, framed on all kinds of conspiracy charges. There was a great deal of self-criticism, attempts to lock arms against the beast that we knew lurked outside.

Some people dropped out, rejecting organizational struggle altogether. Some ended up in hippie cults in the East Village. Some even started shooting smack again. Some joined the poverty program; some did serious work there, while others, disillusioned and, for now, weak, became corrupt poverticians.

Malcolm's organization, the OAAU (Organization of Afro-American Unity), after being taken over very briefly by Sister Ella Collins, Malcolm's sister, soon faded. But the ideas promulgated by Malcolm did not. Malcolm's ideas had touched all aspects of contemporary black nationalism: the relationship between Black America and the Third World; the development of a black cultural thrust; the right of oppressed peoples to self-defense and armed struggle; the necessity of maintaining a strong moral force in the black community; the building of autonomous black institutions; and, finally, the need for a black theory of social change.

After Malcolm's death, thousands of heretofore unorganized

black students and activists became more radically politicized. The Black Arts Movement started in Harlem with the opening of Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School under the direction of Imamu Ameer Baraka (LeRoi Jones). The Black Arts school attempted to effect a union between art and politics. Not since the thirties had such a union been attempted with such intensity. Never before had black artists entered into such a conscious spiritual union of goal and purpose. For the first time in history there existed a "new" constellation of symbols and images around which to develop a group ethos. What was happening in Harlem was being repeated all over the United States. Black people were shaping a new concept of themselves both in the national and international sense. Where we were going, we did not know. But one thing was certain, we knew that, as James Brown says, we were a "New Breed." At first we were smug and self-righteous in this new found knowledge of ourselves. We were often arrogant and pushy. Underneath these negatives, we knew that much of what we were about was concertedly related to the total liberation of black people. We knew that without a strong sense of nationalism black people would not survive America. There was no way to survive America fragmented and in general confusion about who we were, and what we wanted.

All of the development of our remembered and unremembered history began to weigh down on us. And the more of our memory that returned to us, the sharper, the more acute the pain became. The more we probed our history and the history of the Third World, the more angry we became, the more nourished our hate for the white world. It had to go down that way. There was a concrete historical reason for everything that we felt. White people deserved to be hated uncritically. Sometimes in our perception of them, they even ceased to be people. They were the "Big White Fog" of the Ted Ward play. They became like the snow falling in Richard Wright's *Native Son* — a dead natural phenomenon that contaminated the entire planet. We reversed the Manichean dualism that placed the symbolism of Blackness on the side of Evil, and whiteness on the side of Good.

This was a necessary reversal. But it led to some contradictions, the most important of which was that our nationalism could

not exist primarily in contra-distinction to white nationalism. We could never hope to develop a viable concept of self, if that concept were purely based on hating crackers. We had to really dig each other, for each other, on our own terms and on the basis of the common emotional history and identity that we shared. The primary focus of our emotional energies would have to be black people. If we made the mistake of constantly addressing scorn and venom to white people, we would fall into the moribund category of the Negro leaders who seemed to be constantly affirming the black man's humanity to white people, and thus constantly implying that somehow black people would gain their humanity when the benevolence of white people finally asserted itself.

It did not matter the style of the address. Even if it were one of scorn and vindication, or if, as in the case of James Baldwin, it was rooted in compassion and ardent desire to make one's self felt as a human being, this approach still implicitly fortified the white man's sense of power in the world. We could historically trace this tendency among black leaders, a tendency that has blurred vision and shattered energies. We had to dig each other, for each other, on our own terms, and on the basis of the common emotional history that we shared; a history that had shaped us both positively and negatively. Somewhere in the maw of that history we will find the means of redeeming ourselves, of "vindicating the blues," as Askia says. *It has to be that way.* Accepting this reality, we can now begin to deal from a strong emotional base.

We will take a stand in the history primarily on the basis of our own emotional history. We have become synthesizers, bringing to bear upon the struggle *all* of the accumulated knowledge of the world. We can only deal realistically, if we know where we are coming from. So we *got* to start dealing with specifics/each to each. That's not an easy thing to do. Black people know how to relate to white people; that part of the survival kit is cooled out. But us relating to each other, that's another thing. We have still to get that together. Witness our Brothers in the Black Panthers struggling for liberalism like everybody else, but so caught up in addressing themselves to the white community

that they, in spite of their deaths and harassments, have become objects of art for jaded folks like Leonard Bernstein and Mrs. Peter Duchin. "It's exciting," the bitch says. And all the time our brothers in the black berets know that it is not exciting. In fact, it's some rather serious shit. Even though it may have started as a dimly perceived game, when you get right down next to it, up under its skin, it ain't no game. No kind of way.

Cut loose from a unified center, we become freaks, confused, driven from without rather than from within. The Eunuch has found his balls only to become the object of wholesale masturbation. Revolution becomes a talk show, the maudlin chatterings of some Hollywood actor. You become just another object of glamor. Slick white boys manage your most private affairs. The swiftness that is you, your essence, becomes mechanized, a glib part of a dead game. Outside of the ethos, you have to become bitchy and perverted, 'cause you ain't holding on to nothing. You are being squeezed spermless, your seed scattered among the ice and rocks.

Think about a nation, a place where, as much as natural laws will allow, you can shape your face. Like:

visions/all forms/actual life is the poem  
 your song bodies/life faces  
 your face/your child's face  
 save something Brother/but let the dead thing go/  
 com'on now/shape the face/and space/yes Father  
 and space/yes/save space/give breath to words  
 make a world/com'on now/move/give fire to deeds  
 love your millions/make a place for all of the faces/  
 but mostly your own/be change/love no dead things/  
 give flesh to energy/do it with style/nigger elegance/  
 com'on now Brother/shape a space/  
 love your face/make a place . . . .

## NOTES

1. See also Mercer Cook and Stephen E. Henderson's *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and the United States* (Madison, Wisc., University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 7-9.
2. From *Studies On the Left*, Volume 2, No. 3, 1962, p. 13. Also in *Black Fire*, edited by LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York, Wm. Morrow, Apollo Editions, 1968), p. 39. In the issue of *Studies On the Left* quoted above, there is also a lengthy interview with Robert Williams, who was a major influence on revolutionary nationalist thinking. Between the Klan, the Monroe police force, the FBI, the NAACP, and the Cubans, this Brother really caught hell.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York, Grove Press, 1965), p. 433.