



A Review of Studies of the Black Arts Movement

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Abstract

The 1960s witnessed the most tumultuous period with emergence of varieties of movements, one of which is the Black Arts Movement. As an influential and controversial literary movement in American history, the Black Arts Movement was overlooked and paid less attention to for a rather long period of time. Currently, the Black Arts Movement has been recognized as the most influential cultural movement in American history rather than a short-lived failure. Since 2000, there has been a upsurge of the research into the Black Arts Movement. This review pertaining to this movement attempts to sum up the relevant study in this field with the purpose of facilitating scholars' in-depth research in the days to come.

Key words: The black arts movement; Significance, Review; Black arts; Black power

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INTRODUCTION

The 1960s witnessed the most tumultuous period with emergence of varieties of movements, one of which

is the Black Arts Movement. A series of events which occurred in the 1960s were more cultural than political and the vast majority of them were quite related to cultural language of America. (Zhu, 2011, p.98) During the Black Arts Movement, African Americans advocated ideas of "Black Power" and "black Arts", made the loudest outcry and helped profoundly boost multiculturalism. The significance of BAM (Note: short form of the Black Arts Movement) is increasingly prominent in the recent years.

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

The Black Arts Movement is widely believed to have started in 1965 and ended up in 1976, spanning more than one decade. Its one-decade existence, nevertheless, does not overshadow its far-reaching influence. According to the noted scholar of the Black Arts Movement James Smethurst, the Black Arts Movement produced some of the most exciting poetry, drama, dance, music, visual art, and fiction of the post-World War II United States. (Smethurst, 2005, p.371) Emerged in this movement are well-known artists like Jayne Cortez, Lorenzo Thomas, Amiri Baraka, Askia Toure, Sonia Sanchez, Woodie King Jr., Kalamu ya Salaam, and Ron Milner, who are still artistically productive to a degree and few of their living contemporaries from the 1960s can match. Many important post-Black Arts artists, such as Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, John Wideman, August Wilson, and Ntozake Shange, were molded by the movement---though sometimes in their negative reaction to it. (Smethurst, 2005, p.371) The Black Arts movement also helped fundamentally change American attitudes about relation between popular culture and "high" art, making the notion of a popular avant-garde a commonplace of rock, hip-hop, jazz, and even country and western. (Smethurst, 2005, p.371)

Another well-known BAM scholar Kalamu Ya Salaam notes the literary and drama/poetry performance wing of the Black Arts Movement was the realization of nommo, the power of the word. (Salaam, 2016, p.vii) BAM was a forceful assertion: we are black and intend to exist in our own way! (Salaam, 2016, p.vii.) He further pointed out that BAM radically sought to establish an alternative literature that validated Black folk traditions and challenged White literary traditions as the ultimate judge of literary value for Black literature. In ways both obvious and subtle, positive and negative, BAM can be considered Black Power in the literary and performance arts sphere. (Salaam, 2016, p.xiv)

In a recent interview on the research into BAM, professor Smethurst indicated, "Black Arts organized and struggled to bring literature and art to black people in the U.S. (and beyond) where they lived, worked, and socialized, both in cities known as centers of art like New York and Los Angeles and in some former industrial cities. To do this, they fought for government and other forms of such art, creating the basis for we know as the public arts sector, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and similar organizations and institutions." (Zhao, 2020, p.5.)

The Black Arts movement also dramatically transformed the landscape of public funding for the arts and the terms of the discussion of public arts support. (Smethurst, 2005, p.372) Among others, the Black Arts Movement inspired African Americans to open their own printing houses, start their own magazines and periodicals, and set up their own art institutions. It also contributed to the creation of many African American research projects in American universities.

To sum up, the Black Arts Movement has been attracting great attention of the academia as a result of its overwhelming impact and huge controversy. The Black Arts Movement can be hailed as a new renaissance in American history since Harlem Renaissance, which is a full display of American African civil right movement. In most cases, this movement has surpassed the Harlem Renaissance in influence and scale. James Edward Smethurst concluded in his book *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) "In short, rather than being a short-lived failure, the Black Arts movement was arguably the most influential cultural movement the United States has ever seen." (Smethurst, 2005, p.372)

2. A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE STUDY OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

Since the birth of the Black Arts Movement, the BAM study has spanned a couple of decades. Basically, the

BAM study especially in America has undergone stages of embryo, upgrowth and upsurge.

2.1 BAM Study in America

Chronologically, BAM study in America has experienced roughly three stages: the stage of embryo: from the late 1970s to the 1980s; the stage of upgrowth: the 1990s; the stage of upsurge: the years since 2000.

More than ten years after the ending of this movement witnessed the embryo of the relevant study. Only sporadic works were known to the public, among which Amiri Baraka's autobiography *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (1984) details the Baraka's transformation of thoughts during and after the Black Arts Movement.

In the 1990s, about two decades after the epilogue of BAM, what dominated the relevant research into the Black Arts Movement in the United States were memoirs and biographies of or by some important participants of this movement. Generally, these memoirs and biographies are predominantly related to Black Power, which is regarded as the power wing of the Black Arts Movement. Besides, most of the published papers focused on organizations concerning this movement, publishing houses that have a profound influence on shaping this movement, critics, and specific art forms that have arisen with the movement, such as "Black Arts Movement and Its Critics" (Smith, 1991) and "Classical Jazz and the Black Arts Movement" (Thomas, 1995). Sandra Hollin Flowers is one of a handful of writers who attempted to give readers an introduction to the Black Arts movement. His work entitled *African American Nationalist Literature of the 1960s* (1996) sheds some light on this literary movement but its inadequate probe into its historical origin and regional identifications left room for further discussion.

Over a relatively long period of time after the ending of the Black Arts Movement, the Black Arts Movement did not attract enough attention from the researchers, and the related researches are fragmented and lacked systematic patterns. Basically, about two decades after this movement, most of the published works, however, examined some important figures like Amiri Baraka and Black Power was specially concentrated upon. In most cases, scholars devoted more attention to Black Power than the Black Arts as a national movement with great regional variations. It is the years since 2000 that have witnessed the prosperity of the research into the Black Arts Movement: a couple of book-length studies of the Black Arts Movement came into the view of the readers including Margaree Ann Reid's *Black Protest Poetry: Polemics from the Harlem Renaissance and The Sixties* (2001); James Edward Smethurst's *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) ; Cheryl Clorke's "*After Mecca*": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005); Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford's *New Thoughts on the Black Arts*

Movement (2006), Regina Jennings's *Malcolm X and Poetics of Haki Madhubuti* (2006) and *The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* by Kalamu Ya Salaam (2016).

Since the entry of 21st century, comprehensive works pertaining to BAM have begun to examine this movement globally. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* by James Edward Smethurst is one of the very few comprehensive monographs on BAM. The book analyzes the formation of this movement and shows how the movement profoundly influenced American literature and art in the context of the Cold War, decolonization, and the Civil Rights Movement. The author also starts from the place where the Black Arts Movement took place, and analyzes the regional performance and differences of the Black Arts Movement being developed at that time. The book *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (2006) co-authored by Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford provides a more comprehensive interpretation of the Black Arts Movement from the perspectives of its birthplace, thoughts and legacies. Amy Abugo Ongiri's book *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (2009) explores the connection between the cultural politics of the black power movement and BAM and the African Americans after World War II. The above works can be regarded as a review and summarization of this movement.

For a rather long period of time, the Black Arts Movement is usually criticized for its sexism, anti-homosexuals, and radical ethnic xenophobia. In recent years, American scholars have begun to study this movement from a broader perspective. They have shifted their attention to the special groups involved in this cultural movement, such as women poets and prisoners, so as to explore the connotation of this movement from diverse perspectives. *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2004) by Cheryl Clarke is a work on black female poets, feminism and lesbian feminism in the Black Arts Movement. The book focuses on the analysis of the relationship between Black Arts Movement and some of the important black women poets of the period such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Alice Walker. Additionally, this book explores how these writers created blackness by resisting white Western society. A very important focus of American academic research on the Black Arts Movement is the racial discrimination faced by black men, while the experience of African American women was rarely described, let alone the racial terrorism and mandatory segregation policies against black women in the middle and late 1960s. Ajuan Maria Mance's book *Creating Black Women: African American Female Poets and Self-representation 1877-2000* (2007) is a masterpiece to help understand how African-American

black female poets deny traditional concepts of race and gender. Since many leaders and activists of the Black Arts Movement had the experience of imprisonment, prison writers and activists involving in BAM became another significant focus. Lee Bernstein's *America is a Prison: Art and Politics in Prisons in the 1970s* (2010) explores the motivations of "Prison Renaissance" and reveals how prisoners created powerful literary works and visual arts. In addition, American scholars also center on the literary and artistic forms of the Black Arts Movement. For instance, Karam Ya Salam specializes in different categories of emerging art forms in the movement in his book *The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* (2016). The newly-published anthology *SOS-Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (2016) edited by John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smetherst demonstrates varieties of dimensions of BAM such as theory, gender, and aesthetics and has become an indispensable reader for those who aim to study the Black Arts Movement.

In the meanwhile, however, it is worthwhile to mention the essays and compiled works created during the Black Arts period, in which some key BAM leaders and participants attempted to publicize and advocate their philosophies and thoughts. These materials are regarded as invaluable sources for relevant study. The more famous ones include "The Black Arts Movement" (2000), an article that defines and describes the role of literature and art written by Larry Neal, and *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968) co-edited by Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, which is regarded as a manifesto to change black thoughts and actions. In addition, the book *Black Aesthetics* (1971) edited by Addison Gayle Jr. manifests important thoughts of black aesthetic theorists, and Stephen Henderson's book *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973) is considered the first masterpiece to formally and explicitly explain the theory of African American poetry, which attempted to probe into the features and evolution of Black Arts movement as a literary movement.

Objectively speaking, the existing researches into BAM in America are precious materials and sources for the relevant in-depth study. However, it is worth noting that most of the authors of these researches are African-American scholars, which also proves from another angle that the research on the Black Arts Movement has not received sufficient attention and full recognition from the American "mainstream" academia.

2.2 BAM study in China

Looking back upon the domestic research on black American history, researchers can find that from the 1950s to the 1970s, African American history research was a frequently reviewed academic area at that time and some important achievements had been made. However, these

academic fruits were subject to the domestic political factors and were marked with political imprints. In the 1980s, the study of African American history entered a relatively silent stage. Since the 1990s, the research on African American history has yielded luxuriant fruits in both breadth and depth. The black slavery and abolition movement in the United States, the black Americans during the Civil War and the reconstruction, the black migration movement, and the civil rights movement after World War II became the academic focuses in this period, while the study of black cultural history was still in its infancy. At present, Chinese scholars engaged in the study of black literature and cultural history are still concentrating upon Harlem Renaissance that occurred in the 1920s and some influential black writers and their works after World War II, but the Black Arts Movement is, more often than not, neglected consciously or subconsciously. Till now, there is only one doctoral dissertations on the black literary movement published--*A Study of The Black Arts Movement* (2018) by Zhao Yunli.

Frankly speaking, researches into the Black Arts Movement at present are not systematic and lacks strength in Chinese academia. "The Three Renaissances of Black Americans" (1988) in the fourth issue of *American Studies* in 1988 was probably the first article to dwell upon this movement. The author notes that the Black Arts Movement is the third renaissance of black Americans. Since the 1990s, important domestic academic journals such as *Foreign Literature*, *Foreign Literature Research*, *Contemporary Foreign Literature* have successively published articles on this movement. Part of the existing researches interpret the Black Arts Movement from the perspective of aesthetic and literary criticism, and some of them analyze and interpret the black aesthetic and literary thoughts of the leading figures of the Black Arts Movement, such as Baraka, Neil, and Sanchez. In addition, *Towards Human Poetics: A Study of the Transformation of African American Literary Criticism in the 1980s and 1990s* (2007) provides a general introduction to this movement from the perspective of political cultural movement and black aesthetic. In recent years, some researchers have targeted the relationship between the Black Arts Movement, American literature and other ethnic literature, so as to provide a new perspective for in-depth study of BAM.

Overall, the study relating to BAM in China is chiefly scattered commentaries and introductions, which is far from being sufficient and systematic. Also, most of the existing researches are positive commentaries and aesthetic studies rather than critical cognition and political studies. These academic vacancies have left possible space for its further study.

CONCLUSION

According to Kalamu Ya Salaam, BAM was both catalyst and genesis of cultural struggle in modern America and worldwide. BAM led directly to an increase in the number of people who wanted to be publishers, producers, entrepreneurs, writers, artists and entertainers. (Salaam, 1998, p.192) He predicts that the BAM's legacy of self-determination, innovation, and conscious alternative to the status quo continues to be relevant to daily existence and spiritual rejuvenation. (Salaam, 1998, p.193) Far from being the "shortest and least successful" movement in African American cultural history, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has provocatively claimed", writes one contributor to *New Thoughts*, "the decade-long Black Arts Movement has had a broad and enduring impact on African American literature. It has remade that literature as a blues-toned legacy—unabashedly invested in, and supremely conscious of, its own southern-born vernacular taproot, a jook-honed survivor's ethos of self-willed mobility, self-determined personhood, and bittersweetly lyric self-inscription. (Collins, 2006, p.373)

Today, African American writers still adhere to the literary path created in the Black Arts era, and is rooted in the central stage of American literature with their unique writing style. In the meanwhile, their writing has deconstructed the single structure of American literature. However, there is still a long way to go regarding the academic research on BAM.

Despite the significance and far-reaching influence of the Black Arts Movement in American society, some American scholars have indifferent attitudes towards this movement, and prejudices are even conceived. Even in a more influential literary anthology *The Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), there is no room left to introduce or make comments upon this movement.

The systematic review of the BAM study is expected to help sort out the relevant study and offer guidelines for the future study. Through the above analysis, the present author hopes to help researchers target the vacancies rendered by the lack of systematic research on this movement both in China and other countries so that the study of American literary history can be further enriched.

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