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African American Poets of the Vietnam War

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African American Poets of the Vietnam War

(TITLE)

BY

Megan Guernsey

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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2000

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

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Almost 6000 African American men gave their lives in the Vietnam War. While peaceful protests, voter registration drives, and racial confrontations occurred throughout the United States, the government continued to send young Black men to Southeast Asia to preserve the “freedom” of the Vietnamese people. The irony of this situation lies in the fact that these soldiers were asked to fight a War in the name of democracy, to kill in order to secure rights that they themselves were being denied. Although many Black Americans saw military service as a means of escaping poor ghetto life, they often were confronted with the realities of discriminatory practices within the Army and the continuation of racism upon their return home.

The poetry of Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Yusef Komunyakaa explore what African American participation in the Vietnam War really meant. By using literary techniques unique to the Black Aesthetic and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, these poets lyrically showed how Black involvement in the War aided the dominant white culture in its attempt for racial genocide. While Baraka related the oppressed condition of the African American to that of oppression in Third World countries, Nikki Giovanni wrote to prove that the War was a waste of Black youth that could better be used in the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States. Yusef Komunyakaa, writing from a veteran’s perspective almost two decades later, showed how the Vietnam War both blurred and emphasized the racial divisions between Black and white soldiers, along with the Vietnamese people themselves.
Dedications

I dedicate this thesis to my family: my mother, for teaching me to always speak my mind; my father, for giving me inspiration to write and travel; and my brother, for proving to me that true strength comes from always resisting the war.
Acknowledgments

The inspiration for this thesis came from my experiences on the Semester at Sea Program. I thank all that are involved with this organization for continuing to open the minds of college students across America and around the world. Because of this unique opportunity, I was able to crawl through the tunnels of the Viet Cong and sing Karaoke with the War’s survivors. Traveling through Vietnam and other countries exposed me to the incredible suffering of many people in Third World countries and has left me with the desire to help end the ignorance responsible for much of that suffering.

Many thanks go out to my good friend, Jen Osborn, who not only allowed me to borrow her lap top computer for the entire summer, but also provided me with pep talks and emotional support. I would also like to give thanks to Dr. Robin Murray, my thesis director. Without her kind dedication, gentle hounding, and delicious veggie burgers, I can honestly say this project would have never been completed.
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INTRODUCTION

Black poetry of the 1960s often called for increased political activism, drew on the strong oral tradition of the African American culture, and renewed the union of written verse and performance. According to Meredith Hindley, African American poetry of this period “wanted to inspire actions” (23). Subsequently, the works of writers like Amiri Baraka (Leroy Jones) Nikki Giovanni, and Yusef Komunyakaa, “became a type of activism in [themselves]” (2). This activism accomplished a new Black aesthetic that fused politics and poetry in a voice that would claim self-worth within and justice in the society without.

These poets created art that not only fulfilled their own needs for emotional expression, but also showed the immense necessity for social change in America. At the peak of the Cold War, these three authors addressed racism and the white fear of communism in eye-opening lyrical fashion. After the “fall” of China in 1950 and an unprecedented decade of “duck-and-cover” atomic years, many Black poets began to question the integrity of the democratic system and ask about their own “inalienable” rights as American citizens. If the Soviets were the so-called enemies, then why were African Americans in a “free” society still being denied the privileges of lighter-skinned citizens? And furthermore, how could the United States government ask Blacks to fight for the freedom of the Vietnamese people when its own policies were corrupt?

By applying the literary and cultural history of African Americans, which necessarily includes the antecedents of Western and African cultural traditions in this thesis, I show how Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Yusef Komunyakaa turned their poetry into both “art” and “propaganda.” Although Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren and President Lyndon Johnson proposed Civil Rights actions by judicial and legislative mandate, many citizens’ minds had been
warped by years of accepting racism. Thus, many well-intentioned Civil Rights policies were embraced as ideals, yet ignored socially. Black Americans began to see the need to speak for themselves, to use their own words to unite against the hypocrisy of an unjust War that could not deliver on the ideals for which it claimed. Not only did many Black writers feel the drive to change life on the homefront, but they also aimed to avoid further African American involvement in Vietnam. Like Plato they too believed that poetry could stop warfare. According to Howard Nemerov in *Reflections on Poetry and Poetics*:

> Plato actually seems to believe, in a famous place in *The Republic*, that both poetry and... a national conscience, or a national morale at any rate, really existed. So strongly did he believe in the relationship between them that their libertine and effeminate individualism might impair the soldiers' will to fight. (147)

Unlike Plato, these poets suggest poetry to end War rather that ban the poets in order to sustain it.

African American poetry of the Vietnam War reflects both the national, political conscience and a cultural, historical pride unique to the Black American. While many early Black American texts equated the struggle for freedom with the acceptance of the Christian faith and imitation of the traditionally “moral” white man, the Black Arts Movement of the sixties reflected a subculture dissatisfied with this delusion. The Black Arts Movement poets challenged the false logic of the good slave expected to live out life in godly submission to white masters with death as the price of freedom. Although earlier African American writers like Frederick Douglass of the 19th century and Olaudah Equiano of the 17th century addressed the then-literate majority of white congregations, the works of Baraka and Komunyakaa intended to reach an
audience of culturally sophisticated, politically active African Americans and a white society attuned to the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Black poetry of the Vietnam Era mostly opposed African Americans’ participation in the war, seeing it as a waste of Black youth, a waste of resources that could be better used to ameliorate the conditions of America’s often Black poor, and casting it often as a racist war against a people of color struggling for self-determination.

During this period, people joined together to fight for Civil Rights while protesters burned American flags in response to the conflict in Vietnam. Between 1965 and 1968, the number of American soldiers in Vietnam had increased by almost 400,000, and President Johnson showed no signs of slowing down (Herring 240). By 1968, the tide of feeling in the United States against the country’s involvement in the Vietnam War was growing among an increasing number of the white middle class. As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, so too did the antiwar forces. Only three days after taking office, President Johnson proposed a Civil Rights Bill that would begin his notion of a “Great Society.” While having simple rights like voting would become commonplace in American society, the inherent contradiction of saving Vietnamese freedom by withholding it from those who fought for it and by dehumanizing those whom they fought could not withstand the glare of the moment. According to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “The ‘Great Society’ was shot down on the battlefields of Vietnam” (Gilbert 226).

Higher on the media’s agenda than ever before in American history, Civil Rights demonstrations competed with Vietnam War images on the nightly news. Average citizens were bombarded over and over with images of peaceful Civil Rights workers organizing voter registration drives juxtaposed with blood baths in the rice fields of Vietnam. Race riots tore through America’s urban streets out of frustration with America’s unshakeable racism, while city
boys dressed as trees in far-away jungles. While 538,000 American men fought the battle against communism in Vietnam, Civil Rights activists kept busy at home. In fact, Malcolm X and other members of the Nation of Islam began to see their struggle towards self-determination as correlative to liberation struggles against Western colonialism in Third World nations. In 1968, Black Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver published *Soul on Ice*; American athletes gave the Black Power salute on the winners’ platform during the Mexico City Olympics; and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis (Dubin 2). Consequently, the anti-war movement and the concern for Civil Rights began to merge. It showed up in artwork, folk music, jazz, and much of the poetry.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed this dual concern for minority rights and America’s involvement with Vietnam in a speech given only months before his murder: “We cannot continue to live in a nation, every summer going up in flames, every day killing up people in Vietnam...some of us have to take up the burden of saving the soul of America” (1968 vid.). Although the Civil Rights Movement’s strength originally came from the church, and its legitimacy came from the Constitution, many of the Movement’s activists feared that they would be perceived as communists and lose the impact of their true cause if they protested the war too publicly. An interview with a white Vietnam War supporter maintained this perception of outspoken Black activists: “It’s bad enough being black without being red, too” (Fayer et al. 235). The issue of Vietnam became a taboo subject for the few Black politicians in America, leaving the dilemma to the artists to address. In the words of Amiri Baraka, “Art does not create sickness, it reflects or demonstrates sickness that already exists” (Shannon 258).

One aspect of America’s “sickness” during the Vietnam Era was society’s perceived association between the Civil Rights Movement and anti-democratic activity. This was proven in
1965 when a Gallup poll showed that 48 percent of all Americans believed there was “a lot” of communist involvement in the Civil Rights Movement (Hampton and Fayer 337). Although many Black Americans, including Amiri Baraka, were drawn to certain socialist ideas, and several underground leftist coalitions formed at this time, most African Americans who opposed the War simply felt that the United States’ involvement was one of selfish imperialism disguised as an attempt to make the world safe for democracy. Supporters of the Civil Rights Movement found it hypocritical that anti-segregation demonstrations and black voter marches were typically peaceful affairs resisting physical confrontations, while African Americans were forced to resort to violence on whites’ behalf in the Vietnam War. In Eldridge Cleaver’s book, Soul on Ice, he insisted on a direct relationship between the War in Vietnam and the racism in the United States. Like many other African American writers of the ‘60s, Cleaver advocated an international perspective on Black Liberation, viewing all people of color as oppressed by racism and colonialism. Empathizing with an enemy of color, Cleaver writes, “The [B]lack man’s interest lies in seeing a free and independent Vietnam, a strong Vietnam which is not the puppet of international white supremacy” (77).

Although many American citizens claimed that Vietnam was a racist genocidal war, many apologists of the United States’ involvement have argued that the integrated participation of white and Black soldiers actually blurred racial distinctions and helped to create bonds between the races. The African American writer and Vietnam veteran, Yusef Komunyakaa, disagrees. In his poem “To Du Street,” he feels he is unwelcome, again an unequal participant in a “White Only” world (6). It was not unusual for a Black American soldier in Vietnam to feel the tension between the races. In a study by Wallace Terry in 1968, fewer than three Black GIs in ten said that they got along better with whites in Vietnam than they did back home. There was racial
tension all over the country, from the front line platoons to the party spots. On the walls of bars and latrines throughout the country, whites infuriated Blacks by scrawling such phrases as “Niggers eat shit” and “I’d prefer a gook to a nigger” (Taylor 110). On several occasions, Black soldiers reported having seen Confederate flags flown from American tanks and trucks. One Black veteran interviewed by Murray Polner claimed that he was often called “nigger” by the Vietnamese people themselves (xiii).

Komunyakaa implies that the discrimination of Black Americans was not only initiated by whites, but also influenced the Vietnamese civilians whose rights they tried to defend. In “To Du Street,” the female Vietnamese bartender doesn’t know if she should serve a drink to Komunyakaa because he is Black. Just as many former American presidents had done, she “skirts each white face for approval” (13) before accepting Yusef as deserving of her service. The possibility remains, however, that her biased actions stemmed from Vietnamese culture itself. Black American soldiers were often mistaken for Montagnards, darkly pigmented Vietnamese who were members of tribes in the mountains of Southeast Asia (Gotera 160). Because these darker members of their nation had been treated with racial prejudice for years, the seemingly logical but biased progression in the American social construction of Black inferiority, was discrimination against Black Americans.

Although some African Americans enlisted in the Army to prove that members of their race had the ability to serve as leaders, few were given the opportunity to actually pursue roles of authority. Most Black soldiers, however, enlisted out of some hope for economic survival or were drafted with no hope of deferment from local Selective Service boards. In “The Eyes and Ears of the World,” Amiri Baraka sarcastically condenses the national racial problem by saying, “The rules of life are the rules” (1). Minority groups fighting for America in Vietnam often
experienced this demand for submission when encountering their commanders. Because of the racially unjust educational system in the U.S., fewer Blacks had the opportunity to avoid the draft because of college deferments, and many scored low on military proficiency tests (Gilbert 189). As a result, the typical company of front line soldiers was disproportionately Black, if not due to biased “intelligence” scores, then as a result of discriminatory policies enforced by white soldiers of a higher rank. According to an eye-witness account by David Parks:

Sgt. Paulson hand-picks the men for this job. So far, he’s fingered only negroes and Puerto Ricans. I think he’s trying to tell us something. I do know he gives me a sour look every time he sees me at the FDC controls. Every time he comes around I get the feeling I should have been born white. (178)

In fact, reports of the War back in the States often left Black soldiers feeling invisible or at least unimportant to America’s effort overseas. According to one correspondent’s writing about Vietnam, “Anyone with white skin caught outside protected areas after dark is courting horrible death” (Herring 16). The Black GI’s experience and his predominant role in combat was largely unseen and unheard by the eyes and ears of the white world.

Historical oppression and segregation due to the color of their skin caused Black Americans in the 1960s to begin questioning even previous Black generations’ inscribed inferiority and to reject white culture’s criteria for physical and intellectual beauty. A study in 1961 by the American Psychological Association drew attention to the fact that young Black boys and girls were being raised with little regard for their own self worth. When presented with the option of playing with either a plastic white baby doll or a plastic black baby doll, four out of five African American children chose the lighter-skinned version. When asked why they did not
choose the black doll, some responses were, “Because it looks dirty,” “...it smells,” and “...it’s stupid” (Smith 42). These interpretations opened the eyes of many Black American adults concerned with cultural representations of the black individual.

Perhaps Samuel Vance, Black veteran of the Vietnam War and author of *The Courageous and the Proud* expressed the need for a new Black Aesthetic best in the explanation of his appearance:

Sir, my hair is curly because for so many years I been so flustered with the hate of my people that it couldn’t grow straight; it curled from lack of security. My nose is large because day after day I had to follow behind the white man and I was so busy doing that I couldn’t breathe the fresh air of freedom. (155)

Although Black Americans grew up in a culture that condemned and ridiculed their identity, the strength of the Civil Rights Movement and the rise in Black Nationalist membership helped to give a new sense of pride to this group of people.

According to Michael Bibby, the “new Black Poetry,” the “Black Aesthetic,” “Black Arts,” and “Black Power,” all foreground the word *black* as a positive, distinctive presence that signifies both cultural and physical value in identity of African origin (33). By foregrounding color as the major sign of difference between American people, the writers of these movements sought to engage the dilemmas of race relations from the inside out. The black skin that had so long been subject to racist oppression and subsequently shame turned into a source of pride. In Amiri Baraka’s *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones*, coming back to oneself meant coming back to Blackness. He addresses his readers with the self-affirming words, “by the time you read this, I will be even blacker” (229). During Civil Rights activism, the phrase “black is beautiful” came to include the recognition of cultural artifacts that had shaped and were shaping a literary
tradition. These artifacts included the slave narrative as a literary art form, spirituals as powerfully coded forms of communication, and the power of African-American vernacular in the linguistic practices of the United States (Moore 139). According to an article by Leslie Sanders: “[Poetry] is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners or customs religious, political, and social. It is a record of growth from generation to generation” (3). Consequently, Black Americans began to reaffirm their African roots through their hairstyles, music, and especially, their writing. According to Richard Wright, “The word Negro in America means something not racial or biological, but something purely social, something made in the United States” (80). To counter the destructive social construction of black as connoting inferiority, African Americans had to reclaim the artistic traditions of Africa and the culture they had created during enslavement.

Black Americans’ deep-rooted connections with African and jazz music is just one of the unique cultural traditions that shapes the poetry of the Blacks Arts Movement. According to Sascha Feinstein, “... outspoken African-American poets of the 1960s adopted [John] Coltrane’s sound as the musical embodiment of Black nationalism in the United States”(1). While these writers felt the strong political influence of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, they did not overlook the underlying beat of their Harlem-born jazz brothers and the rhythmic freedom to experiment. Both Black American jazz and African American anti-war poetry took traditional Western aesthetic criteria, tore them apart, and then rebuilt them into original, pulsating works of their own that sought to save those ideals, such as liberty, from the West’s hypocrisy.

As African Americans of this country began to perceive themselves as a strong and beautiful people with their own unique history and identity, the Black Arts Movement of the
1960s progressed. The literature of this movement reflects the fact that Blacks had moved into a political unity, despite their differences. As Bernard Bell observes, African American literature always has, of necessity, had a “hortatory” purpose, seeking to alter the conditions of Black people. In this role, this literature addresses both whites and Blacks: whites, so they see themselves as oppressors and elect to change; Blacks, so they might see the possibility for creating change themselves (Sanders 7). Their literature has not simply been a reflection of historical change, but also a medium through which this change is made. In much of the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, African American writers questioned the racist policies of the United States. Amiri Baraka comments upon the period in his autobiography:

[The Black Arts Movement] was destined to produce young intellectuals (and older ones too) who reveled in the spirit of defiant revolution and sought to use it to create art. An art that would reach people, that would take them higher, ready them for war and victory... That was our vision and its image kept us stepping, heads high and back straight. (204)

The poets who defined the Black Aesthetic and shaped Black Arts Movement of the ‘60s insisted on their own liberation. They set out to show that real freedom was not the ability to speak French like the Frenchmen or wear powdered English wigs. These writers, with only the fragments of African cultural traditions at their disposal, created a voice of their own. They saw the injustices in America’s racism, and they wanted to shout about it.

The Black Arts Movement poets often cited the Harlem Renaissance writers of the early 20th century as models of Black self-assertion, as a celebration of Black vernacular and a distinctive African heritage. Black military experience in WWI had evoked a subsequent but tentative sense of self-worth in the Harlem Renaissance poets; self-doubt and ambivalence
toward one's own racial identity, however, still marked the poems of the earlier period. Several of these 1960s poets, cast their images, words, and subject matter in ways that addressed Americans' (Black Americans' in particular) involvement in Vietnam. According to *Hearts and Minds* by Michael Bibby:

American [including African-American] poetry from 1965 to 1975 should be periodized as Vietnam-era poetry for a number of interrelated reasons. First, it seems ahistorical to discuss any U.S. poetry produced during this period without recognizing the inescapable fact that it was written during a time of war. Literary histories have long acknowledged major wars as periodizing markers... (24)

The Black Arts Movement Poets like the Harlem Renaissance poets used War as a springboard to aesthetic experimentation, but the threat to survival was perceived as immediate – both at home and in Vietnam. With the enemy uncertain—racism at home or communism abroad – War could be found in the words of the poets.

Poetry of the Vietnam-era is often referred to as post-War (WWII) because the War in Vietnam was left undeclared by the American government. This study, however, relies heavily upon “conflict-inspired” poetry indicative to the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. According to Lorrie Smith:

A poet writing about the Vietnam War is thus necessarily political – not because war is a political topic but because it comes laden with “communal values” which the poet-witness must judge, resist, and revise if the art is to be kept alive and true. (52)
The conflict in Vietnam generated some of the most compelling subject matter, metaphors, and visual images American poetry has to offer. While discussions of African American political poetry of the period usually ignore the salient effects of this literature's production during a time of war (Bibby 27), my study shows that not all anti-war poetry was composed by “white, professional poets.”

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the poetry of and poetry inspired by the Black Arts Movement relating specifically to the Vietnam Conflict. I will focus mainly on the works and lives of Amiri Baraka (often referred to as the founder of the Black Aesthetic), Nikki Giovanni, and Yusef Komunyakaa (black Vietnam veteran). All the poetry discussed will address the issue of the Black Liberation Movement and the Vietnam War. These poems threaten the traditional American social order and offer, in the words of Helene Cixous, “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (245).

My intention is not to speak in place of the Black Vietnam poets of this era, but instead to provide a new insight into the meaning and significance of their compositions. These poets believed in a literature of change rather than one of the status quo; they often called for a metaphorical return to Africa. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Anyone who analyzes [B]lack literature must do so as a comparativist, by definition, because our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black” (Gates xxiv).

Perhaps this dual concept of Western and Black cultural antecedents for the Black Aesthetic comes across most strikingly in Yusef Komunyakaa’s poem “Facing It,” written about the Vietnam War memorial in Washington D.C. As Komunyakaa himself served America in the war as an information specialist, saw combat, and received a Bronze Star, this particular piece
portrays a veteran “watching” himself as he looks back at Vietnam. He writes, “My black skin fades/ hiding inside the black granite” (1-2). R.S. Gwynn has called “Facing It,” “…the most poignant elegy that has ever been written about the Vietnam War” (Baer 2). This piece demonstrates the combination of sharp, telling images and dialectic complexity that always marks Komunyakaa’s work. When asked about the poem in an interview with the Kenyon Review, the poet remarked:

That’s pretty much how I remember the war—imagery that we sort of internalized, that was informed by the whole vibrations of the body.

…It [Vietnam] was a place of emotional and psychological flux where one was trying to make sense out of the world and one’s place in that world. And there was, relentlessly, a going back and forth between that internal space and the external world. It was an effort to deal with oneself, and with the other GIs, the Vietnamese, even the ghosts we’d managed to create of ourselves. (4)

The Vietnam poets of the 1960s Black Arts Movement used the written word in an artistic attempt to “save the soul of America.” Plato’s worst fears came true in the writings of Baraka, Giovanni, and Komunyakaa: the poet became the philosopher, the keeper and creator of society’s most fundamental and urgent questions. These works testify that poetry can call a people to action and inspire a community of change.
Amiri Baraka: Poems like “Fists” and “Daggers”

Calling black people
Calling all black people, man woman child
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling you, calling all black people
calling all black people, come in, black people, come on in. (Black Magic 115)

Mimicking the language of a war-time telegram, Amiri Baraka begins the third section of Black Magic with the poem appropriately titled “SOS.” The tone coming through as unbearably urgent, “SOS” asserts the need Baraka sees for the Blacks of the world to unite. This poem, written in the riot-stricken year of 1966, intended to inspire racial unity for social change. Baraka asks African Americans to wake up and to recognize their unjust treatment by the United States government and the hypocrisy of their involvement in Vietnam.

Unlike the 1950s when Americans were, “relaxed, unadventurous, comfortably satisfied with their way of life, and blandly optimistic about the future” (Siegal 24), many citizens of the 1960s put action before apathy. Student protests, civil rights demonstrations, and anti-war campaigns caused an unprecedented rise in the political consciousness of the average American. Along with these activists, Amiri Baraka believed that the ever-oppressive white system needed a radical change. However, Baraka believed Ho Chi Minh’s famous statement: “To make a revolution one must first and foremost remould [sic] oneself” (Bibby 57). The necessity for
political upheaval through Black self-assertion and enhanced self-perception came through in much of Amiri Baraka’s poetry.

Born Everett Leroy Jones, Baraka attended public schools in Newark, New Jersey and studied chemistry at the all-black Howard University before turning to literature and philosophy. In 1954, he left Howard and joined the U.S. Air Force where he became increasingly interested in literature and writing. According to his autobiography, Baraka was “trying to become an intellectual” (120) and sought meaning concerning his own “captivity” through the literature of James Joyce, Earnest Hemmingway, e.e.cummings, and Ezra Pound. Because the United States Air Force during the 1950s allowed its members to own only two books – one being the Bible, Baraka (still Jones at the time) was discharged in 1957 for possessing allegedly communist literary journals (Smethurst 1). For Baraka, studying the Bible and accepting a “white God” was synonymous with the justification of an immoral, oppressive society. Thus, he searched for life’s philosophical interpretations in literature other than the “ever-acceptable” Bible and, quite often, his reading selections were not socially accepted, but instead viewed as independent, radical self-instruction (121).

From the time he got sick in kindergarten, Baraka learned to read “on his own” (Autobiography 27). For him that meant purposely seeking out knowledge withheld from him by the dominant white culture. While Richard Wright forged the signatures of white men in order to check out books in Black Boy, Baraka himself dug deep into the archives of local libraries varying his literary tastes along the way. He writes: “I would read Bonjour Tristesse and Robert Graves in the same day. A book on Buddhism and the Communist Manifesto in the same afternoon... I’d find an author and read everything of his or hers that I could find”(116).

Undoubtedly, the knowledge Baraka obtained from his socialist readings would be used later in
his work for Black Liberation as well as his anti-Vietnam War poetry. Unlike some earlier African American writers, Baraka refused to portray himself as a “lost” black man who is “found” only after adhering to the beliefs of white culture. Instead, his literary path twisted and turned, he wandered into the jungles of Buddhism and climbed the mountain of Atheism before reaching his “final” destination.

Immediately following his discharge from the Air Force, Baraka moved to Greenwich Village in New York City and established relationships with members of the avant-garde Beat, Black Mountain, and New York School Movements. Baraka, however, began distancing himself from the white-dominated literary scene after a trip to Cuba in 1960. Influenced by the bohemian New York artists and the activists of the newly revolutionary Cuba, as well as by Black political figures such as Malcolm X, his work became more politically and socially committed. Baraka’s poetry represents the evolution of a mind that had gone through radical changes with a consistent theme of self-discovery and rebellion. In the Baraka Reader, he states:

My writing reflects my own growth and expansion, and at the same time the society in which I have existed throughout this confrontation. Whether it is politics, music, literature, or the origins of language, there is always a historical and time/place/condition reference that will always try to explain why I was saying both how and for what. (Preface)

The issues of “why,” “how,” and “for what” perhaps best come across in Baraka’s poetry of the new Black militancy. Through these works, Baraka “demonstrates in a forceful manner the alienation of the new black poet from any addiction to life in an ivory tower” (Jackson and Rubin 89). For example, the poem “Black People” describes the material wealth of an America that African Americans cannot afford to buy into. In this poem, Baraka implores them to stop their
capitalistic lust. If Black Americans are to get their deserved piece of the American pie, Baraka claims that they (like the revolutionaries in Cuba) would have to take it by force. "No money down. No time to pay. Just take what you want" (6). According to "Poetry Preview," "[‘Black People’] constructed a unified consciousness of a people divided by their own poverty and hopelessness" (2-3). This poem breaks the storefront glass of American democracy, reflecting Blacks' disillusionment with oppressive white rule.

Perhaps most importantly, the poem "Black People" designates capitalism as the root of racism. As a Black Nationalist and Marxist sympathizer, Amiri Baraka, along with many other Civil Rights separatists, related to Ho Chi Minh and other Third World revolutionaries like Castro in Cuba. Although Baraka had been discharged from the military before being asked to serve in the Vietnam War, much of the poetry he composed during the late 1960s expresses a deep interest in revolutionary socialism. As Baraka says in "Jitterbugs," on this planet, "You can't go anywhere without an awareness of the hurt/ the white man has put on people" (6-8).

Amiri Baraka, like many of the other members of the Nation of Islam, felt that America's involvement in the Vietnam War was one of racial genocide in which a dominant white culture intended to destroy people of color (Cartey 103). The war in Vietnam was looked at by many as an extension of the pre-war racist hegemony in the United States. In the book Black Power, Stokley Carmichael states:

Participation of black men in the white man's wars is a characteristic of colonialism. The colonial ruler readily calls upon and expects the subjects to fight and die in defense of the colonial empire, without the ruler feeling any particular compulsion to grant the subjects equal status. (25)
Thus, many Black Americans who saw their participation in the Vietnam War as a means of improving their social status back in America were surprised to find that the war had not ended when they returned from their call to duty. In the words of historian George Luker, “The war has never been over, it just came back to the hood” (227). The war in Vietnam and urban America often appeared as synonymous in Baraka’s poetry.

Although a poll taken in 1967 showed that most Americans opposed the war going on in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson continued to send young men overseas (Vietnam: A Television History, vid.). Unfortunately for those more susceptible to the draft, namely Blacks and poor whites, Johnson himself was in full command of America’s involvement and continued fighting that which he perceived to be a threat to democracy. Because Congress “…approve[ed] and support[ed] the determination of the President, as Commander in Chief, to take all necessary measures to repel an armed attack against the forces of the United States…” (Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, 1964), the number of citizens shipped to fight in Vietnam went from 184,000 in 1965 to 538,000 in 1968 (Gilbert 232).

Considering these statistics, one is not at all shocked when Amiri Baraka’s “Word from the Right Wing” states:

President Johnson
is a mass murderer...
and he probably steals
hates magic
and has no use
for change, the changing, and changed...
He has negroes work for him hate him,
While Amiri Baraka undoubtedly expresses his own disapproval of President Johnson with these words, he also presumes to speak for his African American brothers and sisters, “He has negroes...hate him” (18). One cannot assume by Baraka’s lines that every individual Black American hated President Johnson; in fact many felt that the programs implemented by his “War on Poverty” actually aimed to improve the conditions of urban ghetto life. Baraka’s brutal indictment, however, concerning the President in “Word from the Right Wing” were not completely unjustified. Though Johnson’s policies often reflected a growing concern for the equality of African Americans, the reality beyond legislation is that many of his programs failed to alter the pre-established system of racial oppression. According to The Statistical Abstract of the Unites States Bureau of the Census, 63 percent of non-white Americans participated in the labor force in the year 1960, yet that percentage had dropped to 62 by the year 1970 (217).

Quoting the Assistant Secretary of Labor Moynihan’s report on poverty, Lyndon Johnson’s 1965 speech at Howard University claimed that “problems of poverty were caused by the increasing unemployment, family desegregation, and reliance upon welfare among African Americans” (Hoff 115). Speaking to an audience comprised almost entirely of educated Black students highly aware of their historical oppression, the President appeared callous to the needs of the black American as if he really had “no use for change.”

Once again indicting the President as the “blue-eyed devil” responsible for the both unfavorable conditions of Black America and the cause of racial genocide occurring in Vietnam, the poem “Eyes and Ears of the World” sarcastically demands:

... All Praise the Congealed Vomit

In Lydon Johnson’s Mouth! That it rattles at our
Progress toward understanding. For Crispus Attucks
was not even a nigger, for being talked about
by beady eyes so tough. (34-38)

By placing the Crispus Attucks reference so close to the “Prais[ing of] the congealed vomit in Lyndon Johnson’s Mouth” (34), Baraka makes an indirect claim that Johnson is politically forcing the participation of Black Americans in the “War on Communism” occurring in Vietnam.

Mentioned three times in Baraka’s poem, Crispus Attucks, an African Indian seaman, was the first to shed blood in the revolution that freed America from British rule (Mullen 9). According to Baraka’s portrayal, Attucks was “tight with whitey” (19) and “not even a nigger” (20). With these words, the poet portrays Attucks as a fugitive slave turned white man’s martyr. “Eyes and Ears of the World” hints at the correlation between America’s independence from Great Britain and the war going on in Vietnam. Perhaps the victory of democracy in Southeast Asia would benefit the average Black American only to the same pathetic extent as the win of the Revolutionary War, which continued the abhorrent practice of slavery for at least, as Abraham Lincoln said, “four score and seven years.” “I will not/march to celebrate Crispus Attucks dying for white men” (49-50), says Baraka, in “Eyes and Ears of the World,” urging other African Americans to cease their support of the sanctimonious Vietnam War.

Believing that the Blacks who participated in Vietnam had been “misguided” by a manipulative, over-powering white government, Baraka continues to demonstrate angst towards the conflict’s genocidal aspects. The line, “My brothers misguided, butchered by brothers” (51) insinuates that the war was not anti-Communist, but anti-colored, a white ruler’s attempt to wipe the world free of dark skin. Oppression, exploitation, degradation, discrimination, segregation, and humiliation forged a link between the Vietnamese people and African Americans. They
shared a common oppressor and enemy – white Western society and its colonized legacy. The poet claims Vietnam to be nothing more than the United States’ attempt to put “nigger against chink,” aiming to eventually destroy them both.

“Ever/ see fags drinking tea on leather toadstools in India?” (4-5) asks Baraka, trying to pin-point exactly “who” and “what” are being fought for in the jungles of Vietnam. By equating “Green men” with the higher-ranking army officials, Baraka makes it clear that he feels America’s involvement in the war is one of selfish imperialism, resembling the British occupation of India and Africa in the early 1900s. He alludes to the notion that the Vietnam War is publicly falsified as a conflict sparked by the political desire to defend the independence of the South Vietnamese people. Yet, according to veteran James E. Baker, “The way whites treat the natives of this country I know they don’t give a damn about their freedom” (Taylor 204).

In two stanzas, Baraka claims that the colors of the universe explicitly exclude white, giving an unnatural, alien quality to those of Caucasian descent. The universe, according to Baraka, could only have begun with blue or black. This “bruised” universe results from a fabricated hierarchy of dark to light, unnatural because the light should never have been considered superior. By claiming that only “blue things are real,” the assumption is made that white is inherently “unreal,” an artificial, yet, controlling evil force.

Equating black skin with the godly nature of the sky and the existence of a colored world synonymous with heaven, Baraka reinforces the “black is beautiful” ideology of the Black Aesthetic and the drive for Black unity prescribed by the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X himself found irony in Black America’s involvement with the war:

If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and children

... then it is wrong for America to draft us and make [us] violent in
defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever it is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country. (quoted in Mullen 68)

Although historically Blacks had participated in all of America’s wars, the active consciousness of the Nation of Islam and the Black Power Movement increased the public’s awareness of the hypocrisy of Blacks fighting in America’s military. Using art as a weapon, Amiri Baraka evoked this irony and created hostility in the readers of his poetry.

The uniqueness of the 1960s black culture also comes through in Baraka’s abundant use of jazz rhythms within his poetry. The line, “Big lily stomp stomach mambos,” (25) in “Eyes and Ears of the World,” verbalizes the syncopation of horns, while the repeated “tune” of “the rules of life,” (1, 39) sarcastically insinuates that all pre-established authority can not be questioned. In this poem, Baraka imitates the jazz music of Charlie Parker and John Coltrane which, according to Sascha Feinstein, “takes a weak Western form, a popular song, and murders it. . . The angry black music devours and vomits up the fragments of the white corpse” (3). Like this original African American music, Amiri Baraka set out to destroy old political and poetic forms to create a governmental and literary culture unique to the Black American.

By endowing darkly-pigmented people with a more humane use of all the senses in, “The Eyes and Ears of the World,” Baraka redefines the African American past that was denied by the whitewash of American society. One of the remarkable things Baraka accomplishes in this poem is the inversion of denigrating symbols and demeaning stereotypes of African Americans. In the process of healing self-inflicted wounds as well as those caused by white society, Baraka helps to strengthen and to unify the Black community.
If “The Eyes and Ears of the World” was intended to make Blacks see and hear America’s hypocrisy and racism, then certainly “Black Art” meant to make them fight against it.

... We want “poems that kill.”

Assassin [sic] poems, Poems that shoot guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys and take their weapons leaving them dead with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland... (19-23)

One of Baraka’s most typical explicit poems, “Black Art” commits to the violence that Baraka considers the prerequisite for the establishment for a Black world. By becoming an “assassin,” the poem becomes political; art merges with life leaving artfulness behind (Sollors 1). “Black Art” reflects Baraka’s concept of the Black poem as an active agent, not merely a vehicle of escape to another world. The concrete images in this poem are intended to force Black readers to recognize their situation and to revolt against it.

Perhaps emphasizing the call to Black readers, Baraka’s “Black Art” adheres to the language of the Black community (“put it on him,” “red jelly stuck”). Baraka takes the raw material from the urban streets of Black America and turns it into an authentic call to action. Although the use of Black dialect in literature had come to connote the mental inferiority of African Americans, it also signified “black difference” (Gates 176). In synchronicity with the Black Aesthetic Movement, Baraka takes this white racist textual tradition and inverts it for his own cause. He shows that true black power and liberation doesn’t necessarily require writing or speaking like white men. Thus, the term “black is beautiful” in the case of Baraka’s “Black Art,” means more than just the love of curly hair and skin color; it also promotes the love of African American language and culture itself.
Much of Amiri Baraka's poetry is indicative of the trend towards bold verse of the late 1960s. However, unlike so many of his black author predecessors, Baraka addresses the issues of civil rights, Black separatism, and African American involvement in the Vietnam War. Perhaps the threat of an unchanged system is best expressed in "Election Day – 2." Here, Baraka suggests that Blacks in America have succumbed to "the lies of an old man/a man growing old and fat" (2-3) for far too long. He continues by stating, "These are the lies of death./And the cloak of death they spread" (3) Like many of his African American brothers in Vietnam were realizing, "We can die from them" (4), and someone would have to bury the bodies.
Women, although often overlooked where the subject is concerned, have always been victims of war. From Troy to Saigon, they have felt the pain of burying their sons, mourning their fathers, and remembering their lovers. Until Vietnam, a White American woman could look at her loss as the price that had to be paid in order to gain freedom. Although husbands and offspring oftentimes returned injured or not at all, the sacrifices made were mostly regarded as heroic—a kind of compensation for the high price of winning. However, those soldiers lost to the conflict in Vietnam left many mothers, wives, and daughters feeling betrayed by the American government.

As a group marginalized by mainstream culture for hundreds of years, African American women best represent this “betrayed” people. In the folklore that identifies one’s status in society, these women are called “the mule of the world,” because they have been handed down the burdens that everyone else refused to carry (Walker 237). Black females, whose ancestors were used and manipulated by the dominant white culture as slaves for hundreds of years, whose great grandmothers had often been the victims of physical and sexual abuse by Caucasian landowners, were asked during the Vietnam War to give up their brothers and potential Civil Rights activists for the freedom of “other brown-skinned powerless people” (Rodgers 151).

Claiming that the body itself has always been a site of political struggle, Nikki Giovanni contemplates the voiceless physicality of the Black woman in the poem, “Seduction.”

one day
you gonna walk in this house
and i'm gonna have on a long African
gown
you'll sit down and say “The Black . . .
and i'm gonna take one arm out
then you – not noticing me at all – will say “What about
this brother . . .” (1-8)

While the militant, African American male comes to Giovanni to discuss the fate of “brothers”
involved in the Black Liberation Movement, Giovanni “Seduces” him into a physical act of love. In this poem, the black female is portrayed as only a body, a soundless sexual being, yet she wears an “African gown,” displaying her cultural awareness. The fact that the woman takes the power to undress her politically-minded visitor symbolically puts her body onto the battlefield of Civil Rights with him. Giovanni herself states, “in life all things are political. What we do every
day and how we do it” (Fowler 127). The narrator intends to emphasize her falsely perceived role as a mindless sex object, yet her obvious “undressing” of the situation still fails to get the attention of the male in the room.

By claiming that the body itself has always been a site for political struggle, Giovanni correlates the voiceless physicality of the Black woman with that of the soldier. While female slaves were often viewed as merely means of procreation, white and Black American males have also been reduced to flesh, disposable citizens, in times of war. According to Michael Bibby:

For peoples whose identity has been principally linked to their “bodies” –

African Americans, women, or soldiers, for example, the politicization
of tropes, symbols, and images of the body both served to foreground a
principle locus of their oppression and helped them articulate new ways of
perceiving their own bodiliness as political identity. (13)

Influenced by the anti-WWII poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni took on the
task of addressing Black America’s involvement in the Vietnam War through verse. Raised by a
politically conscious grandmother in Cincinnati, Ohio, Giovanni claims, “My life style was that I
read about fifty books a year . . . I tried to read Black books . . . I remember reading ‘Annie
Allen’ [by Gwendolyn Brooks] and being pleased for the first time with poetry” (Gemini 140).
The havoc inflicted on mothers and lovers to whom WWII soldiers returned is the focus of this
influential piece, as Brooks depicts Annie Allen’s inability to achieve self-consciousness as a
Black female. The injurious effects of the cultural hegemony of dominant society in the United
States on groups such as Black people and women that appear in “Annie Allen” became
prominent themes in much of Giovanni’s work.

In 1943, Nikki Giovanni was born Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr., in Knoxville,
Tennessee. However, at the age of 14, she possessed such a “strong sense of independence and
self-determination,” (Fowler 8) that she decided she could no longer tolerate the tension between
her parents and moved to the Lincoln Heights neighborhood of Cincinnati, Ohio, in order to live
with her grandmother, Louvenia. This proved to be good not only for her emotional well being
but for her intellectual and political growth as well. When bodies were needed to demonstrate
against segregation downtown, grandmother volunteered young “Nikki” (8). Ironically,
Giovanni’s decision to leave her parents’ household at such an early age enabled her to develop a
strong sense of responsibility towards community and raised her awareness of America’s racism.

In Cincinnati, Giovanni attended Austin High School, where another strong-minded
female entered her life. Miss Delaney, Giovanni’s English teacher, encouraged the youthful poet
to read African American writers and required her to write about her readings. Through this cultural nurturing, Giovanni became interested in African American female poets. A report on Gwendolyn Brooks shows that she was beginning to think about some of the issues she would later incorporate into her own poetry.

She [Brooks], of course, writes of Negroes; but not “of course” as many other Negroes do. She writes, as I see her, as a woman would write, which is an incoherent statement. What I mean is, she writes poetry as a mother might – with understanding, love, and a gentle sense of humor. (Quoted in *Nikki Giovanni*, 9)

Miss Delaney encouraged Giovanni to pursue writing herself, so the young poet left Austin High School at the end of eleventh grade and entered Fisk shortly after her seventeenth birthday.

After receiving a BA from the all-Black Fisk University, Giovanni went on to join Amiri Baraka and other writers of the Black Arts Movement. However, she differed from many other poets in the simple fact that she was writing from a woman’s perspective. The poet herself states, “It’s difficult to be a woman, but being black and female produces a double bind” (Fowler 127). Oppressed through both the racist and sexist policies of the dominant culture, Giovanni wrote because, like Brooks, she felt a motherly responsibility to her people.

Although Gwendolyn Brooks uses her dual metaphor for Black females’ and soldiers’ physicality in a WWII poem, the United States Army’s fixation on body counts was most noticed by politicians and the public during the Vietnam War where conditions did not lend themselves to traditional military strategy for ground warfare. Unlike WWII and Korea, in which territory gained and lost was the Army’s predominant measure of success, the reliance on body counts in Vietnam demonstrated that the geographical and political terrain was unique (Gartner and Myers
Herring explains that “In a war without front lines and territorial objectives, where ‘attriting the enemy’ was a major goal, the ‘body count’ became the index of progress” (153). Giovanni used the technique of counting bodies in her anti-Vietnam War poetry as a means of re-evaluating America’s “democratic” policies.

The poem “The Great Pax Whitie” by Nikki Giovanni correlates body counts with lynchings of African Americans and condemns White America’s preoccupation with numbers and death tolls as signs of “progress:”

The great emancipator was a bigot
ain’t they got no shame
And making the world safe for democracy
were twenty million slaves
nah, they ain’t got no shame
and they barbecued six million
to raise the price of beef
and crossed the 16th parallel
to control the price of rice. (54-62)

In the year 1968 when this poem was written, what counted to most Americans was stopping the war. Information was ammunition. While Giovanni’s poetic statistics remain relevant to this cause, she’s unable to mention all of the conflict’s atrocities. For example, the two million Vietnamese killed by American soldiers and the 1.2 million gallons of agent orange that contributed to the birth defects in up to 500,000 children are overlooked in “The Great Pax Whitie” (Drinan 2). Sarcastically, Giovanni acknowledges that, “genocide is patriotism,” and she
begs her African American brothers to "see the light," and end their participation in the racist Vietnam Conflict.

Because North and South Vietnam is actually divided by the 17th parallel, the "Great Pax Whitie" emphasizes that Black Americans left home, their "mother country," in order to fight a war for another people. Perhaps the fact that Giovanni's "The Great Pax Whitie" claims the "16th parallel" as the line actually crossed provides readers with insight that her real intention was to involve Black people with Civil Rights Movement in America. Writing to "inform and protect" (Fowler 17) the members of her community and fellow Civil Rights activists, the poet emphasizes facts and figures to decrease ignorance about history and the War itself. While Giovanni undoubtedly cared about the mass-murdering of the Vietnamese people, her anti-war poetry focused on the fact that the participation of African Americans within that War was a waste of black youth who could be better used to ameliorate the conditions of their own race within the United States. As she claims in Gemini, "I don't want my son to be a warrior" (147).

Emphasizing once again that she's speaking from America, the "home front" of Civil Rights activity, Giovanni mimics news reports with her media-like obsession of death and body counts in "Poem (No Name No. 3)." In this piece, she asks her African American readers, "Didn't you hear them when 40 thousand indians died from/exposure to/honkies/ Didn't you hear them when viet children died from/exposure to napalm/you hear them when you die from exposure to wine and poverty programs" (17-21). While one of the only anti-war poets mentioning President Johnson's poverty programs in conjunction with the Vietnam Conflict, she was not the only African American writer equating the killing overseas with racial brutality in the United States. In fact, the Spring 1967 issue of the Black Liberation magazine Freedomways featured front cover photos of U.S.-engineered destruction in Vietnam and back cover photos of
police brutality against African Americans. The first photo’s caption read: “IN VIETNAM . . . detention, death, destruction . . . made in the U.S.A.”; for the back cover, the caption read: “. . . in the U.S. south” (Bibby 54).

Writing from a community-centered, protective, maternal standpoint, Giovanni intentionally uses this same photographic imagery when painting verbal portraits of “children” dying in Vietnam. Like the covers of *Freedomways*, Giovanni’s reminds the African American community of the role of their own offspring in America’s conflict overseas. The idea of dominant culture disregarding the death that its own institution has caused is reflected in Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*:

> The racist conscience of America is such that murder does not register as murder, really unless the victim is white. . . America has never truly been outraged by the murder of a black man, woman or child. (73)

Unlike Cleaver, who converted and participated fully in Black America’s involvement with the Nation of Islam, Nikki Giovanni spent only a brief time in the movement because of its degrading views on women. According to David Seelow, “The deliberate exclusion of white men and women of all colors indicates the Nation of Islam’s separatist position regarding black masculinity in American society” (18). The Black Muslim Movement in the United States proved to be an inhospitable place for women whose concerns were usually dismissed as “personal” or “apolitical” (Echols 33). Although Nikki Giovanni is traditionally associated with Amiri Baraka and the other members of the Black Arts Movement, her participation in the Nation of Islam was short-lived. While still writing from a Blacks Arts Poet’s point of view,
Giovanni refused to envision herself as restricted to making “stews and cookies,” as the self-proclaimed doctrine of Elijah Muhammed suggests for females (Gilbert 251).

Refusing the role of submissive Black Muslim woman, Giovanni sought to embody “the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are interlocking factors” (Samuel 3). While Stokely Carmichael and the Black Power movement equated the Black American’s struggle for liberation with Third World revolutionaries, Giovanni synthesized racial oppression with sexual, male supremacy with white supremacy. “In the beginning was the word/ and the word was/Death” (1-3).

Perhaps no endeavor is more paradigmatic of the male preoccupation with power than War, the activity that most cogently presents the manifestations and negotiations of power as it works in society. The poetry of Nikki Giovanni explicitly links the male conquest of the enemy in War with the male conquest of women in society. As Jean Bethke Elshain writes in Women and War, “we in the West are the heirs of a tradition that assumes an affinity between women and peace, between men and war, a tradition that consists of culturally constructed and transmitted myths and memories” (4). According to Virginia Wolf, “To fight has always been the man’s habit, not the woman’s” (8).

The traditional view of the woman as maternal or more “peace”-oriented than man comes across in the community-centered aspects of Giovanni’s anti-Vietnam War poems. Although most poetry of the Black Arts Movement had a formula of two-thirds “hate whitey’s guts” and one-third “I am black, beautiful, strong, and almost always right, (Walker 137) Nikki Giovanni replaced part of this typical equation with “I am also a protective member of the African American family.” According to Leslie Sanders:

Only the black woman can say, “when and where I enter, in the
quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence
and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole
race enters with me.” (5)

Nikki Giovanni claims that her grandmother, “who was one of the world’s greatest women,”
taught her responsibility towards her people (Gemini 138). Through her poetry protesting
African Americans’ involvement in Vietnam, Giovanni demonstrates the ability of white
oppressive society to once again reduce young Black men to mere “bodies” – biological pawns
of an imperialistic war. Through writing, she intends to decrease ignorance and provide nurturing
insight into the necessity for Civil Rights activism over military service. “We are facing the
resegregation of America, and we are asking for freedoms abroad that are not yet secure at
home” (Fowler 18).

Though the language of the Black Arts Movement used in much of Nikki Giovanni’s
poetry is often both militaristic and revolutionary, she writes with a maternal desire to better the
African American community. Like many male writers of the Black Arts Movement, Nikki
Giovanni created a poetry that recast a distorted history, claimed the moral right to speak, and
further, used War in the discovery of self and cultural affirmation. Unlike Amiri Baraka,
however, who often justified blacks’ violence and thievery against white society, Giovanni
believed that “Black love is black wealth” (Nikki Rosa 17), and still thinks that a “Black,
beautiful, and loving world is possible” (Gemini 149).
Yusef Komunyakaa: Poems that Remember

In spring of 1984, fourteen years after Yusef Komunyakaa’s participation in the Vietnam War, the poet began renovations on an old house in New Orleans. While removing layers of plaster to uncover the house’s original oak walls, Komunyakaa suddenly became inspired by this metaphorical “peeling away,” as previously suppressed images of war surfaced in his mind. With the humid Louisiana air as a backdrop, Komunyakaa descended his ladder and gave instantaneous birth to the poems “Somewhere Near Phu Bai,” “Starlight Scope Myopia,” and “Missing in Action.” According to his own account:

... these poems seemed to have merely gushed out of me, and they surfaced with imagery that dredged up so much unpleasant psychic debris. All the guilt and anger coalesced into a confused stockpile of unresolved conflict. These poems were prompted by a need; they had fought to get out. I hadn’t forgotten a single thread of evidence against myself. (Blue Notes 14)

As the poet continued the renovations to his home, he wrote more and more poems about Vietnam.

Although Komunyakaa had begun writing during his tour of duty in Vietnam, it took the author almost a decade and a half before his memories of War became lyrical subject matter that he could transcribe onto paper. Perhaps, like many veterans, Komunyakaa had suppressed these violent images. In “Control is the Mainspring,” he writes, “I had purposefully evaded Vietnam-related literature and had seen only one ‘Vietnam War’ movie” (Blue Notes 14). Like other survivors of the War, Komunyakka spent years trying to forget the traumatic events he
experienced during his time in the military. Ironically, in the years since 1984, he’s done his best to make himself and other people remember.

While other African American poets like Amiri Baraka address Black America’s involvement in Vietnam with militant words often justifying violence as a means to end oppression, Komunyakaa’s poetry mostly resists the need for words to act as “fists” and “daggers.” Instead, Komunyakaa’s work, full of visions of vegetation and haunting ghosts, comes across as more inward and suggestive. Instead of proposing the violent overthrow of white racist government and suggesting the moral superiority of Black suffering as the call to explicit direct political action, Komunyakaa’s poems lean more towards the philosophy of integration, peace, and equality. Although Komunyakaa undeniably addresses the issues of racial oppression, much of his work portrays nature itself as a brutal yet beautiful force and questions the ability of humans to acknowledge that natural duality, the capacity to create beauty and the capacity for brutal destruction, within themselves.

In the poem “Re-Creating the Scene,” for example, Komunyakaa draws a verbal picture of the gang rape of a Vietnamese woman.

The three men
ride her breath, grunting
over lovers back in Mississippi.
She floats on their rage
like a torn water flower,
defining night inside a machine
where men are gods. (14-19)
Although the attack is undeniably disgusting and brutal, the poet keeps the victim virginally clean by casting her image as a “torn water flower” (17). The men, though still “grunting” for their girlfriends back home have become both “machines” and “gods” from their tortured stay in the jungle. They have been given the power to destroy but have had to numb their minds and souls in order to succumb to the evil of war. According to Peter Huber:

Nature is supposed to be as fragile as a lotus blossom. Man is dominant and rapacious; nature is submissive and gets raped. This view of Man versus Nature dictates the most stringent possible restraints on everything. It requires command-and-control government at every turn. (1)

Obviously, the victim in this poem bows down to the dominance of “nature.” While the rapists have lost the ability to govern their own bodies, they set out to destroy the “weakness” they once saw in themselves.

Yusef Komunyakaa was born 1947 in Bogalusa, Louisiana, a poor and impoverished neighborhood in the Deep South which was full of poetically inspirational nature, yet dominated by a “Calvinist work ethic” (Blue Notes 26). He spent his childhood surrounded by people who believed if they worked hard enough, they would get ahead in the “American Dream” (27). Although this ideology often caused conflict between the intellectually driven Komunyakaa and his carpenter father, the writer uses many childhood experiences to inform his work. Familial relationships, his maturation in a rural Southern community, and the musical environment afforded by the close proximity of the blues and jazz center in New Orleans provided inspiration for much of his poetry, including some of those written about his experiences in the Vietnam War.
Unfortunately, Komunyakaa had very limited access to literature while growing up in Bogalusa. In contrast to Baraka, he claims that his interest in literature first came from reading the Bible (which he has read twice in its entirety) and then Shakespeare, Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickinson, and a lot of Alfred Lord Tennyson (“Poetry and Inquiry” 1). He was introduced to African American literature during “the Negro History Week,” which Komunyakaa calls, “brief moments in our education before we went back to the regular curriculum, which was the history and literature dominated by Europeans” (Blue Notes 25).

After graduating from Bogalusa’s Central High School in 1965, Komunyakaa enlisted in the United States Army and began a tour of duty in Vietnam (Ashford 1). Politically against the War and its senseless violence, Komunyakaa had thought of going AWOL; however, the thought of “bearing witness” lured him. In the essay “Poetry and Inquiry,” Komunyakaa recalls:

> When I went to Vietnam, I carried a couple of poetry anthologies with me. I continued to read poetry but was not writing it. I was in the information field and was doing newspaper work. When I came back from the war, I found myself enrolled in a poetry workshop at the University of Colorado, and I’ve been writing ever since. (Blue Notes 26)

Before returning home from the War, Komunyakaa received a Bronze Star for his work on the military newspaper, The Southern Cross (Sayer 2). Undoubtedly, this experience allowed Komunyakaa to master a journalistic style which he would later use in poetic efforts to assess objectively the time he spent engaged in warfare.

Not only did the poet earn a BA in English and Sociology from the University of Colorado, but he went on to pursue an MA from Colorado State and earned an M.F.A. from the University of California at Irvine in 1980. During this time he read widely: T.S. Eliot, Ezra
Pound, Paul Celan, Baudelaire, the French Surrealists, Jean Toomer, Robert Hayden, Bob Kaufman, Helene Johnson, and Amiri Baraka (Sayer 2). Komunyakaa also spent time studying classical surrealists like Brenton, whose influences would later appear in the “hallucinatory” imagery of his Vietnam War poems (Baer 1).

In addition to receiving a Master’s in creative writing during the year 1980, Komunyakaa joined the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, a closely-knit community of artists geared towards encouraging the self-conscious, individualistic writer. While in residence at this work center, Komunyakaa gained a deeper understanding of himself as a writer and as a human being, an acute awareness that he now strives to recreate in much of his poetry. In order for one to find his true voice as a writer, Komunyakaa claims: “a sort of unearthing has to take place; sometimes one has to remove layers of facades and superficialities. The writer has to get down to the guts of the thing and rediscover the basic timbre of his or her own existence” (quoted in Ashford 2).

For Komunyakaa, it took fourteen years to “get down to the guts of the thing” and begin writing poetry about the Vietnam War. However, this poet, however is not alone in his struggle with violent wartime material. Literary critics have often cited the difficulty of assimilating the Vietnam War into poetry. Jeffery Walsh, for example, has argued that “poetry of a traditional kind has proved inappropriate to communicate the character of the Vietnam War, its remoteness, its jargonised recapitulations, its seeming imperviousness to aesthetics” (Walsh 204). The Black Arts Movement and the Black Aesthetic had overcome the European aesthetic that poetry and politics could not, should not mix. Yusef Komunyakaa’s formal education had led him to the same conclusion that Amiri Baraka and Nikki Giovanni had delineated. To be personal in poetry demanded political awareness by definition of being Black in America. Writers in this position must find an authentic voice by resisting the cultural codes that define them only as soldiers.
Yusef Komunyakaa faces a difficult challenge, then, of representing both the Vietnam veteran and the African American—two identities typically perceived by the American culture as “other,” marginalized in many ways throughout American history. In “Untitled Blues,” Komunyakaa catches himself trying to “look into the eyes/of the photo, of a black boy/behind a laughing white mask” (3-5). When asked about the prevalence of racial psychological warfare in an interview with William Baer, Komunyakaa responded: “...the Civil Rights Movement was going forward back home, along with the anti-war movement. So the problem was very much alive for the black GIs, and there was always a discourse” (3). A black GI in the historical narrative *The Courageous and The Proud* claims:

> Our mighty [white] leaders talk about patriotism, which is supposed to be the foundation stone of our nation. But those leaders can’t understand that there is a lot of unrest among Negro people because of their treatment in America... how am I, as a Negro, supposed to feel about going to a place where I got a good chance of not coming back, and if I do get back, I’m still treated like a second-class citizen? (23)

Whereas the previous poets had challenged the abstractions of the War with the personal experience of racism at home, Yusef Komunyakaa had to begin with the experience of the Vietnam War as well.

Like Komunyakaa, most soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War came from lower-middle and working-class families. Although the war in Vietnam was presented as necessary for the national interest, comparatively few men from other social classes were forced to fight it. Those who served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1969 were America’s “expendables” (Polner 162). Subsequently, the casualties of Black soldiers were proportionately far in excess of the
estimated Black population in the United States. It is understandable that the African American soldiers’ doubts as to the war’s justice must have been greater than their white compatriots’ (Polner xxiii).

Although from the early ‘60s to 1966 many African Americans supported duty in the newly integrated military as a move out of ghetto unemployment, by 1968 attitudes had shifted. A disproportionate percentage of troops assigned to combat duty were Black. Programs such as Project 100,000 specifically targeted low-income, urban Black males for the draft and the number of minority soldiers killed in Vietnam outweighs their relative presence in the field (Bibby 55). Proving that the attitudes of Black Americans changed in relation to U.S. involvement with the War, a 1966 poll by Newsweek showed that 35% of African Americans opposed the war; in 1968, however, that number rose to 56% (55).

Obviously, perceptions of equality and justice in and out of the military service differed markedly from white to Black soldier. However, the overwhelming violence of warfare and shocking terrain of the jungle occasionally built bonds between Black and white Americans. Under the conditions of War, Komunykaa claims that racial distinctions become blurred. “You are only trying to stay alive. You’re going to try to protect your fellow soldiers, black or white” (Baer 3). This statement proved true in the heat of the battle, yet racial division and discrimination still occurred in the private lives of soldiers.

The poem “Tu Do Street” focuses on this dual theme of segregation and intimacy shared by white and Black Americans fighting in Vietnam. He begins the poem, “Music divides the evening” (1). This division, this sense of separation, exists not only between the musical tastes of black and white soldiers, but between wartime enemies as well. Komunyakka also shows this “division” to be a biased racial attitude that soldiers have carried with them to Vietnam. The poet
then takes the readers back in time when he remembers “White Only/ signs & Hank Snow” (6-7) as cultural indicators of his Black community in Bogalusa. When country singer “Hank Williams/ calls from the psychedelic jukebox” (13-14), Black and white soldiers, brought together by machine gun fire that surrounds them, are still separated by the American culture in which they were raised.

This poem acts more than once as a time machine, as it brings the readers back to the days before Earl Warren and desegregation laws, when men “drew lines in the dust” to “confront” their differences. Using a bit of television deja vu, Komunyakaa recreates a scene from the old west. Here, the poet relies on elements of the very media most closely associated with the war’s communal experience - - music, television, drama, and film - - to reveal how these elements were perceived, often quite differently, by white and American soldiers.

Although “Tu Do Street” alludes to a potential “brotherhood” between Caucasian and African American soldiers, it places Vietnamese prostitutes, not the sharing of near-death experiences, at the root of the soldiers’ integration. Portrayed as a catalyst between these soldiers, the Vietnamese women in “Tu Do Street” play both sexual and maternal roles in relation to the young, homesick men. Much like the soldiers, these women have been forced to prostitute their bodies, risking pregnancy, disease, and psychological trauma as opposed to war wounds and death. Komunyakaa insinuates that the War itself has reduced everyone to mere physical entities, defined not only by their color of their skin but also by the beating of their hearts.

The soldiers, Black and white, in “Tu Do Street” run to these women to “hold them in their arms” (27) seeking sexual gratification and forgiveness simultaneously. Coming from battle, these men are desperate for affection and comfort, and they find these emotional diversions
synonymous with intimacy with the enemy. "Tunnels leading to the underworld," "off limits," and "white only," signs all suggest that Komunyakaa is entering a secret abode. As these men enter private rooms with the women, they too seek a womb-like place of protection and security. The poet emphasizes lines drawn and broken, creating a lyrical maze that fantastically leads American soldiers underground quite possibly with the Viet Cong and prostitutes, while sensibly leading them back home with each other.

Playing on the adage that love is a two-way street, the poet uses the black vernacular, as scholar Alvin Aubert asserts, claiming that desire itself is a "tu do street," or two-door street (Ashford 7). The obvious metaphor calls upon images of the vagina, relating it to sinister terrain that must be conquered or overcome.

Aware of the hypocrisy of treating the Vietnamese as both enemies and lovers, Komunyakaa compares the actions of the American soldiers with those of the Biblical character, Judas. Quite possibly, this two-faced disciple with monetary motivations serves not only as a metaphor for the prostitution occurring in "Tu Do Street," but also points out the hypocrisy of America, a country founded on the doctrine of equal rights for all, calling its citizens, both Black and white, to offer themselves in sacrifice in war without offering them equal rights on the homefront.

While the geographical area referred to by Komunyakaa in "Tu Do Street" comes across as being predominantly inhabited by white soldiers, the poem alludes to the fact that Black dominated nightclubs exist not far away. Hence, "Tu Do Street" does not imply that only white soldiers are interested in maintaining their turf, but that both racial groups intended to preserve their "American" identities. According to Vietnam and Black America, this segregation was not at all uncommon. "Black soldiers, attracted by common music, language, or hate, live when they
can in black hootches and spend their off-duty time together in black dominated ‘soul’ bars” (213).

The prominence of Black nightclubs and African Americans’ desire for a sense of their own identity appears again in Komunyakaa’s poetry, namely, “Hanoi Hannah.” Employing every tactic available to them to undermine the morale of the American troops, the North Vietnamese employed this female radio DJ to produce homesickness by specifically playing black music and commenting on the irony of African Americans’ fight in Vietnam, a dual strategy captured by the poet:

Ray Charles! His voice
calls from waist-high grass,
& we duck behind gray sandbags.

“Hello, Soul Brothers. Yeah,
Georgia’s also on my mind.”

“You’re dead as King today in Memphis.”
... “It’s Saturday night in the States.
...Soul Brothers, what you dyin’ for?” (1-3, 21-22, 27)

This question, asked by Hannah in fluent Black English, preys upon African-American soldiers’ ambiguous position in the war. By playing Ray Charles and Tina Turner, addressing Black soldiers as “Soul Brothers,” and mentioning the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., this Vietnamese radio personality solicits emotions that only Black soldiers can relate to, intentionally stressing racial divisions between them and their white war mates. In reference to “Hanoi Hannah,” Kevin Stein writes:

[Komunyakaa’s] poems become politically charged, though
always understated, as he offers a black American’s perspective on psychological warfare strategies that accentuate racial division. (6)

Like many of the writers of the Black Arts Movement, Komunyakaa feels guilt about the Vietnam War and sees the necessity of political and social change in America. However, he believes that what is needed to accomplish this change is no longer an explicit challenge to white authority shocked by confrontation but instead lyrical sensitivity. The fact that Komunyakaa waited almost two decades to publish poems on Vietnam differentiates him not only from other veteran poets but also from the Black activist poets of the late 1960s and early seventies. According to Richard K. Barksdale:

... in some of the poetry of recent young Black writers there is a broad humanistic concern that breaks through the cloud-cover of confrontation rhetoric to pin-point the evils of the times, to subject these to trenchant political analysis, and to pronounce their desperate remedies for mankind’s moral and spiritual salvation. (Modern Black Poets 161)

Certainly, Black soldiers remember Vietnam differently than their white counterparts. The Confederate flags that fly in “Re-creating the Scene” and the Viet Cong leaflets that read “VC didn’t kill Martin Luther King” in “Report from a Skull’s Diorama” provide visual representations of what it must have been like for an African American in the War. Unlike white soldiers, the African Americans fighting for the United States carried the historical baggage of cultural oppression with them to the jungles of Vietnam. Although using metaphors to underscore this idea, Komunyakaa often understates his Blackness, concentrating more on the
notions of physical and spiritual unity, claiming, “Poetry is a process of getting back to the unconscious” (*Blue Notes* 27).

In fact, much of the Vietnam War poetry written by Komunyakaa focuses on natural images of death and the human emotion of guilt. By connecting a bloody history with spirituality, Komunyakaa asks America to confront fully the moral consequences of its involvement with Vietnam. “You feel you could reach out/& take him in your arms,” writes Komunyakaa about a Vietnamese civilian. Perhaps, through poetry, he fulfills this wish.
Conclusion

Truly the movement against America’s participation in the Vietnam Conflict was a broad-based antiwar mobilization of a sort rarely if ever before seen in recent American history. However, the anti-Vietnam poetry of Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Yusef Komunyakaa offers unique interpretations of African American involvement in the longest battle the United States has ever fought. Like many Black Americans, these writers felt that the participation of the members of their race in America’s fight for “democracy” overseas was hypocritical; as a means of addressing that issue, they chose poetry.

While many writers of the 1940s called for an end to “race-consciousness” in African American poetry (Bibby 40), the Black Arts Poets of the 1960s reclaimed the right to express, with artistic pride, their Blackness. Their images, language, and subjects were cast in ways that appropriated the discourses of liberation and revolution generated through the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Undoubtedly, the works of Baraka, and Giovanni used this “blackness” as both a cultural and physical sign synonymous with corrosive power aiming to destabilize the legacy of white dominance. Along with Yusef Komunyakaa, who wrote about the war from a veteran’s perspective almost two decades later, these poets linked themselves with the Vietnamese people on the common basis of dark skin and the experience of racial oppression. They portrayed this “epidermal difference” as the factor connecting all people of color subjecting them to oppression by white U.S. imperialism. Peter X articulates this position in *Black Vanguard*:

Black is the basic of all colors; all colors come from black. White is the absence of color — no color. If the persons who are blond and light-skinned, brunette and dark-skinned, or red-haired and
freckeled can call themselves white, why can’t we, who are black, brown, yellow, and red call ourselves black? (3)

Unquestionably, the poems “The Eyes and Ears of the World,” “A Non Poem about Vietnam,” and “To Du Street” could not easily have come from a Caucasian mind or hand. Not only do these works rely heavily upon their creators’ ethnic descent, they also depend on their disillusionment with the traditional American system. Many of these themes perhaps echo Frederick Douglass’s Fourth of July oration in 1852.

To him [the African American] your celebration is a sham; Your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity...your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery...your parade[s], are, to him, more bombast, fraud, deception, impiety and hypocrisy – a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. (Cleaver 75-76)

Although this speech was given in relation to America’s position on slavery, it can easily be applied to America’s “boasted liberty” and “swelling vanity” in sending Black Americans to fight for the freedom of the Vietnamese people, while not granting equality to its own black citizens. In 1970, the Congress of African Peoples “went on record as being unalterably opposed to the war and urged black troops to cease firing on the Vietnamese” (Bibby 54). However, the United States’ government continued sending troops until 1973. By that time, over 5,600 African Americans had been lost to the conflict in Vietnam (Thayer 113).

The anti-War poems written by Baraka and Giovanni served to inspire a generation of young African Americans to see what their participation in the Vietnam War really meant. While Nikki Giovanni wrote to condemn black involvement in the Vietnam conflict, claiming it to be a
waste of black youth whose participation was needed in the Civil Rights Movement at home, the poetry of Amiri Baraka showed that the struggle of African Americans reflected those of oppressed people elsewhere in the world. He saw black participation in Vietnam as aiding white culture’s attempt at racial genocide. Although it is impossible to claim that the reading of “The Great Pax Whitie” or “Black Art” caused young Black Americans to rip up their draft cards and immediately join the Civil Rights Movement or become involved in the quest for Black Power, the words of these poems certainly had both artistic and political consequences.

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, when peaceful protests turned into angry riots, these writers of the Black Arts Movement captured the needs of the moment through poetry. According to Nikki Giovanni:

The writers brought the message. They said we are militant; we are strong; we are black; we are proud, and we are going to fight a war with words. If I would be granted anything, I would say to Black Americans: we are the ones who perfected the “war of words.”

(Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate 12)

Although writing almost two decades later, Yusef Komunyakaa undoubtedly felt the influence of Baraka, Giovanni, and other anti-Vietnam War poets of the Black Arts Movement. However, Komunyakaa chooses to leave his militancy in the jungles of Vietnam, and captures the participation of Black soldiers of the Vietnam War through a personal, veteran’s perspective. While his comparison of the Vietnamese woman with “a torn water flower” will probably not stop the United States from entering another brutal conflict, its image imprints itself upon minds and asks readers to continue to question the traditional concept of “enemy.”


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Drinan, Robert F. "When Will The American Conscience Demand Justice for Vietnam?"


