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**Listen to the Beat: The Core Contributions of Amiri Baraka, Ted Joans, and Bob Kaufman
to a Poet's Vision of an American Future**

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The United States in the 1950s and 60s was faced with the task of reconstituting what it meant to be American in the wake of World War II. Due to wartime necessity, labor was redistributed and traditional social roles based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status were altered, leaving the social and cultural landscape of the nation completely restructured. What immediately followed was a national push toward conformity which aimed to reinstitute pre-war ideals of capitalism, conservatism, and the centrality of the nuclear family in American society. This codification of conformity into social law met its ideological adversaries in a small population of artists and writers known as the Beat Poets.

Though the most widely disseminated works of the Beat Poets were those done by white writers, the question remains how much of this was due to their protected status in society. The extent to which black Beat poets contributed to the movement and sustained its vision for a liberated American future remains to be discovered. I argue that in mid-twentieth century America, black writers such as Amiri Baraka, Ted Joans, and Bob Kaufman, familiar as they were with the nuances of identity formation due to the double-consciousness they faced in navigating their black and American identities, formed the basis of the Beat movement's vision for a future America. The individual exploration and liberation the Beat movement valued was rooted in black experience, communicated through their poetry, and shaped in conversation with white writers. Ultimately these poets formed a collaborative process, where the contributions of black Beat writers sustained the Beat movement through their navigation and communication of the necessity for space and context in the formation of individual and community identities.

While this counterculture movement promoted sexual liberalism, psychedelic drug use, and socialist political and economic values, they were also formulating a social vision of an American future which emphasized liberation of the self, through both self identification and

expression. Through an assessment of the works and conversation surrounding Baraka, Joans, and Kaufman, it becomes clear how the liberation at the heart of the Beat's vision of a future America was a concept born from the experiences and works of these black poets. Not only in their writings, but in the way they were disseminated under the umbrella of white association that the 'Beat Poet' moniker afforded them. Through interaction with their white counterparts and the social safety and ideological space their race afforded them, these black poets were the primary progenitors of this future vision — a vision that may have remained muddled in ignorance had it not been formulated in the conversation of racial expression of the Beat era. This 'racial collaboration' itself was brought about not necessarily by the enthusiasm of its participants or interest in the racial other, but the search for self which necessarily instigated conversation across their bodies of work.

The search for personal liberation that the Beat poets embarked upon relied on an availability of space. They countered the conservative majority which held uniformity as paramount; a majority which filled the public conversation, leaving no space for alternative ideation — even promising violent danger in response, particularly for African Americans. One way this social 'space' is negotiated is through the noise or sonic expressions of different communities. In his book, *The Dead Lecturer*, Amiri Baraka challenges the commonly held conviction that noise is essential to black life, as African American culture is so often claimed to be a vernacular one (Fragopoulos, 2016). Recognizing the habit of a dominant culture to flag and stigmatize signifiers of a marginalized culture, through his work Baraka attempts to detach us from these stigmatized assumptions, claiming silence as not only a primary facet of black culture but one which functions quite differently than it is normatively addressed. Silence, in the face of oppression, is so often posited as either an outcome of subjugation, or an act of resistance to

one's oppressors. While Baraka recognizes that it can function as either in certain scenarios, the silence he speaks of is a connective one. One which is essential not only to the continual construction of black American identity, but also to the process of community and creating the balanced, equitable, and free American future the Beats strove for.

The falsity born of the noise/silence dichotomy which Baraka was addressing was a commonly accepted notion by the white majority that black culture was analogous to and could be intrinsically signified by certain noisy city streets. There existed in the popular white imagination the sonic fantasy of members of the black community calling out to one another, blaring cultural music, cheering for the winners of games and dances, the sizzle of food cooking, and black vernacular flying through the air in every direction. Baraka challenged this, positing silence as the stage upon which black expression could be pronounced. Be there too much external sound and you'd wash it out, so that the truth of black culture could not be distinguished from the fictions of public perception. The sound he speaks of which washes out black culture, in fact, is not that colloquial cacophony of a Harlem street, but the sounds of the surrounding white city which work to blot out black expression — to disallow it the luxury of existence at all. He gives the example of city construction noise, cranes hanging over their neighborhoods like vultures, ever impeding the sonic space of black culture, washing it out with the racket of gentrification and white entitlement.

That 'noise' created by white hegemonic society also consisted of the public proliferation of false, but normatively accepted, black noise. Such as the sounds, style of speech, and scripts written out for the characters in minstrel shows of the early twentieth century. Scholar J. Peter Moore explores this conjunction of noise factors, explaining how minstrel shows were by no means silent acts performed by black characters, but rather white fantasies acted out and

contributing to the common-culture perceptions of black America. The demeanor and dialogue of the characters in these shows created deafening white noise (which allowed no room for black noise or expression) through the “insistence on placing certain words in the mouth of the black performer” which acted as a “silent recitation of white fantasies” (Moore, 2016). Compounding this with the “corrosive whirr of construction equipment” blaring in the city streets where groups of black Americans strived to create community, all accrued “in one deafening roar intent on silencing black expressivity” (Moore, 2016). The white fantasy of black vernacular culture sounded to the white American majority like these minstrel shows; these foolish characters whose expression of a racist black fictional culture was so commonplace and so widely accepted, it rang far too loud for any other black voices to get through.

The washing out of this black noise (and silence alike) was a direct factor of the white fantasies held about black culture. Fantasies held by the exact conservative white majority the Beat poets built their movement against. The essential mission of their movement was to create a counterculture to these conservative normative views. Amidst this denunciation of normative conservatism, Baraka posited silence as a signifier of space; space which allowed for the creation and contemplation of black American identity. Space that the Beat poets emphasized in their vision of a new and more free future America.

Baraka’s beloved silence, and the connective space which it signified, in large part accounted for the Beats’ emphasis on poetry and literature, the “literary mobility” which afforded them a stage of sorts on which to present their issues with normative culture and posit their solutions to it (Harney, 1991). More than this, it afforded them the beginning and the end of a page, and all the sweet silence which surrounds. In his sequence of poems, “A Poem for Willie Best,” Baraka explores the nature of silence as a dimension of dialect, closing the sequence with

an open-ended parenthetical around a request which simultaneously begs silence and wishes for sonic connection: “(Hear?” (Moore, 2016). In its place at the end of the sequence, this phrase invites the reader to join the silence which follows a reading of the poem to the poem itself, connecting the world created by the words on the page — the envisioned world of the Beat ethos in Amiri Baraka’s mind — with the external world the reader is living in. With a single word (and a purposeful disregard for punctuational etiquette), Baraka calls the reader’s awareness to the space surrounding the information they are processing. Even going so far as to position the reader themselves as the connective tissue between the ideas on the page and the world which surrounds them. The act of finishing reading, or having not yet read the first line, becomes analogous to the margins — paper strips of silent space, allowing clarity and room for the expression within the poem to exist as a connected piece of a larger external world. Simultaneously, the phrase invites the reader to action; to be an agent of the Beat ethos seeking space for self discovery.

The space which silence inhabits is so often born from the restraint of expressing oneself loudly and with dispensation to overpower the expressions of others. Many recall America in the mid-twentieth century as a period of strengthening family values and rebounding the postwar economy, but disregard how the pervasive normative advertising of this family image — particularly as it lacked racial flexibility — left little space for any other identity images. To frame a single portrayal of an American family as the blueprint for the interpersonal lives of an entire nation is to forget the nature of culture in general. Dependent on infinite combinations of individual people, histories, attitudes, preferences, and values, “American cultural fabric, is not foundational, not essential, but arbitrary, and open” (Muyumba, 2007).

In the United States of the 1950s and 60s, the space that allowed for the formation of varied interpersonal identities was incredibly scarce due to the excessive public emphasis on white identities above all else; an effort for the conservative and racist American majority to maintain power (both sociopolitically as well as economically) after World War II. This scarcity of space was a key driving factor toward the American future the Beat poets envisioned. The core Beat ethos highly emphasized self exploration and expression, recognizing the commonplace nature of intersectional identities, and the absurdity of normative American culture of the mid-twentieth century which positioned uniformity and congruence with a tempered and unexpressive social public as the moral height of American citizenry.

For decades, many have also tried to position writers like Kerouac and Ginsberg (who, for all his whiteness, took his turn as a subjugated man, both for his Jewish heritage and his homosexuality) — white, American men — as the forebearers of the Beat movement. This claim has long been rooted in the white-hegemonic romanticization of young erudite men from the Northeast, gathering in saloons and study halls, contemplating social theory and their own protected liberalism, dreaming up alternatives to a broken world they watched from arms' length.

While the first iteration of the Beat movement may have been born from the tight social circles of these socially dissatisfied white writers, it owes its germination and sustainment in cultural history to the contributions of Joans, Baraka, and Kaufman, as well as black American experience and identity formation at large. In fact, this notion of white writers as the primary progenitors of the movement becomes increasingly suspect when one considers the blossoming endeavor of individual exploration, so idealized in the Beats' vision of the future. While this idealization feasibly prevailed in the minds of those Beats who rejected conservatism and discrimination, regardless of their race, it was a desperately necessary feat for black Beat

writers. In her book, *Performing the Word: African American Poetry as Vernacular Culture*, Fahamisha Patricia Brown “traces black cultural distinctiveness to the systematic degradation of African Americans through slavery, segregation, and continued economic, political, and sociopsychological privation” (Moore, 2016). She holds, as does Baraka, that the context for social bonds is created through oppression. A context which, when fully uncovered, erodes the claims that the connective space the Beats sought to create such social bonds, which would engender self exploration in a racially pluralistic symbiosis, was born in the liberalism of white Beat poets.

The white-washed America of the 50s and 60s created a backdrop for social change which drew intellectuals and revolutionaries of all races to explore the possibility of counterculture. It set a scene which invited a counterculture of middle class white intellectuals to reject that normative culture which would set strict social rules upon them. But it was also a scene set in the wake of a brutal world war, where black and white men fought alongside one another for the safety of all Americans, and which was directly tied to the civil rights movement of the 60s and 70s. It was a backdrop which posited a fantastical view of American culture, highlighting through its saccharine ignorance the oppression of non-normative racial identities in popular American society. It was also a sweet spot in history for a shared counterculture vision for black and white radicals. The perfect combination of personal and social prudishness to offend the wayward sensibilities of young, intelligent, and privileged white male writers who dreamed they could build a world less strict and mass producing of amorphous personalities, and found an avenue to do so through engagement with black experience and poetic works.

Still, the space they sought to freely cultivate identity — the basis of their vision for an American future — was necessarily dependent on the nature of identity itself and the common

fiction we tell ourselves that the ‘self’ is private property. One of the greatest contradictions of the Beat era was their emphasis on individualism as well as self exploration. I maintain this as a contradiction because, as Baraka, Joans, and Kaufman well knew, one’s identity is not some purified substance kept safe inside oneself. Nor is it the self-image projected onto you by your surroundings. Rather identity is an inflective culmination of the interaction between your internal knowledge of self and that self which is reflected back at you from others, or the context in which the frame of your identity falls. At the time, black Americans and writers better understood the importance of context in identity creation largely due to the double-consciousness which commonly arose while navigating their identities as African Americans in the post-slavery United States — neither solely the products of their ancestors nor belonging to the land which enslaved and persecutes them, but which they still call home (Harney, 1991). At the tail end of the Beat movement, Baraka writes how he has always sought a “poetry that would help transform society” (Moore and St. Onge, 2016). A transformation which is part and parcel with the transformation of double-consciousness to a true and culturally rooted personal identity for black Americans.

The process of ethnogenesis for black Americans in the mid twentieth century arose as “the inner battle between an African American self-identity and seeing oneself through the eyes of white America... threatened to destroy the African American intellectual” (Marshall, 2007). In Ted Joans’ own life, the conflict that arose due to the contention between the two aspects of his identity — blackness and being American (typically thought synonymous to ‘white’) — was a truth bored into him from the beginning of his life. When Joans was just fifteen years old his father was killed in a race riot in Detroit, leaving him fundamentally altered as so many black Americans were and continue to be due to acts of racial violence. As the relation between white

hegemonic power in American society was directly related to these race riots, it was impossible for Joans ever again to ignore the dangers and racial othering of this normative society. Later in his life Joans even left the United States for many years, living abroad in Europe and Africa as he found America unprepared in its current state for a substantiated African American culture in the mainstream (Lindberg, 1998). Amiri Baraka found himself at a similar turning point when later in his career he changed his stance on racial integration, favoring instead a Black Nationalism which strayed from the white aesthetic that colored much of Beat poetry (Gill, 1999). They found themselves unable to contend with an “American cultural smorgasbord that remains under white — or Establishment — ownership” (Lindberg, 1998). While their white Beat poet contemporaries could gain an awareness of the true inequitable state of their shared nation, separate from the veneer of the white American idealization of the 50s, they were not subject to the fundamental mark this sort of systematic oppression entails. Nor were they subject, as Maria Damon puts it, to a “life of “secret terrible hurts” that will never be known,” as the black Beat poets were who remained guarded behind the “hyperverbal poseurism” of the Beat poetry which tied them to white America both as their oppressors and as the poets working alongside them (Damon, 2000).

The need for any individuation to pertain to the social context around it was a necessary acceptance for black Americans, as they were afforded no space to cultivate that identity in normative society, while still their marginalized status only highlighted this need. For the Beats’ vision of a liberated America that fostered self exploration, as in any case of ethnogenesis or identity formation, it would be a mistake to claim that process can ever be isolated from sociocultural context.

H. William Rice explains how Bob Kaufman directly acknowledged this malleable nature of identity as well as its reliance on the external, shown through the histories he told of his own life — real or fictionalized. The telling of these possibly-real-histories, as well as his period of professional and personal silence, allowed him a hand in the piece of his identity formation that relies on public perception — what Maria Damon would categorize as the goal of the Beat writers to “write their lives” (Damon, 2000). Rice disagrees with this statement from Damon, claiming Kaufman’s approach to the public presentation of self “parodies” this aim, challenging commonly postulated claims that identity (or life itself) could ever exist as a printed and proofed finalized product, or that identity could ever be taken “out of motion” (Rice, 2014). Rather, Kaufman recognizes the organic nature of identity and toys with his own power to alter that interactive formulation of internal and external factors. Kaufman was not alone in this awareness, as the individualism the Beat poets idealized relied necessarily on the kind of formative identity process black Americans had been building on in response to double-consciousness since abolition, nearly a hundred years earlier.

The post-war period that led to the Beat era saw accepted social rules knocked out of place, creating a rare social inflection point in the history of the United States. Those who had always been in power found, in their preoccupation with war and promoting traditional American ideals globally, a gap had opened, wherein echoed the question of whether those social rules held real merit for a modern America. A nation which longed to leave the conflict of war behind, but could not forget the progressive steps taken in the wartime daze. This confusion of social rules caused panic for white conservatives who saw their reign threatened as it had never been before. Their desperate grasp for traditionalism created a wide pendulum swing, all but inviting the Beat poets to formulate an alternative vision of what America could be. Riding the swell of racial

consciousness that gave rise to the subsequent Civil Rights era, the white writers who initiated the Beat movement found in black experience and double-consciousness the moral fodder that would sustain the ideological counterculture framework they'd created. Simultaneously, the black writers who would be known as Beat poets — such as Baraka, Joans, and Kaufman — found a platform in the Beat movement on which to build their civil rights rhetoric. A platform which, though counter to the culture of their oppressors, afforded them the social safety of association with the protected status of their white counterparts.

Still, the marginalization of Baraka, Joans, and Kaufman has extended through history, to this very present moment. The scarcity of their works in conversation about Beat poetry — let alone American literature or popular book sales — is evidence of this. Yet to claim an understanding of the Beat poets and their vision of a future America would be hollow and ill-conceived without the contributions of these writers. Still more is to be learned about the cultural history of the United States by further exploration of these poets' deviation from the Beat movement as each of them, in the continuous constructions of identity that made up their lives, grew estranged at times with their ties to white culture — a counterculture though it may have been. Through all the mystique that surrounds the Beat era, in all the haze of literary legend and the proliferation of false histories, considering the works of these black writers in the context of a larger U.S. history reveals the Beat era as a social tool through which non-normative identity formation could find a spotlight like never before. It similarly reveals the crucial differences between counterculture as choice versus necessity, while proving true a statement made by cultural philosopher, Paolo Friere: “no one can say a true word alone” (Harney, 1991).

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