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Amiri Baraka and two consequential poems from 1965

Howard Rambsy II, Black Studies Program and the Department of English - Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Author of [The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry](#)

In 1965, Amiri Baraka (then known as Le Roi Jones) produced "Black Art" and "A Poem for Black Hearts," which became two of the most widely circulated poems of the time period. That the poems appeared at the outset of the Black Arts Movement is hardly coincidental. Baraka and his poems were instrumental to the formation of the movement.

On February 21, 1965, Malcolm X was assassinated in Harlem just as he began to deliver a speech. His violent murder was traumatic, painful, and tragic. African American literary artists would not allow Malcolm to be forgotten.

In the course of the next several months and years, writers found various ways to memorialize the slain leader in their works. Baraka took the lead. His piece "A Poem for Black Hearts" was one of the first widely distributed tributes to Malcolm when it was published in the September 1965 issue of *Negro Digest*. The poem carried a note "April, 1965" alerting readers that Baraka had composed it months earlier.

"For Malcolm's eyes," Baraka began "when they broke the face of some dumb white man. For Malcolm's hands raised to bless us all black and strong." The poem was a fiery tribute for Malcolm. The poem also showcased a new or intensified militancy from Baraka, who was using the poem to urge his black audiences to action. As Baraka noted, "let nothing in us rest until we avenge ourselves for death."

In retrospect, the "April, 1965" designation was important because it marked the moment when Baraka and a group of fellow artists, including Askia Toure and Larry Neal among others, had organized the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem. Baraka's collaborators also included playwrights, actors, visual artists, and musicians.

At some point in 1965, Baraka recorded a reading of his poem "Black Art," and he was backed by a group of jazz artists, Sonny Murray on drums, Albert Ayler on tenor saxophone, Don Cherry on trumpet, and Lewis Worrell and Henry Grimes on basses. The poem appeared on Sonny Murray's album *Sonny's Time Now* (1965) prior to the poem's initial appearance in print in the January 1966 issue of *Liberator*.

In "Black Art," Baraka makes the case that "Poems are bullshit unless they are" functional and tangible. Similar to "A Poem for Black Hearts," Baraka uses "Black Art" as a rallying cry for his black

audiences and as a platform for listing demands:

We want a black poem. And a
Black World.
Let the world be a Black Poem
And Let All Black People Speak This Poem
Silently
or LOUD

Part of what ensured that Baraka's poems would become canonical, not only memorable, was the tacit agreement among dozens of anthology editors from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s that "A Poem for Black Hearts" and "Black Art" should appear in collections. Time after time when editors gathered works to include, they included Baraka's two poems. Between 1968 and 1973, at the height of the Black Arts Movement, Baraka's two poems were reprinted in more than 15 anthologies.

The 1960s and 1970s are known for the production of "new black poetry," but as the continued circulation of Baraka's two works suggests, the publication of dozens of anthologies during the time period meant that the era gave rise to reprinting new and old black poetry. Baraka's two poems appeared in collections with signature works by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Margaret Walker on the one hand, and Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti (then Don L. Lee), and Sonia Sanchez on the other.

Decades later, during the 1990s and early 21st century, when scholars and commentators wanted to cite Baraka's 1960s militancy, we had many options of poems, essays, plays, and performances to mention. Yet, we were often inclined to highlight his two poems from 1965. How could a reflection looking back on the most pervasive, potent, and consequential poems of the past 50 years overlook Baraka's "A Poem for Black Hearts" and "Black Art"?

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