Zero Hour and the Changing Same: Aesthetic Modernism and Black Nationalist Identity

⊙ Lauri Scheyer
Hunan Normal University

Abstract: What is the meaning of Zero Hour for African Americans? The Zero Hour of May 8, 1945 was a celebratory moment to mark "the victory of the cause of freedom," in the immortal words of Winston Churchill. But what could Zero Hour signify for African Americans who continued to encounter racist and discriminatory practices at the end of the war and into the present? The history of African Americans has been characterized by series of "victories for freedom," "new beginnings," "forward progress," and "breaks with the past." How many other Zero Hours can we identify in the history of Black people in the U.S.? Examining 2020's moment of pandemic and protests in relation to race and class, I ask what any Zero Hour means for African Americans who have encountered many promising milestones of liberation that fell short of the expected rights and rewards. Using literary examples including Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Ray Durem, Langston Hughes, Frederick Douglass, and Anne Spencer, I propose that African American history has been marked by a long line of Zero Hours that have indeed achieved progress yet never fully realized the goal of just and fair equality of treatment and opportunity.

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What Zero Hour?

The Zero Hour of May 8, 1945 has been viewed as a military and ethical break with the past and a new beginning in "the victory of the cause of freedom," in the words of Winston Churchill. But what can Zero Hour mean for African Americans, whose freedom was still in question at that historical moment, and in fact, remains in question in the present? We face a series of questions relating to the concept of Zero Hour that echo the tone and content of Frederick Douglass's famous

July 5, 1852 oration, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," which uses a self-described tone of "scorching irony" to emphasize an engrained perspective of "self" and "other" in U.S. history. Douglass's speech drums home the pronouns "you" and "yours" to show how "your fight" for "your freedom" has not been applied to African Americans: "This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn." Douglass's exhaustive summary of America's hypocrisy and criminal conduct towards African Americans ends by announcing that global changes have added a new level of external scrutiny to all nations: "No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world. . . . Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. . . . No abuse . . . can now hide itself from the all-pervading light" (web).

The end of World War II, nearly a century after Douglass's oration, was a period when the whole world's eyes were trained once again on racial persecution, oppression, and genocide, as indeed they are today. "The changing same," probably Amiri Baraka's most famous phrase, describes the recurrent moments of progress and setback toward the goal of racial equality. The Zero Hour was one such "changing same" moment for African Americans: as only one Zero Hour in a long sequence, it was a different Zero Hour than the one celebrated internationally to mark the triumph of freedom over fascist oppression. Instead, this moment represented a far more ambiguous signpost for African Americans. May 8, 1945 did indeed indicate significant progress in racial parity over the past century while simultaneously placing into high relief the long road ahead still to be traveled: widespread abuses and intolerable inequities were yet to be resolved. The explosion of protests in the 1960s and 1970s was inevitable and would have been better understood and predicted if there had been greater general awareness of literary and political expressions by African Americans from the interwar years between the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement era. Instead, the decades of the 1930s through the 1950s remain a relative vacuum when compared to the knowledge, interest, and scholarship on the decades that open and close the twentieth century. The New Negro Renaissance remains the most studied and famous period of African American literature, commonly regarded as the "first flowering" of African American writing and culture. This has reinforced images of the genteel aesthetic polish of the best-known poets such as Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, an impression that has resulted in suppressing and ignoring more political voices in the following decades.

What is the meaning of any Zero Hour for African Americans? Questions continue in 2020, where progress surely has been made from the antebellum speech of Douglass, who even during the era of slavery acknowledges some positive changes, albeit too few, too slowly, and too temporarily. The history of African Americans has been characterized by series of "victories for freedom," "new beginnings," "forward progress," and "breaks with the past." What other Zero Hours can we identify in the history of Black people in the U.S.? The present stands in a long line of Zero Hours for African American rights, among them Emancipation, Reconstruction, Red Summer, Civil Rights, Voter Rights, Black Arts, Black Lives Matter, and now the ongoing national protests and outcry over the murder of George Floyd. Countless African American writers and philosophers, from the poets of the spirituals to Douglass to Paul Robeson, have expressed frustration over "how much longer will we have to wait" for freedom—in a recurrent pattern of deferral and denial, in other words, Baraka's "the changing same."

In the middle of a still-uncontained pandemic, African Americans and members of other minorities have been disproportionately represented on "the front lines" of service. The use of military terminology and metaphors has been often applied and is wholly appropriate. Phrases have daily appeared in the news such as "being on the front-line," "warriors in this battle," "heroes," and "winning the war against this virus." Other commonly appearing phrases are "we are all united in fighting this virus," yet that cry of unity has demonstrably been untrue. Concurrently with the pandemic—and brought to light by COVID-19—America is dealing with unresolved and ongoing racism that has been visibly manifested in numerous widely publicized cases of brutality and discriminatory practices by the police. The murder of George Floyd may well represent a Zero Hour following a sequence of questionable deaths, imprisonments, and detainments of African Americans in recent memory, from Oscar Grant to Ahmaud Arbery.

The correlation of the inequities and injustices of the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of U.S. race relations has been made explicit. Ben Crump, the lead lawyer representing the family of George Floyd, referred to "the pandemic of racism." Concerns have been raised about public protests when the virus is not yet contained, yet racism is at (yet another) such a point of intolerability that U.S. citizens have chosen to take this risk of potential exposure. The conflation of the pandemic and racism has been made explicit in signs of protesters which read "Racism is a virus too." The "warriors" living in the closest quarters where COVID-19 is most likely to spread, who take public transportation and who continue to work at a wide variety of "essential jobs" instead of sheltering in place: those who have contracted and died from this virus are disproportionately people of color and shift workers who cannot perform their jobs in the safety of their homes, and often are members of minority populations.

On June 3, 2020, New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees reiterated his previously stated disapproval of athletes who kneel during the national anthem to express their intolerance of racial oppression. In Brees's mind, the kneeling indicates "disrespect for America and its flag," which he explicitly linked to World War II: "What I see or what I feel when the national anthem is played and when I look at the flag of the United States, I envisioned my two grandfathers, who fought for this country during World War II, one in the army and one in the marine corps, both risking their lives to protect their country and to try to make our country and this world a better place" (qtd. in Martinez web). Journalist Jeremiah Martinez points out Brees's egregious oversight of Black war heroes who fought the same fight as his grandfathers but with ironically different treatment and consequences after returning home: "I want to remind people that there were African American soldiers that fought alongside Brees' grandfathers. When those same black WWII veterans returned home, they were denied benefits from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, which is commonly known as the G.I Bill" (web). As Martinez points out, unlike white soldiers who were embraced and rewarded by society, African American veterans were deprived of the privileges of the G.I. Bill, including education and housing. The disappointed promises are nothing new. We find the same outcry in historical records from Black Revolutionary War veterans who believed they were fighting for enfranchisement and respect for their children only to discover that "liberation" didn't apply to them. Douglass calls out the irony and hypocrisy of a celebration of freedom in a nation that continues to systematically tolerate the deprivation of that right to African Americans.

While the New Negro Renaissance is often perceived as a period of political quietude, we must recall that by the early 1920s, Marcus Garvey and his Black nationalist organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.), reportedly established seven hundred branches in 38 states, which then was considered to be the largest organized African American mass movement (though the earlier demand for abolition can certainly be described as one). Garvey and the U.N.I.A. were strongly influenced by the earlier example and ideas of Martin R. Delaney, whose promotion of African return and development of a pan-African nation also influenced a major and too often overlooked poet, James Monroe Whitfield. U.N.I.A.'s message of transnational pan-African diasporic consciousness, Black national identity, and the right of return instigated a series of evolving and diversifying dialogues in the U.S. and internationally through the era of World War II and past the Zero Hour.

This emergent but as yet unrealized politics was a social context for African Americans at the Zero Hour and led directly to the nationalist and separatist sensibility of the Black Arts Movement, including its stress on the fusion of art and politics. From the 1920s to the 1970s—the decades surrounding the Zero Hour—there was a spiraling and connected series of movements and moments of competing, alternating, correlating, and vacillating patterns of universalism and isolation in conceptions, circumstances of literary publication and dissemination, and relevant artistic and cultural products under the conceptual and ethical auspices referred to as pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism, Negritude, Black diasporic consciousness, liberation theology, Black nationalism, and other relevant political affiliations and oppositions. We would benefit from additional studies that recognize the relationships among these philosophies and related aesthetic practices in the decades both before and after World War II.[1]

By 1945, the year of the Zero Hour, more than a million African Americans had served with distinction in World War II in segregated units of the U.S. military, including such elite groups as the Tuskegee Airmen. It is a widely acknowledged irony that the fight continued for Civil Rights on the home front while these soldiers risked their lives to represent America abroad. Extending the practices of racial separation in civilian life, the U.S. Armed Forces did not adopt a policy of integration until 1948. While serving in Europe and the South Pacific, African Americans in the military were exposed to international standards and influences, while also spreading African American culture and arts. At the end of World War II, looking ahead to the decades to follow, we find reasons for protest still festering, including the obvious context and aftermath of that war: the fight for liberty and justice, the rallying cry of World War II, was not universal when it came to African Americans.

In a poem using this theme from *A Street in Bronzeville*, Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000) writes in "Negro Hero" from the perspective of an African American World War II veteran commenting on the racially discriminatory practices of American society: "They are not concerned that it was hardly The Enemy / my fight was against / But them." For African Americans, the fight for democracy abroad may have been less urgent than the fight against racism at home.[2]

A lesser known poet deserving of greater attention, Ray Durem (1915–1963) serves as an important hinge between the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts era. Durem fought in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and is a precursor of the Black Arts Movement for his insistence, from 1950 onward, that there can be no separation between art and politics for African American artists. In a series of poems addressed to "Joe" from his only collection *Take*

No Prisoners (posthumously published in 1972, but mainly consisting of poems written in the 1950s), Durem employs his signature laconic irony in hyperbolically extending the logical consequences of racism in America. In "White People Got Trouble, Too," Durem speculates with faux sympathy on a white G.I. who is killed when sent to serve in Africa during World War II. The poem opens with apparent consolation in the lines, "You suffered a lot with the depression / and the recession— / then came the war." In an ironic twist, the addressee is sent "way off to Africa, / where they left your bones to rot in the sun." With a trickster's retribution, Durem closes with lines that echo in reverse the ancestral legacy evoked by Brees: "did you know / that your grandfather brought mine / from Africa, long ago? / One tooth for one tooth. / Mark it paid" (13).

Durem's poem "Sympathy," from the same volume, presents another such ironic reversal set just after the Zero Hour in discussing the atom bomb and whether Black society will once again be victimized by white "progress." Instead, Durem parodically suggests that African Americans could finally benefit from practices of segregation and "whites only" signs: "but with that atom bomb, Joe / looks like I'm gonna die with you! // What do you think, is it too late / to make that A-bomb segregate? // One little change would suit me fine: / just add a big 'White Only' sign" (7). Another poem, "The Saddest Tears," describes the "brown girl's tears" over the probable fate of her son: "kill him in Korea, / make him a waiter with Ph.D." (12). In "To the Pale Poets," we read: "There is a black boy, blacker still from death, / face down in the cold Korean mud. / Come with your effervescent jive, / explain to him why he ain't alive" (18). Durem's ironic treatment of African American soldiers in a conflict between serving the nation and being denied the full rights of citizenship is a central theme of this underrecognized military veteran poet.

Just prior to the Zero Hour were the Harlem Riots of 1943. On August 1, a uniformed African American soldier named Robert Bandy, in New York with his mother, attempted to assist an African American woman named Marjorie Polite in an altercation she was having with a white police officer named James Collins, who then shot and wounded Bandy. In the preface to his only poetry collection *Personals* (1972), Arna Bontemps (1902–1973), another important bridge between the New Negro Renaissance and Zero Hour, recalls the instigating event: "A Negro soldier was shot and wounded slightly when he attempted to take the part of a Harlem *poulet* in an altercation with a white policeman in the lobby of a small hotel. . . . At first it seemed that the mad rage which followed this incident in Harlem was a protest and a reaction against the true report of kicking around, sometimes the killing, of colored soldiers in the South" (8). The conditions identified by Brooks in 1945 are also articulated by Bontemps, who connects the Harlem Riots with the "problem of race relations in America as it sees fit, irrespective of the interests of the nation as whole—to maintain its caste *mores*, as a leading editor asserted during World War II, in defiance, if necessary, of all the allied and axis armies" (9).

In another pre–Zero Hour incident, a riot on June 15, 1943 by thousands of white residents in Beaumont, Texas destroyed Black businesses after a white woman claimed without proof that she had been raped by a Black man. Weeks later, on June 29, another major riot occurred in Detroit, where police killed seventeen Black people, which was indisputably correlated with the larger issue of white resistance to integration. In his poem "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943," Langston Hughes connects these two events to the hypocrisy of the American fight for democracy abroad while perpetuating racist

practices at home. Hughes importantly points out that conditions for African Americans were the same before and after World War II: "You jim crowed me / Before hitler rose to power— / And you're still jim crowing me / Right now, this very hour. / Yet you say we're fighting / For democracy. / Then why don't democracy / Include me?" (280).

The prominence of African Americans honorably representing the U.S. in World War II, and the ensuing cultural exchange, helped trigger an explosion of African American poetry starting in approximately 1945. But politically outspoken writers in the 1930s to the 1950s, such as Durem, Samuel Allen, Conrad Kent Rivers, Frank Horne, and Waring Cuney, whose words could have served as harbingers of what was to come, were overlooked. Pernicious discrimination resulted in narrow perceptions of mid-century African American writing and quashed opportunities to publish and distribute literature associated with protest and outrage. The landmark African American literature anthology *The Negro Caravan* (1941) put it succinctly: "Negro poets have concentrated upon protest poetry more than upon poetry of interpretation and illumination, but Negro poets have often had more to protest than others" (qtd. in Ramey 172).

While there is extensive material addressing the tumultuous sociopolitical context of the postwar years in the struggle for equality, and the slow dismantling of Jim Crow legislation, this earlier period of militancy, unheard at Zero Hour, needs to be brought more fully to light. Post–Zero Hour, African American writing clearly reflects the lingering evils of bigotry, the power and agony of the Civil Rights Movement, the fight for educational and employment parity, and the demand for freedom and equal opportunity: one Zero Hour after another, perhaps, but also reflecting "the changing same."

Baraka's Zero Hour

I will now move from the focal point of 1945 to an account that bridges the New Negro Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement.[3] How and why did the mid-century become such a lacuna in knowledge of African American literature when it is bracketed by the two most renowned periods of the entire genre? How might attention to the interwar period help illuminate the continuities of this tradition by understanding the correlation between these historical moments? I propose we examine two exemplary writers whose best-known works bookend the Zero Hour: Anne Spencer and Amiri Baraka. By understanding their connections rather than their separation, we can see how the Zero Hour had a very different meaning for African American culture. Rather than a turning point or shift, we see its translucence as a continuing signal of long-standing injustice coupled with progressive literary evolution.

Baraka built on the historical tactics of African American literature in his activist and politically instrumental view of poetry and poetics, especially after his transformative visit to Cuba in 1960, which he called "a turning point in my life" (163; Jones 11-62). According to Baraka, "I was never the same again. The dynamic of the revolution had touched me" (165). Prior to that trip, he was deeply involved with the jazz scene, wrote from a racially conscious perspective, befriended and worked with Black cultural figures, and even participated organizationally in publications and activities to

promote Black revolution (160-163). Yet, despite his earlier interest and involvement in revolutionary causes, organizations, and issues of Black identity, he credits the exposure to Cuba with definitively and permanently transforming his life and ideas. Although he worked organizationally in nationalist movements before his trip, Baraka claims he separated his ideas about poetry from politics until then. His consciousness of African American writing as a force of political agency, and his position within this framework, had not yet fully emerged until this experience. Afterwards, his notions of the aesthetic became fused with the political and public, including the use of downtown spaces and practices incorporating performance, poetry, music, and painting that were inherently valuable and sites of social experiment: "In all my poetry which comes out of this period there is the ongoing and underlying contention and struggle between myself and 'them' that poetry and politics, art and politics, were not mutually exclusive" (167).

Though his tactics were widely regarded as revolutionary, after his carefully calculated move to Harlem, he strategically and consciously applied two defining characteristics of the Black literary and cultural tradition to the contemporaneous moment: art as political action for the communal benefit and as a performative multimodal space through urban-centered community activities. By alluding in his aesthetic ethos of the 1960s to past practices and conditions, he became an inspiration for many African American poets who had been following diverse stylistic paths. In a long career marked by a succession of iterations and impacts, the era associated with the Black Arts Movement represented a watershed in Baraka's personal and professional life. In this period, he emerged more prominently as an instigator of activist poetics among Black poets and a force to increase African American representation in American poetry.

In *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, Baraka thoroughly documented his own origin story as an African American poet with certain "natural proclivities" in a white-oriented society. Early on, he recognized that "a political consciousness was lurking" beneath his interest in art and culture. Influenced by underrecognized and underappreciated (to this day) African American contemporaries like Allen Polite and A. B. Spellman, he was also "open" to "white poets of all faiths and flags," including the "schools" of the Beats, San Francisco Renaissance, Black Mountain, and New York (233). "Whitman and Williams and Pound and Apollinaire and the Surrealists were our prophets," he recalled, enumerating the breadth and depth of his influences at the time (234). In contrast with his own receptivity to everything that was interesting in aesthetic expression, Baraka was vocal about the absence of reciprocal enthusiasm among white poets and publishers towards a panoply of African American writings. In his essay "Tokenism: 300 Years for Five Cents," Baraka (then Jones) defined "tokenism" as "the setting up of social stalemates or the extension of a meager privilege to some few 'selected' Negroes in order that a semblance of compromise or 'progress,' or a lessening in racial repression might seem to be achieved" (Jones 73).[4] He observed the prevailing climate of racism where he was often the sole black figure to be included in publications, asking "What had happened to the blacks" and "How is it that there's only one colored guy?" (Baraka 231). Regardless of Baraka's token inclusion, most collections of Anglo-American poetry maintained a pattern of racial segregation following the Zero Hour through the 1960s and 1970s. The slow but appreciable shift to new practices of racially diverse representation are in no small part the result of Baraka's adamant pursuit of aesthetic and stylistic justice.[5]

Two examples demonstrate his powerful influence in the 1960s as Baraka melded literature and politics to reveal the abiding racism that could no longer be pushed to the future to resolve. A key moment serving retrospectively as a crucial link joining the "New American Poetry" and "African American poetry" was Baraka's engagement with Cuba at this pivotal time in his life and career. The record of the spirited interchange between Baraka and Lawrence Ferlinghetti firmly displays the way Baraka served as a locus to bring together the "circle of white poets" (231) and African American traditions by connecting social responsibility with the performance and practice of aesthetic principles. In a mutually impassioned and uncompromising exchange of letters and telegrams between Baraka and Ferlinghetti starting on May 2, 1961, Baraka requested that Ferlinghetti "send names of artists and writers to be used on declaration condemning intervention in Cuba." It was explicit that the protest involved "no endorsement of Fidel, simply protest against intervention." Although the issue was transnational, Baraka's public image among literary conservatives as a hot-headed and outspoken firebrand who had been transformed into a radical America-hating ideologue was inevitably impacted by his race and perceptions of him as a Black poet. Although always identified with countercultural practices and forces, Ferlinghetti—whose first poetry collection, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, is a much-beloved best-selling world classic—has not generally been viewed as an equally "dangerous" social or political threat in the way Baraka has been construed in some quarters. Although Ferlinghetti was arrested on charges of disseminating obscene literature for publishing Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, the judge rejected the charge that this poem was obscene. In contrast, when Baraka was arrested on what appears to be trumped-up charges of weapons possession (discussed later in this essay), the judge used a poem by Baraka as damning evidence against his character.

Indicating the wide and diverse networks of affiliations inhabited by Baraka, the hand-written names "not sent in" on his first telegram to Ferlinghetti included (in addition to Ferlinghetti) Paul Blackburn, David Meltzer, Pierre Delattre, Kirby Doyle, and Robert Duncan. Ferlinghetti quickly replied in his own telegram, also dated May 2, 1961, that "many writers will sign" but requested to see the wording of the declaration, and to know who sponsored it and where it was proposed to be published. Jones explained it was sponsored by Casa de la Americas in Havana and would be published in *Kulchur* and "various Cuban periodicals." Ferlinghetti replied that "poets here strongly oppose any intervention in Cuba by any government" but refused to sign the declaration because it was sponsored by a Cuban organization "which would invalidate their protest." Ferlinghetti did tell Baraka that his telegrams could be published in *Kulchur*, indicating he acquiesced to Baraka's insistence on fusing art, politics, ethics, and social action.

For Baraka, this disappointing gesture in the absence of signatures and explicit endorsement was not enough. His scorching reply, which appears to have ended the exchange, was that the failure of action by Ferlinghetti and others was "a blatant example of soft headed [*sic*] liberalism. You people play radical but still think this country is 'well meaning.' Adlai is dead. I hope its [*sic*] just the weather. Salud." The tone of moral chiding in Baraka's correspondence had its antecedents in such poems as "America" by James Monroe Whitfield and "To the White People of America" by Joshua McCarter Simpson in chastising white liberal hypocrisy and equivocation. We find the same charges against Ferlinghetti in Durem's blistering poem "The Inverted Square: A Problem in Social Geometry (for Ferlinghetti)" (undated, c. 1955, and certainly before Baraka's interchange), which opens: "I have seen

the smallest minds of my generation / assume the world ends at Ellis Island." It continues "Man, there were no hypes at Stalingrad / and Malcolm X is real! / Spare us the cavils of the nihilistic beats / who criticize the cavities and contours of their nest / but never leave it" (20). Baraka may not have invented protest poetry, but he used the examples of his predecessors—including the anonymous authors of spirituals, the first African American political poems—to make it impossible for Black solidarity and resistance to be ignored any longer on either a national or international stage, as Douglass had predicted.

The Black Arts era is often misperceived as the first major movement—even an unprecedented period—of African American protest poetry, but the history goes back to the roots of this genre which historically combined lyricism and language for activist and political purposes. This exchange of Baraka with Ferlinghetti, where Baraka deliberately sought to engage the support of poets across color lines for a class- and race-based cause, is consistent with the revolutionary tradition in African American poetry from its origins in spirituals and antebellum abolitionist poetry. Baraka was a linchpin and figurehead who reconnected African American poetry to its origins in protesting injustice, a practice which dated to the literary assaults against American prejudice and cruelty by George Moses Horton and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. Baraka's words and actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis echoed the positioning of African American poetry in direct and satirical dialogue with prideful American nationalistic poetry and poetics, in good company with the counter-songs and parodies of national anthems by Alfred Gibbs Campbell and Joshua McCarter Simpson. Ultimately, Baraka's efforts in international political intervention through the vehicle of poetry, and his own writing that ultimately ensued from his Cuban encounter, are emphatic reminders that politics and poetry have always been intertwined in African American literature.

After examining this example of Baraka's interactions with white poetry culture in the 1960s through his exchange with Ferlinghetti, a second indicates Baraka's influence on the community of African American poets. The renowned and respected poet Anne Spencer, who is sufficiently prominent that she was selected to be honored with a U.S. postage stamp, seems an unlikely author to be associated with Baraka or the genre of political poetry. Eternally frozen in time in the eyes of readers as "one of the youngest women Harlem Renaissance poets," Spencer, born in 1882, has been widely stereotyped as the reclusive poet who retreated from publishing and the public eye to tend to her Lynchburg, Virginia garden and work as a librarian. Critics have often concluded, illogically, that while she may have held NAACP meetings in her home and been an outspoken Civil Rights activist, she scrupulously kept her poetry and politics separate. The justifications for insisting on Spencer's compartmentalization range from observations of her demure character to commentary about the climate of the New Negro Renaissance, where women had to toe a careful line to avoid social offence. Widespread consensus among critics from Robert Thomas Kerlin to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has long been that Spencer's poetry remains deliberately devoid of controversial topics such as racial or gender discrimination and oppression.[6] Cheryl A. Wall claims that "in her poetry Spencer often invents a world in which racism and sexism do not exist" (86). Spencer has been judged exclusively for her handful of "some thirty" published poems which were almost all written in her young adulthood during the New Negro Renaissance. Many are conventionally Christian in themes and images and written in rhymed couplets.[7] What is less well known is that she died in 1975 and continued writing

until the end of her life. Her published poems represent only a tiny percentage of her *oeuvre*, the great majority of which remains accessible in manuscript in Special Collections at the University of Virginia Library.

We experience a very different Spencer than her distorted and dated image by reading a pair of unpublished poems likely to have been written in 1968, "LeRoi Meets Lincoln" and "When Abraham Lincoln Met Leroy Jones."[8] Clearly working a theme, the two poems written in his honor record Spencer's powerful emotional reaction to Baraka's personal and artistic model and circumstances. Her writing was never as free of politics as it has been represented, but these poems, stylistically unique in her archive, represent a watershed. Baraka's example may have served as a kind of Zero Hour moment for Spencer in her need to speak out directly against injustice at this late point in her life. The poems are presented here in the order in which they seem to have been written, with the first as a possible "study" for the second. It is common in her later unpublished writings for Spencer to work a theme using variant forms and perspectives, and this pair appears to fall into that pattern. Although these poems are different in many ways from her published poems, they reflect the natural maturation and evolution of a poet who lived and experienced several decades since her youth during the New Negro Renaissance. Her political activism during those intervening years is well established though not seen as relevant to her "raceless" poetry. That oversight is partially understandable because her later poems (in fact, the great majority of her poems) remain unpublished, but the political dimension of her published works too often has been ignored. From the time of her early appearances in the 1920s in magazines such as *Opportunity* and anthologies such as Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1922), Spencer mentions having written more than a thousand poems although fifty or fewer have been identified by scholars. Based on her correspondence and interviews, Spencer tended to distrust publishers and never showed much interest in publication: writing and creative acts motivated her. It's a well-known story coming directly from Spencer that she probably would never have published had it not been for the insistent persuasiveness of her dear friend James Weldon Johnson.

Although the combination of aesthetics and politics in Spencer's poetry has been widely disregarded, astute scholars such as Evie Shockley have noted her race consciousness and double voicing even in her New Negro Renaissance poems (121-144). But intensified from this dimension early on, there is still a notable shift in the two poems inspired by and dedicated to Baraka, who was obviously an energizing force emotionally, politically, and aesthetically for this then-83-year old poet. Spencer has long been (wrongly) stylistically associated with a late Victorian sensibility evolving into the gnomic imagery of modernism. The correlations between the New Negro Renaissance and Black Arts Movement have led to these two periods being called "two renaissances." The example of Spencer shows the prominence of nationalist politics joined to aesthetic expression in both periods. The Baraka poems in their formal looseness, spirit of direct witness, and feminist perspective call for a rethinking of the *oeuvre* of Spencer and her literary identity. Important in her own right, Spencer's example also indicates the diversity of African American poets inspired by Baraka in the 1960s, who showed it was not tenable to uphold a separation between art and action.

The poem in manuscript titled "LeRoi Meets Lincoln" is subtitled "2-14," Valentine's Day:

brightly clad figures walk down the
steps of the building past Lincoln,
I was attracted to them because of the
way the wind was blowing the cotton
garments and it was cold. I then realized
they were Leroy Jones and his wife in African dress.
They stopped and she took the baby from
him so that they could wrap him in
her striped shawl and they walked on purple,
yellow, green, orange and brown waving
in the wind. He is appealing from a
conviction of 3 to 5 years in the State Prison
for having carried a weapon in his car
during the riots last summer. He says
the police stopped his car and while he was
being searched planted the gun in his car.
At the time he was being sentenced last
month the Judge read some of Jones poems,
to those present in the courtroom, commenting
that the poems were revolutionary in content—
thereupon a melee, a free for all broke off
the sentencing. Jones was taken to State
Prison where he spent one night and day
And was then placed on bail pending
his appeal. (n.p.)

Spencer's archive is idiosyncratic for containing a wide variety of mostly unpublished writing, much of which is in draft and manuscript form.[9] She experimented widely with literary styles and forms and often seemed to work a theme using various genres and perspectives. Her archive contains political writings, letters, lists, and records, but her literary writing has a different affect and shape. For her musings, journal entries, unsent draft letters, political statements and plans, and informational writings, Spencer does not use lineation or other poetic devices such as imagery or symbols. She generally names a specific recipient or organization and has an apparent purpose or occasion in mind. The two pieces for Baraka, open as their forms appear to be, are unquestionably intended as poems—bold poems at that—from a writer who was well aware of her reputation for avoiding sensitive topics.

In this deeply affecting poem, we find surprising new dimensions of Spencer in an unexpectedly contemporary style where her strong political stance is conveyed unmistakably yet with subtlety. The occasion of the poem is Baraka's 1967 arrest on the spurious charge of possessing two weapons. The narrative follows Spencer's surprise sighting of Baraka and his family. Her first-hand encounter is superimposed over public knowledge of his case and court hearing, including the judge's expurgated

reading of the poem "Black People" to "show that I was guilty," in the words of Baraka (262 ff.). The statue of Lincoln—savior to African Americans—appears in this poem as inert and unresponsive, implicitly but fruitlessly called on by the speaker to bear witness and act, echoing Baraka's call to Ferlinghetti and other white poets during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The natural flow of diction and easy lineation evoke a found poem. Spencer's act of witnessing for injustice is implied more than stated, as she tenderly foregrounds the reality of Jones as a human being, husband, and father. The mention of "his wife in African dress" makes explicit Spencer's concern for the twinned issues of race and sex in a poet who has been accused of avoiding both topics.

This poem opens mid-observation with the lower-case opening word "brightly," and continues to describe Baraka and his family as an explosion of vivid color against the otherwise nondescript background. Spencer employs uncharacteristically conversational diction to recite a first-person narrative. "I was attracted to them" and "it was cold" suggest a personal level of engagement though from a distance. The chill in the air which the poet shares with the figures she observes from afar—and to whom she does not speak—evoke pity and catharsis, but the encounter was not mutual. The speaker does not directly engage with the poet, shown isolated with his family, but instead remains a Wordsworthian observer of this scene, which ironically takes place on Valentine's Day. The speaker responds with flesh-and-blood empathy, but the figure of Lincoln is merely a statue, an inanimate symbol of the unkept promises and racial oppression of the American legal system, which is manifested toward Jones in the judge's personal, legal, political, and aesthetic disrespect. A famously reserved and fastidious poet, it is certain that Spencer was profoundly moved both by the sighting of Baraka with his family and his legal treatment, which she carefully documents in poetic form. We note the absence of rhyme, and her customary rigidity of stanzas is rejected in favor of only one natural break of an indented line as the poem moves into the future: "At the time he was being sentenced last." The enjambment implies her prophetic expectation that the experiences of his "being sentenced" as a wrongful target were likely to recur ("the changing same").

Spencer's second poem to Baraka, potentially an unfinished draft, serves as a presumed counterpart to the first and is titled "When Abraham Lincoln Met Leroy Jones":

> Don't let the cliché
> people fool you
> What we do not know
> hurts:
> The white marble
> Court House is the
> only handsome building
> There (maybe, I
> know, a lot changed,
> most of them wrong)
>
> (n.p.)

Also combining poetry and politics, this poem as much as its counterpart marks a bold departure

from Spencer's published poems. Both demand we rethink her lifelong poetic output and Baraka's impact on a broad swath of African American poets. In the first poem, LeRoi passively meets Lincoln, but in the second, Lincoln is forced to be actively confronted by Leroy (the use of both "Leroy" and "LeRoi" in the first poem and only "Leroy" in the second poem may be inadvertent). The dramatic shift is important. More a poem of political commentary than a lyrical narrative, "When Abraham Lincoln Met Leroy Jones" even more aggressively calls Lincoln to task than in the first poem rather than allowing him to be an inert symbolic bystander. One poem obviously was not enough for Spencer in giving poetic tribute to Baraka as a rare figure in her opus to be afforded two dedicated poems.

While this cryptic and experimental poem is perhaps an abandoned or at least incomplete draft or fragment, several intriguing interpretations are possible. It is suggestively knowing about power dynamics yet subtly indirect in avoiding polemics. It opens with chiding not to be fooled by popular beliefs. The "cliché people" who resort to facile maxims would say, "What we don't know can't hurt us." In contrast, the poet writes, "What we do not know / hurts." The grand "white marble Court House" is emblematic of white male authority. The pomp of this seat of legal power is magnified by the capital letters. It is described as white and by the typically masculine and anthropomorphized adjective "handsome." The scene evokes urban blight with only one impressive building as a showcase, implying that its surroundings are overlooked. It opens with the warning "don't get fooled" and ends by stating there have been a lot of wrong "changes." In a poem written for Baraka, and under the circumstances of his suspicious charges and arrest, it is impossible not to read this poem as a testament to "the changing same."

Baraka was an energizing force for many African American poets whose aesthetics and politics previously had been kept or at least viewed as separate entities. He had enormous influence on surprisingly varied African American poets not typically associated with the Black Arts Movement or practicing a poetics of political witness and activism, as in the example of Spencer. Long perceived as a poet whose writing avoided issues of race, these poems written in her final years defy that stereotype. Here is evidence that Baraka triggered a political response even in the writing of a poet said to write "raceless poetry," as she was described in *The New Negro Renaissance* (1975), published during the Black Arts Movement.

Baraka as a monumental postmodern figure was a standard bearer for the continuously confrontational, oppositional, and righteous history of African American poetry that addresses social issues, reveals the truthful realities of Black life in America, adapts assertively to changing times and situations, contains blazingly personal honesty and outrage against lies and bad faith, devotedly preserves consciousness of African origins, comments on African American communal needs and issues, and insists on being performed and heard inside—not on the outskirts—of the American political and literary context. The inextricable relationship between art, action, and politics that Baraka relentlessly modeled began to slowly infuse other schools of American writing. African American voices are increasingly perceived as essential to the American canon. Baraka ignited a spirit of political agency in a diverse range of African American poets, including those who may have radically differed from his literary or personal style. The course of both the African American and American literary traditions has been liberated as a result of Baraka's own transformations in the 1960s and

after. We can see properly illuminated how Baraka continues the revolutionary statements and styles of earlier African American writers like George Moses Horton. Baraka also ignited purposeful and focused rage and action during the Black Arts Movement in a poet like Anne Spencer, a figure with a vastly different literary style, from an older generation affiliated with the New Negro Renaissance. Through Baraka, we gain a more expansive and accurate perspective of the correspondences among Black and white politically engaged American poetry, which is too often segregated based on racial profiling of the authors.

Today we see the multiculturalism of protesters in the wake of George Floyd's murder, and it appears for the moment as if many members of America's diverse society might come together in united insistence that Black Lives Matter. There is far to go, but each of these Zero Hours for African Americans has left a lingering basis for hope and indications of progress. Through the examples of Baraka and Spencer, this vision of a sequence of Zero Hours as both substantive but not sufficient reconciles two seemingly opposed interpretations of African American historicism: that progress and "the changing same" can and do coexist.[10]

Note

1. Recommended resources on this and related topics include Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century*, New York UP, 2006; Anthony Dawahare, *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars: A New Pandora's Box*, UP of Mississippi, 2003; James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930–1946*, Oxford UP, 1999.
2. I discuss this poem and the situation of African Americans in military contexts in *History of African American Poetry*, pp. 168-173.
3. For more detailed analysis, see Ramey, "The Twentieth Century Renaissances," *History of African American Poetry*, chap. 4, pp. 125-193, which argues for more recognition of the patterns of stasis and progress that extended from the New Negro Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement.
4. I will consistently use "Amiri Baraka" as the author's name in this early period, even when he was writing and publishing using the name "LeRoi Jones."
5. Baraka's inclusion as the sole African American among forty-four poets in the landmark anthology *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, edited by Donald Allen, was likely what prompted Baraka to address head on the problem of tokenism. This volume itself was a kind of aesthetic Zero Hour in presenting a unified front of disenfranchised and countercultural voices, which made its absence of racial inclusion even more pronounced. Nonetheless, this oversight became a Zero Hour in Baraka's own emergence as a major commentator to Black and non-Black audiences. See Ramey, *History of African American Poetry*, pp. 7-8.
6. See the editorial introductions to the sections on Spencer in Robert Thomas Kerlin, *Negro Poets and Their Poems*, Associated Publishers, 1935; Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie Smith, editors, *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 3rd ed., vol. 1, Norton, 2014.
7. The best source currently for Spencer's published poetry remains J. Lee Greene, editor, *Time's Unfading Garden: Anne Spencer's Life and Poetry*, Louisiana State UP, 1977. A Collected Anne Spencer is a much-needed project, as these examples of her unpublished writing suggest.
8. Anne Spencer Collection, box-folder 17:30, 14 Feb. 1968.
9. See Carlyn Ferrari's essay "'Leventy-leven Bits Stuck in So Many Different Places': Anne Spencer's Audacious Eccentricity," *Her Unfading Garden: Critical Essays for Anne Spencer* (forthcoming), edited by Ferrari and Steven C. Tracy, U of Virginia P, for detailed insight on Spencer's archive and home.
10. I express my appreciation for assistance with archival materials in the Anne Spencer Collection to Special Collections

reference librarian Molly Schwartzburg in the University of Virginia Library, and for archival materials on Amiri Baraka to curator Scott Krafft and the staff of the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections in the Northwestern University Library.

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