3. Black Writers—Black or White Readers

Between August 5–9, 1964, at Asilomar, a conference camp on the forested shore of Monterey Bay, operated by the California State Parks under the auspices of the Letters and Science Extension, Special Programs of the University of California, and under the general management of Herbert Hill, Labor Secretary of the NAACP, there was held a conference on the Negro writer in the United States. About two hundred people attended as audience. There must have been some thirty representatives of the press and ten people gave speeches and led discussions—Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks, Horace Cayton, LeRoi Jones, Saunders Redding, Ossie Davis, Nat Hentoff, Harvey Swados, Robert Bone, Herbert Hill. James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were scheduled but cancelled their engagements. Juridically speaking, the affair was a summer-school course of the University of California. There were a few scholarships and the press representatives who paid only their board. Otherwise the audience paid one hundred dollars for tuition, board, and room.
The discussion leaders were transported across the country and were paid the usual fees for such appearances.

I have given you all these vital statistics because they are really more important than anything said at the conference. They are a most clear demonstration of what has become a characteristic social mechanism—the institutionalization of dissent and revolt. All of us with grey hair who were in this thing way back when can remember hitchhiking, riding freights, or struggling across the country in packed, periodically collapsing jalopies to meetings concerned with what on the face of it seemed to be the same problem. We slept on one another’s floors; we kept going through the day on coffee and donuts; we quarrelled violently about art and politics, form and content, and were buffeted on one side by the cops and on the other side by the Apparatchiks. Today, Malcolm X is invited to address executive seminars at Shangri-las nestled in the snow-clad Rockies. We are all indulged rebels if we are not allowed clowns. In fact, indulgence hastens to anticipate rebellion. All you have to do nowadays is begin to growl and somebody in a pin-stripe suit with real buttonholes on the cuffs shows up with a fist-full of foundation money.

Does it mean anything? Harlem gets catastrophically worse and worse by the second. Goon squads seize the Party of the Great Emancipator, while representatives of the State Department abuse the Black Bourgeoisie gathered in the conclave of the leading Negro Greek letter organization for their lack of militancy.

There was plenty of militancy at Asilomar. Meeting under the storm clouds of the nomination of Goldwater and the Harlem riots (which, as everybody was too excited to point out, have a very obvious connection), the conference kept turning into a civil-rights rally. Everybody tried to be as charismatic as he could be. This was not Herb Hill’s fault. NAACP or no, he tried to keep the people talking about writing. The only genuinely literary discussions occurred in brief interchanges after the papers on Ellison, Baldwin, Toomer, and Wright, and they bore a chilly resemblance to the battles of the Thirties over form and content and Art and the Masses. Just like the John Reed Club or the League of American Writers, most of the wrodage was spent offering up dense clouds of verbal incense on the altars of Our Great Writers, a commendable but unilluminating ritual.

Stars of the show were LeRoi Jones, Horace Cayton, and Ossie Davis. True, they talked about the problems of the Negro writer, but in general terms of moral exhortation. I have great respect for all three of these men. I know that they are, in fact, concerned with all sorts of concrete problems and their work is much broader and deeper and at the same time more pointed than propaganda and protest literature, but that was not the effect of their talks. Partly, this was due to audience response and speaker projection. You put 250 Negroes and whites together in an auditorium today and you get a civil-rights rally, willy-nilly. The three programs that raised a genuine literary response from the audience were the poetry readings by Gwendolyn Brooks and LeRoi Jones and Arna Bontemps’ talk on Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance. Gwendolyn Brooks’ encores were a revelation to the whites in the audience. People obviously knew her work by heart and called again and again for one favorite poem after another. LeRoi Jones stands at the opposite pole of American literature and Negro life, yet the audience was at least as attentive and a number (that surprised even me) requested favorite poems. More remarkable, any attempt to create a literary antagonism or schism between Miss Brooks and Mr. Jones was fiercely resisted by ordinary people in the audience. This was not just “defending our own.” It revealed a degree of understanding of how poetry works that would be unlikely in an all-white audience.

More surprising was the response, especially on the part of young people and especially the more militant and even hostile ones, to Arna Bontemps’ talk. When he finished a forest of hands went up. Everybody wanted to know more about the legendary figures of Harlem’s golden age and everybody wanted to discuss the spiritual and literary problems of a very great writer, almost certainly the greatest Negro writer up to this time, who had, for religious mystical reasons, rather than racial ones, long ago renounced both his race and literature. Most of them had never heard of him, but they certainly wanted to hear more. And I,
production, so to speak, and usually most inconspicuous. I think they enjoyed themselves. It's always nice to meet a lot of people in the flesh you've only read about. In fact, it can be quite educative. I don't think they were swept off their feet.

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