
THE NEW BLACK AESTHETIC

By Trey Ellis

While the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. . . . And this tale, according to that face, that body, those strong hands on those strings, has another aspect in every country, and a new depth in every generation.

—James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket*

They have recently reopened a wing of huge Junior's Restaurant in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, just so Spike Lee can talk in peace. Though some may say he looks like a black Woody Allen, he's got the mouth of a filmmaking Cassius Clay. "People aren't going to see your shit just because you're black. People didn't go see *Native Son*. I didn't think they should see *The Color Purple* and any black person who saw *Soul Man* should have been shot." I admit I was curious, so I rented *Soul Man* just last week. He shrugs. "Black people are the greatest artists on this earth, probably because we're the first people on the earth. White people know that . . . [but] I still can't catch a cab. Ask any black man. Bill Cosby couldn't catch a cab if he wanted to. They ain't stopping for him."

A few days later, on the other coast, another interview, a little different. While Mr. Lee looks meek but talks strong, I am scared of entering this old Los Angelino theater where a black rock group that tosses dead fish onto its audience and once rear-projected a porno film of an oceanically fat black woman having sex with two white men during the song "Cholly" ("I love ya Cholly with your big fat body/Oh oh golly Cholly you're just chubby wubbly wobbly") is grinding out material for their third album (*Truth & Soul*, Columbia). Today's the 22nd birthday of Fishbone's oldest member and its namesake, drummer "Fish" Fisher, so the band isn't getting a lot of work done. Guitarist "Special K" Kendall Jones swings a half-full bottle of tequila toward me and everybody stops to watch me drink. Am I just imagining Fish's drum roll? Oh how I'd love to be able to chug the booze, smear my mouth with the back of my hand and belch, thus making these mean-looking black punks cheer and let fly guitar chord bursts like rounds from Zapata's *pistoles*. But I'm not about to throw up my magazine expense-account lunch, black male bonding ritual or no. However, they don't mind. The band members just smile and introduce themselves as they warmly shake my hand. Cocky, black West Coast Ska/punk/funkers meet buppie East Coast novelist. I guess Spike Lee is culturally somewhere in between.

Yet we all share a lot more than just skin color. Lee, Fishbone, and I, along with the battalions of other young black artists I run into more and more frequently, all grew up feeling misunderstood by both the black worlds and the white. Alienated (junior) intellectuals, we are the more and more young blacks getting back into jazz and the blues; the only ones you see at punk concerts; the ones in the bookstore wearing little, round glasses and short, neat dreads; some of the only blacks who admit liking both Jim and Toni Morrison. Eddie Murphy, Prince, and the Marsalis brothers are just the initial shock troops because now, in New York's East Village, in Brooklyn's Fort Greene, in Los Angeles, and in Harlem, all of us under thirty only ones are coming together like so many twins separated at birth—thrilled, soothed, and strengthened in being finally reunited.

Out of this ferment will emerge something new. It reminds me of early bebop. Maybe this will spill into politics.

—novelist Ishmael Reed

I now know that I'm not the only black person who sees the black aesthetic as much more than just Africa and jazz. Finally finding a large body of the like-minded armors me with the nearly undampenable enthusiasm of the born again. And my friends and I—a minority's minority mushrooming with the current black bourgeoisie boom—have inherited an open-ended New Black Aesthetic from a few Seventies pioneers that shamelessly borrows and reassembles across both race and class lines. This muscley combination of zeal, *Glasnost*, and talent is daily commanding ever-larger chunks of the American art worlds.

Fishbone has just finished practicing and is ready to talk. Brought together by court-ordered busing out to a mostly white San Fernando Valley junior high school, the six members are the New Black Aesthetic personified. They are a mongrel mix of classes and types, and their political music sounds out this hybrid. Brothers Norwood Fisher and Fish used to bum free lunches from the Black Panthers' headquarters in East Los Angeles; Chris Dowd's father is both a Deep Purple fan and an engineer; "Special K" chose the band over Stanford. Cocky and crazy, they are now very hip among the black and white avant-gardes, yet they yearn for broader, especially black popular support. However, they refuse to pander to an audience just to top the charts. Says Fish, "If it happens, it happens, [but] we're not changing our course." Like the rest of the NBA artists, however, Fishbone's course has frequently changed, crossed, and flouted existing genres according to their own eclectic inspirations. When the band first started playing they covered art-rock songs by Rush and Pink Floyd. Later they moved on to heavy metal and punk before discovering George Clinton's spaced-out soul bands Parliament/Funkadelic and then ska, a British wedding of rock and reggae. "We're like bag people," says "Special K," "Whatever we do we take with us."

We explored in the past but were not allowed to
survive. I'm sure there were other kooky ethnic artists
that were coming from the left but were discouraged.

—August Darnell, "Kid Creole," 37, of *Kid Creole and the Coconuts*

I grew up in the predominantly white, middle and working-class suburbs around Ann Arbor, Michigan, and New Haven, Connecticut, while my mother and father worked their way through the University of Michigan and Yale. At public elementary school in Hamden, Connecticut, my sister and I were the only blacks not bused in from New Haven. It wasn't unusual to be called "oreo" and "nigger" on the same day. After going to private junior high and high school in New Haven, I transferred to Phillips Academy, Andover, in the eleventh grade. At Stanford I majored in creative writing. I won't pretend to be other than a bourgeois black boy, now 26 years old, who hadn't lived around a lot of other black people except my own family until I moved into Ujamaa, Stanford's black dorm, my freshman year. When a white friend I've known since the fifth grade heard I was writing this article and asked, "What do you know about black culture?" I realized I was a cultural mulatto. He didn't know I was reading *Soul on Ice*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and listening to Richard Pryor's *That Nigger's Crazy* after school. I didn't share them with him, one of my best friends.

Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world. And it is by and large this rapidly growing group of cultural mulattoes that fuels the NBA. We no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black. The culturally mulatto *Cosby* girls are equally as black as a black teenage welfare mother. Neither side of the tracks should forget that. Edmund Perry, bouncing from Harlem to Exeter and on his way to Stanford, might have been shot by that white police officer because the old world, both black and white, was too narrow to embrace a black prep from Harlem.

I was so confused about my identity. I attributed a lot
of negative things to black dance. It represented a too
conventional, too restrictive point of view. . . . [Now]
my work will have a black face because we are black. I
now have an anger and a location in history that is
bigger than me. I'm not just a loose cannon.

—Choreographer Bill T. Jones, 36

Today's cultural mulattoes echo those "tragic mulattoes" critic Sterling Brown wrote about in the Thirties only when they too forget they are wholly black. Most self-deluding cultural mulattoes desperately fantasize themselves the children of William F. Buckley. However, a minority affect instead a "superblackness" and try to dream themselves back to the ghetto. Either way they are letting other people define their

identity. Today, there are enough young blacks torn between the two worlds to finally go out and create our own. The New Black Aesthetic says you just have to *be* natural, you don't necessarily have to *wear* one.

Lisa and Kellie Jones, 26 and 29, are Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Hettie Cohen's daughters. Their parents were divorced when the children were young and they were raised primarily by their Jewish mother. "I was always searching for the black," says Lisa, "overcompensating as a kid." Besides working on Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* and *School Daze* (she also coauthored *Uplift the Race, The Making of School Daze* with Mr. Lee), the Yale graduate founded Rodeo Caldonia, a black women's performance-art group. After Amherst, Kellie worked at the Studio Museum of Harlem. She is now the Visual Arts Director of the Jamaica (Queens) Arts Center. Never before have individual, educated blacks had the ability to assimilate so painlessly, yet both Jones sisters didn't. Says Lisa, "I had a lot of options, but I chose [blackness]."

Rae Dawn Chong says she's Cherokee, Chinese,
White. . . . Look in a mirror Rae . . . you're BLACK! Go
try and marry a fucking Kennedy and see how black
you really are.

—Comedian Chris Rock, 20

Besides the Jones sisters, many other members of the NBA are the children of Civil Rights workers or black nationalists, and we have inherited from our parents what *Village Voice* critic Greg Tate, 30, calls a "postliberated aesthetic." Though even they themselves might not have arrived at the promised land completely freed from a slave mentality, they thoroughly shielded us from its vestiges. All those Ezra Jack Keats black children's books, *Roots* parties, *For Colored Girls* . . . theater excursions, and the nationalist Christmastide holiday of Kwanzaa worked. Says Spike Lee, "My grandmother would color in the birthday cards black, the dolls brown. We knew that black people are a great race."

Yet ironically, a telltale sign of the work of the NBA is our parodying of the black nationalist movement: Eddie Murphy, 27, and his old *Saturday Night Live* character, prison poet Tyrone Green, with his hilariously awful angry black poem, "Cill [sic] My Landlord," ("See his dog/Do he bite?"); playwright George Wolfe, 34, and his parodies of both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *For Colored Girls* . . . in his hit play *The Colored Museum* ("Enter Walter-Lee-Beau-Willie-Jones. . . . His brow is heavy from 300 years of oppression."); filmmaker Reginald Hudlin, 27, and his sacrilegious *Reggie's World of Soul* with its fake commercial for a back scratcher, spatula, and toilet bowl brush all with black clenched fists on their handle ends; and Lisa Jones's character Clean Mama King who is available for both sit-ins and film walk-ons. There is now such a strong and vast body of great black work that the corny or mediocre doesn't need to be coddled. NBA artists aren't afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line.

However, the works and protests of the nationalists "made us possible," says Lisa. "Though we make fun of them, if it weren't for [deceased, brilliant critic] Larry Neal

and my father, we wouldn't have the freedom now to be so nonchalant." Like any new movement of artists and like most people in their mid-twenties, part of the process of stamping our own adult identities includes rebelling against our parents, cautioning ourselves against their pitfalls.

Yet our spiritual and often biological older brothers and sisters, those who were artistically coming of age just as the bloom of Mr. Baraka's Black Arts Movement was beginning to fade, are our constant icons. Though during the mid-seventies they were a minority of the black-arts community, branded either counter-revolutionary, too artsy or just not good propagandists, nevertheless avant-garde artists like novelists Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, and John Edgar Wideman; George Clinton with his spaced-out funk band Parliament/Funkadelic; conceptual artist David Hammons who has hung empty Thunderbird bottles and spades from trees; Richard Pryor with his molten parodies of black life on his early albums and short-lived television show, all helped forge our current aesthetic. Stripping themselves of both white envy and self-hate they produced supersophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness, showing us as the intricate, uncategorizable folks we had always known ourselves to be. These artists—what the University of Massachusetts's Pancho Savery calls the "Third Plane"—saved my generation from a decade of not-so-funky chickens and disco ducks. If it weren't for them, the NBA—like the current young white aesthetic of kitsch Americana—would be fueled just by the junk of the Seventies: mood rings, crock pots, *Bicentennial Minutes*, "Keep On Truckin' " T-shirts, and *Josie and the Pussycats*.

But today's new black cutting edge has two advantages over the Third Plane. Though as an aesthetic the NBA might not be any newer than Ms. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), yet as a movement we finally have the numbers to leverage this point of view. For the first time in our history we are producing a critical mass of college graduates who are children of college graduates themselves. Like most artistic booms, the NBA is a post-bourgeois movement driven by a second generation of middle class. Having scraped their way to relative wealth and, too often, crass materialism, our parents have freed (or compelled) us to bite those hands that fed us and sent us to college. We now feel secure enough to attend art school instead of medical school.

Another great advantage we have over the artists of the Seventies is that today's popular culture is guided by blacks almost across the board. Between Eddie Murphy and Bill Cosby (soon to be the first entertainment billionaire), Spike Lee and Robert Townsend, playwright August Wilson and poet Rita Dove (1987's Pulitzer Prize winners), novelist Toni Morrison (1988's Pulitzer winner), Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Prince, and the explosion of rap artists, the world is not only now accustomed to black faces in the arts, but also hungers for us.

I feel the new, unflinching way NBA artists are looking at black culture is largely responsible for their popularity. No longer are too many black characters either completely cool and fearless (*Sweet Sweetback's Badaaaaaa Song*) or completely loving and selfless (*Sounder*). Says Spike Lee, "The number one problem with the old reactionary school was they cared too much about what white people think." And it is precisely because Mr. Lee isn't afraid of what anyone else thinks that he dares to show his world warts and all in both his first film *She's Gotta Have It* and in this year's controversial

musical *School Daze* that opened up, among other things, the previously taboo subject of intra-racial, skin-color prejudice; and gave us a black version of Jimmy the Greek-esque theorizing in the form of the musical dance craze in praise of the extra-large curves of the Afro-American behind (“Da Butt”) and another praising natural black hair (“Straight and Nappy”). Again with the hair, Mr. Hudlin has invented an improbable ethnic group, the Rasta-Hassidim, in his parody of a black TV news magazine; Mr. Wolfe’s *Colored Museum* includes a sketch in which a pair of wigs—one Afro, one straightened—discuss the politics and love life of their owner; and in Mr. Townsend’s *Hollywood Shuffle* his character defeats the villain Jheri Curl by withholding his curl activator until the man’s greasy ringlets dry back up to their natural naps.

Though Third Plane playwright August Wilson, 43, wrote agitprop in the Sixties because “that was necessary, a more polemical theater,” in his Pulitzer and Tony award-winning play *Fences* he didn’t whitewash the bitter stubbornness of one 1950s black father just because some white people might mistake one man’s flaws for across-the-board black male cruelty. And in Mr. Wilson’s latest play, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, his characters are the polar extreme of propagandistic puppets, instead reaching lyric complexities. Terry McMillan’s acclaimed first novel, *Mama*, doesn’t sidestep the periodic cruelty of the protagonist’s mother just because many non-blacks already believe the black family doomed. Following the lead of the Third Plane, NBA artists are now defining blacks in black contexts—so we are no longer preoccupied with the subjects of interracial dating or integration. And these artists aren’t flinching before they lift the hood on our collective psyches now that they have liberated themselves from both white envy and self-hate.

Unfortunately, however, still too many blacks belie their fears of inferiority by always demanding propagandistic positivism. Mr. Lee returned to Moorehouse College a hero, but soon afterwards he and his film crew were kicked off campus while filming *School Daze*. Moorehouse president Hugh Gloster thought veteran actor Joe Seneca, who played the president of Lee’s Mission College, somehow looked like Uncle Tom.

So we now find ourselves the dominant culture’s “flavor of the month” as has happened before, during Reconstruction, the Twenties’ Harlem Renaissance and the Sixties’ Black Arts Movement, but this time, armed with savvy and hungry new institutions, like the Black Filmmaker Foundation, the Black Rock Coalition, and DefJam records, we are not only determined but also now equipped to extend this month in the sun into a lifetime.

What blacks were doing in the 60s is coming to some
fruition. . . . We have the framework and the
orientation to take things further.

—August Wilson

Warrington Hudlin, 35, is president of the New York-based Black Filmmaker Foundation. I met him and his brother Reginald three years ago while researching an article on black independent filmmakers, and since then they have become two of my best

friends. They are about to produce and direct their first feature film for New Line Cinema. And like fellow BFF member and playwright George Wolfe (whose adaptation of Duke Ellington's jazz opera, *Queenie Pie*, will hit Broadway this Spring at the same time Gregory Hines begins rehearsing Wolfe's new musical, *Jelly Roll Morton*), the Hudlin brothers are some of the most traditionally middle class of the NBA. Artful black yuppies ("buppies"), they don't dress like either hip-hop B-boys or punkish hep-cats. And they aren't ashamed that many of their friends are lawyers and bankers. In fact, the BFF's relationship with those black professionals is probably what has made the ten-year-old black independent film programming, distribution, and exhibition service last so long. It is one of the first black-arts organizations that couples the creativity of the new black artists themselves with the insider's knowledge of high finance from the current flood of young black investment bankers and lawyers.

Reginald is the directorial half of this producer/director brotherhood. He is one of the youngest major-studio filmmakers in the country and his films realistically, relentlessly, and hilariously portray contemporary black working-class life. Like his friend Spike Lee, the Harvard graduate has little tolerance for the *Southerner*-esque "glory stories" of the Seventies where black "films were more obsessed with being good PR for the race than with being culturally authentic. It's as if blacks have to be spoon fed." Some of Reginald's comedy sketches, on the other hand, would be very hard to swallow if they weren't so funny. In his parody of a black TV news magazine, *Reggie's World of Soul*, he claims that "Mello Yello" soft drink is also an effective skin lightener and swears that Lionel Richie used to be the misshapen yellow animal "Drooper" on the Seventies' children show *The Banana Splits*.

I don't want nobody to give me nothing, Open up the door (HUH!) I'll get it myself.

—James Brown, "I Don't Want Nobody To Give Me Nothing"

The revisionism we bring to our understanding of the Civil Rights and black Nationalist movements has little to do with that of black conservatives such as Thomas Sowell of Stanford's ultra-right-wing Hoover Institute or Stanley Crouch of the *New Republic*. Nationalist pride continues to be one of the strongest forces in the black community and the New Black Aesthetic stems straight from that tradition. It is not an apolitical, art-for-art's-sake fantasy. We realize that despite this current buppie artist boom, most black Americans have seldom had it worse. But what most all the New Black Artists have in common is a commitment to what Columbia University philosopher Arthur Danto calls "Disturbatory Art" — art that shakes you up. The moral imperative of being black in America enrapt us with a militant juju that wards off cynical minimalism. In the NBA you won't find many spartan tales of suburban ennui or technicolor portraits of Fred and Barney.

Neither are the new black artists shocked by the persistence of racism as were those of the Harlem Renaissance, nor are we preoccupied with it as were those of the Black Arts Movement. For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither sur-

prises nor enrages. Robert Townsend, 31, puts it this way, "You can sit around and complain about the white man until you're blue in the face. . . . I wasn't listening when everybody told me about the obstacles. I was too stupid to be discouraged." So he took the dominant culture's credit cards and clobbered it with a film. Terry McMillan "thinks life's a bitch no matter what color you are. You can't blame the world." We're not saying racism doesn't exist; we're just saying it's not an excuse.

I had to fight to overcome in the institution and
transform it; make a white institution serve a black
person.

—Anthony Davis, 37, composer of *X*, the opera on the life of Malcolm X.

I'm at Andre Harrell's twenty-seventh birthday party. He used to work for Russel Simmons's Rush Productions which represents most all of today's top rap artists (b-boys, Run D.M.C., L.L. Cool J, The Beastie Boys, Whodini, Public Enemy) but now runs his own hip-hop music management company and record label, the Brooklyn-based Uptown productions. Gary Harris, a big, friendly guy who also used to work for Rush but is now an independent promoter and who knows me only from the times Andre kindly sneaks me into Nell's nightclub with his crew, was surprised to learn I studied creative writing in California. "I thought you went to M.I.T. or some [obscenity]."

So maybe members of the NBA sometimes still type people. And more often than not, at least inside the movement, their guess is going to be right. But cliquish elitism and snap judgments on the content of one's character based on the cut of one's clothes could wilt the NBA even before it has fully bloomed. Insiders too often dwell on the differences between the NBA's buppies, b-boys, and bohemians. Fortunately, however, there is a lot of cross-pollination. The Hudlin Brothers direct hip-hop videos, East Village painter Fab 5. Freddie (Fred Brathwaite) is an ex-rapper, graffitiist, and now host of *Yo. MTV raps!*, and Laurie Anderson-style avant-opera singer Alva Rogers acted in *School Daze*.

Nevertheless, for hip-hop b-boys, style is often as important as one's music and brand names can be more important than one's rap. Suzuki Samurai Jeeps, Moët champagne, complete Gucci or Louis Vuitton leather outfits, Kangol hats, "[heavy] duty gold" rope necklaces, four-finger rings, and crotch-first machismo are all, for the moment, rap *de rigueur*. Most all young, black intellectuals, on the other hand, wear little, round glasses, Ghanaian, kinte-cloth scarves, and, increasingly, tiny, neat dreadlocks. (Unfortunately, my hair is still too short for dreads. Still, I am proud of my also-stylish "Fade" or "jar-head" cut, only one-curl-high on the sides of my head—so short you can see the scalp.) "It's going to be a real challenge for people in our little group to make sure that our movement isn't a little elitist, avant-garde thing," says Lisa Jones. However, at least for now, that is exactly what it is.

You spend a buck in the 80s—what you get is a preacher
 Forgivin' this torture of the system that brought 'cha
 I'm on a mission and you got that right
 Addin' fuel to the fire—punch to the fight.

—Public enemy, "Rightstarter (Message for the Black man)"
Yo! Bum Rush This Show DefJam/Columbia

Rap is the most innovative sound since rock & roll, making new music out of everything from sitcom sound bites to heavy-metal speed-guitar solos to record scratching. Tonight, at Andre's house party, 21-year-old balladeer Al B. Sure croons along with his album, *Al B. Sure in Effect Mode*, (Uptown/Warner Bros.). I swear at least fifteen girls and women at the party hold their knees to keep upright. A posse of rappers from New Rochelle have been invited to entertain live and nervously go through a sound check. Jam Master Jay of Run D.M.C. and Russell Simmons, 31, millionaire co-founder of DefJam records and Rush president, are both in the house. Mr. Simmons describes himself as a shrewd entrepreneur who "sells to pop America what they thought was exclusively black." And like the rest of the NBA, he is creating his own definitions of blackness no matter how loudly either white or black people might complain. Says Simmons, "Even dashiki-wearing blacks who were really important in the black movement just look at us as part of a ghetto mentality. Art shouldn't be categorized."

One categorical mistake many make is thinking that rap is only created by the hardcore children of the slums; that the black middle class is all too busy buying Polo shirts and branding their arms with fraternity emblems to care about black street culture and politics. In fact, most of the big-name rappers are middle-class black kids. Mr. Simmons's father is a former professor of black history at Pace College and his mother a school teacher. His brother is Run of Run D.M.C.; L.L. Cool J grew up around the corner. Public Enemy, Bill Stephney, 27, vice-president of DefJam records, and *Village Voice* rap critic Harry Allen, 27, all met in an Afro-American studies course at Adelphi University on Long Island where they grew up. In fact, Public Enemy's chief, Chuck D., 28, is from Roosevelt, Long Island, sharing the suburban hometown with Eddie Murphy. Nevertheless, his group slugs out the hardest, most militant rap around. Mr. Stephney, who also co-produced the Public Enemy albums *Yo! Bum Rush This Show* and *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, describes their music as "politically conscious but not preachy." They make you realize that you don't have to be black and poor to be black and angry.

I just feel in a lot of ways black people are so much
 looser and cooler . . . just as a culture.

—Pee-wee Herman, *Interview*, July 1987

Two and a half years ago while I was still an "only one" having yet to discover the NBA, I had just hitchhiked my way across central Africa (something only a second-

generation middle-class person would ever volunteer to do) proud of the fact I had only \$80 dollars to my name and was now working my way north through Niger. The Peace Corps was kind enough to put me up for a few nights in a hostel in the country's capital of Niamey. A volunteer, Craig Wilson, then 25, was my roommate. When I met him he was wiping his little, round glasses (Peace Corps standard issue) between stanzas of the Ishmael Reed poem "I AM A COWBOY IN THE BOAT OF RA." Of course we became friends and three months later we met again back here in New York where he, now a music composer, dragged me to see a guitarist he knew at CBGBs, a hardcore club in the Bowery.

Vernon Reid, then 26, shook the sweat from his short dreads arcing out from his forehead before grinding his third encore solo into a psychotically distorted explosion. A black lead-guitarist playing funk-ed-out heavy metal. "Well I'll be damned," I remember thinking. Backstage after the concert, he shook everyone's hand before handing out copies of a manifesto for the then newly formed Black Rock Coalition of which he is a founder: "For white artists, working under the rubric 'rock' has long meant the freedom to pimp any style of black music—funk, reggae, soul, jazz, gospel ad infinitum. . . . We too claim that same right. . . . The members of the BRC are neither novelty acts, nor carbon copies of the white bands who work America's Apartheid Oriented Rock circuit. . . . We are individuals and will accept no less than full respect for our right to be conceptually independent." I was blown away.

Since then Vernon, his band Living Colour, and the rest of the Black Rock Coalition have been written up in *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Billboard*, *Interview*, *the Voice* (where Vernon is also a political essayist), and in the *Times*. He has played with downtown experimental music king John Zorn at Brooklyn Academy of Music's "Next Wave" festival as well as on Public Enemy's rap album *Yo! Bum Rush This Show*. Mick Jagger—who borrowed everything he knows from black bluesmen—repaid the debt, a bit, when he paid for and produced three Living Colour demos last summer. Reid's album, *Vivid* (Epic records) came out last Spring, and artist Robert Longo did the first video.

"I don't mind being in a bag as long as it's one I can define and control," he tells me last summer in the Hiro Cafe's sculpture garden, one of the many artsy-fartsy babaganush and gazpacho joints with sculpture gardens in the East Village. Next to him sit Kellie Jones and painter Fred Brathwaite, both 28. I'm the only one who orders alcohol and red meat.

"When you look into your own shit and dig in," continues Vernon, "then you'll find the universal. You won't find the universal by deciding to go after the universal." Then we all talk about how *She's Gotta Have It* crossed over so well precisely because it was so true to the black. And how Lionel Richie's "Dancing on the Ceiling" and Whitney Houston's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" are so lifeless precisely because they have applied Porcelana fade cream to their once extremely soulful throats. The two now-pop singers have transformed themselves into cultural-mulatto, assimilationist nightmares; neutered mutations instead of thriving hybrids. Trying to please both worlds instead of themselves, they end up truly pleasing neither.

I had somebody say once my black was way too black,
 And someone answer she's not black enough for me.

—Joan Armatrading, *How Cruel*, title track, A&M Records

What I'm noticing most nowadays about the New Black Aesthetic movement is its magnetism. Since anything (good) goes, almost every month a talented new black artist blows into town with a wild new cultural combination. The new Italian critics call it "*neobarocco*." Stanford philosopher Sylvia Wynter calls it "the Democratization of Perspective." I call it the most exciting period I have ever known. "We don't have to go into the white intellectual community in search of kindred souls," says Lisa Jones. "We all considered ourselves freaky, out, rebelling against some sort of middle-class values. I can find that all in black people now." A few years ago it seemed that no young blacks were playing jazz anymore and that the legacy would default upon sympathetic white negroes. Now, besides Wynton and Branford Marsalis, we have bluesman Robert Cray, guitarist Jean-Paul Bourelly, 27, pianist composers Geri Allen and saxophonist Steve Coleman. They are all energetically taking up right where Ornette and Thelonius and 'trane left off. We even have a black folk singer in 24-year-old, boarding-school and Tufts University trained Tracy Chapman. So whether at the Jamaica Arts Center where Kellie Jones works, at the Knitting Factory in the East Village, or at the Black Filmmaker Foundation's free monthly screenings in the HBO building in midtown Manhattan, you can experience everything from the large-format photography of Lorna Simpson to the postmodern, post-Ailey choreography of Fred Holland. Somehow these dry, neoconservative Eighties, these horse latitudes for mainstream culture, are proving one of the most fertile periods black culture has ever known. Says Fred Brathwaite, "That other culture is definitely spent," while black people have yet to see the best days of our race. Until a few years ago I was constantly bemoaning the fact that I wasn't in my prime during the Black Arts Movement or the Beatnik era; I wasn't around to slouch between Picasso and Hemingway on a couch in Gertrude Stein's salon. But I agree with playwright George Wolfe: "*This is an incredible time.*" It has been over a year now that I don't envy any other age. I feel good.