

ABSTRACT

HISTORY

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“OUR ART ITSELF WAS OUR ACTIVISM”: ATLANTA’S
NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS CENTER, 1975-1990

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This cultural history study examined Atlanta’s Neighborhood Arts Center (NAC), which existed from 1975 to 1990, as an example of black cultural politics in the South. As a Black Arts Movement (BAM) institution, this regional expression has been missing from academic discussions of the period. The study investigated the multidisciplinary programming that was created to fulfill its motto of “Art for People’s Sake.” The five themes developed from the program research included: 1) the NAC represented the juxtaposition between the individual and the community, local and national; 2) the NAC reached out and extended the arts to the masses, rather than just focusing on the black middle class and white supporters; 3) the NAC was distinctive in space and location; 4) the NAC seemed to provide more opportunities for women artists than traditional BAM

organizations; and 5) the NAC had a specific mission to elevate the social and political consciousness of black people.

In addition to placing the Neighborhood Arts Center among the regional branches of the BAM family tree, using the programmatic findings, this research analyzed three themes found to be present in the black cultural politics of Atlanta which made for the center's unique grassroots contributions to the movement. The themes centered on a history of politics, racial issues, and class dynamics. The research offers an alternative to the claim that southern expressions of this movement were generated solely by the historically black colleges and universities of their cities.

The study's findings demonstrate that the Neighborhood Arts Center was a grassroots, multidisciplinary entity for black aesthetics and black cultural nationalism. The findings also suggest that the Neighborhood Arts Center perpetuated the Black Arts Movement through the 1980s. Lastly, the study offers insight on the movement's transition and legacies.

“OUR ART ITSELF WAS OUR ACTIVISM”:
ATLANTA’S NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS CENTER, 1975-1990

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BY
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AARL	Auburn Avenue Research Library
AAWC	Atlanta Art Workers Coalition
ACBA	Atlanta Center for Black Arts
ADW	<i>Atlanta Daily World</i>
AFRI-COBRA	African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists
AMT	Atlanta Municipal Theater
AJC	Atlanta Journal/Constitution
APS	Atlanta Public Schools
ASO	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra
AUC	Atlanta University Center
BAM	Black Arts Movement
BART/S	Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School
BCA	Bureau of Cultural Affairs, City of Atlanta
BCIA	Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs, City of Atlanta
BCN	Black Cultural Nationalism
BPM	Black Power Movement
BPP	Black Panther Party for Self Defense
CAP	Congress of African People
CAU	Clark Atlanta University

CCA	Emory College Center for Creativity & Arts
CETA	Comprehensive Employment and Training Act
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
FCAC	Fulton County Arts Council (now Fulton County Arts & Culture)
GCA	Georgia Council for the Arts and Humanities
GSU	Georgia State University
HBCU	Historically Black Colleges and Universities
HUD	Housing and Urban Development
IBW	Institute of the Black World
MARTA	Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAC	Neighborhood Arts Center
NBAF	National Black Arts Festival
NEA	National Endowment of the Arts
NPU	Neighborhood Planning Unit
OBAC	Organization of Black American Culture
OCA	Office of Cultural Affairs (formerly the BCA)
RAM	Revolutionary Arts Movement
SBCA	Southern Black Cultural Alliance
SCAAW	Southern Collective of African/American Writers
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee

TJUTC	The Just Us Theater Company
UNIA	Universal Negro Improvement Association
USCM	United States Conference of Mayors
WRFG	Radio Free Georgia (89.3 FM)
WPA	Works Progress Administration
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

While the general history of the Black Arts Movement has been widely documented, scholarship has only recently begun to explore the regional and local dimensions that emerged from the movement.¹ The purpose of this research is to provide a cultural history of Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center, which existed in Georgia from 1975 to 1990. This historical analysis will explore the black cultural politics of Atlanta, and discuss the Neighborhood Arts Center's motto of "Art for People's Sake" which was adopted from the larger Black Arts Movement. This study promises to explore the lesser known aspects of Atlanta's black cultural history by investigating the connections between the Black Arts Movement, arts activism, and the emergence of the Neighborhood Arts Center.

Atlanta's participation in and contributions to the legacy of the Black Arts Movement have, to date, not received sufficient attention.² In 1974, under Mayor

¹ For regional studies, see Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, ed., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006). For local references, see James Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement in Atlanta," in *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, Peniel E. Joseph, ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 173-190.

² For a cursory discourse on Atlanta's Black Arts Movement, see James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 326-342. Amalia Amaki provides a listing of exhibitions and institutions that includes Atlanta and the Neighborhood Arts Center, but does not elaborate on the Center's contributions.

Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first African-American mayor, a special task force took the initial steps to organize a multipurpose arts space. This space became known as the NAC (pronounced "knack"). As the research will elaborate, the Neighborhood Arts Center's "Art for People's Sake" motto was inspired by the Black Arts Movement and black cultural nationalist ideologies. The center's artistic productions, the enduring institutions it helped create, as well as testimonials by participants who personally and professionally benefited from the Neighborhood Arts Center will attest to its impact as an organization and its enduring legacy.

Background of the Problem

Though the Neighborhood Arts Center was unique to Atlanta, it was not the first community arts or multidisciplinary facility to be established in an urban city using public dollars. Some arts institutions owe their success to their connections with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), whereas others were grassroots, community creations. The connections between Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center and the Atlanta University Center (AUC) will be explored. There were also historical connections between the NAC's public funding and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) examples that spawned other urban arts centers. With this research, a continuum is established between the Neighborhood Arts Center and other black arts institutions in Atlanta which existed at the time and continues to exist today.³

See, Amalia K. Amaki, "The All Black Exhibition in America, 1963 – 1976: Its History, Perception, and the Critical Response," PhD dissertation, Emory University, 1994.

³ Cultural institutions begun in Atlanta such as The Institute of the Black World (IBW), Phoenix Art and Theatre Company, Hammonds House Museum, and African-American Panoramic Experience

The study will first present the cultural history of Atlanta that generated the creation of the Neighborhood Arts Center. From its founding under the city's first African-American mayor and continuing through the administration of the city's second consecutive two-term African-American mayor, Andrew Young, the Neighborhood Arts Center's creation and the cultural politics which surrounded its existence will be documented. The stories and struggles of artists, board members, and patrons were part and parcel of the Black Arts Movement legacy to create and maintain cultural institutions, such as the Neighborhood Arts Center, as viable community organizations.

In the review of literature, Houston Baker, Jr.'s family tree analogy is applied here to place Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center among roots, branches, and leaves symbolizing the Black Arts Movement.⁴ The study investigates how the Neighborhood Arts Center was intertwined with the cultural and political climate of Atlanta: from its creation, its "Art for People's Sake" programming successes; its maneuvering of cultural politics, race, and class; and its resulting legacies. Following an analysis of the findings' themes, readers will be better able to understand the researcher's call to place the Neighborhood Arts Center squarely among the southern branches that were the Black Arts Movement's regional limbs.⁵ The importance of the center and Atlanta to existing

(APEX) Museum were contemporaries of the Neighborhood Arts Center. Only IBW has received scholarly attention. The Atlanta Center for Black Art (ACBA) was a predecessor that has not been studied either.

⁴ The "family tree" concept is applied to the movement by Houston Baker, Jr., See Baker, "Afterword: This Bridge Called 'Our Tradition,' Notes on Blueblack, 'Round' Midnight Blacklight 'Connection'," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, Collins and Crawford, ed., 369-373.

⁵ Smethurst notes the southern regional dimensions of the Black Arts Movement. Smethurst, "Behold the Land: Regionalism, the Black Nation, and the Black Arts Movement in the South," in *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, 319-366.

southern regional arguments and the continuation of the movement will also become apparent.

Atlanta, with its roots in the Civil Rights Movement and the endowment of several historically black colleges and universities, is a city steeped in history and achievement. Thus, research on the Neighborhood Arts Center's institutional place, physically and conceptually, in the fabric of the Black Arts Movement reflects the cultural and political landscape which created and surrounded the arts center. Its role as an Atlanta grassroots, or community, organization and institutional incubator for other regional African-American arts organizations further justifies this study.

Oral histories and archival documents also contextualize the untold story of Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center, and they render significant insight regarding African-American cultural politics in general. There were many stories of "leaves" which came into existence and flourished on Neighborhood Arts Center's "branch" of the Black Arts Movement tree without the direct assistance or input from Atlanta's institutions of higher learning. Discussion of the center's grassroots progeny will thus oppose previous conclusions revealed in the review of literature that southern Black Arts Movement institutions were solely the creation of historically black colleges and universities.⁶

Statement of the Problem

While some scholars are aware of the existence of Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center, the literature review reinforces the fact that little scholarly research and few publications have been written that acknowledge its contributions to the southern

⁶ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 336-342.

perspective of the Black Arts Movement.⁷ Its relevance to the cultural and political fabric of Atlanta continues to be overlooked as one of the seminal predecessors to existing publicly-funded art centers and other prominent arts organizations. This research corrects these omissions.

The history of the southern black freedom struggle is a rich record, but one of its under-researched aspects is the cultural dimension of black politics. The funding of a new branch of municipal government called the Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs (BCIA), later known as the Bureau of Cultural Affairs (BCA), and now known as the Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA), elevated the arts as a prominent platform that earned Maynard Jackson the title of “the cultural mayor.”⁸ The style of Atlanta’s black cultural politics has not yet been fully explored. Even in 2012, there are numerous community arts program facilities that are funded by the BCA and its scion, the Fulton County Arts Council (FCAC). These municipal funding entities can be traced to Jackson’s administrative agenda, which sought to use art and culture to help make Atlanta an international metropolis, more competitive nationally, and more attractive to its own citizenry.

Many of the participants in this research were groomed during the black freedom

⁷ Smethurst also references the Atlanta art center based on an interview with Ebon Dooley without naming the Neighborhood Arts Center as the institution. Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 341. Kellie Jones makes an incidental reference to the Neighborhood Arts Center in her essay on Los Angeles and artist John Riddle, who was from Los Angeles, but moved to Atlanta as Neighborhood Arts Center Director. See Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” in *New Thoughts*, Collins and Crawford, ed., 52; and Alice Lovelace, “It was a Time of Hope—It was a Time of Challenge,” *High Performance* 64 (Winter 1993): 53-54.

⁸ Jackson initiated funds from a one percent of the hotel tax allocated for the arts created the Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs. Its programs included the Neighborhood Arts Center, the Atlanta Free Jazz, and numerous arts initiatives out of the Atlanta Mayor’s Office.

struggle and were involved in the civil rights movement prior to their participation in the formation and nourishment of the Neighborhood Arts Center. Their positions of leadership and management in the now majority black demographics of the city are direct results of the cultural shifts of the early 1970s and are products of Neighborhood Arts Center and Black Arts Movement legacies.⁹ The research illuminates the history of these connections between southern cultural formation and its politics.

While the history of the Black Arts Movement continues to be chronicled, oral history documenting the Neighborhood Arts Center and its contributions remained absent until this study. As important as the archival records of the organization are to history, their value is eclipsed by the rich oral histories that have been kept alive by the memories of the individuals who were directly involved in the creation of the Neighborhood Arts Center and its programs. The combination of oral history and archival research that follows captures a more complete cultural history of Atlanta.

The Issues of Periodization

There are many claims as to the historical beginning and ending dates for the era of the Black Arts Movement. Scholar Kalamu ya Salaam notes the difficulty in determining specific beginning and end dates of any social movement, and the Black Arts Movement, in particular.¹⁰ Some of the key events that helped to shape the origin and

⁹ Former Fulton County Commissioner Michael Lomax, Former Mayor Shirley Franklin, and former East Point Mayor Patsy Jo Hilliard all served on the Neighborhood Arts Center's board at some points in its history.

¹⁰ Kalamu ya Salaam, "Historical Background of the Black Arts Movement (Black Arts Movement) – Part I," *The Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2010).

development of the Black Arts Movement were catalysts such as the assassination of Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones) joining with other black activists and artists to found the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BART/S), and the Civil Rights Movement. Others include the change to more militant politics and social goals by such groups as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) brought about by the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the formation of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements of 1966.¹¹ Art historian Kellie Jones notes the 1965-66 founding of Maulana Ron Karenga's (then Ron Everett) Los Angeles, California US Organization ("US" referring to African Americans), and the creation of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP) in Oakland as a starting point, but also notes that Karenga's cultural nationalism movement was present as early as 1962.¹² Thus, the identification of the beginning of the movement is open to some interpretation.

The 1975 transition point for the Black Arts Movement is tenuous as well. It is spotlighted by the end of several significant black publications in 1976. These include the Broadside Press, *The Journal of Black Poetry* and John H. Johnson's *Black World*, edited by Hoyt Fuller. Salaam concludes that "... after 1976, the Black Arts Movement was a

¹¹ Collins and Crawford, ed., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 3.

¹² Jones, "Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles," in *New Thoughts*, ed. Collins and Crawford, 44.

much less dynamic force and often was in a defensive rather than offensive posture.”¹³

To illustrate his point, artists who were previously able to demand funds using either guilt or affirmative action as a vehicle were forced to rely on a trickle of funds from such sources as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Expansion Arts Program, primarily regarded as “ethnic.”

This research re-contextualizes the closing days of the movement based on the new findings contained herein. The national and international impact of the Neighborhood Arts Center as a model of art and municipal politics working together has not been examined for its contributions to, and continuation of, the Black Arts Movement. The manifestation of this lack of attention is particularly true as it pertains to Atlanta, a southern city often praised for its African-American achievements and history. Specific to Atlanta’s art center, black aesthetic program thrusts lasted well past the trickle of Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA) funding which ceased in the early 1980s. The Neighborhood Arts Center was able to survive until 1990, so the factors contributing to its demise thus give cause for the reevaluation of when, where, and how the Black Arts Movement ended in the city of Atlanta. Its consecutive African-American mayors, and the Neighborhood Arts Center, which was launched in 1975, seem to be catalytic factors for the migration, amalgamation, nexus, and legacy of this national movement continuing to and perhaps beyond the Neighborhood Arts Center’s end in 1990.

¹³ Kalamu Ya Salaam, “Historical Background of the Black Arts Movement (Black Arts Movement) – Part I,” *Magic of Juju: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2010).

Significance of the Study

The Neighborhood Arts Center was a multidisciplinary place perpetuating the black aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement. The research places the institution as a harbinger of the continuation of a black aesthetic and sheds new light on the transitional and culminating days of the Black Arts Movement in the South. The analysis of the many organizations and artists the Neighborhood Arts Center nurtured, and its legacy of fruitful and flowering leaves, will support elevating the center to its rightful place as part of the national family tree that was the Black Arts Movement.

The impact of its programming will be analyzed in the areas of dance, music, theater, creative writing, and visual arts. This part of the analysis will detail how the Neighborhood Arts Center at times met and at others fell short of its institutional motto of “Art for People’s Sake,” which for the Black Arts Movement entailed community building through the black aesthetic concept of cultural nationalism.

The exploration will also include the organizational dynamics of the Neighborhood Arts Center. The characteristics of its board of directors, its funding, and its impact on students and audiences will aid in the analysis of the Neighborhood Arts Center’s programmatic successes and failures. Through an evaluation of the organization’s financial records, this researcher will also contextualize the struggles for public and private funding for the arts before and after the cessation of CETA funding in 1981.

This interdisciplinary research project is a significant inquiry into the humanities. It includes valuable information for the disciplines of history, African-American studies,

and art history, as well as insight into the implications of politics and public policy as they pertain to arts funding. It is, therefore, extremely important to critique the Neighborhood Arts Center, as well as its multidisciplinary programs and institutional connections to the movement. In the final analysis, the study seeks answers to the following questions as they relate to Atlanta's black cultural institution:

- 1) Why was the Neighborhood Arts Center created?
- 2) What made the Neighborhood Arts Center successful?
- 3) What factors led to the demise of the Neighborhood Arts Center?
- 4) What historical lessons of the Neighborhood Arts Center are relevant today?

This synthesis of humanistic inquiry will ultimately determine whether or not Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center contributed to the Black Arts Movement and championed its precepts. If Atlanta's arts center significantly contributed to the movement, this fact would give cause for the extension of the period, an issue raised in the section of periodization. Alternately, if the Neighborhood Arts Center itself was a legacy of Black Arts Movement's ideologies and principles, then the research will rightfully place Atlanta's forgotten institution among the leaves on the figurative Black Arts Movement family tree.

Research Questions

For all of the above reasons, which necessitate an historical analysis of the Neighborhood Arts Center and the black cultural politics of Atlanta, the following research questions are explored:

1. How did the Neighborhood Arts Center meet its Black Arts Movement motto of "Art for People's Sake" within the various arts disciplines?

2. How did Atlanta's cultural politics enable the Neighborhood Arts Center to become a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement?

Through an analysis of the data acquired in an effort to answer these questions, the research hopes to locate the Neighborhood Arts Center's position along the continuum that was the Black Arts Movement and discover any unique regional dynamics it offered to the black aesthetic. Together, these questions, and the responses thereof, address the theoretical concept of simultaneity framing the cultural politics of the period.

Simultaneity: A Conceptual Framework for Cultural Politics

The conceptual framework underpinning these research questions blends two important ideas into a third. Maulana Ron Karenga's concept of black cultural nationalism uses the black aesthetic principle of "Art for People's Sake" as opposed to the Western notion of "art for art's sake."¹⁴ Molefi Kete Asante's concept of "location centering" that creates a sense of place and space is used in his definition of Afrocentricity.¹⁵ These two meld into a third concept, championed by cultural historian

¹⁴ Maulana Karenga, in *The Quotable Karenga*, ed. Clyde Halisi and James Mtume (Los Angeles: US Organization, 1967). For Karenga's reprinted position on art, see Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 31-37. Also see Karenga, "On Black Art," *Black Theater* 3, 9-10, under "Historical Documents of the Black Arts Movement," <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/blackarts/documents.htm> (accessed June 26, 2004). See page 31 for quote. The article was previously published as "Ron Karenga and Black Cultural Nationalism" in *Negro Digest* 17, no. 3 (January 1968): 5-9. The article reappeared as "Black Art: Mute Matter Given Force and Function," in *New Black Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary New Black Literature*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1972), 477-482.

¹⁵ Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity: Notes on a Disciplinary Position," in *Handbook of Black Studies*, Molefi Kete Asante and Maulana Karenga, ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 152-163.

Susanne Smith, of simultaneity in cultural formation.¹⁶ This tri-conceptual blend, which serves as the framework of this research, is discussed below.

Art for People's Sake: A Black Aesthetic

Karenga's 1968 black cultural nationalism concept of "Art for People's Sake" is reiterated in the 1971 publication *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle, Jr.¹⁷ Gayle's anthology, which is discussed more thoroughly in the review of literature, provided the source documentation for the location of Black Arts Movement theoreticians. Karenga's philosophical doctrine espousing art for the people was an oppositional, non-western, and revolutionary doctrine which supported both Black Arts (cultural nationalism) and Black Power (revolutionary nationalism).

The 1960s and 1970s are significant in as much as it was during this time that Africa and Africans were fighting for colonial liberation and self-determination. Karenga argues that the battle for African-American liberation must first be won in "the minds of Black people" by connecting this struggle to those of the African Diaspora.¹⁸ His inspiration for the black cultural nationalism concept was the Senegalese architect of the Négritude Movement Léopold Sédar Senghor.¹⁹ Karenga explained, "Tradition teaches

¹⁶ Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Streets: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8-9.

¹⁷ Karenga, "On Black Art," *Black Theater* 3, 1968, 9-10, under "Historical Documents of the Black Arts Movement," <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/blackarts/documents.htm> (accessed June 26, 2004). Also see Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," 31-37.

¹⁸ Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," 31.

¹⁹ For Senghor's position on négritude, see lecture delivered at the University of Cairo on February 16, 1967 titled *The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité,"* translated by Mercer Cook, (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1971). Also see Senghor, "The Problematics of Negritude," *Black World* (August 1971), 4-24.

us, Leopold [sic] Senghor tells us, that all African art has at least three characteristics: that is, it is functional, collective and committing or committed.”²⁰ Karenga espoused the belief that “all art reflects the value system from which it comes.”²¹ Black cultural nationalism thus becomes the revolutionary, or counter-theoretical, directive of black aesthetics in the arts for the Black Arts Movement.

Karenga’s adoption of Senghor’s black aesthetic definition of “functional, collective, and committed” became the movement’s rhetorical strategy for the transformative ideology to free its people’s minds from the margins of Western notions of art and beauty, as well as that for which black arts struggled. “Art for People’s Sake” was meant to make thoughts of Africa central to the community as artists worked to move minds toward a “Black is Beautiful” consciousness. This was committed art and equally important to the three-fold definition for a Black Arts Movement theoretician.

Of equal importance to black art being “functional, collective and committed” was the sense that it be a mutual dialog between artists and audiences rather than a singular experience focused upon the artist himself.²² According to Karenga, art should not raise or lower in level to meet black people but instead, “art and people must develop at the same time and for the same reason. It must move with the masses and be moved by

²⁰ Karenga, “Black Cultural Nationalism,” 32.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jacques Maritain, “Art for Art’s Sake,” in *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), 47-65. Also see Amy Abugo Ongiri, “‘Black Arts for a Black People’: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic,” PhD diss., Cornell University, 2000.

the masses.”²³ He functionalized his definition of “Art for People’s Sake” as follows, “Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution.”²⁴ Contrastingly, “art for art’s sake” does not take into account the mental and physical liberation of people of African descent as dictated by Karenga’s Black Arts Movement philosophy.

From the 1960s onward, black artists had a directive. African, African American, and other African Diasporic artists united around the tenets of black cultural nationalism and Karenga’s adoption and promotion of Senghor’s component of the Négritude Movement. The black aesthetic is singularly focused. “Art for People’s Sake” was the sole black aesthetic that Black Arts Movement theoreticians felt all black artists should strive to attain, and served as the foundation of black cultural nationalism. Karenga’s essay concluded, “[T]he real function of art is to make revolution, using its own medium.”²⁵

Black cultural nationalism stretched well into the 1970s, subtly changing nuances, sometimes begetting other names such as Pan-Africanism, or the Revolutionary Arts Movement (RAM). Its trajectory was meant to simultaneously oppose and be more palatable than that of the more militant Black Power Movement’s (BPM) revolutionary nationalists. The doctrines of the BPM were synonymous with provoking propaganda and violence. This latter group, impatient with the Civil Rights Movement’s nonviolent

²³ Karenga, “Black Cultural Nationalism,” 34.

²⁴ Ibid., 33.

²⁵ Ibid.

responses to unprovoked attacks on African Americans, espoused decidedly more physical, and at times even armed, resistance and self-defense of the people in its actions and in the visual imagery of the organization's rhetoric.²⁶ The BPM and the revolutionary nationalist views of cultural politics were much more aggressive. Karenga's message of a revolution in the mind, as opposed to the BPM's use of physical confrontations for national terrorism and non-western assimilation, will be a method for evaluating whether the Neighborhood Arts Center met its "Art for People's Sake" mission.

Afrocentricity: Location Centering

The concept of "Art for People's Sake" is merged with the second conceptual framework of this research which is based on Molefi Asante's position that Afrocentricity is concerned with the movement of people of African descent from a place and space at the margins to a location in the center.²⁷ Artistic struggles within and among Black Arts Movement participants to leave the margins of Western notions of "art for art's sake" and move toward a committed Afrocentric center; a collective community functionalizing "Art for People's Sake" in its programs, its products, and its institutions were all part of the period's exploration of black aesthetics. The "Art for People's Sake" motto determined how Afrocentric culture would be created within its institutional doors, thus creating the space for black aesthetic exploration. It is for these reasons that the

²⁶ See several examples of visual artist Emory Douglas, illustrator for the Black Panther Party's periodical, for representative examples of guns and police depicted as pigs. Emory Douglas, *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas*, preface by Danny Glover, foreword by Bobby Seale; edited with an introduction by Sam Durant (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 32, 46, 54, 56, and 74.

²⁷ Asante, "Afrocentricity: Notes on a Disciplinary Position," 154-155.

culturalist concept of “Art for People’s Sake” and the Afrocentric principle of “location centering” must both be included as part of the theoretical framework of this research.

Simultaneity

As a cultural historian, Suzanne Smith’s discussion of the politics of Detroit, Michigan and the Motown music business synthesize both the “Art for People’s Sake” concept of black cultural nationalism philosophy adopted and promoted by Karenga and Asante’s location-centered Afrocentricity. Smith explains:

Cultural infrastructure instigated social change and created community identity. Local activists, politicians, community leaders, business owners, autoworkers, musicians, and performers used the infrastructure to pursue a wide range of goals: campaigning for elected office, supporting community activism, forming unions, celebrating black culture and art, and preserving history.²⁸

Smith adds that her particular type of cultural analysis “employs the theoretical concept of cultural formation to understand the role of black commercial culture in the development of a black urban community.”²⁹ Smith continues, “The constant dynamic between an ‘artistic form’ and its place of origin or ‘social location’ structures the analysis of a cultural formation. Art, in broader and more traditional terms, cannot be separated from the society that produced it”³⁰ She notes that the idea of simultaneity is based on cultural theorist Raymond Williams’ work. “[Williams] has argued that ‘you cannot understand an intellectual or artistic project without also understanding its

²⁸ Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8-9.

²⁹ S. Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264, fn.12.

formation.’ He defines cultural formations as ‘simultaneously artistic forms and social locations’.”³¹

An historical analysis of all of the disciplines represented at the Neighborhood Arts Center, not just music as in Smith’s approach to Detroit and Motown, will be undertaken here using the concept of simultaneity as the theoretical framework. This exploration incorporates the particular southern cultural politics of Atlanta, its social location, and the cultural movement in the city and its artistic forms, during the period of the Neighborhood Arts Center’s existence. It will yield a more comprehensive understanding of Atlanta’s version of the simultaneity in cultural formation particular to the Black Arts Movement regionalism that the center expresses. For this author, Smith’s use of simultaneity in cultural formation as her theoretical concept thus blends the notions of “Afrocentric location centering” and “Art for People Sake” black aesthetic cultural formation. Atlanta as a location was and still remains an urban southern metropolis influenced by middle-class black economic agendas, African-American mayoral politics, and a social history entrenched in the Civil Rights Movement and the continuing struggle for black freedom.

Specific to the Neighborhood Arts Center, the “artistic form” included at various times visual, performing, and literary arts, but all were based in the Black Arts Movement aesthetic of “Art for People’s Sake” as expressed in the Neighborhood Arts Center’s mission statement. This ideal embodied Karenga’s base principle at the time for black

³¹ Raymond Williams has two discussions of the concept of cultural formation. See “The Future of Cultural Studies” and “The Uses of Cultural Theory,” both in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989). Michael Denning offers an example of cultural formation analysis. See Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).

cultural nationalism. Also applicable to the Neighborhood Arts Center are the multidisciplinary art forms that should be taken as exemplars, or southern expressions, of the Black Arts Movement because of their simultaneity of art forms coupled with their southern social location. It is because of social location and its urban environment that black southern cultural politics spawned such a vibrant institution as the Neighborhood Arts Center.

“Our Art Itself was Our Activism”

In one of the research interviews, artist Alice Lovelace asserts, “Our art itself *was* our activism.”³² The research title quotes her as the statement embodies the period. Ultimately, the artistic forms of the Neighborhood Arts Center must be seen in political terms significant to Atlanta, its social location. Black cultural nationalism’s mission was to free the minds of people of African descent from indoctrination by the Eurocentric concepts of “art for art’s sake.” “Art for People’s Sake” was ever present at the Neighborhood Arts Center in the minds of its cultural workers, and in the many institutions emerging from this fruitful, prolific, southern branch of the Black Arts Movement, often in spite of the opposition of middle-class board members.

Maneuvering through Atlanta cultural politics were artist activists, Neighborhood Arts Center board members, and African-American political leaders serving an audience that, though primarily black, represented a multiracial and economically diverse voting base. Strategies included being “revolutionary” through aesthetic programming, not in physically taking up arms. Collectively, but not without tension, these three

³² Alice Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, 17-18, transcript; Lovelace’s emphasis.

Neighborhood Arts Center constituent groups are shown to move black aesthetics to a position at the center of the institution and away from Eurocentric margins, a basic premise of Asante's Afrocentricity and the research's conceptual framework.

Black cultural nationalism and aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement taken up in the late 1960s by Sengor and Karenga underwent an intellectual metamorphosis throughout the transitional years of the 1970s in the Black Arts Movement, with Addison Gayle, Asante, and others. These mental and aesthetic changes, which occurred within all the arts disciplines, are also exemplified at the Neighborhood Arts Center. They emerged in various cultural forms including black history celebrations, the holiday celebration of African principles known as Kwanzaa, rites of passage and renaming ceremonies, and Black Studies Departments on college campuses. This shift in thought resulted in communities embracing Afrocentricity as well as the creation and incubation of several Afrocentric institutional manifestations throughout the 1980s, some of which still exist.

The research on Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center will add to the scholarship describing how nationalistic the Black Arts Movement became, how deep the southern roots reached, and how far in time the Black Arts Movement's branches extend with leaves that continue to flourish. The first conceptual framework of "Art for People's Sake" adopted by Karenga described an intellectual transformation. Asante's "location centering," or moving people of African descent from the margins to the center, is a second, transformational concept for this research.

While the tenets of the Black Arts Movement aesthetic simultaneously frame the subsequent analysis, they are also strengthened by Smith and her use of Williams'

concept of simultaneity for cultural formation as both a result of “artistic forms” and “social location.” The Neighborhood Arts Center was an institution incubating black cultural nationalist artistic formation for centering people in Afrocentricity influenced simultaneously by their southern urban location. These theoretical concepts have been used to enlighten this researcher’s conclusions.

Methodology

Primary sources of archival materials on which this research is based is supplemented by oral history interviews conducted with artists, administrators, board members, former students, and audience members (see Appendix A). The interviews with Neighborhood Arts Center artists from the various arts disciplines, student participants, and audience members are used to corroborate and enliven unwritten records of the Neighborhood Arts Center’s cultural impact with “Art for People’s Sake” as its mission. Recording the collective experiences of these constituencies helped to alleviate speculation on the part of the researcher in areas where archival documents were lacking in substantive data.

Project Design & Data Collection

Oral history interviews were conducted with both individuals and groups. The participant artists knew best the story and enduring legacy of the Neighborhood Arts Center and its largely overlooked moment in history. The interview questions (see Appendix B) had as their purpose the gathering of information on the perceived impact of the Neighborhood Arts Center’s cultural programs. These findings were compared with their artistic intentions, often documented in grant applications and reports.

The project's design used grouped constituent interviews to keep the conversations specific to the Neighborhood Arts Center and aid in their mutual remembrances. Discussion by pairs or groups of interviewees on key elements of the Neighborhood Arts Center allowed for a more thorough analysis of the data collected with the permission of the participants. Audio and video interviews were digitally recorded from the thirty-five constituent interviews. All were transcribed which facilitated the qualitative analysis herein.³³

The archival records of the Neighborhood Arts Center, located at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African-American Culture and History (AARL), were completely processed and very accessible. A detailed finding aid categorized the organization's financial records and programmatic documents. The collection was supplemented by a digital archive of images, titled *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander's Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts Center*.³⁴

The Maynard Jackson Collection, on the other hand, was a newer acquisition housed at the Robert W. Woodruff Library Special Collections at the Atlanta University Center. Though it was not fully processed at the time of this research, the researcher was allowed special access using a finding aid draft as working document.³⁵ The files had not

³³ The recordings and transcripts will be deposited in Special Collections of the AUC Library, and the consent forms will be stored in the Clark Atlanta University (CAU) History Department. Duplicate recordings and transcripts have been deposited with the Auburn Avenue Research Library.

³⁴ Jim Alexander, "Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander's Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts Center," http://dbs.galib.uga.edu/cgi-bin/aNeighborhoodArtsCenter.cgi?ini=aNeighborhoodArtsCenter_galileo.ini&userid=galileo&_cc=1 (accessed June 30, 2011).

³⁵ Maynard Jackson Mayoral Administrative Records, Series B: First and Second Term Mayoral Records, Robert W. Woodruff Library Atlanta University Center.

received their final numeration, but the holdings were organized according to Jackson's terms of office, which easily facilitated the location of cultural material from his first administration. The Jackson collection has since published an online finding aid and initial notes have been synchronized with the library's final numeration.

The archival materials at both libraries have been systematically reviewed, and an organizational chronology (see Appendix C) has been developed based on the contents of material artifacts in both collections. Grant applications were reviewed to determine the financial stability of the organization both for programmatic intentions and for audience statistics. Interview questions were assembled based on the research questions and collected data. They were presented to interviewees by email prior to meetings and based on their relevance.

Other primary source components of the research were the more than two hundred and fifty articles on the Neighborhood Arts Center published in the *Atlanta Daily World* (*ADW*) and the forty references in *The Atlanta Journal* and the *Atlanta Constitution* newspapers. The *ADW* is the oldest African-American daily newspaper in Atlanta and is dedicated to news coverage of the community. It should be noted that during the time of the Neighborhood Arts Center, the Atlanta Journal/Constitution (*AJC*) had two separate editions, the morning *Constitution*, and the evening *Journal*. While the *ADW* provided the coverage of most events, the *AJC* offered insight as to the perceived significance or relevance of many Neighborhood Arts Center programs for the paper's white readership in Atlanta.

Limitations

Oral histories are a useful source of information, but they have their limitations as well. Some Neighborhood Arts Center staff members critical to this study are now deceased and their collective cultural memories lost forever.³⁶ While some remaining participants remembered details well, others required the assistance of facts shared by the researcher to remember details such as names and places from thirty-plus years prior to the interviews. Some of these oral remembrances, therefore, are presented by the interviewees with the caveat that with time and forgetfulness come some contradictions in facts. Details are at times limited by what participants are actually able to recall, and at others times by their willingness, or reluctance, to share publically.

Tracking down equal numbers of audience members and youth program participants proved challenging as well. The archival records rarely identified members or audience participants by name. There was not a sufficient number of people found in Atlanta, in the Mechanicsville neighborhood or elsewhere, who were able to offer an assessment of the Neighborhood Arts Center's impact on them as audience members, or students, is not proportional to identified artists and board members.

Chapter Organization

The following research is organized accordingly. Chapter 2 is a review of literature on the Black Arts Movement, black aesthetics, and cultural politics that frames

³⁶ Former Board President Dr. Otis T. Hammonds, for whom the Hammonds House Museum is named; former Neighborhood Arts Center activist and artist actress Georgia Allen; dancer Fred Taylor; artist and Neighborhood Arts Center director John Riddle; bookstore owner, WRFG board president, and Neighborhood Arts Center writer-in-resident Ebon Dooley; director Sandra Swans; actress Carol Mitchell Leon; and board member George Howell, Esq., are all deceased.

the study and points out the gap in scholarship pertaining to Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center. Chapter 3 and 4 provide the historical context of African-American cultural politics in Atlanta. Chapter 5 and 6 present the research findings for the first question on how the Neighborhood Arts Center fulfilled the Black Arts Movement's black aesthetic principle of "Art for People's Sake" in five themes that developed. They are as follows:

- 1) The NAC represented the juxtaposition between the individual and the community and local and national;
- 2) The NAC reached out and extended the arts to the masses, rather than just an emphasis on the black middle class and white supporters;
- 3) The NAC was distinctive in space and location;
- 4) The NAC seemed to provide more opportunities for women artists than other BAM organizations; and
- 5) The NAC had a specific mission to elevate the social and political consciousness of black people.

Chapter 7 and 8 detail the findings of the second research question on southern expressions of the Black Arts Movement particular to the cultural politics, race, and class dynamics of the time.

Finally, Chapter 9 summarizes and analyzes these research findings in the conclusion. Areas for further study are also suggested including the need for scholarship on individual artists and histories of many other Atlanta black cultural institutions that are Neighborhood Arts Center legacies, and thus leave of the Black Arts Movement. The research findings of how Atlanta's black cultural politics made an impact on the Black

Arts Movement in the South are revealed by this historical analysis of the Neighborhood Arts Center and how it met its “Art for People’s Sake” Black Arts Movement mission. The conclusion of this research delineates the Neighborhood Arts Center’s impact on the argument for regionalism in the Black Arts Movement and beyond. The family tree is a continuum of regional branches to the Black Arts Movement that is missing the Neighborhood Arts Center and the leaves it produced. This research corrects this omission.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

This review of the literature will analyze how scholars conceptualize black cultural aesthetics and politics in major metropolitan cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles to demonstrate how the same scholastic rigor is needed in researching arts developments in Atlanta, particularly as it pertains to the Neighborhood Arts Center. The argument here will attempt to explain why analyzing the cultural politics of a major metropolitan city such as Atlanta is essential to getting to the roots of the Neighborhood Arts Center's story as part of what literary critic Houston Baker, Jr. describes as the Black Arts Movement tree with its branches, or legacies, spreading from its trunk. The argument will also demonstrate the need to present a "bridge to the past" and engage in an "intergenerational" dialog on the southern expressions of the Black Arts Movement, as Baker recommends for all of the Black Arts Movements.¹ Such as dialog is necessary to address both the past origins of southern expressions of the Black Arts Movement and the enduring legacy which exists today.

Black Aesthetic Predecessors to the Black Arts Movement

While black aesthetics were debated in and around the Black Arts Movement of

¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Afterword: This Bridge Called 'Our Tradition': Notes on Blueblack, 'Round' Midnight, and Blacklight 'Connection,'" in Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts*, 369-373, particularly 372-373.

the 1960s and 1970s, movement theoreticians were not the first to address at this notion. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr., an African-American literary scholar at Harvard University, the roots of black aesthetic discussions began as early as 1900 with the New Negro Literary Movement. Pauline Hopkins wrote,

Art [is] . . . of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs—religious, political, and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history. . . .²

She stresses the intergenerational component.

W.E.B. Du Bois used *Crisis*, the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as a medium to further disseminate literary and visual works of art by people of color. His earlier 1903 treatise, titled *The Souls of Black Folk*, had already detailed the issue of the twentieth century would be the color line as blacks grappled with their double consciousness of being black and American.³ In 1926, he stated,

Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while

² Pauline Hopkins, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (New York: Oxford, 1900/1988). In the 1900s, black writers seemed to aspire to mainstream western culture, although in present day context, this quote seems Afrocentric. Many early 20th century black writers were criticized for their Western aesthetic assimilation. For more on Hopkins, see Thomas Cassidy, "Contending Contexts: Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*," *African American Review* 32, no. 4 (Winter, 1998): 661-672.

³ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Introduction by John Edgar Wideman (New York: Vintage Books Random House, 1903/1990), 8-9.

the other is stripped and silent.⁴

He knew the power of the arts and used it throughout his years at the publication. This early literary movement continued into the 1920s with the Harlem Renaissance's assemblage of art and artists of all disciplines, and continued in some form through the 1950s.⁵

Alain Locke, a Harvard-educated African-American philosopher, was a literary voice for black aesthetics in the 1920s with the emergence of the Harlem Renaissance Movement. Locke was criticized and sometimes ostracized as being too closely aligned with the forces of Eurocentric patrons. However, several mentions of Locke's ideas for a black art aesthetic can be found in his writings. These writings pre-date the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s showing that Locke deserves greater recognition for his contributions to this poignant concept.

As editor of the 1925 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, published during the Harlem Renaissance, Locke strongly promoted an African artistic impulse for visual artists, an ingredient which already existed in literature, theater, music, and dance.⁶ The earliest mention of Locke's ideas of black aesthetics appeared in the special Harlem issue of *Survey Graphics* from which *The New Negro* anthology was derived. African-American visual artist Aaron Douglas contributed the illustrative décor for

⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32, no. 6 (October 1926): 296.

⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge," *Time*, October 10, 1994, 74. The arts of the Harlem Renaissance were expanded to include music, dance, and the visual arts, in addition to the already established literary movement.

⁶ Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, with introduction by Arnold Rampersad (New York: Touchstone, 1925/1997).

Locke's special issue on the Harlem types, yet the magazine also included prints of African-American types naturalistically drawn by German artist Winold Reiss.⁷

Questions have been debated in the literature as to whether the subject matter made the art black, as in the case of Reiss, or did the nationality of the artist make the aesthetic black, as with Douglas. The subtle nuances to this argument from both sides explain why this question, to this day, remains central to current aesthetic considerations.

In "The Art of the Ancestors," Locke situates the continent of Africa in an African-American aesthetic in visual arts. He writes, "[T]here comes from the consideration of this ancient plastic art another modern and practical possibility and hope, that it may exert upon the artistic development of the American Negro the influence that it has already had upon modern European artists."⁸ The plastic arts for Locke represented African sculpture and its noted influence on European artists, such as Pablo Picasso, inspired the Cubist Movement. Locke felt the closer kinship between black art and black artists would produce even more dramatic results.⁹

Locke influenced younger artists of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. In 1926, Hughes' position, in "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," was that artists should "be free within ourselves," and not ashamed of

⁷ Aaron Douglas, an African-American art teacher at Fisk, and European artist Winold Reiss combined to illustrate the entire issue devoted to Harlem.

⁸ Locke, "Art of the Ancestors," *Survey Graphic* 53, no. 11 (March 1, 1925): 673. The African artwork referenced was part of the Barnes Foundation of Merion, Pennsylvania owned by Albert C. Barnes, who contributed "Negro Art and American" to Locke's anthology *The New Negro* (New York: Touchstone, 1925/1992), 19-25.

⁹ Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)," Paris, 1907, oil on canvas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was named for the bordello in the Carrer d' Avinyo (Avignon Street) or Barcelona's red-light district. See Laurie Schneider Adams, *Art Across Time*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002), 888, Fig. 25.2.

being an ethnic, then “Negro,” artist.¹⁰ This was uncharted waters as neither black nor white audiences fully embraced a black aesthetic.

In 1931, Locke wrote “The American Negro Artist.”¹¹ The aim of the work was “to express the race spirit and background as well as the individual skill and temperament of the artist.”¹² His reference to a “race spirit” implies that a black aesthetic existed. He firmly believed that the black artist should draw from the roots of his African heritage for themes to reflect in his works as much as, if not more than, European artists such as Picasso and others were doing. He referred to this as “their own racial milieu as a special province.”¹³ Locke defined this category of artists as “Africanists,” or those artists who derived their inspiration from the principles of African designs. He felt that this group of visual artists carried “the burden of the campaign for a so-called ‘Negro Art’.”¹⁴ In 1939, Locke described the black aesthetic as follows, “Like rum in punch that although far from being the bulk ingredient, still dominates the mixture, the Negro elements have in most instances very typical and dominating flavors, so to speak.”¹⁵ Locke is making reference to all of the African-American cultural influences on the nation in music, religion, literature, and slowly in the visual arts.

¹⁰ Langston Hughes, “The Negro and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation* 122, no. 3181 (June 23, 1926): 692-694.

¹¹ Alain Locke, “The American Negro as Artist,” *The American Magazine of Art* 23 (September 1931): 213-14.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 214.

¹⁴ Ibid., 215.

¹⁵ Alain Locke, “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture,” *Journal of Negro Education* 8 (July 1939): 521-529.

Locke's philosophy and presence were even felt in the South when Atlanta University, in 1942, began its Annual National Art Exhibition awards program in an effort to address the cultural needs of its constituency. At that time, segregated majority institutions did not allow black artists to participate in exhibitions. Resident visual artist Hale Woodruff invited Locke as the keynote speaker for the inaugural event. In the exhibit's catalog, Locke stated that the project represented "one of the ultimate goals of the whole art movement among Negroes . . . to encourage a healthy and representational art of the people with its roots in its own soil."¹⁶ In his writing and practice, Locke advocated for more African expressions in black art works and appreciated the fact that black aesthetics of varying types existed, in contrast to the one singular aesthetic that existed during the Black Arts Movement.

Locke's last propagandistic article published on black art appeared in June of 1953. Entitled "The Negro in the Arts," it summarized music, dance, theater and pictorial arts accomplishments. He stated:

At the height of the New Negro phase there was promise that African art would exert a special influence on the work of Negro American artists. After some experimental flurries, this did not fully blossom. The contacts with African sculpture were not as direct as they could and should have been; and there is no doubt that a more informed development in this direction could still be fruitful.¹⁷

¹⁶ Locke, quoted by Tina Dunkley, "Clark Atlanta University Galleries," in Richard J. Powell, Jock Reynolds, *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, with introduction by Kinshasha Holman Conwill (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press), 1999, 18. The date of Locke's address was April 26, 1942. See Robert V. Rozelle, Alvia Wardlaw and Maureen A. McKenna. *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), 65.

¹⁷ Locke, "The Negro in the Arts," *United Asia: International Magazine of Asian Affairs* 5 (June 1953): 177-181, particularly 181.

Locke's preference for sculpture as "more powerfully expressive" denoted his belief that the strongest ancestral connection existed with this form as opposed to painting, where he believed the particular aesthetic was slower to develop.¹⁸

Beginning in 1925, Locke made more than 300 literary contributions and was the earliest exemplar of a consistent promotion of a black aesthetic in African-American art, beginning forty years prior to the Black Arts Movement. Unfortunately, he was also indicative of classism present in and perpetuated by the field of fine arts, which exhibiting a preference for the visual form, a more Western aesthetic, over sculpture and other art forms. His sentiments were that the work of black artists did not yet measure up to that of western painters, where sculpture offered some equal footing.

The working definition for black aesthetics at that time preserved the manner of cultural customs extolled by Pauline Hopkins in 1900, contained the propaganda of politics according to W.E.B. Du Bois in 1926, and had the "rum" flavor of Africa described by Alain Locke in 1939. Early theoreticians were not set on one exclusively Afrocentric aesthetic, but rather on a black aesthetic that might accommodate multiple genres.

Black Aesthetics in the Black Arts Movement

The scholarly discussion of the Black Arts Movement in literature has a long and varied history of supporters and detractors since Hopkins, Du Bois, and Locke. This discussion sought the inclusion of other arts disciplines. Black Arts Movement theorists in the anthology, *The Black Aesthetic* (1971), edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., included such

¹⁸ Ibid., 178.

names as Maulana Ron Karenga, Larry Neal, and Hoyt Fuller. All set forth strong opinions about the arts, but in particular literature, where they urged artists to follow one, or “the,” Black aesthetic.¹⁹ This singular opinion was a shift from Locke’s position of several aesthetic pursuits among black visual, as well as literary, artists. It was in this anthology that Karenga popularized and nationalized the concept of “Art for People’s Sake” as the black aesthetic all artists should pursue.

Literature in the vein of racial uplift and black cultural nationalism has been perpetuated from the Harlem Renaissance to the present day by such poets and publishers as Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Toni Cade Bambara, Dudley Randall, and Hoyt Fuller.²⁰ Anthologies such as *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (1968) edited by Larry Neal and LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), Toni Cade Bambara’s edited work, entitled *The Black Women: An Anthology* (1970), and Dudley Randall’s historical compilation, entitled *Black Poets* (1971), mark the transition of the late 1960s to 1970s, the heated times of Black Power, the Black Arts Movement, and black women's struggles for inclusion.²¹

¹⁹ Addison Gayle, Jr. *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971). See particularly Hoyt Fuller, “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” 3-11; Larry Neal, “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic,” 12-15; and Ron Karenga, “Black Cultural Nationalism,” 31-37; and Addison Gayle, Jr., “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic,” 38-45.

²⁰ Langston Hughes, “The Negro and the Racial Mountain,” *The Nation* 122, no. 3181 (June 23, 1926): 692-694. Sterling Brown, *Southern Road, Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974, ©1932); Gwendolyn Brooks, *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper, 1945); Hoyt W. Fuller, “Toward A Black Aesthetic,” *The Critic*, (April-May, 1968), 70-73, in “Hoyt W. Fuller Collection,” Atlanta University Center Archives, Box 50, Folder 2; Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement,” *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (Summer, 1968): 29-39.

²¹ LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, ed. *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (New York: William Marrow, 1968); Toni Cade Black Arts Movementbara, ed. *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Signet/New American Library, 1970); and Randall Dudley, ed., *Black Poets* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971).

Rhetorical discussions and debates around black arts and aesthetics in literature can be traced through Black Arts Movement interpretations of Stephen Henderson, then a professor of English at Morehouse College, in his book *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972), and continued with Houston Baker's book *Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (1980).²² Moving forward to the late 1980s and 1990s, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), set the stage for the debates that followed.²³

At one end of the spectrum, Gates argued that the Black Arts Movement was the "most short-lived of all [movements]." ²⁴ David Lionel Smith, on the other end, in an article titled "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics" (1991), believed that only "rudimentary work" had been done and "careful and balanced scholarship" was needed.²⁵ Smith's approach has withstood the test of time as there has been a dearth of scholarship on the many angles of Black Art, Black Power, cultural nationalism, feminism, and sexual orientation.²⁶

²² Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*, An Institute of the Black World Book (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973); Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

²³ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 107-108, 237.

²⁴ Gates, "Black Creativity: On the Cutting Edge," 74.

²⁵ David Lionel Smith, "The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics," *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 93-110.

²⁶ William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and *Black Camelot: African-American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Madhu Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Eddie S. Claude, ed., *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Adolf L. Reed, Jr., *Race, Politics, and Culture: Critical Essays on the*

Literature particularly important to this research on the Neighborhood Arts Center includes these more recent works: James Smethurst's book, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005); Cheryl Clarke's discussion, "*After Mecca*": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (2005); and Lisa Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, editors of *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (2006); *Radicalism in the South Since Reconstruction* (2006) edited by Chris Green, Rachel Rubin, and James Smethurst; and the latest installment, titled *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level* (2010), edited by Peniel F. Joseph.²⁷

Smethurst probes the groundbreaking concept of regional manifestations and national coherence of the Black Arts Movement by exploring its cultural and intellectual institutions which include periodicals, universities, and artistic groups. He shows that movement diversity existed in the Midwest (Chicago and Detroit), the West Coast (San Francisco and Los Angeles) and the South (Nashville, Atlanta, and New Orleans). The

Radicalism of the 1960s (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1986); James C. Hall, *Mercy, Mercy me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jerry Gafilo Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); K. Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Wahneema Lubiano, "'But Compared to What?': Reading Realism, Representation, and Essentialism in *School Daze*, *Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 253-82; Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Winston Napier, "From the Shadows: Houston Baker's Move toward a Postnationalist Appraisal of the Black Aesthetic," *New Literary History* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 159-74.

²⁷ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Cheryl Clarke, "*After Mecca*": *Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); and Lisa Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, ed., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Chris Green, Rachel Rubin, and James Smethurst, ed., *Radicalism in the South Since Reconstruction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2006); Peniel F. Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2010).

author indicates that although regional differences could be readily seen in the art produced, regional institutions remained at the core of creating a national, somewhat centralized, Black Arts Movement. Smethurst does not approach gender and sexual politics prevalent in Black Arts Movement discourse, but he does tie many Black Arts Movement accomplishments to his research interest in communism.

Even though his title says the “70s,” the scope of his project ends in 1975, the year the Neighborhood Arts Center opened. Thus, there is no inclusion of Atlanta’s Neighborhood Arts Center, a Black Arts Movement cultural institution, being part of a continuation, or legacy of the Black Arts Movement.²⁸ While certain regions had strong, community-based iterations of the Black Arts Movement, Smethurst claims that radicalism was spawned by faculty at southern educational institutions, perhaps due to the influence of the civil rights movement in the south. He implies that the Black Arts Movement failed because of Atlanta. This in depth research on the Neighborhood Arts Center refutes such claims.

Cheryl Clarke’s book, *“After Mecca,”* took its title from the prominent African-American author Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem of the same name. Clarke does focus on race, gender, and sexuality intersections which are not found in Smethurst’s book.²⁹ Her work extends beyond the traditional Black Arts Movement time line limit of 1970 to cover the period from 1968 to 1978, thus offering an example of why Black Arts Movement

²⁸ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism*, 370. Smethurst interviewed both Ebon Dooley and Ed Spriggs, and mentioned “black regime politics in Atlanta” as well as Maynard Jackson without naming the Neighborhood Arts Center.

²⁹ Cheryl Clarke, *“After Mecca”: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

periodization needs to be more fluid. She, contrary to the male scholars, looks at the black aesthetic espoused by Gayle's 1971 book through the eyes of black women and their literature. Just as Clarke has gone beyond the traditional envelope of time expected for the movement, this research will also delve into a timeline beyond the traditional rubric of the Black Arts Movement by exploring the Neighborhood Arts Center's responses to black aesthetics and black consciousness which continued the movement's tenets through the 1980s.

More recent literature on the movement has been supplied by Lisa Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, editors of *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (2006).³⁰ This work takes on the scholarly debate by offering responses that are divided into sections corresponding to Black Arts Movement cities and sites, genres and ideologies, and lastly, predecessors, peers, and legacies. *New Thoughts* includes and supports Smethurst's regional approach used for Black Arts Movement literature, and it places the movement along a continuum.³¹ The editors' purpose is stated as follows:

What were the principal cities and sites of the movement? How were art forms fused and synthesized, and why were criteria for creating and evaluating art so hotly contested during the period? And what are the links between the Black Arts Movement and other socio-cultural movements? Who are the movement's predecessors and peers, and what are its legacies?³²

By approaching these questions, many of the *New Thoughts* scholars also expand the start

³⁰ Lisa Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, ed., *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

³¹ Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement and Historically Black Colleges and Universities," in Collins and Crawford, 75-91.

³² Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts*, ix.

and end of the period.

Their approach is also expanded with essays that cover the visual arts, photography, music, and the creation of numerous institutional spaces and places for black art.³³ To use Baker's analogy of a tree with roots, branches, and "fallen leaves,"³⁴ some of the essays' "new thoughts" have "branches" that lead to Atlanta, where the Black Arts Movement tenets continued and flourished, and produced "Black Arts Movement leaves" in the city through the 1980s. This analogy thus strengthens the idea of revisiting the movement's dissemination and southern impact, particularly in light of this research, on Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center during its existence from 1975 to 1990.

Joseph's *Neighborhood Rebels*, the most recent publication pertinent to this study, has Smethurst offering a more refined look at the Black Arts Movement in Atlanta thus correcting some of his earlier presumptions made in his 2005 contribution.³⁵ While detailing a history of "contradictory character," Smethurst finally gives Atlanta some credit stating, "nowhere else was public support of the arts such a grassroots issue and so prominently tied up with black political and economic empowerment (and white backlash

³³ Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. For visual arts, see Margo Natalie Crawford, "Black Light on the *Wall of Respect*: The Chicago Black Arts Movement," 23-42; for photography, see Cherise Smith, "Moneta Sleet, Jr. as Active Participant: The Selma March and the Black Arts Movement," 210-226 and Erina Duganne, "Transcending the Fixity of Race: The Kamoinge Workshop and the Question of a 'Black Aesthetic' in Photography," 187-209; for music, see Wendy S. Walters, "Blackness in Present Future Tense: Broadside Press, Motown Records, and Detroit Techno," 117-133 ; and for institutional examples, see Mary Ellen Lennon, "A Question of Relevancy: New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968-1971," 92-116.

³⁴ Houston Baker, Jr., "Afterword," in Collins and Crawford, *New Thoughts*, 369.

³⁵ James Smethurst, "The Black Arts Movement in Atlanta," in Peniel F. Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, 2010), 173-190.

toward that empowerment).”³⁶ The Neighborhood Arts Center is finally named as one of the non-HBCU, grassroots institutions.³⁷ While Ebon Dooley and Michael Lomax are given the majority credit for the NAC’s establishment, other prominent voices will be revealed in this research.

Cultural Politics: Urban Manifestations in Chicago, Detroit, and California

Three scholars and their books peculiar to black cultural politics in major urban centers are listed here in chronological order: Bill V. Mullen’s *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-1946* (1999); Suzanne E. Smith’s *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (1999); and Scot Brown’s *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (2003).³⁸ Mullen’s discussion was the most applicable to this research because his approach included several arts disciplines. The literary forms were used such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks. The visual artists were represented by Charles White and Elizabeth Catlett working in the South Side Community Arts Center (a WPA project). *The Chicago Defender*, the black community newspaper, and the political pressures of the period were also shown to have a strong impact on cultural production. Mullen includes the struggles for public funding and the consequences for those aligning themselves with people, causes, or groups that supported less popular

³⁶ Ibid., 188.

³⁷ Ibid., 184-85, 87.

³⁸ Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-1946* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Scot Brown’s *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2003).

political opinions or beliefs particularly those of the Communist Party.³⁹

The complex issues that Mullen presented for discussion were debates about class and the arts, about the rising black middle-class, and about what art forms were most accessible to the people. Race and culture consciousness have a long history, as they were certainly present during the Depression and war years of the 1930s and 1940s and are still relevant to this discussion of the Neighborhood Arts Center today. For the current research, Mullen's approach to location (Chicago in this case) and art forms (multidisciplinary) also uses the conceptual framework of simultaneity which are relevant to Atlanta and the Neighborhood Arts Center.

Cultural historians Suzanne Smith's and Scot Brown's books deal with culture and race issues of the turbulent 1960s. Smith's approach to the black music industry and the city of Detroit, in *Dancing in the Street*, is an aesthetic look at the internal and external consequences of Berry Gordy's Motown Music business decisions that ultimately represented the black race locally and around the world. The cultural considerations and political implications included promoting the black aesthetics of Motown: the physical appearance, dress and image of the performers; minimal use of race recordings, such as the poetry of Langston Hughes; and how, when, and where to align the company's music, whether in the struggle for Civil Rights or on the Ed Sullivan Show.⁴⁰

Brown's book *Fighting for US* is similar to the current research discussion in that

³⁹ Mullen, *Popular Fronts*, 75-105.

⁴⁰ Smith, *Dancing in the Street*, 139-180.

the author approaches cultural politics through the eyes of one institution, Karenga's US Organization, and its counter-response to their politics. In the chapter titled "The Politics of Culture: The US Organization and the quest for Black Unity," Brown explores the implications of US programs, such as the creation of holidays like Kwanzaa and the Malcolm X Memorial Observation, and support for the unification of cultural organizations to facilitate the attainment of a political goal.⁴¹ The current research builds on these California examples, leading readers to visualize Atlanta black cultural politics, adding such nuances as race and class issues, to further elaborate on Atlanta's cultural style during the Neighborhood Arts Center period.

While scholars today feel a definitive, singular black aesthetic is unrealistic, if not undesirable, this was the charge of Black Arts Movement theoreticians of the 1960s and 1970s to black artists of all disciplines. Pauline Hopkins forged new paths in black literature while Du Bois recognized very early the propagandistic attributes, the political implications, and the value of the arts. Locke also understood culture's power and pressed for a black aesthetic in the visual arts as a strategy to gain respect in the eyes of others, regardless of what his actual political motive may have been.

By the late 1960s, Karenga had taken the black cultural politics of the Négritude Movement to a nationalist, Pan-African level during the Black Arts Movement, thus creating and popularizing such activities as the Kwanzaa holiday, African renaming ceremonies and language use, and heightening political engagement to include the African Diaspora. The cultural politics of a black aesthetic, thus, stretch as far back as

⁴¹ Brown, *Fighting for US*, 74-106, particularly 75.

Hopkins, Du Bois, Locke, and Hughes, and were present during Chicago's Popular Front period, Detroit's Motown experience, and Los Angeles' Black Power era.

What is absent from the literature is a fuller analysis of Atlanta's cultural politics during the Black Arts Movement and its legacies. It is best exemplified by the Neighborhood Arts Center and the black cultural politics of this urban city, beginning with Maynard Jackson's administration in the early 1970s and extending through the late 1980s into Mayor Andrew Young's administration. The historical context of Atlanta, a city too busy to hate, presents a picture to visualize black cultural politics of the 1970s and 1980s where race and class dynamics made the Neighborhood Arts Center not only a necessity but a successful reality. The research that follows regarding the Neighborhood Arts Center broadens the scholarly discussion by giving specific, multidisciplinary, and institutional examples and programmatic responses to the Black Arts Movement's aesthetic charge of "Art for People's Sake," and it challenges the periodization of the movement.

Oral History Methodology

An integral part of the primary research for this project includes oral history. Though the professionalism of the oral history field improved during the time period of the 1930's to 1950's, modern oral historians have been concerned with theorizing subjectivity, memory, and authorship.⁴² Oral history collections by Federal Works Progress employees included narratives by former slaves, recorded music of Native

⁴² Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in Thomas L. Carlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006), 19-42; "Historians and Oral History," in Paul Richard Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25-81.

Americans, and recollections of soldiers during World War II. Interdisciplinary oral history has included journalism, legal depositions, reminiscences, memoirs, family histories and more, according to historian Keith A. Erikson.⁴³ More recent regional oral history projects of note include *Living Atlanta: An oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (1990/2005) and *Hand on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (2010).⁴⁴ Overall, there has been increased acceptance by historians of oral evidence as both valid and useful.⁴⁵

According to Norton Wheeler, early oral history was concerned with acceptance, whereas more recent methodological issues are ones of access and authority.⁴⁶ His approach incorporates objectivity, interdisciplinary methodology, and shared authority. Wheeler feels that an interdisciplinary methodology of documentary evidence, content analysis, and participant interviews are the best form of checks and balances for accuracy and plausibility. Some historians argue that a researcher gains access to information only at the expense of objectivity. Kirin Narayan explained that objectivity was not necessarily

⁴³ Keith A. Erikson, "Method and Memory in the Midwestern 'Lincoln Inquiry': Oral Testimony and Abraham Lincoln Studies, 1865-1938," *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 2 (2007): 49-72, particularly 72.

⁴⁴ Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens and London: The Atlanta History Center and The University of Georgia Press, 1990/2005); and Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner, ed., *Hand on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ Alistair Thomson, "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History," *The Oral History Review* 34:1 (Winter/Spring 2007): 49-70, particularly 51. Ronald J. Grele, "Oral History as Evidence," in Thomas L. Charlton et al., ed., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006), 43-101.

⁴⁶ Norton Wheeler, "Gaining Access and Sharing Authority: What I Learned about Oral History from an Episode in U.S.-China Transnationalism," *The Oral History Review* 31, no. 2 (2004): 53-68.

the goal of history.⁴⁷ The position should be that all knowledge is partial; therefore oral histories offer an acceptable method for getting to part of the story.

While Wheeler and Narayan offer approaches to access, authority is the other aspect of oral history methodology. Michael Frisch presents the most acceptable approach by calling for “shared authority” which includes scholars and participants working together.⁴⁸ As a scholar, Wheeler warns that oral histories fall somewhere between being treated as another document and being seen as absolute truth without need “. . . for mediation or interpretation by the historian.” Wheeler views oral history as a special kind of evidence, and the scholar’s role then is to “creatively and fairly incorporate this evidence.”⁴⁹

Where shared authority is one approach, Neal Norrick warns the oral historian regarding collaborative remembering between the narrator and the interviewer.⁵⁰ As the researcher, being aware of the line between remembering and constructing is essential. In other words, the narrator, as storyteller, may become overly concerned with gaps in memory that cause the narrator’s story to go off course. Norrick cautioned that interviewers should learn “to observe talk about remembering and forgetfulness as cues suggesting certain lines of inquiry over others to advance the interview and to avoid

⁴⁷ Kirin Narayan, “How Native is a ‘Native’ Anthropologist?” in *Situated Lives: Gender and Culture in Everyday Life*, ed. Louise Lamphere, Helena Rogone, and Patricia Zavella (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 33, 37.

⁴⁸ Michael Frisch, “Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process,” *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2003), 111-113.

⁴⁹ Wheeler, “Gaining Access and Sharing Authority,” 68.

⁵⁰ Neal R. Norrick, “Talking about Remembering and Forgetfulness in Oral History Interviews,” *The Oral History Review* 32, no. 2 (2005): 1-20.

awkward moments for the narrator.”⁵¹ Therefore, shared authority and collaborative remembering have their warning signs.

There are other instances where narrators may “construct dialogue” as opposed to recalling, as described by Deborah Tannen.⁵² Norrick shows “how narrators can construct dialogue based on assumptions about the context rather than pure memory.”⁵³ Some narration is based on the speaker’s current assumptions about past events, known as “symbolic evaluation.”⁵⁴ Lastly, with oral historians, negotiating voice becomes important. Deborah Gershenowitz particularly shares the “curious triangle” between subject, author, and editor.⁵⁵ Historians have to be aware of the issue of what the subject did not say. It is important to understand how to reconcile intentional omissions. Individual stories in transcripts open windows to connecting other historical issues such as gender, place, and historical context. There exist many compelling stories in her transcribed interviews, but the goal was to move from the transcript to the life or lives that influenced history and ultimately were history.⁵⁶

Clifford Kuhn’s *Living Atlanta* is unique in that the project began as a documentary for radio. The subsequent book offered an organized format of themed

⁵¹ Ibid., 19.

⁵² Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁵³ Norrick, “Talking about Remembering,” 18.

⁵⁴ William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

⁵⁵ Deborah A. Gershenowitz, “Negotiating Voices: Biography and the Curious Triangle Between Subject, Author, and Editor,” *The Oral History Review* 32:2 (2005): 71-76.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 73.

topics (neighborhoods, education, leisure, politics, health and religion, etc.), as well as an extended biography of a participant's life exemplifying the period. The researcher also found useful the alphabetized appendix of interviewees and their connection to Atlanta. *Hands on the Freedom Plow* is a recent oral history lifting the voices of fifty-two women who give personal accounts of their involvement with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Their unique stories span from 1961 to 1969 but show how their lives were touched by segregation in the 1940s and 1950s. While the participants are divided regionally, a substantial section provides insight into the SNCC National Office located in Atlanta.⁵⁷ The book is a much needed womanist approach to a historical record dominated by stories of men.

Where Narayan rightly states that oral history only offers part of the story, Wheeler's oral history methodology of shared authority, employed here as an interdisciplinary approach, offers a fuller narrative option. As an art historian and native of Atlanta, this researcher had acceptance and access as an "insider" to the arts of the city making interviews comfortable and participants more accessible. Access was also achieved based on social levels of intellectual, professional, and elite status, but none interfered with objectivity.

Conclusion

The following research on Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center (1975-1990), using archival research, oral history methodology, and narrative analysis, will enhance the regional discussions of the Black Arts Movement as set forth by Smethurst's work.

⁵⁷ *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, Faith S. Holsaert et al., ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 299-394.

The research offers an alternative to the assertion that southern expressions of this movement were generated solely by the historically black colleges and universities of their cities, as the Neighborhood Arts Center was a grassroots, multidisciplinary, place and space for black aesthetics, black cultural nationalism, and the perpetuation of the Black Arts Movement through the 1980s, and possibly beyond.

During and after making a full examination of the cultural history of the Neighborhood Arts Center while simultaneously looking at the historical context and culture of Atlanta, this study desires to offer a clearer understanding of the local and national scope of the Black Arts Movement and its manifestation in Atlanta's black cultural politics. The research also offers an alternative explanation for the movement's demise in Atlanta by turning attention to the institutional Black Arts Movement legacies the Neighborhood Arts Center and its mission represented. There is a definite continuum that can be traced from the New Negro Literary Movement at the dawn of the twentieth century to the Harlem Renaissance, then to the Black Arts Movement. With literature, like *New Thoughts*, that continuum is perpetuated to include present day twenty-first century legacies.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In literary critic Houston Baker's *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* epilogue, the movement is eloquently made analogous to a family tree of roots and branches, and with some now defunct institutions representing "fallen leaves."¹ The following historical context of the city of Atlanta leading up to the establishment of the Neighborhood Arts Center (NAC) will certainly strengthen the depiction of the southern roots of the Black Arts Movement leading to Atlanta. The environment that created the Neighborhood Arts Center, Atlanta's "fallen leaf," is also responsible for many offspring in the forms of institutions and artists. Some of these legacies, newer branches and leaves, include: the Bureau of Cultural Affairs, the Fulton County Arts Council, Southwest Arts Center and the West End Performing Arts Center, the Atlanta Life Insurance Company's Art Annuals, and the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF).

Atlanta's history and development changed significantly during the 1970s following the 1969 election of Maynard Jackson, the city's first African-American vice mayor. Shortly thereafter, dramatic changes in the racial and political landscape opened new opportunities for cultural growth. In order to visualize the cultural politics indicative of the research's title, "Our Art Itself was Our Activism," an historical review of some of

¹ Houston Baker, Jr., "Afterword: This Bridge Called 'Our Tradition,' Notes on Blueblack, 'Round' Midnight Blacklight 'Connection'," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 369-373.

the pertinent socioeconomic and political factors present leading up to that time is necessary. Together it will help the understanding of the cultural politics of biracial interaction that existed in the city at the time.²

The shift from segregation to embracing a multicultural landscape was certainly gradual. Atlanta's socioeconomic and political makeup was described by many interview participants using the phrase "it was a time when" to explain the measured historical differences of the preceding thirty plus years. It was a time when groups worshipped on their Sabbath separately, were educated separately Monday through Friday, and lived separately seven days a week. It was a time of transition marked by both social and economic factors described in this chapter. The political factors will be addressed in the next chapter. The following review uses oral history excerpts to attest to the differences and the balancing of power between races that took place at the roots of Atlanta's branch of the Black Arts Movement.

Socioeconomic Factors

Sweet Auburn Avenue is where this story of transition begins. Originally named "Wheat Street," in 1893 the name of the thoroughfare was changed to Auburn Avenue. The historic street "Sweet Auburn" Avenue derived from Maynard Jackson's grandfather John Wesley Dobbs, Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masonic Temple. Dobbs chose the

² Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989); Herman Mason, *Going Against the Wind: A Pictorial History of African-Americans in Atlanta* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992); Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising: The Invention of an International City, 1946-1996* (Marietta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1996); Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Auburn: The Saga of Two Families and the Making of Atlanta* (New York: Scribner, 1996); and Alton Hornsby, Jr., *A Short History of Black Atlanta, 1847-1990* (Atlanta: The APEX Museum, 2003).

name from the 1770 Oliver Goldsmith poem, titled *The Deserted Village* and the line “Sweet Auburn! Loveliest village of the plain / Where health and plenty cheer’d the laboring swain . . .”³ It became “Sweet Auburn” because black businesses in segregated Atlanta thrived up and down this access road. The area became, in essence, the city’s “Black Wall Street,” or in Atlanta terms the “Black Peachtree Street,” an economic center for blacks, as comparable to all the white-owned businesses which were on Peachtree Street, the city’s main concourse through the downtown district.⁴ Black-owned businesses on Sweet Auburn Avenue were so successful that they became the targets of the infamous 1906 Race Riot, started by allegations published of four assaults by black men on local white women.⁵

The Oddfellows Building, an historic six-story structure, was erected on Auburn Avenue between 1912 and 1913 for Dobb’s Grand United Order of Oddfellows of America. The original structure was complete with an auditorium, called the Annex, which also served as a movie house and represented one of the few Atlanta venues where African Americans could be seated.⁶ The Prince Hall Temple was constructed on Auburn Avenue, in 1937, helping to strengthen the economic alliance among African Americans made necessary by Jim Crow segregation.

³ Pomarantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Auburn*, 124-127.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark Bauerline, *Negrophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001), 133-219. The riot occurred September 22-24, 1906. Also see Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens and London: The Atlanta History Center and the University of Georgia Press, 1990, 2005).

⁶ Conversation with Dr. Matthew Bernstein, Chair of the Emory University Film and Media Studies Department, June 14, 2011. Noted that the movie house was called “Bailey’s” and that five to eight black movie houses existed in Atlanta at any given time.

Mainstay institutions in the black community included several churches: Big Bethel A.M.E., the oldest church begun in 1847; Wheat Street Baptist Church, pastored by the later Reverend Dr. Peter James Bryant; and Ebenezer Baptist Church, pulpit to Reverend A.D. Williams and Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr. Black-owned banks such as Citizens Trust Bank and Mutual Federal Savings & Loan, insurance companies such as Alonzo Herndon's Atlanta Life, and mortuaries such as Haugabrooks Funeral Home, positioned themselves along Auburn Avenue to further enhancing the existing cultural anchors. The Royal Peacock night club, WERD 860 AM radio, and the only African-American daily in America for many years, C.A. Scott's *Atlanta Daily World*, all found a home on Sweet Auburn Avenue along with other restaurants and shops.⁷

These historical nuggets about Auburn Avenue are important to this story because the school building which originally housed the Neighborhood Arts Center was named in honor of Wheat Street Baptist Church's Reverend Bryant, a Morehouse College graduate. The church and Bryant were responsible for organizing a self-help association in 1904. This organization was purchased a year later by former slave Alonzo Herndon and became the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, a host of later art annual exhibitions assisted by the NAC.⁸ The Peter James Bryant School, built in 1910 and located in the Mechanicsville community discussed below, was originally known as the Georgia Avenue School. The Board of Education later changed its name to honor Bryant as the demographics of the area shifted from a majority Jewish community working as

⁷ Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Auburn*, 189-191.

⁸ The Herndon Home, "Biographical Note," Atlanta Life Insurance Company Photographic Print Collections, <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/herndon/atlantailifephotos.html> (accessed July 18, 2009).

mechanics for the railroad (hence the name “Mechanicsville”) to a struggling, black, overcrowded neighborhood.

Mechanicsville Community

Georgia Institute of Technology historian Ronald Bayor, in *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, offers an interesting historical perspective on the Georgia Avenue, Mechanicsville, and Summerhill neighborhoods of Atlanta in which the Neighborhood Arts Center was situated. In the 1960s, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was involved with the neighborhood associations in organizing against the city’s white administration for services including the 1963 effort by the Georgia Avenue-Pryor Street Civic League to get a traffic light at an intersection where African-American children had been killed. The Atlanta Project’s campaign for the south side included recreational facilities, street lights, and other basic civil services. Pressure and threats of racially motivated violence, similar to the riots in the Watts area in the summer of 1965 in Los Angeles, California, finally prompted then Mayor Ivan Allen to create a biracial Citizen’s Advisory Committee for Urban Renewal.⁹

The focus of municipal attention on black neighborhoods, however, was not sustained. The city’s eminent domain statute was used to facilitate the construction of the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium in 1965, which resulted in the displacement of African-American residents and the destruction of needed housing in the black community, often replaced with empty promises from city officials. Not until the Summerhill riot in September of 1966 in a neighborhood adjacent to Mechanicsville did the area get the city’s attention. SNCC, and Kwame Turé (then Stokely Carmichael), were accused of

⁹ Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 136-147.

instigating unrest.¹⁰ The urban reform component included in the Civil Rights struggle was beginning to work. The neighborhood atmosphere that would house the Neighborhood Arts Center almost ten years later, in 1975, was in part a result of the fallout from these turbulent times.

The Economics of Housing

A dichotomy of race as well and economic class perpetuated within Atlanta's black community, creating a virtual "tale of two cities." Not only did poor African-Americans suffer from negligent public services and inadequate housing, there were the constant issues of unemployment, overcrowded schools, and few, if any, recreational facilities. The African-American community in Atlanta was in reality two separate communities, if not separate worlds. One was privileged, stable, and upwardly mobile; the other was under-employed, under-educated, and under-class.

While the creation of sports arenas promised economic advantages for the city, the results for the black community were mixed at best. The negative impact of displaced housing was not offset by the further expansion of the black middle class created when, in the late 1960s and 1970s, professional sports, such as the Atlanta Braves baseball and Hawks basketball teams, came into the city. Carlton Molette, Neighborhood Arts Center's first chairman of the board, recalled that the exclusive Cascade Road area of Atlanta was all woods and owned by the families of white airline pilots from Delta and Eastern Airlines. He stated, "When Walt Hazard, a UCLA, John Madden legacy and the first black UCLA head coach, and Bill Bridges bought houses on Village Drive,

¹⁰ Ibid., 139.

immediately the whole block was for sale.”¹¹ The Mangum Road block also went up for sale because Hank Aaron, an African-American baseball player for the Atlanta Braves, bought a home on that street.¹² The interesting housing dynamics of the South made racial tensions more real than imagined, regardless of economic class.

The Economics of Class

Both Molette and John Eaton felt class, social exposure, and race were key factors to Atlanta’s integration and biracial balance. According to Molette, the white, college-educated military officers working at Fort McPherson made the difference when voting on issues. Upwardly mobile and benefitting from two to three generations of wealth, they became mentors to middle-class African Americans. Conversely, the other class of whites, college-educated or not, felt displaced. Eaton left the Neighborhood Arts Center as Deputy Director in 1981 and joined to the Southern Arts Federation as a middle level manager working with nine state arts councils with all white middle-level managers. It provided a challenge. Eaton found himself being called an “uppity Negro” because he had been mentored by lawyers who wined and dined at the exclusive Capital City and Commerce Clubs in downtown Atlanta.¹³

Black Atlanta’s Social Culture

The gradual development of the southern branch of the Black Arts Movement germinated from the historically black college and university system at the Atlanta

¹¹ Carlton Molette, Carlton Molette and John Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 30A-B.

¹² Ibid. The Braves baseball team moved to Atlanta from Milwaukee in 1966. Aaron broke Babe Ruth’s record in 1974 with his 715th home run.

¹³ John Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 32A.

University Center as scholar James Smethurst alluded to in the review of literature. The black church was another source.¹⁴ Cultural expressions spread through the creation of non-traditional institutions throughout the Civil Rights Movement such as the Harambee singers, featuring Bernice Johnson Reagon and fundraising programs. The next wave of creation to follow came from more traditional institutions such as community arts centers, museums, and theaters supported by the government. Michael Lomax, head of the Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs (BCIA) at the time of the Neighborhood Arts Center, explains:

[T]here's been a long history of artists, of African Americans, pushing hard for artistic expression and institutions in this community. There was a time when [artistic expression] was only in the colleges, then this was expanded to being a kind of proletarian art that came out of the Civil Rights Movement but wasn't looking to build traditional institutions, and then you had government involvement and the emergence of traditional institutions¹⁵

The progression from colleges to civil rights-inspired manifestations to more traditional institutions is the path next described in more detail.

The following cultural history looks at the rich soil tilled to make the Atlanta branch of the Black Arts Movement that cultivated the city's first publicly-funded, grass-roots, black arts institution, the Neighborhood Arts Center.

The traditional venues for black art were in the AU Center which consisted of Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University), and Morris Brown College. There were attempts during the Civil Rights Movement to

¹⁴ Big Bethel A.M.E. Church has mounted a dramatic presentation of *Heaven Bound* since the 1930s.

¹⁵ Michael Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, 12.

expand these offerings to off-campus institutions. The Atlanta Center for Black Arts (ACBA), the Institute of the Black World (IBW), and the King Center were among them. The city then saw the emergence of traditional spaces dedicated to the arts and black culture such as Just Us Theatre Company (1976), the Phoenix Arts & Theatre Company (1976), the African Panoramic Experience known as the APEX Museum (1978), and the Arts Exchange (1984).¹⁶

Lomax's influence was instrumental in assisting Emeritus Director Edward Spriggs with the creation of the Hammonds House Museum (1986), named for Neighborhood Arts Center's board chairman, Dr. Otis Thrash Hammonds, after he passed in 1985.¹⁷ Lomax would also be instrumental in the formation of the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History (AARL), in 1994, which houses the "Negro History Collection" of the Atlanta-Fulton County Library System started in 1921 on Auburn Avenue. All of these institutions demonstrated the Atlanta's growth and ability to open doors for cultural opportunity. The creation of the Neighborhood Arts Center, in 1975, was the institutional catalyst that bridged these periods.

Influence of the Atlanta University Center

W.E.B. Du Bois, renowned sociologist and historian at Atlanta University from 1897 to 1910, and chair of sociology from 1934 to 1944, saw arts as propaganda potential

¹⁶ "Just Us Theatre, 1976," Neighborhood Arts Center Collections, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, GA, 91-009-14.019; "Biographical/Historical Notes," Phoenix Arts & Theatre Company, Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta, GA, aar198-002.

¹⁷ Lenn Sisson, "Otis T. Hammonds Dies; was Doctor, Art Patron," Atlanta Journal and Constitution, June 16, 1985, 7B.

as early as 1900 when he was approached to mount an exhibition, titled “The New Negro,” at the Paris Exposition.¹⁸ His treatise, thirty-five years since emancipation, was “an honest, straight forward exhibit of a small nation of people, picturing their life and development without apology or gloss, and above all made by themselves.”¹⁹ The term “New Negro” first appeared after a reporter heard Booker T. Washington’s speech at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition, and asked “Is he a New Negro?”²⁰ Art historian Deborah Willis found a photograph in the papers of Booker T. Washington at the Library of Congress, dated October 16, 1900, that had “old” and “new” written on a single image with a just-off-the-farm, ex-slave in wrinkled pants and coat on the left, and a younger man in a tie, hat, and suit on the right.²¹ This offered visual rhetoric to support this concept.

Du Bois’ impressive exhibit included 360 images, and a bibliography that included 1,400 titles, 200 books, and 150 periodicals published by African Americans.²² The Du Bois display attempted to show how successfully blacks had assimilated into all areas of nineteenth century expectations, and that art would enhance the reputation of and

¹⁸ David Levering Lewis and Deborah Willis, *A Small Nation of People: W.E.B. Du Bois and African-American Portraits of Progress* (New York: Amistad, 2003), 39.

¹⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The American Negro in Paris,” *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 22 (November 1900), reproduced in *Writings by W.E.B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus Thompson, 1982), 1:88.

²⁰ L.W.B., “Is He a New Negro?” *Chicago Inter Ocean*, September 28, 1895, in *Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, et al. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 4:34.

²¹ Lewis and Willis, *A Small Nation of People*, 52-53.

²² *Ibid.*, 13-17. More than 50 million visitors attended the world’s fair between April and November of 1900.

esteem for black people in American culture.²³

For Du Bois, culture was not only political but was reflective of class consciousness. Popular culture was accepting racist propaganda films such as *Birth of a Nation* (1915) based on the 1906 novel *The Clansman*.²⁴ The black intelligentsia, led by Du Bois and Locke, responded with propaganda of their own in the form of a photographic exhibition and a literary anthology.

The Harlem Renaissance and Alain Locke

While Du Bois chronicled African-American culture in a sociological exhibit using Georgians at the turn of the new century, Locke, as editor of *The New Negro*, gave literary definition to a cultural movement based in New York called the Harlem Renaissance. Locke recognized that “in the arts, then, as in matters political, economic, and social, the Negro road has been a slow and tortuous journey up from slavery to gradual freedom.”²⁵ He placed the talent of African-American artists at the time into three categories: traditionalists, modernists, and the Africanists or Neo-Primitives. Locke’s preference for sculpture as “more powerfully expressive” supported his belief that the strongest ancestral African connection was with this medium as opposed to

²³ Jeffrey C. Stewart, “(Un)Locke(ing) Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series,” 43. In Stewart’s “Black Modernism” section, he termed this assimilation “Black Victoria.”

²⁴ D. W. Griffith, et al., *The Birth of a Nation* (New York, NY: Kino on Video, 2002/1915). Thomas Dixon and Arthur Ignatius Keller, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1906).

²⁵ Alain Locke, “The Negro in the Arts,” *United Asia: International Magazine of Asian Affairs* 5 (June 1953): 177.

painting where he believed the development was slower.²⁶ He continually perpetuated his visual arts philosophy through organizing exhibitions, publishing critical responses, and using his network of white patrons during the Harlem Renaissance.²⁷ Lois Mailou Jones, an art professor on the campus of Howard University concurrent with Locke, was moved by his philosophy of incorporating her African heritage. *The Ascent of Ethiopia*, 1932, was one of her earlier transitions in style toward the Harlem Renaissance aesthetic.²⁸ In one of his last articles, titled “The Negro in the Arts,” Locke summarized music, dance, theater and pictorial arts accomplishments.²⁹ His propaganda campaign during the Harlem Renaissance was steady and continuous, a full frontal attack on the “old” image of the enslaved Negro.

Atlanta Traditions

As major cities go, Atlanta was a relative newcomer to the fine arts arena. The High Museum of Art, started in an old Georgia mansion in 1905 with collectibles, had the non-accredited Atlanta School of Art associated with it as well as the struggling Symphony Orchestra. It also claimed rights to the first regional ballet company in 1929,

²⁶ Ibid. The work of sculptors Richmond Barthé and Meta Warrick Fuller are examples from the Harlem Renaissance period, but African-American sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis was working with ethnic subject matter earlier in the late nineteenth century.

²⁷ Locke began an association with the Harmon Foundation at their 1929 exhibit and served as a consultant. Richard J. Powell, *Homecoming: The Art and Life of William H. Johnson* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution and New York Rizzoli, 1991), 52. Locke organized the showing, titled *Exhibit of the Work of Negro Artists*, at the Art Center, New York, from February 16 – 18, 1931, and wrote the foreword for the exhibit *Contemporary Negro Art* mounted at the Baltimore Museum of Art from February 3 – 19, 1939.

²⁸ Rachanice P. Tate, “A Harlem Renaissance Painting by a Renaissance Woman: *The Ascent of Ethiopia* (1932), Lois Mailou Jones,” MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1995.

²⁹ Locke, “The Negro in the Arts,” *United Asia: International Magazine of Asian Affairs* 5 (June 1953): 177-181.

which became the Atlanta Ballet. The first real art gallery began in 1946, and the Arts Festival of Atlanta began in 1953 as a one-week event in May. The Arts festival would eventually allow the city to claim “black and white artists exhibiting, black and white families walking through the panels of art.”³⁰

The roots of this southern branch of Black Arts Movement and the Neighborhood Arts Center are far reaching. Starting in the 1930s, Anne Cooke, one of Yale’s first female black doctoral graduates, headed the Atlanta University Summer Theatre, and she was succeeded by Baldwin Burroughs when she left to head Howard University’s drama department. As Atlanta University Summer Theatre’s third artistic director, Molette stated that theater’s longevity in the city is noteworthy. Theater in Atlanta, before the Neighborhood Arts Center, was not exempt from racial restrictions. Segregation laws were regularly violated at the Atlanta University Center. According to Molette, there was seldom a musical or theatrical event that did not have integrated participants.³¹

By the time the AUC celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1942, it had already become a hub of culture for an educated class of primarily black citizenry, offering concerts and plays in addition to the visual arts.³² Under the leadership of visual artist Hale Woodruff (1900-1980) who came to the center in 1931, the art departments at Spelman College and AU’s Laboratory High School were established. The school also

³⁰ Carlyn Fisher, “Art in Atlanta: the Tradition,” n.p.: n.p., 38.

³¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 6.

³² “First National Art Exhibit,” *AU Bulletin* III, no. 39 (July, 1942): 24-25. Also see “About the Campus,” 26. This issue was the 75th Anniversary (1867-1942) issue.

established a national art competition.³³

Woodruff's interest in murals led him to study with Diego Rivera, a famous Mexican muralist. The *Amistad Mutiny* murals (1938) at Talladega College in Alabama, including *The Revolt*, *The Court Scene*, and *Back to Africa*, were the result of this apprenticeship.³⁴ In 1942, with the approval of Atlanta University President Rufus Clement, the Atlanta University Center began its Annual National Art Exhibition awards program that continued through 1969. A tradition was created where Atlanta engaged the national arts community. The annual exhibitions were a galvanizing and catalytic force during a time of racial separation and exclusion.

Hale Woodruff invited the noted African-American philosopher in residence at Howard University, Alain Locke, as the 1942 keynote speaker.³⁵ Locke had recently published *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* by 1940.³⁶ He was a leading proponent of visual artists pursuing a black aesthetic, just as writers had successfully done in his 1925 *New Negro* anthology.

Unfortunately, it was also a time of irony as white artists were brought in to

³³ Powell, *To Conserve a Legacy*, 18-19. Amalia K. Amaki and Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, *Hale Woodruff, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, and the Academy*, Atlanta: Spelman College Museum of Fine Art; Seattle: In Association with University of Washington Press, 2007, 27. Also see Winifred L. Stoelting, "Hale Woodruff, Artist and Teacher: Through the Atlanta Years," PhD diss., Emory University, 1978.

³⁴ Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 67-69. Also see *Hale Woodruff: 50 Years of His Art* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979) and M. Akua McDaniel, "Remembering Hale Woodruff's Talladega College and AU Murals," *International Review of African American Art* 12, no. 4 (1995): 4-17.

³⁵ Robert V. Rozelle, Alvia Wardlaw and Maureen A. McKenna, *Black Art Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African-American Art* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1989), 65. The address was given April 26, 1942.

³⁶ Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art* (New York: Hacker Art Books 1979/1940).

judge, and thus validate, black art at the Atlanta University exhibitions. *Old House Near Frederick, Virginia*, by Lois Mailou Jones, won second purchase prize in 1942. Her painting, titled *Les Fetiches*, 1938, which depicted African masks, went unmentioned.³⁷

After fifteen years at Atlanta University, in 1946, Woodruff left for an art career in New York and to teach at New York University. He maintained his connection with Atlanta and his production of revolutionary art with the 1950-51 commission *Art of the Negro*, a group of six murals for the Trevor Arnett Building on Atlanta University's campus, then a library and which currently houses Clark Atlanta University's museum.

Woodruff commented on the commission:

It portrays what I call *The Art of the Negro*. This has to do with a kind of interpretive treatment of African art . . . I look at the African artist certainly as one of my ancestors regardless of how we feel about each other today. I've always had a high regard and respect for the African artist and his art. So this mural, . . . is for me, a kind of token of my esteem for African art.³⁸

The titles in this series include: *Native Forms* (African icons included), *Interchange* (between African and European artists), *Dissipation* (British burning of the city Benin and its art in 1897), *Parallels* (commonalities between cultures), *Influences* (Africa's on Western art), and *Muses* (evolution of the African artist).³⁹ In the early 1950s, there was

³⁷ Tribotia H. Benjamin, *The Life and art of Lois Mailou Jones*, San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994, 126.

³⁸ "Murals," http://www.cau.edu/Academics_Murals.aspx (accessed December 20, 2011). Also see John Hewitt, "Remembering Hale A. Woodruff," *International Review of African American Art* 13, no. 4 (1997): 50-56; Donald F. Davis, "Hale Woodruff of Atlanta: Molder of Black Artists," *The Journal of Negro History* 69, no. 3/4 (Summer - Autumn, 1984), 147-154. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717619> (accessed December 24, 2011).

³⁹ "Murals," http://www.cau.edu/Academics_Murals.aspx (accessed December 20, 2011).

not a wholehearted embrace of Afrocentricity, but instead a gradual educative process that began with writers and later with visual artists, making Woodruff's ethnically-themed works cutting edge.

Atlanta University was the exception not the rule, however. Georgianne Thomas, a former Neighborhood Arts Center Board member, contrasts these art efforts with New York's of the 1940s to illustrate how the South lagged behind culturally, because Atlanta, its patrons, and its artists were dealing with Jim Crow segregation. Thomas explains,

You had to deal with so much of the "law" that you couldn't really move freely like you could in New York. You had blocks of space [in New York] you could feel the spirit of your people and the blackness, and the culture and the artists. But here [in Atlanta] you had to figure out if you could get 'cross town, you know, without going down the wrong street.⁴⁰

The gradual slow change was also evident in the music, as it was with theater, productions on the campus and in the Atlanta community. Whites played in the Atlanta University Orchestra and sang in the chorus because they were on the Music Department faculty. Families from the Ivy League and seven sister colleges, who were New England Quakers or Jews, taught on campus and were active participants in the arts. Howard Zinn, a well-known historian who taught at Spelman College, was also distinguished by the fact that his wife Roslyn played Anna in *The King and I*, the first musical licensed by Rogers and Hammerstein to be presented at a historically black educational institution. The lead actors were Johnny Popwell, an African American, and Mrs. Zinn who was white. Molette noted that this was the 1958-59 school year, and it was a very revolutionary

⁴⁰ Georgianne Thomas, Juliet Blackburn-Beamon and Georgianne Thomas interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, March 4, 2010, 30.

action to have happen in the state of Georgia.⁴¹

Arts and culture were adversely affected by the restrictive nature of legalized segregation. “This was dangerous stuff.” Molette remembers, adding “This was at a time that if black folks went to the Fox Theatre, you climbed up a flight of stairs on the outside of the building, actually the fire escape.”⁴² During his 1955 to 1959 college days at Morehouse, African-American musicians could play to white audiences, but could not intermingle at intermission. They were required to stay on stage. Molette reminisced on the time when “. . . Georgia Tech used to invite us to their dress rehearsals because it was illegal for them to sell us tickets.”⁴³ Atlanta’s branch had the weeds of Jim Crow policies attempting to suffocate it; however the actual practice was occasionally bent, or pruned, by some more liberal practitioners. The arts climate in the South, and particularly Atlanta, was a garden in progress moving gradually toward integration.

Off campus in the Atlanta community, music is remembered by Juliet Dobbs Blackburn-Beamon, a Neighborhood Arts Center audience participant, who shares this recollection of her and Maynard Jackson’s aunt, opera singer Mattiwilda Dobbs, and the early 1950s and 1960s efforts at cultural integration in Atlanta:

[Mattiwilda Dobbs] refused to sing to a segregated audience so one of the performances was actually cancelled because they did not want to [integrate]. I know we’re talking about the arts, but we haven’t really talked about the performing arts on that level. This was the Metropolitan Opera that she was with and we listened to it on radio and we would go when they came, but it had to be segregated if somebody black was going to be a part. And yet, when they turned around and when they built the

⁴¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 14A-B.

⁴² Ibid., 14B.

⁴³ Ibid., 38B.

Woodruff Center about ten years later. They opened it in the 60s I believe [1968] She was the stellar attraction for opening the Symphony Hall. She came down and performed . . . as the featured artist.⁴⁴

Musically, Dobbs' performances with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO) have been mentioned, but the late 1960s was a different time from 1940s and 1950s.

Lomax also remembered momentous occasions the ASO was involved in such as producing Scott Joplin's opera "Treemonisha," or when André Watts, an African-American pianist, performed with the symphony, as it was not black music he was playing.⁴⁵ New York had African-American opera singers beginning with the acclaimed Marian Anderson, in 1955. On the other hand, Atlanta institutions, audiences, and neighborhoods remained racially divided by law.

Molette recalled from his Morehouse days the Dave Brubeck Quartet's popular LP titled *Jazz: Red, Hot, and Cool* (1955). Brubeck, a pianist, and Paul Desmond, an alto saxophonist, were well-known white artists. However, bassist Eugene Wright who started with the band in 1958 was African American. The Georgia Institute of Technology Student Association, disregarding that fact, contracted the artists to play on campus. However, the school's administration refused to allow an integrated group to play. Southern decorum allowed for all African-American bands to play and then stay on stage while white groups were allowed to mix with the audience during intermission. Molette

⁴⁴ Juliet Blackburn-Beamon, Juliet Blackburn-Beamon and Georgianne Thomas interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, March 4, 2010, 30-31. Ann Uhry Abrams, *Explosion at Orly: The Disaster that Transformed Atlanta* (Atlanta: Avion Press, 2002). The Atlanta white arts community leaders died in a plane crash at Orly outside of Paris, France in 1962. The city responded by erecting a memorial arts center, later named the Woodruff Arts Center for the anonymous donation of \$4 million.

⁴⁵ Lomax, interview with the author, 20. Joplin's opera was performed at Morehouse in 1972 with Robert Shaw as the conductor. See Ruby Nell Herbert, "A Study of the Composition and Performance of Scott Joplin's Opera Treemonisha," Doctor of Musical Arts Diss., Ohio State University, 1976, 39.

stressed, “You can have a black group; you can have a white group, but you cannot have an integrated group.”⁴⁶

The Brubeck Quartet ended up playing at the Wallahagee, a black club situated in a hotel built by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).⁴⁷ Since none of the hotels run by whites would accommodate African-American patrons at that time in the South, the federal government ignored its own rules’ violation by reserving some rooms in HUD housing for use as hotel rooms. Out-of-town family members of Atlanta University Center graduates, including Molette’s, used these hotel rooms. Atlanta would slowly experience cultural transformations in music and in theater that made the Black Arts Movement family tree flourish in the late 1960s.

The 1960s

The history of theater in Atlanta is rooted in the Atlanta University Center, as are visual arts and music previously described. There was a cooperative relationship with the school’s administration and the theater department. Molette would let the President of Spelman know which productions were appropriate for board members to attend, so that less conservative subjects could be approached. Fortunately, there was no censorship.

In the 1960s, times, and minds, were rapidly changing. The new era saw productions like *The Blacks*. Lomax was an actor in Morehouse-Spelman productions and remembered SNCC members coming to watch. Their offices were not far from campus, so he came to know activists such as Julian Bond, John Lewis, and Bernice Johnson

⁴⁶ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 13B.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 14A. The club was named for the owner (Walter), his wife (Hazel) and her sister. It is today the Job Corp for Women by the West Lake MARTA station.

Reagon. Speaking of the early years of working for civil rights and the start of the Black Arts Movement, Georgianne Thomas reflected that her Spelman College class of 1964 was involved in the Student Movement. Calling herself a “foot soldier,” Thomas says this of the experience, “. . . [it] made me just follow whatever was black. It was a black theater, I was there. Black art, I was there.”⁴⁸

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal to segregate public accommodations. Arts organizations, according to Molette, got into bad repute with a segment of Atlanta’s white population, which did not support them because federal regulations contradicted Georgia’s segregation laws. Tickets were sold to anyone who came up and bought them, thus whoever happened to sit in the adjacent seat could be African American, white, or any other race or religion. These arts organizations were recipients of National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding, and as Molette remembers, “They were getting no support [locally] from the segment of the white population that wanted to maintain segregated seating and so they really had nothing to lose, and most of them thought it was the right thing to do long before they could do anything about it”⁴⁹

Where southern mores repressed societal interaction, the arts served as a bastion of progressive thinking. It was also a new time on the campuses for the arts when Morehouse College had grassroots festivals with performers from the Georgia Sea Islands or other older African-American blues performers such as Buddy Moss from Atlanta, Lomax recalled of his college days from 1964 to 1968. In the visual arts, by the

⁴⁸ Georgianne Thomas, Blackburn-Beamon and Thomas interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, March 4, 2010, 26.

⁴⁹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 12B.

late 1960s, fine artists Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden managed to cross the color line, opposing the segregated concept of the AUC Art Annuals. Other African-American artists' also desired to be known as "artists," not merely "black artists." Integration, the Du Boisian "double consciousness," and the Langston Hughes "Racial Mountain," were all insurmountable. The aspirations of the black artists ultimately caused the end of a cultural era. The AU Annuals ended in 1969.

Civil Rights: SNCC and Its Freedom School Legacy

1968 was a watershed year following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4. Lomax remembered his SNCC and AUC campus connections continued as friends rallied during King's funeral procession. This was a time when Lomax recalled becoming acquainted with Atlanta politicians Julian Bond, John Lewis, and Shirley Franklin. Lomax remarked that the Vietnam War, which continued until 1975, was also on his mind when he decided to go to graduate school and come back to teach at Morehouse College.⁵⁰ It was a time of war, of civil unrest, and of protest, but it was also a time of exploration and creativity.

Institutions such as The King Center established in 1968, the Institute of the Black World (IBW) founded in 1969, and the Atlanta Center for Black Arts (ACBA) starting in the spring of 1971, were also the results of this transitional era. By the time Molette returned to Atlanta in 1969, Pascal's Motor Lodge had been in operation for ten years in its historic location on 837 West Hunter Street, now named Martin Luther King, Jr.

⁵⁰ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, 3.

Drive.⁵¹ It was the premiere hotel during segregated times with its restaurant and jazz at Le Carrousel, and it was the hub for many civil rights movement meetings.

There were several interviewees who mentioned the ACBA, a SNCC initiative started in the spring of 1970, as a predecessor to the Neighborhood Arts Center.⁵² Lomax recalled the “idea” of a community arts center was not entirely new to Atlanta. He remembered “initiatives” such as “coffee houses over Alex’s Barbeque Heaven on Hunter Street, now Martin Luther King, next to West Hunter Street Baptist Church where Rev. [Ralph David] Abernathy was the minister.”⁵³ Lomax first heard Bernice Johnson Reagon, one of the SNCC Freedom Singers, perform there as a solo artist.⁵⁴

According to Lomax, “There was sort of the notion that you would bring identifiably black artistic programming into the community, and other people would have to come to that.”⁵⁵ The ACBA was run by Cynthia Saiddie Washington and Brice Smith, both products of SNCC. There was a jazz music program directed by Joe Jennings, who had recently arrived at Clark College, which included saxophonist Marion Brown, visual arts with Ethiopian artist Skunda Bhogasian, and a journal titled *Rhythm* edited by A. B. Spellman, a noted poet and jazz critic who left Spelman College and worked full time

⁵¹ “Paschal’s History: 1950-1960,” <http://media.paschals.com/paschals.html> (accessed June 11, 2011).

⁵² Photography of ACBA Concept Paper. Original in the personal collection of Joe Jennings.

⁵³ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, 6.

⁵⁴ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Uncovered and Without Shelter, I Joined This Movement for Freedom” and “Since I Laid My Burden Down,” *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC*, Faith S. Holsaert et al., ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010) 119-128, 146-152.

⁵⁵ Lomax, interview with the author, 6.

with the ACBA.⁵⁶ Shirley Rushing, who taught dance at Spelman College, also performed at the ACBA, and Lomax adds, “It was bringing arts to the people.”⁵⁷ As part of the black cultural revolution, the ACBA was heavily ideological.

Lomax related specifically that the ACBA was “in the community where artists would have studios and in return for the studios, work with the community.”⁵⁸ He saw spaces being created across the country “where artists would work and be in direct contact with the community.”⁵⁹ The Neighborhood Arts Center was charged with teaching classes to youth. This work with community youth, Lomax emphasizes, was heavily “influenced by the Freedom Schools and it had the imprint of the student movement.”⁶⁰ He felt that SNCC and the Black Panther Party (BPP) and their work with children in the community, more so than the larger civil rights movement, seemed to influence Neighborhood Arts Center’s creators. Lomax stressed that “it was a different period. [There] was a sense of community that existed in a very hostile environment and

⁵⁶ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 7B-8A. A.B. Spellman was married to Pearl Cleage’s cousin Karen Spellman. Joseph Jennings, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, 2. Myrtle Glascoe referred Jennings, who was finishing his Masters at the University of Illinois, to Saiddie Washington when she heard he was relocating to Atlanta.

⁵⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, 7. Smethurst, “Black Arts Movement in Atlanta,” 178-179.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ For more information on SNCC’s Freedom Schools, see *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition*, ed. Charles M. Payne, Carol Sills Strickland with foreword by Charles E. Cobb, Jr. (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2008). The most prominent example of the Freedom Schools was in Mississippi in August 1964, but it had been used in New York, Boston, and Prince Edward County, Virginia until closed in reaction to the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

where artistic expression had a strong political and ideological bent.”⁶¹ It was not unusual to hear talk about machine guns, he remembered.

In the area of creative writing, Lomax shared that the Atlanta University campus afforded him the opportunity to meet the renowned African-American writer Mari Evans. In his 1968 senior year, Evans gave him a book of Etheridge Knight’s, titled *Poems from Prison* that sparked Lomax’s interest in poetry.⁶² Knight had been released that year after serving eight years for robbery to support a drug addiction. Dudley Randell’s Broadside Press published his writings to coincide with Knight’s release from prison. He had been inspired there by reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and the poetry of Langston Hughes, making Knight a notable poet of the Black Arts Movement. Lomax’s interest in poetry ultimately resulted in his Harlem Renaissance dissertation topic, “Countee Cullen, ‘From the Dark Tower’,” at Emory University in 1984.⁶³

There was a lot of institution building and organizations working for the community in the South between the educational centers, their neighborhoods, and the community. “AU was only part of it,” Molette shares.⁶⁴ SNCC and its off-shoots were all closely intertwined. Molette recalls the Atlanta University Center being part of the community connection between the ACBA and the Panther’s breakfast program, run at the YMCA by Morris Brown College. For example, Professor Baldwin Burroughs was mentioned for his particular concern for punctuality, but allowed the Spelman College

⁶¹ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, 8.

⁶² Ibid., 2. See Etheridge Knight, *Poems from Prison*, Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968.

⁶³ Michael L. Lomax, “Countee Cullen, ‘From the Dark Tower’,” PhD diss., Emory University, 1984.

⁶⁴ Molette, interview with the author, 17.

students working with the BPP to be tardy. The young women were “over to that Y at five o’clock in the morning and cooked breakfast for those kids . . . and Burroughs said, ‘it’s okay for you to be late for my class, nobody else!’”⁶⁵

The Black Arts Movement: Radical 1970s and 1980s

Atlanta had become a reflection of the national black arts scene. Many art forms existed on the HBCU campuses, and it often took biracial cooperation for ethnic arts to flourish beyond the ivory towers in the community. More than anything else, it took money, and “it was a time when” the public sector seemed to carry the largest purse for ethnic arts.

Dance came to the city via the AU Center, and Lomax remarks, “. . . the one and only time I ever saw Dance Theatre of Harlem perform, it was on a cramped stage in Davage Auditorium, at Clark Atlanta University, then Clark College.”⁶⁶ The Neighborhood Arts Center would bring the Alvin Ailey dancers to Atlanta’s Civic Center in 1977, with the help of the majority dance company Dance Atlanta, whose white director Susan Hunter sat on the Neighborhood Arts Center board. It would be this type of biracial collaboration, typical to Atlanta, that moved dance from its segregated past to more integrated opportunities.

By the early 1970s, racial politics had shifted dramatically, giving way to the politics of Black Nationalism and a demand for recognition. The NEA, begun in 1965, and its funding came with its own issues around ethnic arts. The Expansion Arts

⁶⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁶ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, 20.

Program, started in 1970, was groundbreaking because it allowed ethnic arts to receive federal funding.⁶⁷ The grants, however, were not at the same financial level as mainstream opportunities, giving cause for interview participants to call the Expansion Arts program “ghetto money.”⁶⁸

Molette noted his run in with NEA occurred while applying for funding for the Atlanta University’s Summer Theatre as an applicant competing with other mainstream, start-up theaters. Even though the company met the requirements of other equity companies, Molette was strong-armed to meet with A.B. Spellman and only apply for Expansion Arts funding. Molette shares, “. . . essentially what [Spellman’s colleague] was saying is, we’re not going to fund you in this department, but you can get funded in Expansion Arts.”⁶⁹ Ironically, black actors from out of town were being hired with NEA funds the AU Summer Theater did not receive, but ended up at Molette’s program volunteering with AU Summer Theater to “do something meaningful.”⁷⁰

Another story relevant to contextualizing Atlanta’s cultural politics in the theater of the time revolved around the creation of the Alliance Theater Company, originally called the Atlanta Municipal Theater (AMT). It lasted only a couple of years before conspicuously declaring bankruptcy when the last show of the season, *Wedding Band: A*

⁶⁷ “The National Endowment for the Arts: A Brief Chronology of Federal Support for the Arts, 1965-1990,” 17, <http://www.nea.gov/pub/NEAChronWeb.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2011).

⁶⁸ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 37A-38A. Expansion Arts grants ranged from \$10-15K while mainstream grants ranged from \$50-60K renewable awards.

⁶⁹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 49A.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Love/Hate Story in Black and White by Alice Childress was set to premiere. Childress was an African-American writer from Charleston, South Carolina and the niece of Alonzo Herndon, former slave and founder of Atlanta Life Insurance Company.⁷¹

Molette shares Childress's contentious plot:

It was not so much a play by a black woman, as that the play is about an interracial love affair in Charleston, South Carolina at the turn of the century [1918]. It was . . . [a] black woman/white man in bed together. This was a long-term, committed relationship. The goal of this guy was to leave the family business, get on a boat with her, and go to Philadelphia 'cause they could get married in Pennsylvania, and they couldn't get married in South Carolina.⁷²

When it was revealed that a well-known, white male lead and Abby Lincoln, an African-American female lead, would take center stage together, administrators began to break contracts with playwrights and actors. The AMT was part of the Memorial Arts Center (now the Woodruff Arts Center), so the only legal escape was to file bankruptcy and reopen in 1969 under a new name, the Alliance Theatre.

Molette recalled that the *Atlanta Journal* theater-film critic Terry Kay wanted to write more about black theater, but making it a featured item in the column would offend white readership and advertisers.⁷³ Molette also reminisced that he personally witnessed the changes in Atlanta when he went from climbing the exterior fire escape stairs of the

⁷¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 32B. Herndon's wife Adrienne was head of the drama department at AU. See Carole Merritt, "African Americans in Atlanta: Adrienne Herndon, an Uncommon Woman," *Southern Spaces*, March 16, 2004, <http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2004/merritt/1a.v2.htm> (accessed July 11, 2009). Also see Merritt, *The Herndons: An Atlanta Family* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2002).

⁷² Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 34A.

⁷³ Terry Kay resigned from *The Atlanta Journal* in 1973 and went on to become an award-winning novelist.

Fox Theatre as a freshman in the mid-1950s to actually having the 1972 movie, *Together for Days*, shown there with his name in the credits as Art Director.⁷⁴

While the theater arts were experiencing their growing pains, Joe Jennings was recruited to Clark College in 1970 to start a new jazz program, a fairly progressive move on the institution's part. He remembers his attraction to Atlanta over other cities this way: "After reading Du Bois talking about the hills of Atlanta, and how great the educational institutions were, I wanted to give it [my] choice. Plus Atlanta, Denver, Miami, and New Orleans were becoming the places for young blacks to migrate."⁷⁵ Jennings' southern musical foundation starting in Natchez, Mississippi helped him to build Clark's music program through 1976.

Abby Drue, a Jewish visual artist whose faculty appointment at Spelman College in 1971 was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, remembers the vocalist/musician Nina Simone coming to the campus's Sister's Chapel. Being a white professor did not preclude her from being asked to leave the 1973 concert at the request of the artist. Drue explains,

I wanted to see Nina Simone! I was sitting in the audience and do you know she would not perform until the white folks got out of the audience and left! . . . I understood it. I left. I had a lot to learn too. I left at first trying to say, "Not me!" but yeah me. You're right. I left. I understood it. I got it. I'll never forget it. I never got to see her . . . but that was at *Spelman* in the same year that Maynard took office . . .⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 14A. The movie *Together for Days* was directed by Michael Schultz of the Negro Ensemble Company, included Clifton Davis, Lois Childs, and Samuel L. Jackson in a minor role.

⁷⁵ Joseph Jennings, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, 2. Jennings explained that the his reference to the hills of Atlanta as discussed in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Atlanta was sets on three hills and the AUC is on one of the three.

⁷⁶ Abby Drue, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, April 21, 2010, 32A-32B. Drue's emphasis.

Prior to the 1970s, if black art was to be enjoyed, particularly visual art, it had to be taken in at either Morehouse, Spelman, Clark, or Morris Brown Colleges. Lomax remembers, “I saw my first [Henry O.] Tanner, my first Elizabeth Catlett work, and it was there, and I could go look at it every day. You wouldn’t have found any of it in the 1960s at the High Museum of Art.”⁷⁷ It was 1973, before a comprehensive black arts exhibit, *Highlights from the AU Collection of Afro-American Art* organized by Richard A. Long, was shown at the High Museum, and 1975 when the museum exhibited a large number of works by Benny Andrews, an African-American artist from Georgia.⁷⁸ Atlanta also began an “Urban Walls” project in 1973 with \$10,000 from the NEA that local businesses and corporations (owners of the walls) had to match. Romare Bearden was responsible for one of the nine murals commissioned by the Fulton County Trust Company. Given all the above examples of theater, music, and visual arts, it was still a tumultuous time for the races, whether in the city or on the AUC campus.

Renaissance of Atlanta Black Theatre

Playwright and creator of the Jomandi and New Vista Theater Companies, Tom Jones, described the 1970s as a “renaissance of black theater” in Atlanta. At the time, eight to eleven companies existed, and Neighborhood Arts Center was the “nexus” for all of them. The NAC was the meeting ground, and it was described as the “magnet.” According to Jones, rehearsals, auditions, casting, and just hanging out were all part of

⁷⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, 19-20.

⁷⁸ High Museum of Art. *Highlights from the AU Collection of Afro-American Art*. Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1973. See Carlyn Fisher, “Art in Atlanta: The Present,” 40-41.

the arts center's purpose. He recalled there was even a restaurant at one point.⁷⁹

New York had the Black Theatre Alliance, host to more than 145 black theaters. The largest ones were the Negro Ensemble Company, started in 1965, and New Federal Theatre, founded in 1970 by Woody King, Jr.⁸⁰ Jones explains that the 1970s was a time when “. . . it was kind of a renaissance” in Atlanta with nine black theater companies emerging. Each had to “find their voice as an artist.”⁸¹

In Atlanta, black theater came to the community in 1969 through Andrea Frye as the artistic director of Black Image Theatre, known for being politically active “for blacks by blacks.” It developed from the Atlanta Street Theater with Edward R. Billups, III as one of the original founders and Samuel L. Jackson as an active member. Over time, the company also featured Kenny Leon, Carol Mitchell, and LaTanya Richardson. Liz Ann Mitchell, and many other Atlanta artists, went on to national prominence. Clark College had a professional theater company called New Cosmos Cultural Theatre, Inc., directed by Joan Lewis and Georgia Allen as associate director. This provided an opportunity for students once they graduated.

Byron Saunders, Don Bryant, and Art Johnson were from Hampton University and worked with the People's Survival Theater (PST) at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Elisabeth Omilami, activist and daughter of Civil Rights

⁷⁹ Tom Jones, interview with the author, March 12, 2009, 9.

⁸⁰ Tom Jones, interview with the author, 9. For more on black theater, see Woodie King, *The Impact of Race: Theatre and Culture* (New York: Applause Theatre Cinema Books, 2003), Glenda Dickerson, *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), and Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards, ed., *Black Theatre: Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

⁸¹ Tom Jones, interview with the author, 6-7.

icon Hosea Williams, ran PST. Saunders, Bryant, and Johnson left PST to join The Just Us Theatre Company (TJUTC) formed in 1976 by a group including Edward R. Billups, III. There was another swap shortly thereafter when Billups left Just Us, which was running under the majority company called Theater of the Stars, started in 1953, and he joined with PST. Theater of the Stars' Just Us had as its initial goal "to cultivate the indigenous art of the black people, to foster the creativity of the black community."⁸² With substantially more financial support, TJUTC became known for bringing in African-American celebrities to do pre-existing works such as *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry.⁸³

There were progressive whites interested in the advancement of all the arts. Jones and Molette remembered Christopher B. Manos, for example, as a leading figure in this regard. Manos provided the financial backing for Just Us Theatre, and he was a leading figure in TJUTC efforts to bring Broadway productions to Atlanta in 1976. Manos was also part of the Maynard Jackson's Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts responsible for Neighborhood Arts Center's creation among other things. According to Molette, Manos was ". . . the white guy that would come up to me and say, 'Theater is not that way and it ought not be that way in Atlanta'." He was obviously referring to the racial division that existed at the time.⁸⁴

Manos was not just a man of words, his actions also spoke of his commitment to

⁸² "About Just Us Theatre Company Press Release," Just Us Theatre, 1976, Auburn Avenue Research Library, NAC91-009-14.019, n.d. (circa 1976), 2. "Out History," www.theaterofthestars.com/about.htm (accessed February 7, 2012).

⁸³ Ibid., 8-9. Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Random House, 1959).

⁸⁴ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 35A.

equal opportunity in the theater. While holding the lease on the Peachtree Playhouse, he allowed TJUTC to come to Peachtree Street. As Molette proudly acknowledges, “*Dr. B.S. Black*, by Barbara and Carlton Molette and Charles Mann, was the first black play done on Peachtree Street!”⁸⁵ It was a musical adaptation of Moliere’s “The Doctor in Spite of Himself.”⁸⁶ The group would not have been able to afford a Peachtree Street venue, nor would anyone in Atlanta have rented theater space to an African-American group at that time, but Manos was different.

Walter Dallas’ Proposition Theatre was the original house company for the Neighborhood Arts Center in 1975. He was known for performing the classics, both African and European, but better known for the acting company. A product of Yale University, he would mold and shape actors as the great “director auteur,” Jones explains.⁸⁷ Serving as the rehearsal space and location for casting calls, the NAC became the main theatrical conduit through which the branches and leaves of other black theater institutions were nurtured. The list of African-American theater companies continued to grow with Atlanta Renaissance Theatre and Theater Without Walls.⁸⁸ The latter was said to be more of a “poet’s theater.”⁸⁹ All of these theatrical relationships began around 1974, concurrent with the emergence of the Neighborhood Arts Center, according to Jones.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 35A-B.

⁸⁶ “Atlanta Gets New Black Theatre Group” Press Release, “Just Us Theatre, 1976,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, NAC91-009-14.019, n.d. (circa 1976), 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

⁸⁸ Tom Jones, interview with the author, March 12, 2009, 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 8-9.

In 1979, Spelman College Drama Department Chairman Emeritus Dr. Baldwin W. Burroughs was honored for his lifelong commitment to theater in Atlanta. He was labeled “the architect of the Atlanta-Morehouse-Spelman Summer Theatre, the oldest Afro-American Summer Stock Company in the country.”⁹⁰ Some of Burroughs’ former students/artists were responsible for the formation of many black theaters in Atlanta and across the country. They included Dallas, Billups, and Bill Nunn of Playground Players. LaTanya Richardson, of the “For Colored Girls” Broadway production, was a student of Burroughs, as well as Georgia Allen, a Neighborhood Arts Center Board member. Carlton Molette, then Dean of the School of Theatre and Mass Communications at Texas Southern University and Sandra Dunson Franks, who became head of Instructional Drama Program at Atlanta’s Neighborhood Arts Center, were also beneficiaries of Burroughs’ instruction and insistence on punctuality.⁹¹ The branches and leaves of the Black Arts Movement, rooted in the AUC because of a history of racial segregation, began to spread into the community during the civil rights era creating a vibrant cultural canopy of community-based theater companies fertilizing a black renaissance in Atlanta theater.

Revolutionary Art for the Times

The continuum of art as propaganda, or political, has made its way through the twentieth century, from Du Bois exhibiting in the Paris Exposition in 1900 to the segregated AUC gallery walls of the 1940s to the 1960s, and the more revolutionary

⁹⁰ “Tribute to Spelman’s Chair Emeritus Set,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 12, 1979, 6.

⁹¹ Ibid.

content on urban walls of the late 1960s and 1970s. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon states, “Revolutionary art is both a product of struggle and a reflection of it.”⁹² Art of the 1960s included “taking it to the streets” with such organizations as the Watts Project in Los Angeles and the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in Chicago.⁹³

Writers, musicians, and artists came together in the late 1960s, as they had done during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, to produce “Art for People’s Sake.” By the 1970s in Atlanta, “Sweet Auburn” was a deteriorating section of downtown Atlanta as segregation had given way to integration, suburbanization, and the abandonment of many social support structures innate to a system of racial separation. As part of downtown revitalization in preparations for the country’s bicentennial celebration in 1976, Federal block grant funds were issued to restore some of the glory to Sweet Auburn Avenue.

While the ACBA was a unique multidisciplinary cultural center giving AUC artists an outlet in the early 1970s, it unfortunately did not survive because it lacked the stable financial base federal funds could provide. Federal support stimulated the arts just as it did during the WPA. In addition to the NEA, some sixty CETA positions were located in arts organizations around Atlanta including the Georgia Council for the Arts and Humanities, the High Museum of Art, IMAGE, Inc., Nexus, Inc., Dance Unit,

⁹² Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, translated by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961, 1963, 1991).

⁹³ Jeff Donaldson, “The Rise, Fall and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement,” *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 1 (1998): 22.

Proposition Theatre, Atlanta Center for International Visitors, Contemporary Art/Southeast, and the Neighborhood Arts Center in Mechanicsville. Lomax's aspiration at the time was that the NAC would be "an educational force in the black community where black creative artists [could] find expression," and that it did.⁹⁴ It was the NAC, the first arts group funded by the BCIA as an ongoing project, which became the catalyst for the growth of community arts in Atlanta as the research findings demonstrate.

Unfortunately, many arts organizations found out the hard way that federal funding was tenuous as well. Artists and arts organizations during the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s gave numerous accounts of the frustrations they faced. Many of the Black Arts Movement institutions that found life in the 1960s and 1970s came into existence because ". . . the country was in turmoil and we Blacks did not believe in the American Dream anymore," according to Woodie King, Jr., then Director of Drama for the Henry Street Settlement in New York City. He continued, ". . . the cultural arts-including theatre, dance, music, and film-flourish[ed] and regress[ed] according to the economic and social conditions of the times. Thus, art [was] political, both in its production and in its distribution."⁹⁵

For King, as for the generations before him and to come, the crisis was ". . . we want our art appreciated by white Americans."⁹⁶ When the sale price is based on what white America can pay, many African Americans cannot afford it, and therefore art is not

⁹⁴ Gayla Jamison, "Art in Atlanta: the BCIA," n.p.:n.p., 46.

⁹⁵ Woodie King, Jr., "The Politics of Black Art," *Black American Literature Forum* (1983), Vol. 17, No.1, 30.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

a financial priority. To lower the price in a capitalistic system meant diminishing the value, thus African Americans were caught in the catch-22 situation. The black community could not raise the level of support previously provided by federal dollars causing the collapse of several anchor cultural institutions.

By 1984, the Neighborhood Arts Center had to move, but it took advantage of early restoration efforts to Auburn Avenue by relocation from Mechanicsville to the Oddfellows Building. Maintaining the 1910 building was no longer financially feasible. The “Art for People’s Sake” motto was recast as “Arts on Auburn” in an effort of the NAC to remain relevant.

When the AUC ended their annual competition in 1969, the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, located on Auburn Avenue since 1918, revitalized the art annual tradition from 1981 to 1990. A black corporation carried the baton as a national standard bearer for ethnic art support drawing the community back to Sweet Auburn.⁹⁷ The later annuals were noted for their focus on emerging artists, and the NAC was instrumental in assisting Atlanta Life in the continuation of this tradition. The 1988 inauguration of the National Black Arts Festival, the brainchild of Michael Lomax as this research helps to explain, extends the southern system of roots that comprise Atlanta’s cultural branch of Black Arts Movement.

Unfortunately, the Neighborhood Arts Center did not have the funding appeal to outlast the gradual response to revitalizing for an entire city district. Other deteriorating structures that surrounded them proved uninviting to audiences with a variety of choices for socializing and cultural engagement around the city. The Neighborhood Arts Center

⁹⁷ Amaki, “The All Black Exhibition in America 1963-1976,” 245.

would have to move from its second home on Auburn Avenue to its final Broad Street location in 1987. The board's attempts to restore the NAC to its glory years in Mechanicsville with an abundance of grant support would go unfunded with an entanglement of IRS, cash flow, and staffing issues. They would have to ceased operations by 1990.

CHAPTER 4

VISUALIZING ATLANTA'S CULTURAL POLITICS

Political Factors

The southern experience of Atlanta has historically been one of biracial politics, originally with whites in positions of political power and minorities receiving the dregs of public service. Mayor William Hartsfield hired the first African-American police officers in 1947, but African-American citizens had to regularly endure the Jim Crow South. Mayor Ivan Allen, serving in office from 1962 to 1970, hired the first African-American fire fighters, but under Allen's leadership, the city also displaced neighborhoods of African Americans to build the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium in 1965 and the Atlanta Civic Center in 1967, both benefiting primarily white constituencies. Communities such as Mechanicsville, where the Neighborhood Arts Center would initially be situated, Pittsburgh, Buttermilk Bottom, and the Fourth Ward area, never fully recovered from the civic expansion projects.

When Sam Massell, a Jewish businessman, served as mayor from 1970 to 1974 with Maynard Jackson, an African American, on his ticket as Vice-Mayor, many hoped it was truly going to be a "New South," breaking its de-facto Jim Crow reputation. Carlton Molette shares this of Sam Massell's administration, "[He] inherit[ed] a totally segregated city operation . . . and tried to make things better without trying to make a lot

administration, Drue, also Jewish, was hired as an “arts specialist” providing outreach programs in the city during the summer to the African-American community.⁵ She explains,

[W]e assume[d] goodwill [I]t was maybe 90 degrees on these play lots, and they’d bring these boxes, and they were peanut butter sandwiches. The kids would say, “Here comes choke time! Here comes choke time” I’d grab up a bunch of them and take them to a Burger King with money. I would just get people to give me money for kids.⁶

Having a full program of the arts at the municipal level would not come to fruition until Jackson took the helm.

Both Molette and Eaton remembered city parks and the arts, such as Chastain Park, being part of Sam Massell’s administration, but Jackson was thought to have taken the arts to the next level. Molette said, “It wasn’t an integral part, because Chastain Park, for example existed before so somebody in city government was responsible for Chastain Park at a time when black folks didn’t go to Chastain Park.”⁷ Eaton noted that staffing the BCIA happened as a result of CETA funding directed by Aaron Turpeau, but this was under Jackson.⁸

In seeking a second term of office, Massell faced Atlanta’s changing demographics which forced a runoff with Jackson because African-American State

⁵ Abby Drue, interview with the author, April 21, 2010, 9B.

⁶ Ibid., 15B.

⁷ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 9A-B.

⁸ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 9B.

Senator LeRoy Johnson split the African-American vote trying “to give voters a choice.”⁹ Historian Bayor notes that Massell’s run-off campaign for re-election, based on the slogan “Atlanta, too young to die,” was perceived as a fear tactic.¹⁰ It ultimately backfired by mobilizing Jackson supporters and making Massell the last white mayor for the city of Atlanta into the twenty-first century.

The Jackson Years: The First Term (1974-1977)

Atlanta had long been known for counting the black precincts last in elections. Jackson knew that he needed to get twenty percent of the white vote in the upper middle class neighborhoods to win. “They had done the numbers,” Molette remembers, and “[Jackson] knew that if he got more than fifteen percent of the Buckhead vote . . .,” he was assured a win.¹¹ Jackson did not wait to receive a majority of the vote, Molette recalled, before declaring himself the winner. Jackson ultimately received ninety-eight percent of the black vote and twenty percent of the white precincts.¹²

Jackson took office in 1974 becoming the first African-American mayor of a major southern city. He would serve three terms, two of which were consecutive. His commitment to biracialism in his post-inaugural appointments was noted with African Americans for the administrative services, personnel, and sanitation, and whites for the

⁹ Hornsby, *A Short History of Black Atlanta*, 85. Johnson, in January 1963, was the first African-American Georgia Senator since Reconstruction.

¹⁰ Ronald Bayor, “African-American Mayors and Governance in Atlanta,” in *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, David R. Colburn and Jeffrey S. Adler, ed. (Urbane and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 179.

¹¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 12A. Also see Robert A. Holmes, *Maynard Jackson: A Biography* (Miami: Barnhardt & Ashe Publishing, 2009), 62-77.

¹² Hornsby, *A Short History of Black Atlanta*, 96.

airport, treasury, and budget and planning.¹³ He delayed appointments to human resources, which included parks and libraries, and to public safety; and the top aid to the mayor was awarded to Jule Sugarman, a white man from New York.¹⁴ Despite this balanced record, Jackson faced constant criticism for showing racial favoritism.

Federal Funding: Comprehensive Employment & Training Act (CETA)

When Jackson took office in 1974, it was a time when the nation was in an economic recession.¹⁵ The city received \$30 million from the Federal Government's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to assist with hard economic times when the recession of the 1970s created significant unemployment. Molette worked with Lomax on the initial grant proposal that got the federal funding for CETA, and the Neighborhood Arts Center received a portion of that funding, which paid for many jobs.¹⁶

The city's history with the CETA enacted in 1973 had been tainted by the public pushing and shoving of unemployed Atlantans trying to be first in line at the City's CETA Office where thousands showed up for the mere 225 available jobs. Atlanta was particularly creative in its deployment of federal dollars, using some for the employment of artists. Jackson worked cooperatively with private agencies, such as the Arts Festival of Atlanta (AFA) and the City Council to initiate funding for a multi-disciplinary art space that would become the Neighborhood Arts Center. Jackson proclaimed:

¹³ Ibid., 98.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stone, *Regime Politics*, 93.

¹⁶ Molette, interview with the author, 11. Some of the funds went to AU to start the African American Studies Department.

I am so pleased to sign this ordinance, drafted and sponsored by my office and introduced by Councilpersons Charles Helms and Arthur Langford amending the 1974 (CETA Fund) Budget, Department of Community and Human Development, by transferring appropriations in the amount of \$32,000 for the purpose of entering into an agreement with Arts Festival of Atlanta, Inc., for the operation of a multi-purpose arts center that will provide temporary public service employment as well as be an addition to the cultural life of the city.

The multi-purpose arts center will employ ten artists, one director, one secretary/bookkeeper, one custodian and two security guards. Because of this ordinance, the center will fulfill not only its main purpose of providing an outlet for local artists and a focus for increased cultural activity, it will play a part in stemming the tide of rising national unemployment that has hit us so hard. . . .¹⁷

There were almost 100 applicants for the ten artist positions, and while CETA funds could be used for their salaries, other creative measures had to be sought for funding program development and implementation.

From hospitality patrols for the downtown streets, to secretaries, to a multi-purpose arts center employing artists through federal dollars, a unique partnership between government and the arts was being initiated that had not been seen since the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The new entity, the Neighborhood Arts Center, the NAC, would thrive until 1990, but it would not have been possible without the arts activism and dedication of many culture workers who also kept art on the political agenda of the city.

Jackson spoke at a CETA Conference held at the Atlanta Civic Center Auditorium on May 12, 1976. He felt the Atlanta CETA workers deserved commendation and spoke of the NAC by name for “bringing ‘Art to the People’ on a community wide basis.”

¹⁷ “Multi Purpose Arts Center, Undated,” Series D: Speeches and Speaking Requests,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 25, Folder 4.

Jackson announced that the current national administration had granted a continuance of CETA funds to create 2,000 positions on the local level, extending Title II and Title VI, through January of 1977, but noted how insensitive the federal government was to the needs of unemployed and that the job creation numbers were grossly inadequate.¹⁸

While additional jobs would have been excellent news in tough economic times, Jackson stressed to the conference attendees that the purpose of CETA was job training to afford participants the opportunity to find permanent employment elsewhere. Jackson did not want attendees to lose sight of CETA's purpose. He stressed:

The purpose of the program is not to create permanent jobs. The purpose of the program is not to replace regular city employees. The Congressional purpose of this federally-funded program is to give a person temporary placement while they find permanent employment. Hopefully, the experience that is gained during your tenure with the CETA program will be helpful when you look for a new job.¹⁹

By the fall of 1976, Atlanta had the attention of the federal government regarding its municipal arts programming. The National Council on the Arts, which was part of the National Endowment, held its first meeting in the southeast. Jackson welcomed Ms. Nancy Hanks in his mayoral greetings to open the meeting. He noted the special appreciation that Atlanta had for the Council and the Arts Endowment because the city was part of an "exciting experiment" with the creation and development of the Bureau of Cultural & International Affairs (BCIA), a municipal arts agency. Jackson's belief was that ". . . the arts should be available to all citizens in much the same way that the other

¹⁸ "CETA Conference, 1976, May 12," Series D: Speeches and Speaking Requests," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 9, Folder 16.

¹⁹ Ibid.

city services are.” This belief, coupled with the conference being in Atlanta, marked for Jackson “. . . a new era of southern integration into the national artistic life.”²⁰

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies also met in Atlanta in 1976 coinciding with the National Council. In a speech to the assembly, Jackson expressed understanding with other agencies that public art funding, particularly in tough economic times, was an “emphatically political process in which the public dollar is divided up by fiercely competing interests.” For Jackson, the question of the day was how to justify arts funding among the other pressing city services, such as garbage collections, police or fire protection. His argument was threefold: 1) economically, art was an industry itself that employs and generates taxes; art was a “leisure time economy” stimulus because the cultural environment promoted tourism; 2) politically, Americans were shown to value access to cultural venues and would pay additional taxes if funneled to public arts activities so elected officials respond to constituent priorities; and 3) humanistically, the arts were good in and of themselves, drawing people together, touching lives, and promoting downtown revitalization.²¹ The 1977 Jimmy Carter Presidency marked a change in national focus. The United States voter brought an end to the Republican agenda.

²⁰ “National Council on the Arts, 1976, September 17,” Series D: Speeches and Speaking Requests,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 9, Folder 31.

²¹ “National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1976, September 19,” Series D: Speeches and Speaking Requests,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 9, Folder 33.

Local Funding

Atlanta's history of cultural involvement was primarily tied to private patrons, such as Coca-Cola's Robert W. Woodruff, and not local government prior to Jackson's election into office. He explained that the city entered a kind of "cultural doldrums" after the plane crash outside Paris in Orly, France in 1962 that killed many community arts leaders, and resulted in the naming of the Woodruff Memorial Arts Center on their behalf.²² Particular to Atlanta, Jackson noted that the city's creation and growth of the BCIA was symbolic of arts' importance to the city. He likened the period to a "genuine cultural renaissance in Atlanta."

The BCIA was created as a distinct arm of city government, "analogous to the Bureau of Police Services or the Bureau of Fire Services." Starting with a mere \$40,000 budget, it grew in a year and a half to over \$400,000 in 1976. Jackson bragged that over three quarters of a million dollars in material resources for a variety of arts programs were slated through upcoming federally funded projects. "I confess that no cause has been dearer to this administration than its concern for restoring the vigor of our cultural life," Jackson shared.²³

The Bureau's primary purpose was to channel money from national and state agencies, Georgia Council for the Arts & Humanities (GCA) being one of them, as well as private foundations to local artists and cultural groups. Funding locally was derived

²² Atlanta Art Association. *The Atlanta School of Art: A Memorial by the Atlanta Art Association and Friends to the Memory of Its Members Who Lost Their Lives on June 3, 1962, at Orly France* (Atlanta: The Association, 1962).

²³ "National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1976, September 19," Series D: Speeches and Speaking Requests," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 9, Folder 33.

from a hotel-motel tax, “twenty-five percent of which is earmarked for the promotion of tourism, and artistic and cultural events.” In 1976, the city also proposed to implement a one percent levy for art formula for all capital construction projects financed through the Public Works department, and Jackson wanted to enact legislation to make the funds part of the city’s annual building program.²⁴ CETA and a hotel/motel tax passed by the Georgia legislature awarded the city a portion of that revenue, and allowed for the use of public dollars for the arts, similar to the funding for the Seattle Arts Council. Lomax pointed out that Atlanta’s portion of the tax was “for the promotion of tourism, and art and culture were considered part of the promotion of tourism.”²⁵

Jackson was known for initially shunning Euroamerican business class concerns in favor of race issues during his first administration. Though the Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport is so named because of these two mayors’ influence on transportation and the city, it was Jackson’s unprecedented stance on affirmative action in 1978 that spread the economic wealth gained from federal airport expansion funds into the African-American community.²⁶ According to Juliette Blackburn-Beamon, Jackson’s cousin who frequented the NAC, his affirmative action stance was, “Gentlemen, you can have seventy-five percent of this or 100% of nothing.”²⁷ Jackson also used his position to

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lomax, interview with the author, 5.

²⁶ Holmes, *Maynard Jackson*, 154-155. The law required that twenty-five percent of the city’s projects be set aside for minority firms.

²⁷ Juliette Blackburn-Beamon, Blackburn-Beamon and Thomas interview with the author, March 4, 2010, 36.

get federal dollars to help get art at the airport starting in 1979.²⁸

Jackson's Focus on Neighborhoods

Jackson's administration became known for its neighborhood focus, in addition to affirmative action at the airport. The community approach was a drastic shift from a single-minded view targeting the downtown business district by former white administrations.²⁹ Jackson changed the planning process for the city to a neighborhood planning unit (NPU) system, where citizens were given a voice, with the city's new charter and the Citywide League of Neighborhoods.³⁰ Jackson's administration also benefited from the excitement of the country's bicentennial celebrations, in 1976, and the launch of the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival in 1978. Unlike any mayor before him, Jackson put issues of the black community on the city's daily agenda.³¹

The progressive agenda of the Jackson administration was far reaching. It included the community in neighborhood planning, affirmative action requirements that 20% of contracts for the \$400 million airport expansion be awarded to minority companies, and police reform with the creation of a new Public Safety Commission.³² The generally negative feeling fueled by business elite and the city's news media was that

²⁸ "Permanent Art," http://www.atlantairport.com/passenger/art%20program/firmPassengerInformation_ArtProgram_Permanent_Exhibits.aspx (accessed June 22, 2011). The inclusion of permanent art at the Airport started in 1979 when former Mayor Maynard Jackson commissioned 14 pieces for the new main terminal through the City of Atlanta's Percent for the Arts Ordinance.

²⁹ Bayor, "African-American Mayors and Governance in Atlanta," 182.

³⁰ Stone, *Regime Politics*, 86, 91.

³¹ Bayor, "African-American Mayors and Governance in Atlanta," 183.

³² Stone, *Regime Politics*, 87.

City Hall was anti-business and anti-white.³³ Administering the city was a political balancing act between over-expectations by his race and overt antagonism by white businesses whose financial base held the city together. Stone's description of Atlanta's "regime politics" was thus one of black political clout verses white economic power.³⁴

Atlanta's city council saw the need to balance racial changes and become more representative of its citizenry during Jackson's first term. At this level of city government, Wyche Fowler won the president's seat, defeating the African-American opponent. Hosea Williams was seen as a political anomaly wearing jeans and dashikis, but had a degree in chemistry.³⁵ The council was equally divided with nine blacks and nine whites, furthering the history of biracial politics used to operate the city.

City Hall at five o'clock became an interesting place, as Molette recalls, "In the very early days of the Jackson Administration's first term, . . . people coming out of City Hall sort of looked like Atlanta."³⁶ Only a few blocks away at the state's capitol there were no African Americans to be seen, with the exception of the cafeteria and grounds staff that did not leave at that time. Molette did point out that every time Jackson appointed somebody that attended his Alma mater, Morehouse College, he was accused of cronyism. While Atlanta newspapers made it appear as if this cronyism was something new to urban city government, Eaton remembers that nepotism was rampant in City Hall,

³³ Jack Tarver, "A City in Crisis," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 24, 1975.

³⁴ Stone, *Regime Politics*, 87.

³⁵ Hornsby, *A Short History of Black Atlanta*, 96-97.

³⁶ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 10A.

quipping that “half of the white folks were related.”³⁷

Jackson’s Second Term (1978-1981)

Jackson’s second term policies, from 1978 to 1981, were marked by a sided shift toward Atlanta business leaders, who were primarily white.³⁸ There was a significant increase in white flight among the citizenry resulting in a suburban economic boom. By 1980, double-digit unemployment plagued black Atlantans as compared to 4.1% for whites.³⁹

Jackson had a history of conflict with the city’s police, first as vice-mayor overseeing the Aldermanic Police Committee, next with police chief John Ingram, and then later with his college friend and appointee Reginald Eaves. Despite these differences, the entire city came together in 1981 for the “Missing and Murdered Children” cases that inspired NAC writer-in-residence Toni Cade Bambara to later pen *Those Bones Are Not My Child’s* with references to the NAC.⁴⁰ The unfortunate child crisis would strengthen the partnership between the city’s administration and Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), the downtown central business district’s organizing group.

The Andrew Young Years, 1982 – 1989

In 1982, with the city’s charter setting a maximum of two consecutive mayoral terms, the field of candidates in Atlanta was diverse even though the 1980 census

³⁷ John Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 5A.

³⁸ Bayor, “African-American Mayors and Governance in Atlanta,” 187.

³⁹ Ibid.,” 188.

⁴⁰ Toni Cade Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child’s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999). For a novel based from the children’s perceptive, see Tayari Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* (New York: Warner Books, 2002).

revealed its population to be two-thirds black. As former UN Ambassador under the Carter Administration, the Reverend Andrew Young returned to local politics to be opposed by Sidney Marcus, a Jewish state legislator, and Reginald Eaves, Jackson's fired Public Safety Commissioner. All were seeking to win the job of Atlanta's next mayor. Economic development played a large part of Young's 1981 platform, but the business elite still backed Marcus. Young prevailed in the runoff and took office from 1982 to 1989 as the second consecutive, two-term African-American mayor of Atlanta.

During Young's first term, he and the city developed closer ties between the business community and city hall, particularly through the Underground Atlanta revitalization project, a retail district formed as the city re-erected and elevated downtown streets following the 1864 burning of the city by General William T. Sherman during the Civil War. According to political historian Clarence Stone, housing "for the affluent on the periphery of the central business district" was another one of Young's special interest.⁴¹

Unfortunately, during the Young years, Atlanta lost some 13,000 factory jobs in the 1980s. Bayor speculated that although racial issues may have decreased, issues of classicism increased: "Thus the reality of governing, the necessity of accommodating the business leaders, forces beyond the mayor's control, and the salience of class, once official racism was eliminated, all limited the ability of black mayors to change the city's historic priorities."⁴² This shift from race to class will be evident at the NAC as the

⁴¹ Stone, *Regime Politics*, 111.

⁴² Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 196.

research revealed that its artists' concerns were aligned with the community, while its board members espoused a more black-elite, middle- to upper-class priorities.

Stone summarized Jackson's administration as one of "intraregime conflict" with his progressive agenda being at odds with the city's business elite. Young's time in office as the second African-American mayor for Atlanta was seen differently as one of "extraregime conflict" where his opposition came not from within but from outside regime forces such as the neighborhood groups and preservationists. Both mayoralties relied on Stone's concept of "regime as the governing arrangement for the community."⁴³ His *Regime Politics* model for Atlanta showed that the business elite could not be ignored. Racial balancing was expected even with African Americans in charge.

Compromise and biracial coalitions were already part of Atlanta's regime politics. They are what allowed for the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) referendum of 1971 to pass, and the compromise on school desegregation in 1973, detailed next, occurred in a similar fashion. Jackson's policy of affirmative action at the airport was "therefore built on clearly established precedents."⁴⁴ White business elite and middle-class African Americans in the city of Atlanta have always had a distinctive history of biracial cooperation, marked even today by the name its airport bears, Hartsfield-Jackson, one white and one African American.

Stone felt that Jackson led with the perception that the popular vote, or mandate, granted him authority to do so without regarding the business class. Stressing in *italic*,

⁴³ Stone, *Regime Politics*, 182.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

Stone stated that Jackson “*lacked command of the informal system of cooperation that was so important in the civic life of Atlanta.*”⁴⁵ This perceived deficit in abilities, however, could not be further from the truth in view of the committee Jackson formed to create the NAC.

The Politics of Education: The Atlanta School Board

The city’s educational politics struggled to keep pace as its constituent base changed rapidly after the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954. White flight to the suburbs gave African Americans more and more power at the Atlanta ballot box, but the educational system was reflecting similar bi-racial balancing as did the city council and between businesses and neighborhoods. The Atlanta Board of Education saw changes as Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, the first African-American president of Morehouse College, led the public school system’s board for eleven years, starting in January of 1970.⁴⁶ A brief review of the impact of educational desegregation, starting with Atlanta’s 1973 Compromise, sheds some light on the history of this political balancing act.

According to Bayor, black students represented 77.1 percent of the school population in 1972 and 81.5 in 1973, making Atlanta’s educational system still the most segregated of all southern cities.⁴⁷ The exodus to suburban counties and private education to avoid integration was so dramatic that litigation by the National Association for the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 95. Stone’s emphasis.

⁴⁶ Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 244. Also see Hornsby, *A Short History of Black Atlanta*, 97. For Mays’ life and times prior to joining the school board, see Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 249.

Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to desegregate Atlanta Public Schools (APS) was seen as an impractical attempt to achieve social balance using the bussing of children. The focus shifted to employment concessions, which benefited African-American administrators consisting primarily of the educated, middle-class segment of black Atlanta. The goal was achieving fifty percent employment within their ranks.

All involved realized that the city's demographics would not support integration for the students, so educational employment opportunities acted as the olive branch. The concession was called the "Atlanta Compromise of 1973" because in many ways it was similar to Booker T. Washington's 1895 Atlanta Cotton States Exposition "Compromise" of the South where he stated, "In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress."⁴⁸ Washington felt African Americans could help southerners economically but remain separate from whites. The NAACP was the twentieth century vehicle working toward improving economic opportunities for African Americans, but arguably the school system's black children saw few, if any rewards. The research findings showed that the NAC's targeted after school and neighborhood art programs going into the schools and offering residential opportunities then became a point of administrative pride.

The Politics of Economic Class

Black economic class issues were even more pervasive in the city in the 1970s.

⁴⁸ Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, 247-251. Also see Booker T. Washington *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1900/1901/1940), 160.

Middle-class blacks, or “the black elite”⁴⁹ depending on one’s perspective, were moving into formerly white neighborhoods to send their children to schools with like-minded African Americans of the same class. The decade also saw an influx of African Americans attending private white schools if they could afford it.

With the infusion of federal opportunities, increased black wealth, and a large educated middle-class produced by the AUC, the city of Atlanta was the jewel of the “New South.” Unfortunately, the city was also drenched in old social mores and segregated practices which had been, to a certain degree, self-imposed in the 1970s and 1980s. What happened next is the historical transition from “it was a time when” to a period described as “a lot of very important, but very small, quiet breakthrough moments.” The cultural politics that created the NAC are revealing of the larger community’s transformation.

Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts

Several interviewee participants had vivid memories of the creation of the NAC and all the political hurdles that had to be overcome before its creation. Oral histories included Dr. Michael Lomax, Dr. Carlton Molette, the initial chairman of the NAC board, Shirley Franklin, Joseph Jennings, and John Eaton, the former deputy director. All contributed to the full picture of visualizing cultural politics in Atlanta. Lomax was Mayor Jackson’s director of research, having volunteered with Jackson’s 1973 campaign

⁴⁹ Hornsby, an African-American historian, calls this group “the black elite,” while Stone, a white scholar, refers to African-Americans of economic means and power in the city as “the black middle-class.” Stone’s business “elite,” white and male, ran the city’s business district.

and having made connections in the Atlanta community from his ties with Morehouse College as an alumnus and then as a teacher there.

In 1974, Jackson pledged his administration “to the enhancement of the city’s cultural life through active governmental support of the arts.”⁵⁰ According to Lomax, Jackson’s commitment was reinforced by having one of his aunts, Mattiwilda Dobbs, perform *Villa Lobos* with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO) at his Atlanta Civic Center inauguration. This was a far cry from her past southern experience of having to refuse to perform to segregated audiences up to 1962.⁵¹

Molette also noted that Jackson’s interest in the arts was instilled by his family and was perpetuated throughout his life by constant contact with his aunts. Mattiwilda, the earlier-mentioned aunt, was an accomplished opera singer, and Millicent Dobbs Jordan served on Spelman’s theater faculty for many years, teaching Molette’s wife Barbara as a student in the Theater Program, and was still at the school when the Molettes returned to Spelman as faculty in 1969. Dr. Molette emphasizes,

Mattiwilda and Millie were very much in Maynard’s consciousness before he became mayor about the significance of the arts in any civilized community, and he had talked about that during his campaign and had contacted several people who were considered leaders in the arts community at that point about the fact that he wanted to change the sort of perception of the arts in Atlanta once he became mayor.⁵²

⁵⁰ Michael Lomax, “Neighborhood Multi-Purpose Arts Centers,” Concept paper attached to memo from Lomax to Governing Board of the Neighborhood Multi-Purpose Arts Center, January 30, 1975, 1. Personal collection of Carlton Molette.

⁵¹ “Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon Biography,” <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=1009> (accessed July 11, 2010). It was 1962 before Mattiwilda Dobbs performed in her hometown of Atlanta because of segregated audience requirements.

⁵² Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 8A. Molette’s emphasis.

Jackson was not long in office before a bi-racial arts delegation, including Aunt Millicent Dobbs Jordan, came to visit him.

The meeting that Aunt “Millie” initiated was the beginnings of the Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts. Lomax explains,

[T]here [was] interestingly a delegation that came to see Maynard right after he got elected. It was an interesting, bi-racial delegation. His aunt, Millicent Dobbs Jordan, was the African-American ring leader and actually got the meeting set up. But Robert Shaw came, the head of the Symphony, a guy named David Goldwasser, who was a businessman, Jewish community leader, but at the time was chair of the board of the Symphony; a guy named Joe Perrin who was head of the Art Department at Georgia State . . . and Millie was there. They asked Maynard to consider taking a leadership role in city government becoming supportive of the arts. And that might sound like that wasn’t such a big deal. It was still a very big deal for things to happen interracially in the community, given ’74, to say that they wanted the local government to take an active role in the cultural life of the community. And it wasn’t entirely embraced. . . . There wasn’t this embrace of African-American leadership or necessarily the city taking an active role but Maynard agreed. [He] wasn’t sure how he was going to execute that, but he assigned me the job.⁵³

Lomax remembered being sent to Seattle, Washington, a city seen as a trailblazer in public arts at the time. He visited John Blain, head of the Seattle Arts Council, which supported a major festival called “Bumbershoot.”⁵⁴ They were incorporating the arts in urban design using one percent of the hotel tax for the arts, and they were focusing on individual artists. From this visit, Lomax came back with the ideas to create the BCIA through the creative use of federal and city funding, and to create community arts centers,

⁵³ Lomax, interview with the author, May 14, 2010, 4.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 5. Patrick MacDonald, “30 of Bumbershoot Years,” *The Seattle Times*, August 27, 2000. <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=20000827&slug=4039085> (accessed July 31, 2011). “Bumbershoot,” another name for umbrella, started in 1971 as an art and music festival called “Mayor’s Art Festival” in hopes of boosting the local economy after the near collapse of the Boeing Corporation. Also see “History: 1971,” <http://bumbershoot.org/history/> (accessed July 31, 2011).

the NAC being a model for others.⁵⁵

John Eaton recalled that author and playwright Pearl Cleage was Jackson's press secretary at the time. Cleage was then married to Lomax, whose position in the Mayor's office was funded by CETA. It was Lomax's idea, according to Eaton, that Jackson go forward with an arts initiative. Eaton remembered that Lomax met with Rob Rivers, another CETA employee and graduate of Georgia Institute of Technology who worked in the Water Department/Architecture Department, and hashed out these ideas in the cafeteria of City Hall. Lomax took it to Jackson, and together they began to assemble the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts that would make community-advised recommendations to the Mayor.⁵⁶

Other AU connections named by Molette included Morehouse College's Wendall Whalum and Georgia Allen, who was affiliated with Clark College, the AU Summer Theater, and a noted actor.⁵⁷ Molette recalled that Millicent Dobbs Jordan stayed in the background, never taking any credit but was nonetheless very instrumental to the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee: "She was working hard to get things done but never took any public credit for it because at the time the local news media . . . had a sort of cronyism watch going on."⁵⁸ Molette's memory of the events corroborated those of Lomax.

⁵⁵ Lomax, interview with the author, 5–6.

⁵⁶ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 7B-8A.

⁵⁷ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 6. Georgia Allen played the octogenarian in Tyler Perry's *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006).

⁵⁸ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 4B-5.

Remembering her as a key figure committed to the success of arts in Atlanta, Eaton also added that Dobbs Jordan later joined the board of the NAC.⁵⁹

Getting the “old guard” arts organizations of the city on the Ad Hoc Committee was conceived as part of the cultural politics of making the group work. In addition to the ASO and Georgia State University’s Joe Perrin, Ouida Canady had a visual arts school in Decatur so she was included. Susan Hunter, wife of Woody Hunter, then dean of Emory Law School, ran Dance Atlanta and ultimately joined on the NAC’s Board after serving with the Mayor’s committee.

Shirley Franklin remembered that Gudmund Vigtel, then director of the High Museum of Art, and Vincent Anthony, from what became the Center for Puppetry Arts, were among the first thirty people convened.⁶⁰ The committee grew to some sixty people who represented a cross section of the arts stakeholders in discussions with Mayor Jackson, the city council, and a broader community. Consequently the two groups, one white and one black, were very influential politically. Some NAC board members were part of the Mayor’s original Ad Hoc Committee, and Molette reiterated others were put on the board for political reasons “to make the thing work, because if it had not been a broadly based board, [the NAC] would have failed.”⁶¹

The AUC, a major institution representing Atlanta’s middle-class African-American community, also held a place at the table. Franklin, a graduate of Spelman

⁵⁹ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 5.

⁶⁰ Franklin, Shirley Franklin and Jim Alexander interview with the author, February 15, 2010, 19A.

⁶¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 19A.

College and a colleague of Lomax for ten years going back to days at AU, chaired the Mayor's arts committee. She recalled being a housewife married to David Franklin, an entertainment lawyer, and having young children at the time. She became the board chair for the Advisory Committee to the City of Atlanta's BCIA.⁶² "One of the platform issues," Franklin recalls "was working spaces and living spaces for working artists."⁶³ She also became vice-chair of the City's Grant Committee. Joe Jennings, then teaching jazz music at Clark College, was another individual balancing the racial composition of the committee. Molette, who represented Spelman College's theater interest, was also present. The grassroots community was represented by Ebon Dooley, a long-time black arts advocate.

The local "politics" of the day was that the city's major institutions, the High Museum of Art, the ASO, and the Alliance Theater, all part of the then Memorial Arts Center (now the Woodruff Arts Center), were line items in the city's budget. This type of financial status quo left other arts, both blacks and whites, and communities lacking. Jennings remembers the need to help the "grassroots," or black community, this way:

[Jackson] formed this committee and we debated issues, some of the best ways to service what he called "the grassroots arts community," and I always thought that the grassroots focus was black arts. I mean trying to bring parity because you had all these organizations [in the] Woodruff Arts Center, getting tax dollars and supporting their arts forms. The symphony was getting money. The Arts Center was getting money, but no money was coming to the black community. . . . I think this was grassroots, was one way to say . . . help these other folk out here who are struggling and their arts are as meaningful as others.⁶⁴

⁶² Franklin, Shirley Franklin and Jim Alexander interview with the author, February 15, 2010, 17.

⁶³ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁴ Joseph Jennings, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, 4.

Cultural workers were at the table to effectively change Atlanta's arts policies.

Lomax recalled that the committee was charged with determining, "What would the blueprint be for the city's engagement in the arts?"⁶⁵ Molette remembered Ted Mastroinni, a New York transplant, as another instrumental figure in city government helping the Ad Hoc Committee to function. Mastroinni was formally part of the New York Mayor John V. Lindsay's administration (1966-1973), and came south as Atlanta's Director/Commissioner of Parks, Libraries and Cultural Affairs.⁶⁶ Molette harked back to the New Yorker being an excellent community organizer: "[Mastroinni] could bring a group of diverse people into a room and get them into an agenda and move forward."⁶⁷ Apparently, Mastroinni's skills were needed because the first assembly of people brought together represented two divergent groups that were not used to working with each other. By the end of that meeting, a "we've got to get this done" sentiment emerged. Mastroinni had moved them past the old suspicions and issues about "why, way back when, someone was keeping the other from getting things done."⁶⁸

Creating an Arts Blueprint

The imperative to create an arts blueprint made balanced representation necessary. Lomax's memory of a new arts blueprint for Atlanta materialized into what

⁶⁵ Lomax, interview with the author, 5.

⁶⁶ See "Ted Mastroinni," www.allusa.com/classmates/autobiographies/MASTROINNIted.htm (accessed July 31, 2011).

⁶⁷ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 17A.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 17B-18A. Molette also notes that Lomax and Tobe Johnson were integral to the AU Program Ford Foundation money that created the undergraduate and Master's African-American Studies Program.

Franklin recalled as several initiatives, including: 1) increased grants programs, 2) the Neighborhood Arts Center, and 3) community outreach for existing major institutions. Franklin shared that the NAC initiatives “[were] thought to be a way to institutionalize the engagement of local community grassroots people in understanding the arts whether they were going to be artists or not, but also to just expand their horizons.”⁶⁹

Lomax and Rob Rivers put the details on the Mayor’s concept for the arts. Molette explains, “It’s easy to say ‘we’re gonna make the arts better,’ but those two guys got together and started identifying a place where the Symphony could give a free concert outdoors, [and] downtown, for example.”⁷⁰ There were also negotiations with the Musician’s Union and the Symphony’s administration to create an environment that they were willing to give concerts. Molette remembered that GSU’s park at Hurt Plaza was selected because the beautiful white marble retaining wall was acoustically appealing.⁷¹

Mayor’s Day for the Arts: Two Communities Coming Together

On May 9, 1975, Mayor Jackson said, “‘Art for the People’ is a major goal of my administration and this day is one step in that direction,” to a forum on media and the arts to open “Mayor’s Day for the Arts” in the city of Atlanta.⁷² Jackson instituted Atlanta’s first “Mayor’s Day for the Arts,” at the intersections of Central City Park, Hurt Park, and Edgewood Avenue in the heart of the central business district. The scouting done by

⁶⁹ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, February 15, 2010, 17.

⁷⁰ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 9A.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Forum on Media and the Arts, 1975, May 9,” “Speeches Subseries,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Box 7, Folder 1. Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center Special Collection.

Lomax and Rivers became the basis for “Mayor’s Day for the Arts.” It was based on the model from the Seattle visit. Molette’s memory of this significant day in Atlanta was that “all sorts of artsy things [were] going on that day.”⁷³ It was an effort to bring the citizens of Atlanta back to the downtown district instead of just coming into the city to work and leaving. Jackson’s purpose of “Mayor’s Day” was to “turned over [the park area] to artists of all kinds so that they can demonstrate and perform their art with and for the people of Atlanta.”⁷⁴

To the media, Jackson impressed that it was one thing to look around and enjoy sculpture on the streets, artists performing, and artwork on the walls, but quite another to commit to *paying* (his emphasis) for it. “Art was not a frill to be put on the back burner while the city deals with ‘other problems’.” His commitment was to find the resources necessary to regard the city as a “regional cultural center.” Mayor’s Day was seen for its utilitarian social value of bringing citizens back to the downtown area, revitalizing the city and increasing citizen involvement, thus combining two of his administration’s goals of cultural activity and citizen participation.

Clark College art faculty Lev Mills supported the project by designing the original Mayor’s Day poster. Jackson explained Mills’ importance as an artist as follows:

[Mills’] work hangs in the National Library of Scotland, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Library of Congress and the High Museum. Mr. Mills’ willingness to translate his art into poster form

⁷³ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, 9A.

⁷⁴ “Mayor’s Day, 1975, April 24,” “Speeches Subseries,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Box 6, Folder 42. Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center Special Collection.

is one indication of the enthusiastic support of the Mayor's Day among members of the City's arts community.⁷⁵

Most important to the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee was attracting a broad, biracial support. The group of concerned citizens was wide-ranging, but Jackson mentioned specifically the following as instrumental to the event's success: Commissioner Hope Moore, whose Department was involved with the total effort; Lomax, then Director of the BCIA, Franklin, Chairperson for Mayor's Day who was responsible for the entire project, and Rob Rivers, Program Coordinator for Mayor's Day.⁷⁶ Key figures in the memory of interview participants were corroborated by archival records.

While Molette said "artsys things [were] going on," Lomax remembered the day as a "ragtag parade" of sorts because it had a "make-it-up-as-you-go-along quality."⁷⁷ Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby happened to be shooting the movie *Let's Do It Again* (1975) in the city and appeared in the parade. Performances were held on makeshift stages, and Lomax remembered both white and black organizations were represented. Franklin's memory of the event was that Jim Alexander took a picture of her with the two celebrities on the steps of City Hall.⁷⁸ Molette shared humorously that today's movie star Samuel L. Jackson and wife LaTonya Richardson Jackson performed pantomime on a downtown street corner as representatives of the NAC.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1-2.

⁷⁶ "1975, May 9, Forum on Media and the Arts," "Speeches Subseries," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Box 7, 1.

⁷⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, 5.

⁷⁸ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, 16.

⁷⁹ Lomax, interview with the author, 6.

Mayor's Day achieved its objective. As Lomax shares, "It was one of the few spaces in the city where blacks and whites came together because artists were always marginalized. Black people were marginalized, so that the two communities came together."⁸⁰ Molette's comment that "a lot of very important, but very small, quiet breakthrough moments" occurred while serving on the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts emphasizes that there could be incremental changes to politics using the arts, Atlanta-style.⁸¹

Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs (BCIA) and Public Art

Another BCIA program that benefited the NAC was having arts organizations perform around the city and "in the community." BCIA had the ASO give performances "for the first time on the south side of town to all-black audiences," Lomax said proudly. They were staged at John A. White Park in the African-American neighborhood. ASO ultimately gravitated to the majority-white Piedmont Park, where Lomax explained they drew "very large, integrated crowds into the city because people were leaving the city."⁸² There were performances in Central City Park, now Woodruff Park, in the downtown business district that featured the Neighborhood Arts Ensemble. All of these cultural events were also political actions. In Lomax's words, they were efforts toward "making people comfortable coming back into the city."⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁸¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 10A.

⁸² Lomax, interview with the author, 6.

⁸³ Ibid.

The NAC's music program performed around Atlanta with the BCIA's support, bringing art to the people but remaining true to the black community by going into public housing projects, parks in the African-American community as well as Central City Park. Jennings remembered that the NAC's Mobile Jazz Atlanta Program used its connections with the BCIA to secure venues run by the City's Parks and Recreation Department. The cultural politics of Atlanta initially dictated making conscious attempts at performing to both black and white audiences.

Jazz Capital of the World

The BCIA mobilized to make Mayor Jackson's desire come true to transform Atlanta into "the Jazz Capital of the World."⁸⁴ The NAC played into his political agenda for promoting the city's culture and art locally and nationally. By 1978, Franklin was director of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs (BCA), and Lomax had moved on to being Commissioner of Parks and Recreation. CETA workers from both the BCA and NAC approached Franklin about establishing an Atlanta Jazz Festival. "Gary [Windom] and Sherman [Golden] were these twenty-year olds who convinced me to do a jazz festival," Franklin recalls. "They had me traipsing around New York asking million dollar talent," to come to Atlanta for free "the first year."⁸⁵

The NAC, an integral part of Atlanta's jazz scene, was making a name for itself with its Afrocentric programming. The same people who supported the NAC were in

⁸⁴ Correspondence from Maynard Jackson to Joe Jennings, September 6, 1978, 1. Personal Collection of Joe Jennings.

⁸⁵ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, 19. Sherman Golden, Gary Windom, Lamar Renford, Willis Barry, Balogi and Joe Jennings (NAC Music artist-in-residence) were the initial instigators. Some of these musicians had jazz shows locally on WCLK's radio station and volunteered to make the festival a reality. See Franklin, Franklin and Alexander Interview, 9-10.

favor of mounting an Atlanta Jazz Festival of which Franklin remembered, it was a “good partnership.”⁸⁶ Jim Alexander, who has documented all thirty-two years of the Jazz festival since it began in 1978, remembers fondly that it is a mainstay for the city’s culture and tourism. The festival has grown over the years, and Alexander recalls,

[I]t wasn’t just the named people that [were] out in [Piedmont Park]. We had people all over the city out in the plazas and out in the streets, different people with their groups. Whoever signed up and they had a group, they could sing or whatever. So it went on for a whole month. So now they actually use that name “Thirty Days of Jazz.”⁸⁷

Franklin and Alexander explained that the Jazz Festival “catalyst” also fueled the start of middle school jazz bands and competitions up to the collegiate level.

As a jazz musician in the community, Jennings also benefited from the Jazz Festival. A native of Natchez, Mississippi and schooled in musical performance at Southern University in Louisiana and the University of Illinois in Chicago, Jennings shared the mayor’s ambition but found Atlanta’s cultural politics troubling. Jennings explained that in New Orleans, their festival concept was the promotion of local talent, whereas Atlanta’s was not. He felt having a local focus also aided New Orleans’ budget in not having huge transportation and boarding costs for outside artists.⁸⁸ Seemingly, the Atlanta mayor’s desire for international recognition got in the way of promoting local arts assets.

Franklin remembers, “It was 1% for the arts that grew out of the same

⁸⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁷ Alexander, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, 20.

⁸⁸ Jennings, interview with the author, 18.

movement. That was really Maynard's initiative. We were one of the early centers/cities with 1% for the arts. It's primarily the visual arts and the city has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars."⁸⁹ The one percent for the arts idea, borrowed from Seattle by Lomax, not only helped create a public arts budget for the BCIA, it later created a presence for the arts in Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport.

Creating a Community Arts Center: The Politics of Location

The second charge of the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee was to create community arts centers, and the concept of a multi-purpose arts center was formally proposed on October 31, 1974 in a memorandum to the Mayor from Michael Lomax.⁹⁰ The NAC staff, including an artist-in-residence program, was created as a separate contractor of CETA. Given Jackson's new Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) system, finding a location for the NAC was a decision draped in political ramifications as well.

Many of the city's cultural anchors were on the northern, mostly white, side of town Franklin recalled, and several members of the Ad Hoc Committee desired a black "community" presence. Franklin shares,

I became particularly interested in opening a center on the south side of town. . . . [T]he Woodruff Arts Center played an anchor role on the northern side of the city and that on the Eastern side was the Nexus initiative and it seemed that in order to have geographic bounds and also easy access to this center that we needed to have some geographic boundaries in the Southside.⁹¹

Franklin remembered proposing the use of vacant school buildings so the search for a

⁸⁹ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, 21.

⁹⁰ Michael Lomax to Mayor Maynard Jackson, October 31, 1974, 1. Personal Collection of Carlton Molette.

⁹¹ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, 2-3.

location ensued. Molette recalls thinking that the big political hurdle he thought he would have to overcome for the NAC's creation would be getting the Atlanta School Board to approve the use of a mothballed school building for the NAC's physical location. The board composition was split evenly along racial lines, but Mays, the first African American to hold the chairman's position, was able to get the motion approved to rent the facility for \$1 without it being an issue.⁹²

The Capital Avenue School was originally leased for the NAC, but they quickly found that the heating system was not repairable. The NAC's staff and board began working with community contacts to find a new location. It was Mrs. Rosa Burney, known as the "Mayor" of Pittsburgh/Mechanicsville, who approached the Southside Daycare about their space in the Peter James Bryant School.

Molette remembered an issue came between him and the city's legal department over the contract for janitorial services with the daycare because the city said he had no authority to sign.⁹³ The NAC was under the auspices of the government not a separate 501(c)3 organization. NAC's model of securing a mothballed school building would become the impetus for other groups. Artists secured the Forest Avenue School (later known as Nexus, and now The Contemporary) and the Center for Puppetry Arts used the Spring Street School in similar fashion.

The purpose of the BCIA, Lomax explains, was to "support artists, arts activities,

⁹² Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 13.

⁹³ Ibid., 13-14.

and arts institutions, but it would also sort of help to give a sense of the creative vitality of the city.”⁹⁴ With the creative use of federal and city funding, the hotel tax provided BCIA with an operating budget, and CETA funds, made it possible for the City of Atlanta to hire staff. Lomax recalls,

We thought about a number of projects that would put artists to work on behalf of making the downtown livelier and attracting tourism was one thing, but also where arts and artists would have a positive impact on the community, and when you say “the community” you meant the black community.⁹⁵

Jackson’s two-fold approach to cultural politics was more than successful for the community because the city gained national and international attention from its commitment to enriching lives. The creation of the NAC discussed herein and its “Art for People’s Sake” programs, considered in the next two chapters, should be firmly situated in the Black Arts Movement.

⁹⁴ Lomax, interview with the author, 5.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 6.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: PART I – NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS CENTER PROGRAMS

Introduction

All resident artists at the Neighborhood Arts Center (NAC) were funded through the Atlanta Office of the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA), and the Department of Community and Human Development operated by the City's Bureau of Cultural and International Affairs (BCIA). The NAC's pinnacle of productiveness in all the arts disciplines was during these financially prosperous times of 1975 to 1981. As Ebon Dooley so aptly describes, what he was most proud of about the center was that it "provided a platform for the flowers in the community to bloom and reveal themselves."¹ CETA funds made most of the programming possible until it ceased in 1981. These transitional times were jolting as participants recalled having thirty-plus artists one day and being reduced to a staff of three the next when the federal program was cut.

The following research findings address two questions: 1) how did the Neighborhood Arts Center meet its Black Arts Movement (BAM) motto of "Art for People's Sake" within its various arts disciplines?, and 2) how did Atlanta's cultural politics have an impact on the NAC being a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement? By answering these questions, the research sought to identify the NAC as a BAM institution, properly placing it among its regional manifestations. Specifically, it

¹ Ebon Dooley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, transcript, 13.

sought to situate the NAC along the movement's continuum not merely as a legacy based on dates, but extending the periodization of the movement based on its programming impact. The following chapter will explore the first of these two queries.

The research findings on the NAC's motto of "Art for People's Sake" and how the organization met its BAM mandate have been subdivided thematically. The five areas that best articulate this Black Arts Movement cultural institution are also identified with an oral history quotation. They are: 1) Local/National and Individual/Community Dichotomies: "Artists have a profound relationship and responsibility to the community,"² 2) Art for the Masses: "Understand(ing) the profound role that an artist can play in helping a person open up,"³ 3) Space and Location, "What was important was the community and the space to create art freely,"⁴ 4) Women and Gender: "What makes a Black woman tick, tock?"⁵, and 5) Social and Political Consciousness: "*All* of us were going through transitions."⁶ Within the five areas, the arts disciplines representing NAC programming included dance, music, creative writing, theater, and the visual arts. The quotations associated with each theme embody an exemplar voice. Together, the art forms and their voices represent this research's conceptual framework of simultaneity.

² Michael Simanga, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 16.

³ Alice Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author. Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 4.

⁴ Simanga, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA January 23, 2009, transcript, 9.

⁵ Sandra Dunson Franks, John Eaton et al. interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, transcript, 29.

⁶ Joe Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 11A. Jennings' emphasis.

This chapter will analyze the first three broader themes, and the next chapter will explore the specifics of this first research question on the NAC's programs centered on the last two themes: their gender position and their stance on raising black consciousness.

Theme I – Local/National and Individual/Community Dichotomies

Former interim director of the Fulton County Arts Council Michael Simanga states, “Artists have a profound relationship and responsibility to the community.”⁷ This exemplar statement could not be truer for the artists at the NAC, but particularly documentary photographer Jim Alexander. *Take Me a Picture*, 1978 (see fig. 5.1), is the photograph that initially introduced this researcher to the NAC. A young girl, about five or six-years-old, is pictured sitting on the NAC's side entrance steps used by the community as the main entrance and exit of the facility. She has her hair in two ponytails, like almost every African-American girl in her youth, and her head rests in her hands with two fingers framing her smile, is slightly tilted to the side. Alexander captures her personality, seemingly thrilled to be the center of the photographer's attention.

The image is a close-up of a Mechanicsville youth from the center's surrounding community, but in another image, a larger exposure of the same location, titled *Romare and Nanette at the NAC*, 1978 (see fig. 5.2), Alexander depicts the renowned visual artist Romare Bearden leading a group of local artists down the same NAC stairs. Included from left to right are Bearden's wife Nanette, a dancer in her own right; Jim Lee, a writer; Kerry Price, part of NAC's administrative staff; and NAC's Executive director John Riddle, a visual artist in the striped sweater. As they all descend the steps, the same

⁷ Simanga, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 16.

Mechanicsville girl looks up at the group, scratching her forehead and wonders who Bearden is to garner so much attention. In the first version, the neighborhood's child was the center of the frame, and in the second, Alexander focuses on the group of impressive artists. As in this later photograph, the juxtaposition of local and national attention, and that of individual and community, was the dynamic dichotomy at work manifested in "Art for People's Sake" during the NAC from 1975 to 1990 as some of the programmatic details will elaborate.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.1. Jim Alexander, *Take Me a Picture*, 1978

The first of five themes present throughout the program findings of this research show that the NAC provided a bridge between the local and national arts, and between the individual and the community. Several examples are presented here. In the discipline

of dance, national and international talent, such as Alvin Ailey and the National Dance Company of Senegal, interfaced with artists and audiences at the NAC. Creative writing opportunities brought, for example, author John Oliver Killens to the center with the collaboration of other community organizations, as will be discussed. In the visual arts, Romare Bearden and the National Conference of Artists offered several occasions for local and national artists to intermingle, while the NAC offered local exhibition opportunities to national talent. Lastly, in the discipline of music, the findings demonstrate that national acts were attracted to Atlanta and the NAC through vehicles such as the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival, while local musicians made names for themselves with programs such as the Mobile Jazz Atlanta and NAC Ensemble.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.2. Jim Alexander, *Romare and Nanette at the NAC*, 1978

Dance offers the first example of the dichotic theme of local/national and the individual/community. While having a resident dance troupe provided continual community outreach, the NAC also benefited from nationally-known troupes that traveled to Atlanta, such as Alvin Ailey's American Dance Theatre, as well as international companies, such as Brazilian folk dancers, who also visited Spelman College, and the National Dance Company of Senegal. It was actually in February of 1976 that Alvin Ailey's dance troupe taught free master classes at the NAC, in jazz, ethnic, and modern dance, and at several other venues prior to their Atlanta Civic Center paid performances.⁸ Ailey's company performed again at the Atlanta Civic Center in the latter part of 1976, and a benefit party for the NAC followed their November performance.⁹ Ailey came back, in 1977, for a long-term residency, and a gala benefit performance was held in the Civic Center with "additional proceeds from the affair" supporting the NAC.¹⁰

While Ailey stands as an example of national artists interfacing with Atlanta artists, one of the highlights remembered about the NAC's dance programming was hosting the National Dance Company of Senegal at the Civic Center in 1980. It was the company's twentieth anniversary and Honorary Consul to Senegal, West Africa, Dr. E.

⁸ "Alvin Ailey Center Dancers Here Friday," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 22, 1976, 10. Spelman, Georgia State University, Northside High School, and Decatur Recreation Center were the other locations.

⁹ "Harlem Dance Company to Benefit Arts Center," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 5, 1976, 3. Another important black choreographer, Arthur Mitchell, was the first black dancer to appear in leading roles in Balanchine's New York Ballet, founded Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969 to provide classical ballet to black dancers and to pay tribute to the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by establishing a black dance company.

¹⁰ "Gala Reception Planned for Alvin Ailey Dancers," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 25, 1977, 10.

A. Jones, worked with the City of Atlanta and the NAC to make the celebration a reality. The forty-two member group, organized in March of 1960, performed dances representing events such as marriage, harvest, fertility, and exorcism. The storyline of dances was complete with “lavish costuming, authentic rituals and spiritual drumming all culminat[ing] in a ‘celebration of life’s most elementary mysteries’.”¹¹

Alexander captured Mayor Jackson in a photograph welcoming the group to the city, and there was a gala reception with the dancers that followed. John Kolé Eaton delights in the success of this event with these memories:

We presented the National Dance Company of Senegal in a rainstorm on a Tuesday night and packed the Civic Center. 4,600 seats and . . . as we often do in our community, advance sales tickets [were] about a third of the seats. We got to the last night and people lined up around the Civic Center to come in. . . . I don’t know if you have ever been in this position where you get caught under the tidal wave of money? Money just came in so fast. I had money all down in my underwear, my shorts. John [Riddle] did too. We had money stuffed everywhere!¹²

Rikka Eaton, then a student in the NAC’s dance program and Eaton’s wife, reassured the group that “all the money went back” to support the NAC at the end of the night.¹³ The NAC’s African Dance Ensemble opened that night’s performance.¹⁴ The fundraising event was programmatically successful as the NAC worked side by side with the city to bring the international art presentation to fruition.

¹¹ “Nat’l. Dance Company of Senegal Slated Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 30, 1980, 3.

¹² John Kolé Eaton, NAC Eaton et al. Panel interview with author, February 15, 2009, transcript, 25.

¹³ Rikka Eaton, NAC Eaton et al. Panel interview with author, February 15, 2009, transcript, 25.

¹⁴ Portia Scott Brookins, “High School Beat,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 28, 1980, 3.

On another occasion, Alexander photographed the African Dance Ensemble preparing to go on tour for a performance in Tennessee against the backdrop of the old Atlanta Fulton County Stadium. Their success, extensive travel schedule, and close proximity of the Mechanicsville community and the NAC to the city's major sports stadium, did not limit their artistic impact which extended beyond the neighborhood to other states. The desire for "Arts for People's Sake" in Mechanicsville even reached internationally as far as the continent of Africa, in Senegal, to bring new cultural forms to the city. It seems to be the NAC that helped to inaugurate hosting African cultural forms in the city, as the center was the underpinning of cultural politics for Jackson's ambitions to make Atlanta an international hub.

Just as the NAC fostered music, it was also a place where local poets joined with creative writers of national repute. The NAC Writers' Workshop brought John Oliver Killens, novelist and literary critic, as the featured lecturer during the summer of 1977. This was a joint collaboration between the NAC, the Institute of the Black World (IBW), and Hoyt Fuller's *First World* magazine, which had recently relocated to Atlanta from Chicago. The lecture theme was "The Resurrection of Alexander Pushkin: The Black Intellectual and the Revolutionary Tradition." It was based on his non-fiction work on Pushkin, a Russian of African descent, who was a father of Russian literature.¹⁵

Killens had a long association with the IBW. He was a native of Macon, Georgia and founder of the Harlem Writers Guild, the oldest association of black writers in the

¹⁵ "Novelist Killens to Lecture Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 26, 1977, 3. See John Oliver Killens, *Great Black Russian: A Novel on the Life and Times of Alexander Pushkin* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989) and Keith Gilyard, *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

country. Killens was a very prolific and popular black author with many novels and non-fiction works, numerous essays, screen plays, and reviews to his credit. His publications were said to “continue the long tradition of the Black intellectual’s work at the services of the ongoing struggle for freedom, justice and human dignity.”¹⁶

The IBW was a natural co-sponsor for the program. Founded in 1969 on the principles of “pragmatic nationalism,” it focused on creating Black Studies programs and a black political agenda, as opposed to “cultural nationalists” whose aesthetic ideology differed, or “revolutionary nationalism” seeking to align with Marxism. “IBW sought to raise and transform the social and political consciousness within black communities by providing public policy research and analysis through newspaper columns, published pamphlets, newsletters, and public lectures.”¹⁷

Hoyt Fuller, the other Killens event sponsor, was connected to Atlanta and his organizational philosophy for *First World*, also aligned with the beliefs of the NAC artists. Richard A. Long, a noted African-American scholar of diasporic culture, knew Fuller well and recalled that he was actually born in Atlanta and had “historical connections” to the city. Fuller came back more regularly when Long moved to Atlanta. *Black World* magazine was closed in 1976 because Johnson Publishing had no affinity for Fuller’s diasporic concepts and wanted to use the space to create a women’s journal, like *Essence* magazine, Long remembered.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Novelist Killens to Lecture Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 26, 1977, 3.

¹⁷ Derrick E. White, “‘Black World View’: The Institute of the Black World’s Promotion of Pragmatic Nationalism, 1969-1974,” *The Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2010), 370-71.

¹⁸ Richard Long, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 26, 2010, transcript, 14B.

While Fuller made efforts to revitalize the publication as *First World*, Johnson never released the subscription list. According to Long, “Now that may not have been the home run they needed anyway, but without [the subscription list], it was just impossible.”¹⁹ There were only a few issues produced of *First World* before Fuller unexpectedly died of a heart attack in 1981.²⁰ Programs like Killens’ fulfilled the mission of cultural workers at the IBW and *First World*, but without the NAC, such national writers would not have had a local venue and may have bypassed the Atlanta community.

The discipline of visual arts at the center was no exception for dichotomies of individual and community, as well as local and national, to exist. Romare Bearden was already quite well known among collectors and artists, with many African-American artists aspiring to his crossover fame.²¹ The exhibition *Romare Bearden at the Neighborhood Arts Center* featured fifteen prints by one of the most outstanding modernists of the twentieth century. The NAC exhibited prints exemplifying his collage technique, and student group tours were coordinated through the Arts and Humanities Center of the Memorial Arts Center, a unique collaboration for the times.²²

Jim Alexander was the chair of the Exhibitions Committee, which included Steve Seaburg among other artists, when the NAC received a grant to do facility renovations,

¹⁹ Ibid., 15A.

²⁰ Robert L. Harris Jr., “Hoyt W. Fuller: The Man in Historical Perspective,” in *Homage to Hoyt Fuller*, Dudley Randall, ed. (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1984), 16.

²¹ Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), *Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual*. Introductory essay by Carroll Greene (New York: New York, 1971). This was a catalogue of an exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 25-June 7, 1971, and at four other museums, July 16, 1971-April 9, 1972.

²² “Romare Bearden Art Showing Slated Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 17, 1978, 3. The exhibit ran March 23 to April 21, 1978.

which included renovation of the gallery space. They worked with NAC Board Chairman Dr. Otis Thrash “O.T.” Hammonds to prepare for the series of projection prints Bearden donated to the center as a fundraiser. Alexander discussed his idea with directors Riddle and Eaton of naming the gallery after their famous benefactor, and so a tradition was created that the visual arts galleries on Georgia Avenue, and later on Auburn Avenue, were thereafter each named The Romare Bearden Gallery. The NAC’s board was to put the exhibit together, but according to Alexander, O.T. came to him as time was escaping and nothing had been done, to fund framing and installation of the exhibit. Alexander also put the exhibit’s catalog together with the assistance of visual artist Velma Ludaway.

The NAC’s Bearden exhibit occurred simultaneously with the convening of the National Conference of Artists. Begun at an AU Arts Annual in 1958, the professional conference of African-American artists came back to the South twenty years later, in 1978, offering its programming at the NAC.²³ Local sculptor Curtis Patterson delivered a slide lecture at the conference and there were workshops at the NAC in silkscreen, portfolios, audio-visual art, health hazards, and “Afro-Raku” ceramic firing.²⁴

Hundreds trekked to the NAC to see Bearden’s work, and local artists Alexander, John Zeigler, and Charles Harris exhibited with him.²⁵ Portia Scott Brookins, an *ADW* reporter and daughter of the paper’s founder C.A. Scott, described Bearden as “one of the

²³ “Jewel Simon, Distinguished Artist, Civic Leader Here: Exhibit at Neighborhood Arts Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 15, 1978, 3.

²⁴ Alexander’s annotations to #7 “Artist Curtis Patterson,” *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander’s Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library Information*, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/anac_informatin.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

world's most noted artists, especially of the Afro-American theme. An expert in contrast, Bearden has perfected the technique of pasting together caricatures and objects so that they blend and tell a true story of black life."²⁶

Bearden and his wife Nanette returned to the NAC the day following the exhibit opening with BCIA Director Michael Lomax and made several visits to artist studios that inspired many careers. For the NAC students of the visual arts, Bearden's presence was akin to a spiritual visitation. Having this nationally-renowned artist come to Atlanta's NAC was a highlight in the memories of several interview participants. Alexander captured Bearden touring the NAC in its dance studio, galleries with Lomax, and descending the NAC's exterior stairs as mentioned earlier (see fig. 5.2).

Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier, a native of North Carolina, was a student at the NAC when she received a Bearden "visitation." She explains it as life changing:

When we were talking about [Romare] Bearden coming to town, I will *never ever* forget that. I will never forget when he came. Because back then artists like Charles White, Bearden, folks like that to me . . . they were bigger than life. I mean that's how I saw them . . . I saw him and he saw a painting of mine, and he asked who did the painting and wanted to meet me. I *hid* behind the door. I hid behind the door. [He] was like a saint. I remember him coming through and it was like a saint coming through, and I just felt like I was not worthy to meet someone like. . . . He was bigger than life to me. He was in *books*.²⁷

For her, having a national artist that appeared in books admire her work was more than

²⁵ Portia S. Brookins, "Romare Bearden Exhibits Works at Art Center," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 26, 1978, 10.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier, John Eaton et al. interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, Part 2, transcript, 6-7; Marshall-Linnemeier's emphasis. All participants laughed because Marshall-Linnemeier is now in books.

she could process at the time. The irony is that Marshall-Linnemeier's artwork now appears in exhibitions and books.

Clark Atlanta University Museum Director Tina Dunkley offered another example. Dunkley received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1974. She explained that she wrote a final art history paper on Bearden at a time when art schools were not discussing any black artists. She recalls, "I remember going astray to document that [Bearden] had been working before and since 1945."²⁸

Dunkley remembered two reasons for coming to Atlanta were reading of Richard A. Long in a *New York Times* article discussing black art and Maynard Jackson being mayor. Her NAC residency lasted from February 1975 to August 1977. She geared her classes toward making things for the environment such as pillows, covers, simulated stained glass, and other items to enhance interiors. She left to teach in the children's division of the High Museum of Art.

At Atlanta University, Dunkley was influenced by Long's national and international connections. A cultural scholar, Long met Bearden in 1966. When Long came to Atlanta University in 1968 to teach, Bearden stayed with his wife Nanette in Long's home. They were not strangers to the city because Bearden did a brief residency at Spelman College in 1966-67. Long notes that he actually introduced Bearden to O.T. Hammonds.

As a NAC instructor, Dunkley's Bearden "visitation" was just as remarkable for her as it was for Marshall-Linnemeier as a student. She shares, "Richard Long brought

²⁸ Tina Dunkley, Panel #2 (Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 4.

[Bearden] to my studio. I remember this moment was really critical because he came in. Richard said, ‘This is the artist you were asking about.’ . . . [Bearden] held out his hand, shook my hand and said, ‘I am very impressed with your work,’ and I just melted.”²⁹

Board member Jan Meadows also remembered the poignant Bearden visit in her interview remarking, “Oh and one exhibition featured Romare Bearden. He was a personal friend of Dr. Hammonds, and we sold some of those paintings and the proceeds went to the Neighborhood Arts Center.”³⁰ It was this Hammonds-Bearden connection that Long fostered that ultimately helped to make the NAC’s exhibit possible.³¹ Long was also influential in directing Dunkley’s Master’s thesis on the AU Art Annuals, and is a collaborator in the forthcoming catalog on the CAU permanent collection.³²

The Center was not only a place where local artists benefited from the contact with national artists, but national artists also benefited from the existence of the NAC's exhibitions of traditional and non-traditional art. Following the national conference of 1978, one of the first retrospective shows for National Conference of Artists founding member Jewel Simon was mounted at the NAC. Described as “long overdue,” the retrospective of her paintings spanning some forty-four years was said to show the progression and retention of style and themes over the years.

Simon was a native of Houston, Texas and lived in Atlanta since 1941. She received her Bachelor of Arts from Atlanta University in 1931, her BFA from Atlanta

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Meadows, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, March 3, 2010, transcript, 4A.

³¹ Long, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, February 26, 2010, transcript, 6B.

³² The forthcoming catalog is titled *In the Eye of the Muses: Selections from the Clark Atlanta University Art Collection* (Seattle, WA: Marquand Books, 2012).

College of Art (ACA) in 1967, and was the first black graduate of ACA. She appeared in the 1943 Annual Art Exhibit of AU, showed each year of the Atlanta Festival of Art, and served as the National Conference of Artists' treasurer from its inception in 1958 until 1973. Simon was also a founding member of Black Artists of Atlanta. Her exhibit at the NAC was unfortunately not without incident as one of her pieces was stolen. The NAC, represented by Riddle and Lomax, had few funds to cover its replacement.³³

The NAC continued to acknowledge established artists in 1982 by mounting more than thirty drawings and paintings for *A Ten Year Retrospective Look, 1972-1982* of the works of Floyd Newsum in the Romare Bearden Gallery. An assistant professor in Texas at the University of Houston Downtown College, Newsum had been featured in several magazines and newspapers and had exhibited in galleries such as the San Diego Museum of Art and Bishop College.³⁴ The southern exposure at the NAC benefited the artist and the Atlanta community.

An example of the benefits of the individual artist and the community juxtaposition was when NAC board member Alma Simmons was honored posthumously in 1982. Alexander curated the show of her photography, an exhibit for which planning had begun before her death. Simmons was the first chairperson of Gallery I, the only public art gallery for Southwest Atlanta, located in Frederick Douglass High School. Gallery I was initiated by Dr. I. W. Butts and opened March 12, 1980. According to the

³³ "Jewel Simon, Distinguished Artist, Civic Leader Here: Exhibit at Neighborhood Arts Center," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 15, 1978, 3.

³⁴ "Neighborhood Arts Center Takes Retrospective Look," *Atlanta Daily World*, 15 August, 1982, 3. The show ran through October 10.

reporter,

The Simmons Gallery was an effort to make art more accessible to the school and the citizens in the community. By having a gallery in the community, the citizens will be further inspired to attend galleries and museums frequently, and will become more knowledgeable about art and artists. As a learning resource the gallery can magnify the quality and scope of other disciplines as well as Art Education.³⁵

When Simmons passed, it was only fitting that she was honored with Gallery I's name being changed to the Alma Simmons Memorial Gallery in 1982. There was also an unveiling of a portrait of Simmons done by NAC's Patrick Cameron.

Simmons was born in Williamsburg, Virginia and graduated from Spelman College and Columbia University. She taught in Atlanta at such schools as Turner, Archer, and Douglass High Schools before being promoted to Art Coordinator in 1972. She had thirty years of service to the school system. Her community service, in addition to being a charter member of the NAC's Board of Directors, included: Advisory Committee for the Atlanta Life National Annual Art Competition, member of the National Art Education Association, the Georgia Art Education Association, the Georgia Council of Arts Program, 1973 winner of the "Bronze Woman of the Year" for her contributions to Art Education, and Phoenix Arts & Theatre Company presented her with an award in 1981 for services to Gallery I.³⁶ Simmons was truly an individual committed to arts education for the community and the NAC was one of her vehicles of service.

The NAC honored nationally-known, established visual artists such as Elizabeth

³⁵ Mrs. John Shabazz, "Our Own Public Black Art Gallery," *Atlanta Daily World*, December 5, 1982, 7.

³⁶ Ibid.

Catlett, in addition to hosting local and regional exhibitions. Catlett's work was shown at the Chi-Wara Gallery of NAC board member Crystal Britton for Black History month in 1980, but the reception was held at the NAC. The invitation to NAC's gala featured Catlett's *Two Generations* on the cover, and the event included a film screening of Catlett's 1976 Bicentennial creation of a ten foot bronze sculpture of Louis Armstrong for New Orleans.³⁷ The Catlett show and reception were also fond memories of NAC artist-in-resident Michael D. Harris.

Catlett was no stranger to Atlanta, as she regularly exhibiting her work locally. Joe Jennings remembered the Atlanta Center for Black Arts (ACBA) hosting a Catlett Show in the early 1970s:

Elizabeth Catlett's work was there [at the ACBA], and I have to say that actually [as] I look in hindsight, I don't think we were really ready to have an exhibit of that nature there, but we had it, and it worked . . . I'm talking about the kind of security, and the kind of finesse that the thing should have been handled with, but we made it through it.³⁸

The NAC's old Peters James Bryant School building may not have been a climate-controlled gallery, or offered the "finesse" Jennings spoke of, but it served an important role as a space for a Black Arts Movement institution.

Other prominent artists to show at the NAC over the years included Paul Goodnight, Joe Holston, and African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA), of which Harris became a member in 1979.³⁹ It was a time when the commitment

³⁷ Ozeil Fryer Woolcock, "Social Swirl," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 21, 1980, 3.

³⁸ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 3.

³⁹ Under "Michael D. Harris," <http://africobra.tumblr.com/post/359943579/michael-d-harris> (accessed January 22, 2012). Begun in Chicago in 1968, AfriCOBRA was a group of visual artists

remained by established visual artists to black art and black institutions even as mainstream outlets were becoming available.

In the summer of 1980, the NAC collaborated with Phoenix Arts and Theatre Company to mount the exhibit *Spirits, Rituals, and Incantation* by Harris. A native of Cleveland, Ohio, Harris trained at Bowling Green State University, received his Masters of Fine Arts from Howard University, and worked as an art instructor in Cleveland and Norfolk, Virginia.⁴⁰ As a member of the famed art group AfriCOBRA, Harris was invited to participate in a special exhibition at the United Nations building in New York commemorating the fourth anniversary of South Africa's Soweto Uprising and Massacre that occurred on June 16, 1976.⁴¹

In 1981, a Black History Month exhibition, titled *Endangered Species*, was inspired by the Atlanta cases of the "Missing and Murdered Children." This series by Paul Goodnight that focused on black children and raised the question, "Are black children, black people, an endangered species?" This exhibition further exemplified the NAC's ability to garner nationally renowned artists.

Joseph Holston had traveled to East Africa and held workshops and demonstrations at the NAC of work influenced by his trip. Goodnight's and Holston's works were selected for the Atlanta Life Insurance Company's exhibition celebrating its inauguration of their new headquarters building at 100 Auburn Avenue. Varnette

considering black aesthetic issues relevant to their discipline. The original group, led by artist and art historian Jeff Donaldson, was inspired by the OBAC "Wall of Respect."

⁴⁰ "Exhibition Held at Arts Center," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 9, 1980, 3.

⁴¹ "Local Artist Set for UN Exhibit," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 15, 1980, 10.

Honeywood was an artist and teacher, originally from Los Angeles, who had attended Spelman College. The reporter noted, “The imagery of [Honeywood’s] works often evoke memories of what it really means to grow up as a black person in this society.” Marian Langley, a community advocate for black arts who owned a Frames ’n Things franchise, made the exhibition possible.⁴²

The connections, benefits, and interchanges were many between individual visual artists at the Neighborhood Arts Center and the community. It was actually a reciprocal benefit for artists of national stature as well. Together, they made for a national network promoting and perpetuating the Black Arts Movement’s cultural agenda of raising consciousness through an “Art for People’s Sake” mantra, not only on the written pages in literature, or on the dance floor studios or the painter’s easel, but also on the performance stages for music as discussed next.

In 1978, jazz musicians Stanley Turrentine and Ramsey Lewis and the Disciples performed at Atlanta’s Fox Theatre with Jackson hosting a jazz reception afterward at City Hall. Its purpose was to “highlight the efforts of Mayor Jackson and the City of Atlanta to increase citizen awareness of the arts through the programs of the City’s Bureau of Cultural Affairs (BCA) and the Neighborhood Arts Center (NAC).” The NAC was again touted for taking the arts to Atlanta neighborhoods “which historically have

⁴² “Neighborhood Arts Center: An Endangered Species,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 20, 1981, 3. Paul Goodnight from Boston, Massachusetts, Joseph Holston from Washington, DC, and Varnette Honeywood from Los Angeles, California. Toni Cade Bambara, *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999). NAC’s first writer in residence penned this fiction around the “Missing and Murdered Children.” The twenty-eight known incidents took place between the summer of 1979 and the spring of 1981. Bambara mentioned the NAC in several places. Also see Tayari Jones, *Leaving Atlanta* (New York: Warner Books, 2002). The storyline of the first focuses on a mother who lost a child as part of the murders, and the second centers around the children at the time of the murders.

not been exposed to the performing or the visual arts.”⁴³

The NAC Ensemble, directed by Jennings, was not just for their Georgia Avenue facility. The big band played in Woodruff Park at the opening event of the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival. Alexander remembered that the NAC was a big part of starting the Atlanta Jazz Festival, and that Lamar Renford, an employee of the BCA who was also a jewelry maker and musician, was lent to the NAC to coordinate this collaborative effort.⁴⁴

The mayor proclaimed September “Jazz Month” in the city of Atlanta in 1978, and the first annual Free Jazz Festival included opening ceremonies, a jazz clinic, and improvisation seminar held at the NAC. Entertainment featured Yusef Ali, Steve Nelson, Larry Ridley, and Joe Jennings’ Life Force performing to a capacity audience.⁴⁵ Jackson claimed that with “aggressive and active” support from the citizenry, jazz capital status could be achieved within three years.⁴⁶

Jackson continually expressed the desire to make Atlanta “the jazz capital of the world,” and to this effort the city held tributes to jazz greats Sonny Rollins and Donald Byrd, and presented a certificate of appreciation to Atlanta’s own Duke Pearson, described as “a musician of the highest quality.” The 1978 Rollins/Byrd concert was dedicated to Pearson, who by this time was suffering from multiple sclerosis. The NAC,

⁴³ “Mayor Hosts Jazz Reception,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 19, 1978, 10.

⁴⁴ Jim Alexander, Panel #2 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 28.

⁴⁵ Francine Earl, “‘Jazz Month’ In the City to Blast-Off Sept. 21,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 17, 1978, 10.

⁴⁶ Portia S. Brookins, “Mayor Cites Three Top Jazz Artists,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 19, 1978, 6.

the Atlanta Jazz Forum, and the local chapter of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences also paid tribute. In the same ceremony documented by Alexander, the NAC presented Byrd with a 1973 photograph of him performing during a concert at Yale University done by Alexander prior to his relocation to Atlanta from Connecticut.⁴⁷

The BCA sponsored the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival in Piedmont Park which attracted thousands of citizens in the summer, and the BCA assisted the Morehouse College Jazz Festival, mounted by Jennings, with its week-long festival of jazz concerts and lectures, all becoming parts of the lasting institutions for the city.⁴⁸ As hopeful as Jackson's desires were, Jennings in retrospect feels, "'The jazz capital of the world' . . . that's a hard dream there." He felt that with desires, there had to be some support mechanisms, agencies, and dedicated advocates to make that dream a reality.⁴⁹ Jennings recalled that Jackson actually envisioned a music conservatory connected to the AUC, but during Barbara Bauser's leadership of the BCA as Executive Director, he recalled that Georgia State University (GSU) was brought into the conversation without positive results. "[GSU] already had a jazz studies program . . . so you know they would say no."⁵⁰ Jackson's conservancy in the AUC never got off the ground, but the city's free music festival continued.

By 1980, the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival was in its third year, attracting many nationally known musicians to the city, a far cry from Franklin having to beg performers

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Mayor Hosts Jazz Reception," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 19, 1978, 10.

⁴⁹ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 26A.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17A.

to play gratis. The NAC Ensemble presented a series of free concerts at Central City Park and at the Russell Building, two downtown Atlanta sites, in the late summer of 1980. Jennings also took the big band group of master musicians into the Atlanta public schools during the fall to perform lecture concerts.⁵¹

Alto saxophonist, Clark College alumnus from the late 1950s, and Atlanta native Marion Brown also held a workshop/lecture at the NAC that was free to the public. Brown performed with another Georgian, George Adams, a tenor saxophonist, flutist, and native of Covington, Georgia.⁵² A pattern of individual to community, and local to national, giving back to local and individual was a fruitful germination period within the development cycle of the Black Arts Movement as exemplified in Atlanta. Having a strong music component allowed the NAC to take advantage of national acts coming for the city's annual festivals.

As a jazz enthusiast, Alexander created images that recorded the early days of the festival, its performer's importance to the city, and their connections to the NAC. Two such examples were Mary Lou Williams and James Patterson. As Clark Atlanta University's Jazz Director following Jennings, Patterson connected many music students with opportunities to perform with national music legends. The Clark College Jazz Orchestra, a nineteen-piece musical group, performed with pianist Mary Lou Williams at

⁵¹ Lucile McAlister Scott, "Visiting People, Going Places, with Lucile," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 1, 1980, 3. The program was funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the Musicians Performance Trust Fund, and the NAC.

⁵² "Clark Jazz Orchestra Performs at Festival," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 28, 1980, 3. The festival's funding had been increased with the support of the City of Atlanta, the GCA, the NEA, and the Musicians Performance Trust Fund through the Atlanta Federation of Musicians Local 148-462, who was also a NAC supporter.

the Third Annual Free Jazz Festival at Piedmont Park's Inaugural Stage. The student group opened for Dexter Gordon and was featured in a jazz film with Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, and others. Patterson said this in an article, "Perhaps the most outstanding feature of this group is that they perform only pure jazz. They disclaim the idea that more commercial music forms must be played in order to attract audiences. The orchestra has large enthusiastic crowds whenever it appears."⁵³

Patterson, a Clark College alumnus, spoke of being honored to perform with Williams:

It is also a good feeling to know that she has such great faith, trust, and confidence in us that her music would be handled in a professional-like manner, in a short period of time. We must have a pretty good reputation. . . . Ms. Mary Lou Williams, noted pianist, has sent me eight compositions to have ready for the concert performance with the Clark College Jazz Orchestra.⁵⁴

Local college students benefited from their instructors having national connections to performers, and this same advantage to the community was present at the NAC as it was in the AUC.

As a result of Jackson's desire to make Atlanta the jazz capital of the world, photographs of jazz greats that came through the city, such as Rollins, Byrd, Brown, and Williams, are all hallmarks of Alexander's documentary collection. Photography was also part of the Third Annual Free Jazz Festival, as Alexander's exhibition, titled *Duke and Other Legends*, was installed in the Romare Bearden Gallery of the NAC. The residency portion of his responsibilities was directing the NAC's professional training program in

⁵³ "Clark Jazz Orchestra Performs at Festival," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 28, 1980, 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

photography led to a body of work worthy of display.⁵⁵ He honored contemporary and legendary musicians and singers “who played a major role in defining what jazz, blues, gospel, and other black music forms are and have therefore had a significant influence on what music is today in America and the world.”⁵⁶

Alexander recalled that the festival was inclusive of local talent and, not just comprised of national acts. He also explains the history of the festival’s tag line stating,

You know it wasn’t just the named people that were out in the park. We had people all over the city out in the plazas and out in the streets different people with their groups. Whoever signed up and they had a group that could sing or whatever so it went on for a whole month. So now they actually use that name “Thirty Days of Jazz.”⁵⁷

From the initial idea of a few individuals, the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival is now another vehicle of reciprocity for local and national artists, as well as the entire Atlanta community.

Michael Simanga shared this “poignant image” of drummer Max Roach, who was in town for the 1980 Jazz Festival, filling in for Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones), the black activist, poet, and playwright. The *Unity* newspaper sponsored an evening program at the NAC that was to feature Baraka giving a presentation on the struggle for unity in the Black Arts Movement, using a slide show, poetry, and music.⁵⁸ Simanga explains,

⁵⁵ “Photo Exhibit at Art Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 26, 1980, 3.

⁵⁶ “Announcements,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 11, 1980, 6.

⁵⁷ Alexander, Franklin and Alexander, February 15, 2010, 20.

⁵⁸ See “LeRoi Jones Speaks Here on March 15,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 28, 1980, 6 and “LeRoi Jones to Speak for Unity,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 6, 1980, 6.

One of the most poignant images I have [was asking] poet Amiri Baraka to come down and perform and give a lecture at the Neighborhood Arts Center. As happens sometimes, Baraka couldn't come but we didn't know that until a few hours before he was to appear. Max Roach was playing at the Atlanta Jazz Festival in Piedmont Park. So Amiri Baraka said to go over and ask Max to come. So we run out to Piedmont Park and we slip this note to Max Roach. He says soon as I finish my set. So he plays. He gets in the car with us, comes over to the Neighborhood Arts Center, and holds court. He sits and talks two to three hours and somebody had a snare drum there, and Max sat in front of him and played but that was the kind of spirit that existed there.⁵⁹

The NAC offered Atlanta a place where national talent could “hold court,” and perform in an intimate setting with and for the community. Simultaneously, Atlanta offered center stage opportunities for the community to see stars in large venues such as public parks.

Simanga's statement below best summarizes the NAC's sense of community spirit:

You were just a part of this community and I think the thing that tied it all together was this sense that artists have a profound relationship and responsibility to the community, and that permeated everything in the Neighborhood Arts Center. It was not necessarily spoken in that way but was felt in everything that was done. Just the spirit of it.⁶⁰

The theme of this section of the findings is embodied in the quote above. The juxtapositions of individual and community, and of the local and national artists, were made possible because of the existence of the NAC. The city benefited, but more importantly, a communal spirit was created within the center, “permeating” from artist to student to audience to community. It progressed from the inside out. These cultural workers were part of this committed community relationship, one of responsibility and

⁵⁹ Simanga, Panel #1 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 10.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 16.

reciprocity, the essence of the Black Arts Movement's position of "Art for People's Sake."

Theme I – Summary and Analysis

The first theme to emerge from the research findings on programming revealed that the Neighborhood Arts Center provided juxtaposition between the local and the national artist, and the individual and the community. The spirit of the NAC for participants interviewed was best summarized as one of openness. Whether young or old, emerging or established, or of local, national, or international repute, it mattered not to this community of committed cultural workers. Nationally-known figures like John Killens, Max Roach, and Romare Bearden were in and out of the NAC frequently; Alvin Ailey worked with artists there; Elizabeth Catlett was honored there, and the list goes on with painter Paul Goodnight, musicians Mary Lou Williams, Dizzy Gillespie, and more. The NAC allowed local greats, such as Duke Pearson, to receive accolades as well. They all opened up in several ways: the doors of the center, their portfolio of talents, and their hearts to the community at large.

Theme II – Art for the Masses

For the second theme, the research findings demonstrate that the NAC reached out and extended the art to the masses, rather than just an emphasis on the black middle class and white supporters. Art for the masses ranged from artists providing free instruction in the various arts disciplines to the numerous creative outreach programs implemented as part of their stipulations to fulfill their federal CETA grant stipends. These multidisciplinary arts programs had wide ranging effects on everyone from school-

aged youths to senior citizens. They also had an impact on the artists. Playwright and activist Alice Lovelace represented the exemplar voice for art for the masses. She states that her work helped her “. . . understand the profound role that an artist can play in helping a person open up.”⁶¹ The findings showed the NAC’s service locations spanned the gamut, from street academies to senior centers and housing projects, and from public hospitals to city parks, and back to their Georgia Avenue location in Mechanicsville.

The NAC was noted as being formed “to bring art into communities which had little or no previous exposure to art of any kind.” Dance was an integral component of its art to the masses programming. Dancer/instructor Phillip Griffin, in *Like This*, 1978 (see fig. 5.3), taught youth dance classes from August 1975 to April 1979 before moving to Washington, D.C. to pursue a personal career.⁶² Rod Rogers was another dance instructor that conducted beginner, advanced, and master classes between 1977 and 1978.⁶³

However, the first resident troupe to open at the NAC was the Fred Taylor Dance Theater in 1975. As they initiated free classes, the NAC’s dance program quickly grew to be its most popular offering. John Kolé Eaton, a percussionist and deputy director for the NAC, stressed that “although we had theater, music, visual arts and all that stuff, the

⁶¹ Alice Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author. Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 4.

⁶² “Harlem Dance Company to Benefit Arts Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 5, 1976, 3. Alexander’s annotations for image #20, “Dancer/Instructor Phillip Griffin teaching a children’s class,” *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander’s Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library Information*, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/anac_informatin.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

⁶³ Alexander’s annotations for image #36, “Dancer Rod Rogers,” *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander’s Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library Information*, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/anac_informatin.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

dance department was the big draw there.”⁶⁴



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.3. Jim Alexander, *Like This*, 1978

To incorporate the “Art for People’s Sake” motto, Taylor taught black history through the art of dance at the center and in the community using Katherine Dunham-style African techniques. In addition to free classes, Taylor’s troupe performed to “tune in to turned-off youth” at the Atlanta Street Academy, formally directed by Sandra Swans, the NAC’s first director.⁶⁵ Taylor’s expanding popularity inspired him to establish a private studio in 1977 in addition to his NAC offerings.⁶⁶

The visual arts discipline was another key programming component. The initial visual arts courses for adults and children in the community were offered by a group of artists. Luscious Hightower provided the graphic arts component and Tina Dunkley

⁶⁴ John Kolé Eaton, Eaton et al. interview by author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, transcript, 9.

⁶⁵ “Atlanta Street Academy Commencement Thursday,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 7, 1977, 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid. Taylor’s private studio was located on 255 Trinity Avenue.

worked with arts and crafts. Linda Armstrong was the first painter-in-residence, and Claudia Widdis provided sculpture courses. Bill Fibben rounded out this group, serving in the areas of photography and cinematography. The NAC was noted for being “a place where artists and members of the community work[ed] together to develop their artistic talents.” Workshops were offered in drawing, painting, printing, photography and sculpture, in addition to music, dance, writing, and theater.⁶⁷ The NAC also sponsored *The CETA Art Exhibition* in 1976 in an African-American section of town at the Mall West End for the Dogwood Festival affording artists public display opportunities in addition to the in house course offerings.⁶⁸

Age was no limit as the center hosted an exhibit by E.M. Bailey, a seventy-three year old Atlanta sculptor and painter. *Human Image '77/Black Art Sets the Pace*, featured thirty-four Atlanta and regional artists with works in painting, drawing, sculpture, prints, macramé, and appliqué.⁶⁹ One of the NAC’s 1978 exhibits featured mostly works by painting and drawing resident artists Amos Ashanti Johnson and his brother Truman “True” Johnson. There were also works by Nathan Hoskins, Carlton Thompson, and Kanita Poet. A local reporter boasted, “It’s really a collection of fine works that can put you into the spirits, our African roots and just a state of aesthetics.”⁷⁰ For the visual artists, as well as dancers, making the arts available for the masses, not just for black

⁶⁷ “Art in West End Mall,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 14, 1976, 1.

⁶⁸ “Dogwood Festival to have Art Shows,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 28, 1976, 3.

⁶⁹ “‘Woman’s [sic] Work’ Starts May 18 at Art Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 15, 1977, 10. Noted were the embroidery by Ayanna Johnson and the wood carvings by Susan Thomas.

⁷⁰ Portia Scott Brookins, “High School Beat,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 3, 1978, 3.

middle class and white supporters, was foundational to the NAC's programmatic activities.

While visual art outreach meant exhibits and classes at the Neighborhood Arts Center, artists in residence for creative writing took art to the masses by means of senior centers and public hospitals. Ebon Dooley was one of the literary forces at the NAC from its inception that received inspiration from the people his art served. Dooley was a native of Milan, Tennessee, studied at Fisk University, and finished law school in New York at Columbia University prior to going to Chicago. Dooley was secretary for the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) that produced the famed 1967 mural, titled *The Wall of Respect*, on the Southside of Chicago before returning to the South. The mural will be another important link discussed in the chapter that follows.

With a passion for black literature, Dooley received an offer, in 1968, by Abdul Alkalimat (Gerald McWorter), an AUC professor active with the Institute for the Black World, to manage his Timbuktu: Market of New Africa Bookstore. It was a perfect conduit, located close to campus, and connected Dooley with culturally enlightened patrons.⁷¹ Alkalimat's more radical position on black nationalism ultimately got him fired for taking over the Morehouse trustees' meeting on April 17, 1969 to demand the creation of a Black Studies program, the resignation of white trustees, and the name change of Morehouse College to "Martin Luther King, Jr. University."⁷²

⁷¹ Ebon Dooley, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, 3. Abdul Alkalimat opened up a Timbuktu Bookstore in Nashville while teaching at Fisk University and his sister opened a similar shop in Riverside, California. For details on Alkalimat's involvement with the Institute of the Black World.

⁷² Derrick E. White, "'Black World View': The Institute of the Black World's Promotion of Pragmatic Nationalism, 1969-1974," *The Journal of African American History* 95, no. 3/4 (Summer/Fall 2010), 375-76.

Dooley became a community fixture known for being a source of black consciousness, similar to Alkalimat, and had many credits to his name including being published in volumes of poetry as well as contributing to the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts which established the NAC.⁷³ Dooley taught creative writing at the NAC and his outreach component was teaching poetry. He recalls this outreach experience at a Senior Center in the neighborhood:

You know there was of course a curiosity factor initially. But then people began to come to the classes and began to participate. . . . The senior citizen high rise was in the neighborhood . . . not far. We had a writing class. We had discovered this woman, bed-ridden primarily, with a trunk full of poetry up under her bed where she had written poetry all her life, and had stored it away. *Her whole life*, her attitude towards the cosmos, and not ever thinking anybody would ever see it.⁷⁴

While the senior may not have recognized her potential, the thoughts were relevant and important in a center devoted to "Art for People's Sake." In the Black Arts Movement, art for the masses meant new talent did not have to come from traditional, education tracks. A woman in the community at a senior center received encouragement and an audience at the NAC, elevating her self-worth.

The NAC took poetry to the housing projects as well as to senior centers. Dooley shared,

We used [poetry] as propaganda to say well your circumstance and your situation is not something that's given by the gods that you are doomed to be in for the rest of your life. This is something that is due to all kinds of other forces and you can do something about it. You can use [poetry] to

⁷³ Ebon Dooley, *Revolution: A Poem* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1968) and Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Music as Poetic Reference* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 384. Henderson refers to Timbuku bookstore in Atlanta as the "best of its kind in the area."

⁷⁴ Dooley, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, transcript, 5. Dooley's emphasis.

communicate with other people; you can use this as an organizing tool to come together and do something about the situation we find ourselves in, and it worked.⁷⁵

Dooley's point that "art can be us[ed] as an organizing tool" was supported by the many successful NAC ventures using art as propaganda. The history of black art used as propaganda can be traced to W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and the Harlem Renaissance as explained in the review of literature. Dooley's employment of art as propaganda in the 1970s and 1980s should be seen as a continuance of earlier rhetoric propagated, not initiated, by the BAM.

In addition to community outreach in the area of creative writing, the NAC laid claim to having a newsletter for the organization, titled *Pot Likker*.⁷⁶ Dooley refers to it affectionately this way, "Of course, pot likker being the residue . . . the liquid residue that's left when, when you boilin' up the greens and stuff. So that is the distillation of the essence of the culture of a people is the pot likker. . . . You know, the good stuff, the good stuff."⁷⁷ Former board member Georgianne Thomas also remembers the newsletter as an artifact she retained for its historical significance. She explains,

[The NAC] had a newsletter and on the back of it, it listed the Board members and I saved it because it had my name. It was the one little thing I have, the little artifact that I have. They had my name back there and I just said I think I am going to keep this and I have kept up with it over the period of time.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Dooley, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, transcript, 5.

⁷⁶ Both Dooley and Georgianne Thomas speak of the publication, but no copy exists in the archives.

⁷⁷ Dooley, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, 5. "Likker" is the southern use and spelling of the term as opposed to "liquor."

⁷⁸ Georgianne Thomas, Juliet Blackburn-Beamon and Georgianne Thomas interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 5, 2010, transcript, 5-6.

As a Black Arts Movement organization, the NAC understood the importance of having a tangible medium of communication. The NAC and its programs had a positive effect on the community and on its cultural workers.

In the case of writer Alice Lovelace, art for the masses was an integral component to her creative production. She took over as writer in residence in 1979, teaching script writing and poetry. Her outreach component was working with trauma patients at Atlanta's Grady Memorial Hospital, teaching them poetry. Lovelace was profoundly changed and shared these fond memories of the experience:

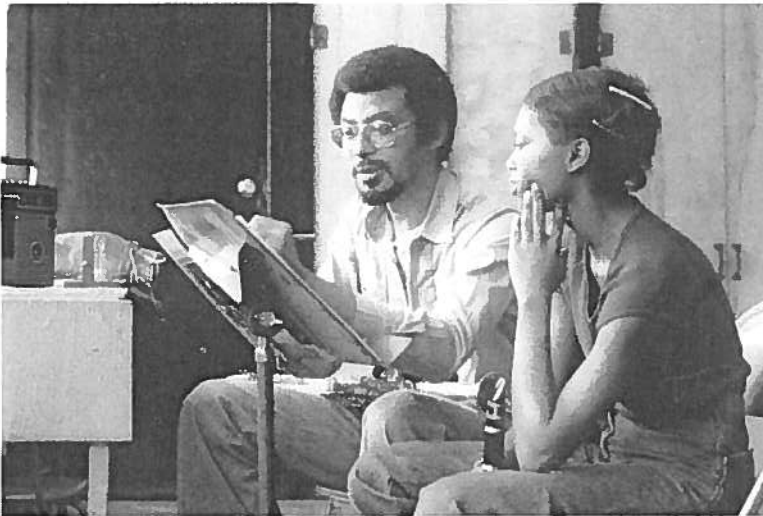
My assignment was to go to Grady Hospital and I worked with head trauma patients. So I worked with patients who could not speak or articulate and I was to teach them poetry. So, I really credit the Neighborhood Arts Center with helping me understand the profound role that an artist can play in helping a person open up. There were these patients with extreme head trauma and could not speak and yet they wrote some of the most beautiful poetry that I ever experienced, and it was a lot by gesture. It was a lot by having to understand the facial expressions. I had to understand their body expressions. I had to figure out how they were communicating with me without words, and it made a profound impact on me. It made me forever a community-based artist. I knew right away that I didn't want to do any other kind of work but work directly with people so I ran the writing program.⁷⁹

The outreach component of the NAC functionalized the Black Arts Movement commitment to the community made by artists. Art could be made in a vacuum or alone in a studio, but "Art for People's Sake" was reciprocal creativity. In this case, the artist helped patients to communicate using poetry, but the continuum of reciprocity included the patient having a profound impact on the cultural worker with the NAC. Art for the masses, irrespective of economics or physical condition, afforded everyone an

⁷⁹ Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author. Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 4.

opportunity.

In the discipline of music, saxophonist Joe Jennings led the charge of art for the masses, working with NAC administrators in 1977 to create the Mobile Jazz Atlanta program. As one of the leaders of the jazz group Life Force with Howard Nicholson, Jennings was the second artist in residence for music at the Center from February 1976 to September 1978, following Ojeda Penn. Alexander captured Jennings, in *Jazz Professor*, 1978 (see fig. 5.4), at work conducting a one-on-one clarinet lesson with a young girl before he left his position as artist in residence to teach music at Morehouse College. Jennings provided individual instruction and collaborated with several of the other arts disciplines during his tenure at the NAC, including the visual arts with John Riddle and theater with Sandra Dunson Franks, both discussed in other themes of the research that follow.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.4. Jim Alexander, *Jazz Professor*, 1978

With the assistance of John Kolé Eaton, NAC's Deputy Director and a percussionist, Jennings formed the center's big band known as the Neighborhood Arts

Center Ensemble. Consisting of twenty professional musicians, the NAC's big band traveled to public housing projects presenting concerts dedicated to big band composer Columbus Calvin "Duke" Pearson, Jr. (1932-1980). A home-grown Atlanta talent, Pearson was described as "a black man who rose from the ghetto to become one of the all-time jazz greats."⁸⁰

Jennings shared that he conceived the idea for mobile jazz from a similar program in New York City. Quoted in a newspaper article, Jennings explained,

The New York City Jazz program has been tremendously successful in bringing the Art of Jazz to areas such as HARLEM. . . . I feel sure that residents of Atlanta's Public Housing Projects will be equally appreciative of the chance to hear free, in their own neighborhoods, what is perhaps America's only truly original art form.⁸¹

Presenting his music and life accomplishments to non-traditional audiences in such venues were foundational components of the NAC's "Art for People Sake" motto.

The NAC summer mobile jazz concerts were sponsored by the City of Atlanta, the Georgia Council for the Arts (GCA), and the American Federation of Musicians Local 148-462 Trust Fund. Jennings negotiated with the Musicians' Union to receive financial support from their trust fund devoted to promoting live music.⁸² It was a matching grant source, so the NAC did not have to "hustle" much of the financing. The Mobile Jazz Atlanta concert program lasted several years, playing summer programs in

⁸⁰ "'Jazzmobile' Here to Aid Poor Blacks, Missing Out on 'Cultural Heritage'," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 7, 1977, 10; "'Jazzmobile' To Visit Public Housing This Summer," *Atlanta Voice*, July 2, 1977; "'Jazzmobile Making Its Free Rounds' Duke Pearson's Music on Program," *Atlanta Journal/Constitution*, August 14, 1977; "Taking Jazz to the People," *The Atlanta Inquirer*, August 20, 1977, 16.

⁸¹ "'Jazzmobile' to Visit Public Housing Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 26, 1977, 10. Jennings specifically credited Billy Taylor for the original idea of a "Jazzmobile" used in New York.

⁸² *Ibid.*

city parks, and in the winter months they visited several schools.

Artists recalled that it was at a time when many children were not into jazz. With “Art for People’s Sake” as the NAC’s motto, there was always an educational component to the program’s music. Their first major series focused on Pearson and his compositions. The arrangements included *New Girl*, *Nefertiti*, and *Rainy Day*.⁸³ Jennings remembers,

One of the education pieces in it was to talk about this great composer who was from Atlanta, who grew up in Atlanta, went to school in the AU Center and eventually goes to New York, becomes a great composer there, A&R man for Blue Note Records, and produced some of Herbie Hancock’s and McCoy Tyner’s [work].⁸⁴

Playing the jazz music form was important, but equally essential was the educational component of the NAC’s programs. It emphasized to students that Pearson came from the same place and space that they did, Atlantic Avenue, and went on to become one of the great composers.

Maynard Jackson was extremely supportive of the NAC’s Mobile Jazz Atlanta because it targeted groups of politically neglected constituents. Jackson shared this with a reporter:

I am pleased that a program as creative and imaginative as the Neighborhood Arts Center’s “Jazzmobile” has resulted from the concentrated effort under Commissioner Michael Lomax’s Department (Parks, Libraries, and Cultural Affairs) to provide cultural experiences especially in those areas of the city that have traditionally been excluded from the arts.⁸⁵

The NAC was a political vehicle, literally and figuratively, for public funding to assist

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 9B.

⁸⁵ Maynard Jackson in “‘Jazzmobile’ to Visit Public Housing Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 26, 1977, 10.

underserved communities. Mayor Jackson was able to point to this program fulfilling one of his campaign promises.

In the same article, Eaton explained the basis for the Mayor's belief that disadvantaged Atlanta citizens were not being exposed to their culture:

When big name black musicians come to town, a lot of black people just can't afford to go see them. The "Jazzmobile" is taking jazz to the people. Jazz is their musical roots. . . . [T]o a large degree, black kids have only heard disco music and they aren't really used to jazz. The "Jazzmobile" rekindles their interest in this kind of music.⁸⁶

"Jazz to the people" was the embodiment of "Art for People's Sake" using the city's Bureau of Cultural Affairs van and park system for the NAC to reach African Americans in public housing projects and city parks. Jennings shared Eaton's concern that "many black people can't afford to attend concerts featuring black music, and they are therefore missing out on a large part of their cultural heritage."⁸⁷ Mobile Jazz Atlanta, mistakenly referred to by the New York Program's name "Jazzmobile," expanded public exposure to jazz, an original African-American musical art form, in Atlanta parks as well as housing projects.⁸⁸

Eaton remembers having "good relations with the public housing communities around there." He states,

⁸⁶ John Eaton in "'Jazzmobile' Here to Aid Poor Blacks, Missing Out on 'Cultural Heritage'," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 7, 1977, 10.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ "'Jazzmobile' Here to Aid Poor Blacks, Missing Out on 'Cultural Heritage'," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 7, 1977, 10. Park dates and venues in 1977 included: August 13 – Mosley Park; August 14 – English Park; August 20 – Pittman Park; August 21 – Joyland Park; August 27 – Southbend Park; September 10 – Eagen Homes; September 24 – Pittman Park.

We would do impromptu kinds [of things]. We had a “show mobile,” as the city called it, the moving stage and we would pick that thing up and take some of our performing artists and go out in the middle of one of the housing projects and just do an impromptu concert. We were always very well received.⁸⁹

Taking art to the masses, not just middle class African-American or white supporters who could afford concert tickets, fulfilled the NAC’s motto of “Art for People’s Sake.”

Unfortunately, as the Mobile Jazz Atlanta Program visited housing projects, Jennings remembered that only some tenants would look out but very few crowds would come and stand. Conversely, the Ensemble performed to a capacity audience downtown at Central City Park, now Woodruff Park, by the fountain. While their mission was noble, practicalities meant adjusting the program slightly for the following year.

For the Second Annual Mobile Jazz Atlanta Series in 1978, the twenty-two piece ensemble played only at parks (see fig. 5.5).⁹⁰ Jim Alexander remembers this of the mobile arts program:

We would say, “Where should we go next Friday?” Let’s go to Perkerson Park, for instance. And we would go and set the trailer up and then we had the dancers and Joe Jennings’ band and whatever in the park and by the time the music hit and drummers and whatever, the park would be full. And then sometimes we would go to different places where there was a dead end street . . . but we did that. Taking stuff to the people.⁹¹

Being a multidisciplinary center made it easy for the arts to collaborate as dance joined the band on outings, and Alexander documented events with his camera. Poetry was also

⁸⁹ John Eaton, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, August 3, 2009, transcript, 11.

⁹⁰ The list of parks included: Perkerson, Willis Mill, Eastlake, Mozley, Grant, John A. White, Piedmont, and Grove. Poster from collection of Joe Jennings.

⁹¹ Jim Alexander, Shirley Franklin and Jim Alexander interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2010, transcript, 21.

read as Sandra Dunson Franks explains in the gender theme that follows this chapter.

The NAC Mobile Jazz Atlanta music program would go out to parks and use the city's truck with a flatbed trailer on the back which opened up into a bandstand. Often they would arrive unannounced. Alexander remembers, "Kids would be playing basketball and whatever and [the NAC musicians] would start playing jazz, and they would all of a sudden, you would have a big crowd out there listening to jazz."⁹² By 1980, an *Atlanta Constitution* critic voted the Ensemble "Band of the Year."⁹³



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.5. Jim Alexander, *NAC Big Band II*, 1978

"Taking art to the people," or "Art for People's Sake," for the NAC was not just within the four walls of the artists' studios on Georgia Avenue in Mechanicsville. That would only exemplify "art for art's sake" where the artist is the only beneficiary and the

⁹² Alexander, Panel #2 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 27.

⁹³ Mitchell Feldman, "Metrognome: And the Envelope Please . . .," *Atlanta Journal*, Leisure Guide, December 27, 1980, 16.

public only sees the finished work. For Black Arts Movement performing and visual arts, the collaboration of an audience was needed, and the NAC took the initiative by opening its doors to the public and taking art that responded to the housing projects, the streets, and the parks of Atlanta. The Neighborhood Arts Center Ensemble probably enjoyed the longest run of any of the center-generated programs. Performing in 1989 for the Georgia Council for the Arts Governor's Arts Award Ceremony, Jennings still occasionally reassembles them to perform in the city even in 2010.⁹⁴

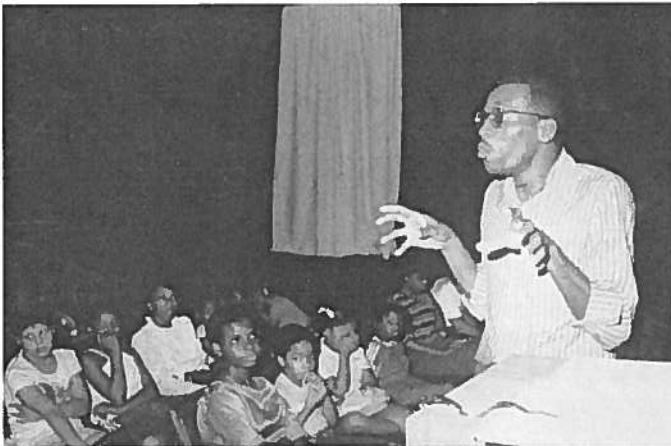
Just as music at the Neighborhood Arts Center had an outreach component for the public with Mobile Jazz Atlanta and the Ensemble, the NAC's house theater companies also had a positive impact on the communities it served. Walter Dallas' Proposition Theatre was the first to offer programming in this discipline. The community's youth were essential ingredients to the success of the NAC's desires to reach the masses and be the "neighborhood" conduit for culture and consciousness. In addition to adult auditions and performers, there was a Children's Drama School at the NAC which was Dallas' outreach component.⁹⁵

In addition to *Like This* (see fig. 5.3), Philip Griffin is in a photograph by Alexander, titled *Puppet Master*, 1978, where he presented a youth performance for the community in the NAC's theater space. Students in costumes act as puppets on strings manipulated by their instructor. In 1982, the NAC offered a summer youth program led by writer/producer/ filmmaker Monty Ross, who provided dramatic storytelling to a

⁹⁴ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 13.

⁹⁵ "Proposition Inc. Plan Tribute to Dunbar, Acting Workshop," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 2, 1978, 10.

young audience in a fall drama program for youth taught by Carol Mitchell, called *The Children's Readers Theatre* (see fig. 5.6). The sessions were billed as offering a positive after school alternative.⁹⁶ Black theater at the NAC continued to work with youth and adults to fulfill its "Art for People's Sake" mission. The theater audiences received a steady dose of creativity in the presentation of historically-rich content, whether young or old, whether part of the general population, or as in Jomandi's case discussed, one step from jail.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1982]

Figure 5.6. Jim Alexander, *Monty Ross*, 1982

As *Dallas*' success propelled his work to be in major films and to be staged in majority theaters at the time, fortunately, other resident arts groups continued to exemplify the theme of art for the masses. Founded in October of 1978, Jomandi became the next resident theater company at the NAC, following the acclaimed Proposition

⁹⁶ "Arts Center Offers Youth Drama Program," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 28, 1982, 3. Auditions were required and some scholarships were offered.

Theatre Company, and it grew to be Georgia's largest African-American theater group.⁹⁷

Tom Jones explains that the company's name came from family members, "'Jo' for Jones, 'ma' for mamma, mother, 'an' for Andrea, and 'di' for Diana, my other sister."⁹⁸

Though People's Survival Theatre had the SCLC as a support mechanism and audience, younger startup companies like Jones' Jomandi Productions found their voice and audience in Atlanta using the NAC's outreach component for assistance.

Jomandi's initial outreach component was associated with Atlanta's Learning Academies for students taken out of the general population and, as Jones describes, "one step from jail." This unique audience opportunity gave a new meaning to art for the masses. Jones recalls,

[The Learning Academy students] were very unforgiving and the work was very, very aggressive and what we were doing was taking Langston Hughes, and [Harlem] Renaissance poets, and Black Arts poets, and all of those folks who had said, "Let's take the language and the intonations and the rhythm of the people and simply catalog it." So we took Harlem Renaissance to Black Arts poets of the 1960s and created these kinds of poetic performance pieces. So first the material was immediately accessible. You're doing Langston Hughes, Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Claude McKay, Countée Cullen. You are doing stuff that had bite to it. People say, "Oh yeah!" . . . Secondly, we were just young and dumb and had all this energy. So . . . [when] students would get up to walk to the bathroom in the middle of reading, "Boy, sit down! I told you to sit!" So, mostly shocked.⁹⁹

Art for the masses, in Harlem Renaissance terms, was a new aesthetic that captured the essence and vernacular of black people, unapologetically, and not beholden to majority

⁹⁷ Originally founded to raise funds for a scholarship honoring his father, Dr. Thomas W. Jones, for his contributions as a faculty member at Morehouse School of Medicine.

⁹⁸ Tom Jones, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 12, 2009, transcript, 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 12. Also see Paul Carter Harrison, ed., *Kuntu Drama: Plays of the African Continuum* (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

publishing companies that did not feel this ethnic art form to be commercially viable. At the time of the Black Arts Movement, a people's aesthetic was more readily adopted, but still fought for a larger voice. Artists were able to move beyond mere cataloging, to applying the arts and capturing the audience with performances that were accessible and related to them. These early experiences with tough, non-traditional audiences helped Jomandi successfully find its voice among all the other theatrical companies.

Theme II – Summary and Analysis

The Neighborhood Arts Center artists understood what Alice Lovelace voiced, “the profound role that an artist can play in helping a person open up.” While they were her words, they embodied the sentiment of Atlanta's cultural center. Fred Taylor's Dance Theatre offering instruction on Katherine Dunham-style African techniques was the biggest draw for the Mechanicsville CETA program. Others went out into the community to take art to the masses. The visual arts exhibited in community malls, and the creative writers took poetry to hospital trauma centers and senior centers. The theater artists held youth and adult drama presentations for the community, while the Mobile Jazz Atlanta program, using the twenty-two piece NAC Ensemble, seemed to reach the greatest number of all finding its niche ultimately performing in city parks instead of public housing projects.

Aesthetically, the findings reveal that art for the masses was promoting an “Art for People's Sake” agenda. Realizing Du Bois' position that art was propaganda, NAC artists were spreading Black Arts Movement works by Countée Cullen and Langston Hughes, or African dance popularized by Katherine Dunham, or music of local composer

“Duke” Pearson who came from the same neighborhoods as youth in public housing. It was not about presenting European versions of art forms such as novels, classical music, or ballet. Art was functional in its educational capacity; it was committed to the Afrocentric cause; and it was collective in its collaboration between artists and audience.

Theme III – Space and Location

The NAC was purposefully distinctive in its space and location. The institutional place and space the NAC provided were essential ingredients to the cultural tapestry of Atlanta and the development of a community of artists. Whether it was using the facility for exhibits and performances or expanding the boundaries of black art at the city’s oldest cultural festival, the Arts Festival of Atlanta, the spirit of “Art for People’s Sake” emanated from the artistic programs these BAM artists created. As Michael Simanga states, “What was important was the community and the space to create art freely.”¹⁰⁰ The NAC’s motto was unapologetically woven throughout its multidisciplinary approaches to art as the following findings in dance, music, creative writing, theater, and visual arts reveal.

Having the physical facility made everything possible. Organizations and individual artists found a home at the NAC. It was somewhere to teach, rehearse, and create. Lovelace felt that the 1970s and 1980s were perhaps the freest time for artists to express themselves, and that a location, having the NAC as a place, made space for that kind of aesthetic freedom possible. She reminisces, “that was a *place* to, when you

¹⁰⁰ Simanga, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA January 23, 2009, transcript, 9.

couldn't go anywhere else, you could go to the Neighborhood Arts Center.”¹⁰¹ Other interview participants longing for something similar today struggled to name a comparable environment.

As a young poet and performer, Executive Director of the National Black Arts Festival Michael Simanga came to Atlanta from Detroit in 1980. He was able to network at the NAC and start Black Fire Poetry Theater. He remembers receiving encouragement and work ethics there, commenting as follows regarding its “spirit”:

[The NAC] was a gathering place for artists with a certain kind of consciousness, or seeking a certain kind of consciousness, to come to be able to do your work, to be able to learn, to be inspired by other artists, because there was amazing production. It was a highly productive place. You really couldn't just hang out in there because people would challenge you. You need to be doing something. If you are a writer, you need to be writing. If you are a painter, you need to be painting. If you were a photographer, you need to be taking pictures. It was a highly productive environment so it was inspirational but it was also just charged, all the time.¹⁰²

The NAC was a “gathering place” and “productive place.” Most importantly, it attracted artists with an Afrocentric consciousness interested in the exploring all the aesthetic ramifications of the Black Arts Movement.

Visual artist John Riddle is remembered for developing his printmaking skills in the basement of the NAC. As a collector, Simanga shares,

. . . and down in the basement, in a place with no windows, was this amazing artist doing this [shows squeegee moving] with these prints, silk screen prints with a bandana tied around his face because the fumes were

¹⁰¹ Lovelace, Panel #1 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg, January 23, 2009, 19, transcript; Lovelace's emphasis.

¹⁰² Simanga, Panel #1 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 10.

so strong you couldn't stand in there without your eyes watering and your lungs hurting. It was John Riddle and those pieces. I actually own a couple of them, but they are in collections all over this town in many, many offices and homes [T]o watch him make that work and just the joy he had in it is kind of the spirit of the Neighborhood Arts Center. The condition of [making] it was not important; what was important was the community and the space to create art freely.¹⁰³

The third theme that the NAC was distinctive in space and location is epitomized by Simanga's last sentence of the above statement. The distinctive location was the Mechanicsville community, and the distinctive conceptual space in the artist's ability to create freely will be demonstrated with the other arts disciplines of this section. As Langston Hughes so appropriately stated in the Harlem Renaissance article *Negro and the Racial Mountain*, the BAM was the time when artists were "free within ourselves."¹⁰⁴

Riddle and artist Michael D. Harris learned silk screening from NAC board member Bill Prankard, and Harris shared that he still possesses an art table Prankard built. Harris notes the following of Riddle's printmaking, "[I]t sent John Riddle off into a fantastic stage of his career, and I see his prints all over the city today."¹⁰⁵ While the working conditions may not have been the best at the NAC, as Simanga explained, space and location did not inhibit artistic creativity, but were quite the opposite. The reason his quote exemplifies this third theme is because "the community" the space at the NAC created allowed artists a place to produce art freely, and it was of higher regard than an

¹⁰³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁴ Langston, Hughes, "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122, no. 3181 (June 23, 1926): 694.

¹⁰⁵ Harris, Panel #2 (Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 6.

“art for art’s sake” environment of a solo studio. The collective element of “Art for People’s Sake” was satisfied.

The NAC was also unique as a multidisciplinary environment conducive to creative productivity. Visual artist Steve Seaburg remembered how nice it was to be able to go down the hall to sketch dancers and to do instant drawings while live music was playing, or to be able to walk into another area where prints or tee shirts were being produced.¹⁰⁶ Seaburg also recalls the need to teach basic appreciation for the visual art among other artist types: “I remember going in and telling these young actors and actresses they couldn’t hang their coats on the sculptures. They were a little annoyed.”¹⁰⁷ With these few exceptions, however, the overall environment and spirit in the NAC space was positive, collective, and committed, all foundational components of the Black Arts Movement.

At the NAC, the Afrocentric sense of working collectively for a common cause predominated, but occasionally having so many creative types under one roof resulted in friction. Alexander gave up his dark room, on the second floor, to move to the basement so that Jikki Riley, Alice Lovelace’s husband, could convert the space into a recording studio.¹⁰⁸ The visual artists working on the NAC mural did not operate under such

¹⁰⁶Steve Seaburg, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 18.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 18.

¹⁰⁸ Riley was a teacher, activist, and artist in most art forms (poetry, photography, film, music composer, conductor, and visual arts). Lovelace was artist-in-residence from March 1979 to July 1980 before marrying Jikki; she later joined the NAC’s board. Alexander’s annotations to Alice Lovelace Riley and Jikki Riley,” *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander’s Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library Information*, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/anac_informatin.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

amenable conditions because Eaton had to call the police as some rolled around on the floor, literally fighting over aesthetic principles. Simanga, Harris, and others remarked on the expectation of excellence this fight exemplified. With nationally-known artists, such as dancer Alvin Ailey, singer Peabo Bryson, or visual artist Romare Bearden, coming through the doors at any given moment, a high artistic standard was regularly maintained.

The NAC at its best allowed the space for creative experimentation. In addition to learning basic art skills, such as posture and grace in dance or printmaking in visual arts, artists and students at the NAC found a place and the space to experiment and functionalize a black, “Art for People’s Sake,” aesthetic. For example, Alexander remembers David Hammons, a California artist and friend of John Riddle, coming through the NAC. Hammons, now a MacArthur Genius fellow with studios in Milan, Italy, was in Atlanta working on *Naps*, a piece that eventually won him a grant to expand his concept for an Atlanta Airport commission.¹⁰⁹ Hammons stayed with Riddle when in town but remembered Hammons also slept at the NAC. Alexander elaborates:

[Hammons] would just come and stay at the Neighborhood Arts Center. You could come to the Neighborhood Arts Center any time of day or night. You come in there at 3 o’clock in the morning you are going to find somebody in some studio. They are going to be rehearsing. They are going to be painting, or my studio was the hangout. My photography studio was always the hangout. Everybody sometime during the day or night passed through my studio.¹¹⁰

The center became the spot where artists would hang out day and night, and experiment

¹⁰⁹ Kellie Jones, “In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture in the 1970s,” in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*, Kellie Jones, with contributions by Amiri Baraka, Hettie Jones, Lisa Jones, and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., 297-304. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 297-304.

¹¹⁰ Alexander, Panel #2 (Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 10.

with their artistic expressions in an atmosphere demanding excellence.

Having space for theater artists was just as important as it was for visual artists. The NAC served as the community's facility, or place, for theater productions, for recruiting talent, for providing rehearsal space for emerging black theater companies, and for staging many black aesthetic productions for the community to enjoy. Renowned actor Samuel L. Jackson, then Sam Jackson, was the NAC's first artist-in-residence for theater. Participants interviewed remembered him for doing pantomime on the streets of Atlanta during Mayor's Day for the Arts in 1975 as the NAC was just getting off the ground. Jackson was a Morehouse College graduate, as was Walter Dallas, artistic director for Proposition Theatre based at the NAC. Both found the NAC to be the next step after attending college in the Atlanta University Center.

Dallas continued his studies in theater at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Ghana in West Africa.¹¹¹ To his credit, Dallas had toured the African continent studying theater and his honors included Atlanta's Bronze Jubilee Award in drama from the Atlanta Board of Education and WETV television. His Proposition Theatre Company was created in September 1976 "to provide professionally inspired theatre training for advocational theatre enthusiasts and to serve as a creative base for experimentally developing theatre events as well as innovative, often outrageous approaches to the production of the classics."¹¹²

Dallas explored and developed new theater and new plays through intensive

¹¹¹ "Proposition Inc. Plan Tribute to Dunbar, Acting Workshop," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 2, 1978, 10.

¹¹² "Proposition Theatre Schedules 'The Seagull,'" *Atlanta Daily World*, November 3, 1977, 6.

workshops. Proposition was unique in its neighborhood location on Georgia Avenue in that it encouraged people in the community to participate in its programs. Storyteller Akbar Imhotep came to Proposition in 1976 as their assistant administrative director. Membership was opened once a year for new talent, and the first auditions were held in October of 1977 at the NAC.¹¹³ Proposition's 1978 season lineup included Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, Dallas' *Asafohene*, Bill Gunn's *Johannas*, Georg Kaiser's *Raft of the Medusa*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*.¹¹⁴ Imhotep performed in the company's productions of *Willie Lobo/Manchild*, *Blood Wedding*, *Olio*, and *The Seagull*, prior to working on Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) *Dutchman*.¹¹⁵

Dallas' first production of *Olio* that included Imhotep (see fig. 5.7) was held in the NAC's multipurpose room just prior to its renovation. The space was accommodating for actors and audiences, even in the building's aged 1910 condition. The performance was a compilation of duologues, acts, dances, vaudevillian specialties, and other entertainment performed in the spirit of the early minstrel shows and based on the works of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar.¹¹⁶ Dallas shared, "Minstrels, though based on negative stereotypes of black people, had a special second half called the Olio, in which blacks performed comic and serious sketches (some were social commentaries) with colorful

¹¹³ "Proposition Theatre Co. Now Taking Audition Applications," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 7, 1977, 10.

¹¹⁴ "Proposition Theatre Slates New Opening," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 28, 1978, 10.

¹¹⁵ Francine Earl, "Leroi Jones' 'Dutchmen' Playing at Arts Center," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 19, 1978, 6.

¹¹⁶ "Proposition Theatre Co. to Salute Paul Laurence Dunbar," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 15, 1977, 10. The show was presented April 13-15, 1978.

costumes and fantastic singing and created positive black images.”¹¹⁷ He scripted marching bands, cakewalks, and very colorful costumes.¹¹⁸



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.7. Jim Alexander, *Akbar* in “*Olio*,” 1978

Dallas demonstrated his creativity through skits like *Encouragement*, a funny piece based on Dunbar’s poem of the same title, which featured Roy Vaughn in a white dress and long plaited wig trying to make a member of the audience “express himself.” The *Colored Soldiers* piece was more serious. Andrea Whatley played the role of a young girl who lost her boyfriend in the Civil War. She showed sympathy for her white plantation owner and his wife and relatives mourning for his death. Rodney Adams, who starred in *Opportunity*, was the interlocutor who moved the show along wearing a white

¹¹⁷ Francine Earl, “‘Olio’ Takes Audience Back to Paul Lawrence Dunbar,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 20, 1978, 6. Musicians Wayne Crowder and Time Malone performed ragtime and Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag” respectively.

¹¹⁸ “Proposition Inc. Plan Tribute to Dunbar, Acting Workshop,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 2, 1978, 10.

suit.¹¹⁹

Dallas also produced *The Seagull*, which premiered at the NAC's new theater space called Stage One. The Russian classic by Anton Chekhov incorporated theater-in-the-round for a new twist. Dallas explained that it was experimental because the play was presented as a comedy, not a tragedy.¹²⁰ Actress Iris Little played the part of Nina, and Eric Sims played the part of Treplyov. Jim Alexander documented the emotional moment in rehearsal between Little and Sims in the photograph titled *Intensity*, 1979 (see fig. 5.8). The play was later presented at the Academy Theatre.¹²¹



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 5.8. Jim Alexander, *Intensity*, 1979

Proposition Theatre Company also presented Amiri Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones)

¹¹⁹ Francine Earl, "'Olio' Takes Audience Back to Paul Lawrence Dunbar," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 20, 1978, 6. Adams, was featured in the ABC made-for-television movie *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*.

¹²⁰ Francine Earl, "'Asafahene'-Post Futuristic Play to Assault the Senses," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 11, 1978, 10.

¹²¹ "'The Seagull' Set for Academy Theater," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 1, 1978, 3.

work *Dutchman* in 1978. The play was named best off-Broadway play in 1964.¹²²

Atlanta's rendition was described as "galvanizing, powerful, and shocking in its impact and message." First written in 1964, *Dutchman* was a transitional piece for Baraka with both anti-racist and racial black consciousness-raising language. Clay, the naïve, bourgeois black male is murdered by Lula, the white seductress. The performances of Akbar Imhotep and Jacquelyn Makilencak in the lead roles were said to be "splendid," so much so that it came back to the NAC "by popular demand" for a second run.¹²³

Proposition's reputation for presenting experimental theater was upheld with Dallas' next original play, titled *Asafohene*. It was based on a West African legend and incorporates his post-futuristic version of Oedipus Rex. The seventy-member cast was the company's largest, and all productions were held at the NAC.¹²⁴ Alexander's photograph *Horrificed*, 1978 (see fig. 5.9) is from a scene in the play. Dallas said, "The play is an assault on the senses and I tried to use as few words as possible." His drama included innovative choreography ranging from African traditional dance to space ballet.¹²⁵

In the summer of 1978, Proposition had the opportunity to diversify and increase its audience by moving from the NAC to the Alliance Theatre's Studio One in the Memorial Arts Center, a major step for black theater in Atlanta. The same fantasy-drama

¹²² Francine Earl, "Leroi Jones' 'Dutchmen' Playing at Arts Center," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 19, 1978, 6.

¹²³ "Proposition's 'Dutchman' Back by Popular Demand," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 26, 1978, 10, and March 30, 1978, 6. It was noted that the play was not recommended for children.

¹²⁴ "'Asafohene' Sold Out for Weekend," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 15, 1978, 6.

¹²⁵ Francine Earl, "'Asafahene'[sic]-Post Futuristic Play to Assault the Senses," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 11, 1978, 10.

Asafohene that sold out at the NAC also ran successfully at the Alliance. Black theater was also making a name for itself in Atlanta in the late 1970s as companies such as People's Survival Theatre presented *Black Eyed Dreams* at Wheat Street Baptist Church, and the Just Us Theatre Company, produced by Theater of the Stars, Inc., presented *In the Last Days, A Ritual* at Peachtree Playhouse.¹²⁶



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 5.9. Jim Alexander, *Horrificed*, 1978

People's Survival Theatre benefitted from the NAC's space and location. Elisabeth Omilami, daughter of civil rights activist Hosea Williams and director of Hosea Feed The Hungry and Homeless, created the theater company under the auspices of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) after graduating from Hampton University with a degree in theater.¹²⁷ Some of the actors that received their first jobs

¹²⁶ Francine Earl, "'Asafahene'[sic]-Post Futuristic Play to Assault the Senses," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 11, 1978, 10.

¹²⁷ "Elisabeth Omilami," <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=1284&category=CivicMakers&occupation=Humanitarian%20%26%20Actress&name=Elisabeth%20Omilami> (accessed August 20, 2011).

included Bill Nunn and the late Carol Mitchell Leon.

Native Son was a Black History Month theatrical presentation organized by People's Survival Theatre at the NAC in 1980. The play, based on a novel by Richard Wright and dramatization by Paul Green, was a look at a black experience in America. The presentation took place in the NAC's newly remodeled theater facility, and it was directed by Eddie Willinsky, with Jule Clifton Lassiter playing the main character, Bigger Thomas.¹²⁸

People's Survival Theatre and the NAC presented *Reader's Theatre* in 1980 where the scripts for *Regression* and *The Riddle* were readings of works by Willinsky, Billups' pen name. He won the Bronze Jubilee Award in Drama that same year as associate manager for People's Survival Theatre. *Regression* was "a one-woman show set in 1998 and concerned the aftermath of a genocidal war in America."¹²⁹ *The Riddle* was "a surrealistic mystery-fantasy concerned with the circumstances surrounding the death of a small-town philandering husband."¹³⁰ Discussions were hosted after the performances.¹³¹ People's Survival Theatre performed *The Island* at the NAC in 1980, and it also held a city-wide talent search for actors, dancers, and singers to tour with the

¹²⁸ "'Native Son' to be Presented by People's Survival Theatre," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 3, 1980, 8. People's Survival Theatre actors included: John Menick, Sharlene Ross, Shiela Tyler, Alicia Nails, Jahmil Shair, Darnell Reed, Elton Beckett, Carol Mitchell-Peck, Pendeza Bailey, Ernest Dixon, Mary Jane Smith, Catherine Del Papa, Dean Lukeheart, Kay Cash and Dennis and Janet Rotch.

¹²⁹ "People's Survival Theatre Presents 'Reader's Theatre'," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 2, 1980, 9. For play details, see "Theatre to Perform New Play," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 3, 1980, 5.

¹³⁰ Ibid., Rozell Clark, "Entertainment Tidbits," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 18, 1980, 6; and "Briefs," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 3, 1980, 3.

¹³¹ "People's Survival Theatre Presents 'Reader's Theatre'," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 2, 1980, 9.

passion play *Death of Jesus*, and auditions for the role of Jesus and others were held at the NAC.¹³²

To add to the facility's Afrocentric distinctiveness, Tom Jones of Jomandi Productions remembers naming the NAC's Paul Robeson theater space: "I thought the Neighborhood Arts Center was in a sense an outgrowth of a kind of Paul Robeson vision."¹³³ Robeson was a first for many black art achievements and for arts activism, refusing segregated audiences and performing dignified roles in such classics as Shakespeare's *Othello*, Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, and George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. He also made Negro Spirituals popular in his bass baritone voice. Jones' idea to name the space after such an historic theater figure speaks of the NAC as a similar trailblazer for black arts in Atlanta.

With the NAC's multidiscipline art space, the black aesthetic fused art forms quite often. For example, *Le Corps*, or *The Body is Not Dead* in English translation, was a 1981 play meant to be a display of some of Atlanta's most professional and gifted dancers and musicians. Ron A. Frazier was the choreographer and conceptualizer. Jones and Marsha A. Jackson adapted and directed the piece. The plot of *Le Corps*,

interfus[ed] the struggles of the flesh, the mind and the human spirit in song and classical dance. . . . In the end, the audience is left with the impression that in the final analysis the human body remains triumphant. There are certain consistencies in this life, the play states, and it is the total synchronization of these consistencies that makes for man at his very best.¹³⁴

¹³² Rozell Clark, "Entertainment Tidbits," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 18, 1980, 6. Also see "Briefs," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 3, 1980, 3. "Survival Theater Begins Talent Hunt," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 21, 1980, 6.

¹³³ Tom Jones, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 12, 2009, transcript, 23.

¹³⁴ "'Le Corp N'est Pas Mort' Rises Above Mediocrity," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 22, 1981, 3.

Dyanne Robinson, dancer and choreographer for the Broadway production of *Bubbling Brown Sugar* who was part of an earlier NAC Robeson Performance and Lecture Series, appeared in *LeCorps* providing a memorable solo to the tune of Roberta Flack's *I Told Jesus*.¹³⁵ Jomandi continued its long association with the NAC by holding their 1983 – 1984 season auditions for actors and dancers there.¹³⁶

Theme III – Summary and Analysis

The NAC as a location was remembered as a “gathering place.” The CETA model of having personal studios space, with a small stipend for supplies and salary, was an innovative arts center model. The physical place may have been a 1910 school building in the Mechanicsville community, but a creative space germinated within the four walls spawning experimentation, productivity, and excellence. As a “highly productive place,” John Riddle experimented with the black aesthetic through his prints, while David Hammons' *Naps* installation was seen as innovative. New experimental aesthetic expressions in theater came from Walter Dallas and Proposition Theatre, as well as Tom Jones and Jomandi. Whether it was a new creation based on the past, such as *Olio* teaching black history through the story of minstrel shows, or a spin on a classic, the NAC's Paul Robeson Theatre offered a host of benefits to the local community. The ability to stage off-Broadway performances, such as Baraka's *Dutchman*, and offering Atlanta's black theater companies a location to recruit cast, rehearse, and stage productions, were just some of the benefits of this Black Arts Movement institution.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ “Jomandi to Hold Auditions,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 28, 1983, 7.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS: PART II – NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS CENTER PROGRAMS

The following findings address the first of two research questions, namely how did the Neighborhood Arts Center (NAC) meet its Black Arts Movement (BAM) motto of “Art for People’s Sake” within its various arts disciplines? The previous chapter explored the first three general themes present among the Neighborhood Arts Center program findings, specifically: 1) the individual/community and the local/national dichotomies, 2) art for the masses, and 3) space and location. This chapter will focus on the last two of the five themes and the quotation endemic of their characteristics.

Jim Alexander’s comment that he took “pictures of black people . . . from a positive perspective”¹ also describes how all of the NAC artists approached their work in these two specific themes: 4) Women and Gender: “What makes a Black woman tick, tock?,”² and 5) Social and Political Consciousness: “*All* of us were going through transitions.”³ Included in these findings will again be examples of dance, music, creative writing, theater, and the visual arts, and the quotation associated within each theme represent an exemplar voice. Together, art forms and voices of social location spawn

¹ Jim Alexander, interview with the author and CAU undergraduate student Kristin Phillips, Atlanta, GA, April 16, 2006, transcript, 5.

² Sandra Dunson Franks, John Eaton et al. interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, transcript, 29.

³ Joe Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 11A. Jennings’ emphasis.

representations of this research's conceptual framework of simultaneity.

The findings are organized in an effort to answer both proposed research questions. The second of these will be addressed in Chapters 7 and 8. Together, all four chapters of research findings sought to identify whether or not the NAC was a Black Arts Movement institution, and if so, to properly place it among the regional manifestations. The results have demonstrated that the NAC should be situated as a manifestation along the movement's continuum, and not merely as a legacy.

Theme IV - Women and Gender

The NAC seemed to provide more opportunities for women artists than other BAM organizations. From all of its represented art forms, women are equally represented and often times spotlighted. Actress Sandra Dunson Franks shares a query many scholars ask of the BAM, "What makes a black woman tick, tock?"⁴ She shares this memory of "taking art to the people" on the show mobile:

I recited this poem called *What Makes a Black Woman Tick?* Mind you we have a big crowd of community people . . . , "What makes a black woman tick, tock, tick tock?/ What makes a black woman tick, tock?" All of a sudden everybody was really quiet [be]cause I was doing my thing right. This guy yells out . . . and he was right on time like we had rehearsed it. "What makes a black woman tick, tock?" "A big, black dick," and I was (shocked face)⁵

While the audience member's response is not what made women of the Neighborhood Arts Center "tick," the findings reveal other tangible characteristics reminiscent of Black Arts Movement philosophies from Dunson's query. For women of the NAC, there is a

⁴ Dunson Franks, John Eaton et al. interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, 29.

⁵ Ibid.

group of positive adjectives to describe their care, concern, and commitment to the arts and its community causes: “independence,” “courage,” “resistance,” “self-respect,” and more. There were also less positive terms like “marginally involved.” With women, as with mothers, there sometimes seemed to be more concern for the nurturing of community children than for their own art work and careers.

Board member Joyce Johnson offered some historical insight from the perspective of a black woman in the music discipline. A professor of music, and an organist at Spelman College, she achieved these positions after undergraduate and graduate studies at Fisk University and Northwestern University, respectively. Her mother was a piano player, and her father played brass instruments, so she was exposed to and encouraged in the study music at an early age. However, Johnson describes her early performance opportunities as “limited” as an African-American and as a woman:

[ASO Director Robert Shaw] took a lot of risks inviting me. One time he asked me what I had on the back burner in terms of repertoire. I had nothing at the time, but I didn’t tell him that. (snapped fingers) I told him what I wanted to play. I hadn’t started on the music . . . I didn’t have to audition for him He was risking his life giving me that opportunity, but it turned out wonderfully.⁶

Shaw’s reputation was on the line for opening the door of opportunity to a black woman, but Johnson met and exceeded the challenge.

Johnson noted that her performance accomplishments included often accompanying traveling performances of opera singer Mattiwilda Dobbs, Maynard Jackson’s aunt, who had initiated the conversations that created the NAC. In speaking of

⁶ Joyce Johnson, James Patterson and Joyce Johnson, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, May 25, 2010, 1.

the classic music genre that has been an AU Center's tradition, Johnson has this to say:

Atlanta has always been a cultural city [T]he churches supported the arts, especially in music. The churches would put on big choral works in music concerts Spelman and the other colleges were very supportive in promoting classical music. At that time in the early years, we were trying to make it to the mainstream of American life in all kinds of ways.⁷

She noted that it was not about “acting white” as much as proving that African Americans could do anything given time and opportunity.

Johnson recalled a period of time where the Blues was not played in black homes, but Mozart was considered cultured. By contrast, the Civil Rights Movement era awakened a consciousness for other music forms.

. . . [We] simply didn't want to accept the reality of our past as slaves, growing up in a slave culture. Families would not even let their children even sing spirituals. There were institution like the Jubilee Singers at Fisk University who made artistic expressions out of the spirituals, but in terms of appreciating the spirituals, and appreciating the blues, the blues was an expression of the reality of our people and we didn't want to face those realities. Now we've grown a lot and we can accept them now.⁸

Johnson did not know about jazz clubs growing up in a “country town” like Bowling Green, Kentucky. During her upbringing, jazz was associated with a lot of drugs because musicians died as a result of overdosing, and “things” happened to women.

All of these historical factors came to weigh on her involvement as a board member of the Neighborhood Arts Center. In reflecting on this experience, Johnson explained that the center was just getting organized and the main concern was raising money and overseeing art instruction. She shares, “I felt marginally involved because the

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Ibid., 3.

interest was in teaching Jazz. I think Ojeda Penn was involved. He was teaching children. So there was not the interest in classical music . . . there was [in] teaching the basics to children, teaching chords.”⁹ It seemed that the organization rejected classical music instruction as Eurocentric and prioritized jazz, an original African-American classical music form, thus missing a chance to utilize her skills and offer a spectrum of opportunities to the community. The NAC was apparently singularly focused on a black aesthetic.

For NAC artist-in-residence Sandra Dunson Franks, writing, acting, and directing were her passions, including the Adult Drama Workshop, and her first production *Owl Killers*, written by Phillip Hayden Dean, in 1978.¹⁰ However, *Hats, A Tribute to Harriet Tubman*, a play Franks conceived about the life of Harriet Tubman, became her hallmark work, and Alexander was there to capture the moments with his work titled *Tubbs* (see fig. 6.1). Franks graduated from Spelman College with a degree in English and Drama and was in the Masters Program at Atlanta University in Black Studies doing the Tubman research when she began portraying Tubman in 1977, and receiving many accolades. Franks remarked, “[Tubman] was a woman of tremendous strength and resourcefulness who was known as much as a leader in the women’s rights movement and in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church as she was known for her success as an Underground Railroad conductor.”¹¹ For her efforts, Franks received a 1979 Bronze

⁹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ “‘Owl Killers’ at Neighborhood Arts Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 23, 1978, 6.

¹¹ “Dunson-Franks Takes Tubman to JCS Univ.,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 23, 1984, 3.

Jubilee Finalist Award in Drama.¹²



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 6.1. Jim Alexander, *Tubbs*, 1979

Franks spent three years in study for the part of Tubman and toured the show, in April 1980, in upstate New York including Tubman's home, Auburn, New York. Franks' show came back to Atlanta's Memorial Arts Center at the Alliance Theatre for Black History Month in 1981, where Walter Dallas directed her production hosted by the Women Voters League.¹³

In the summer of 1981, as part of the Big Bethel A.M.E. Church's Women's Day Celebration, Franks appeared in a one-woman performance "on stage reminiscing about the dark starless night of slavery, her joy of freedom, her experiences as a Union Army

¹² "Sandra Franks to Appear in Show at Big Bethel," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 21, 1981, 5.

¹³ "Alliance Theatre, Women Voters League to Bring Harriett Tubman Tribute," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 13, 1981, 3. Singer Elizabeth "Lady Liz" Spraggins, a Spelman colleague, accompanied with dramatic interpretations of spirituals, and Jule Lassiter was production manager.

Intelligence Agent, [and] her association with John Brown.”¹⁴ The church was a fitting location given Tubman’s A.M.E. connections.

Big Bethel A.M.E. Church also has a long history of supporting the arts, particularly theater, as the African-American folk drama *Heaven Bound* has been produced by the church annually since 1930 with large choral arrangements and two white grand pianos central to the pulpit.¹⁵ The original oral Devil play, dreamed by a laundress from Jacksonville, Florida, has now been scripted for Atlanta, and other known manifestations of it exist in Johns Island, South Carolina and the Church of the Living God, No. 18 in Indianapolis, Indiana.¹⁶ Clearly, before community art centers like the NAC existed, the church played a major role in providing cultural enrichment for the people of the community.

In 1984, Franks’ one-woman, ninety-minute, multi-media show was taken to Johnson C. Smith University’s campus church in Charlotte, North Carolina, as part of their Black History Month celebration. Franks shared,

I really feel that Harriet is a part of me. It’s critical to create attractive role models in the theatre that portray black women other than as nannies or prostitutes. I’ve decided to become a theatrical historian of sorts, and research the lives of black women with substantial impact such as poetess Phyllis [sic] Wheatley and educator Mary McLeod Bethune.¹⁷

¹⁴ “Sandra Franks to Appear in Show at Big Bethel,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 21, 1981, 5.

¹⁵ Gregory D. Coleman, *We’re Heaven Bound!: Portrait of a Black Sacred Drama* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 36.

¹⁶ Mary Arnold Twining, “The Devil Made Me Do It: African-American Folk Drama,” (forthcoming 2012), 10-11.

¹⁷ “Dunson-Franks Takes Tubman to JCS Univ.,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 23, 1984, 3. Franks’ other experience included working with creative drama workshops in the Atlanta city schools, and productions she appeared in were *Macbeth*, *Everyman*, *Hair*, *Three Penny Opera*, *The Mighty Gents*, *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, *Ladies in Waiting*, and *Ceremonies of Dark Old Men*.

For Franks and the NAC, “Art for People’s Sake” meant “creat[ing] attractive role models” of black women, such as Wheatley and Bethune, and the historical figure Tubman was the embodiment of the Neighborhood Art Center’s BAM tenant of art being “functional, collective, and committed.” The imagery of the character was motivating; the drama was scripted to include several women as Alexander’s document reveals; and Franks’ commitment to educating through the arts was demonstrated by the variety of performance venues.

The disciplines of music and theater were natural collaborations at the NAC. When Franks’ creation of *Hats* continued to receive acclaim, Joe Jennings was asked to write the original music, and Peggy Ludaway, the NAC’s office manager and NAC dance performer, helped with Franks’ wardrobe. *Hats* premiered in 1987 at the New Federation Theatre in New York for Black History Month,¹⁸ and Franks remembers it as a “life changing experience”:

We received money from the National Endowment for the Arts to research the life of Harriet Tubman. And that was a life changing experience for me. Peggy [Ludaway] was instrumental in helping me develop the wardrobe and Joe Jennings wrote an original score. Oh my goodness, we came together. . . John [Eaton] was one of the producers on that project. We developed a spoken word album, which was nominated for a local Grammy.¹⁹

The synergy of having multiple arts disciplines under one roof at the NAC made such a

¹⁸ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, 18B. “‘Hats’ Premieres February 15 at New Federation Theatre,” *publication*, February 4, 1987. Article notes that it first appeared at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta with Walter Dallas in 1981, Atlanta production toured across country since opening. Jennings had article; don’t know which newspaper in NY. Also see D.J.R. Bruckner, “The Stage: ‘Hats,’ a Play about Harriet Tubman,” [NY publication], February 18, 1987.

¹⁹ Sandra Dunson Franks, NAC Eaton et al. Panel with author, Part I, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, 36.

unique project that much more successful.

While Franks' career extended from Atlanta's Big Bethel church on Auburn Avenue to an HBCU in North Carolina and Tubman's birthplace in New York State established writer Toni Cade Bambara and aspiring author Alice Lovelace as two women essential to the ingredients of the NAC's formula for success in the area of creative writing. Bambara served as one of the first writers-in-residence, hired using the 1975 funds from the Comprehensive Employment Training Act (CETA). Lovelace later joined as the creative writing teacher from March 1979 to July 1980.

Bambara specialized in short stories and worked with Ebon Dooley who specialized in poetry. By the time this New York native arrived in Atlanta, she had traveled extensively throughout Asia and Africa. Bambara later became a professor in the Atlanta University Center. According to biographer Linda Janet Holmes, "Toni wanted to forge alliance with radical thinkers and activists," and she moved South because "she believed Atlanta would stimulate both her activism and writing."²⁰ The CETA position afforded her time to pursue her passion for writing.

To her credit, Bambara had the following publications by the time of her NAC residency: *Gorilla, My Love* (1960), *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folk* (1971), and *The Sea Birds are Still Alive, Collected Stories*

²⁰ Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall, eds., *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 15-16. The prospect of teaching, see Holmes, *A Joyous Revolt: Toni Cade Bambara, Writer and Activist* (New York: Praeger Publications, forthcoming 2013).

(1974).²¹ The black feminist movement was emerging, and her anthology included Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Paule Marshall. As an established professional, Bambara opened her world of connections to local creative writing artists and the Southern Collective of African-American Writers (SCAAW), which was launched by Alice Lovelace and housed at the NAC.²²

In November of 1977, Bambara assumed a writer's residency at Atlanta's all-women's Spelman College made possible by funds from the BCIA. In addition to being a writer, it was noted that ". . . [her] art training also include[d] weaving, pottery, water color, oil, acrylics, and basketry at Clark Craft Center and at the NAC in Atlanta during 1975."²³ This list of disciplines meant she crossed paths with visual artist Tina Dunkley, who taught crafts at the NAC.

Later writings appear to be influenced by her time in Atlanta and at the Neighborhood Arts Center. The novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980) is about a community festival and healing event in fictional Claybourne, Georgia. *Those Bones Are Not My Child* or *If Blessings Come* (title of the manuscript), was a novel published posthumously in 1999 and edited by Toni Morrison, that is centered on Atlanta's Missing and Murdered Children cases (forty black children 1979 and 1981). Several times the Neighborhood

²¹ By 1975, Bambara's publications included: *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: New American Library, 1970), *Tales and Short Stories for Black Folk* (Garden City, NY: Zenith Books, 1971), *Gorilla, My Love* (New York: Random House, 1960, 1972), and *The Sea Birds are Still Alive, Collected Stories* (New York: Random House, 1974, 1977).

²² Portia S. Brookins, "Noted Writer, Educator Addresses Education Forum," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 25, 1976, 2.

²³ "Toni Bambara Writer in Residence for Spelman," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 17, 1977, 3. Also see Linda Janet Holmes, "Poised for the Light," in *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara*, ed. Linda Janet Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 7-26.

Arts Center is mentioned.

While Bambara was quite an asset to the center, artistic personalities sometime clashed. Michael Lomax has this remembrance on Bambara leaving the NAC:

People like Toni Cade Bambara . . . thought I was, you know, a step above the pig. Toni was so righteous, and a little self-righteous as well . . . particularly when there was a confrontation. I think I fired one of the directors who I did not think was doing the right job. [Bambara] wouldn't speak to me.²⁴

Many of the interview participants were forthcoming with information, but stories around the departure of NAC's first director Sandra Swanns, who came up with the motto "Art for People's Sake" for the organization, remain a mystery. Adjectives like "strong-willed" were used for Swanns, but the reason for their conflict may forever reside with her deceased soul.²⁵

The Neighborhood Arts Center was not only a place for established artists like Bambara, it existed for new talent in the city to network with mentors while establishing their own careers. Kanita Poet was an aspiring writer and creator of poetry who was originally from St. Louis, Missouri and who moved to Atlanta after 1973. She was an English major from the University of Missouri and described herself as a "dethroned African Queen." Over the years, she presented at the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival, Central City Park, local television stations, and "she's even written on a few of Atlanta's walls,

²⁴ Michael Lomax, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, 9. "Pig" is a less than endearing term used to refer to police.

²⁵ John Kolé Eaton, conversation with the author, Atlanta, GA February 20, 2012.

all in the name of poetry.”²⁶

Poet (see fig. 6.2) was responsible for the poem that appears on the final panel of the NAC’s *Wall of Respect* mural discussed below in Theme V, and in the play for the NAC, titled *Three African Women*, Poet performed in addition to writing and directing. The Neighborhood Arts Center served new artists to the city by allowing them to enter the fold, to incubate talent, and to network with national artists. As a female artist, Kanita Poet flourished.

There were many transplants to Atlanta migrating from all parts of the nation to the “New Black Mecca,” so Poet was not alone. Visual artist Tina Dunkley remarked that prior to coming to Atlanta and the Neighborhood Arts Center, her background at the School of Visual Arts in New York City was non-objective content. She states, “Somehow moving into the South, my work became very figurative because I was really moved by the interface with the community, the kids, the elderly people.”²⁷ While in school she studied sculpting and painting, but her craft section at the Neighborhood Arts Center for adults and young people got her to explore batik, a technique she still uses. Dunkley shares, “The change that [the Neighborhood Arts Center] precipitated in my work and my vision is probably still a reflection of the Center.”²⁸ In developing their styles, many aesthetic transitions may occur for these artists. The period of the Black Arts

²⁶ “‘Evening of African-American Culture’ at Junior College Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 14, 1980, 6.

²⁷ Dunkley, Panel #2 interview with the Author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 1.

²⁸ Ibid.

Movement was an intense time of discovery.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1977]

Figure 6.2. Jim Alexander, *The Poet*, 1977

Just as there was regional support for southern writers at the NAC through organizations such as the Southern Collective of African American Writers, visual artists felt equally regarded. *Women's Work* was the title of a 1977 NAC show exhibiting work by Atlanta and regional visual artists. It included the traditional fine arts of painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, and photography, “but also those arts traditionally associated with women – sewing and weaving and a new twist, the art of cornrowing.”²⁹

²⁹ “‘Woman’s [sic] Work’ Starts May 18 at Art Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 15, 1977, 10.

Natural hair, starting in the 1970s, was particularly an expression of black consciousness and an art form in its own right. The NAC was on the cutting edge of this artistic trend hosting David Hammons' *Nap Tapestry: Wire and Wiry Hair* that will be discussed later. However, as art historian Kellie Jones acknowledged, "As much as Hammons would insist on the non-gendered role of hair in his work, the manipulation of hair is largely indented with a female creative space."³⁰ Women's Work occurred in the spring, prior to Hammons' installation. All media were accepted for exhibition at the NAC and not pigeon holed into negative categories of "primitive," "folk" or "vernacular" art, unlike the majority arts institution, such as the High Museum of Art.

There were a variety of art classes at the NAC for youth and adults in addition to the exhibitions. Dunkley is pictured in her classroom with one of the children from the community (see fig. 6.3). Economic class often excluded residents of the Mechanicsville community from other fee-based cultural activities which is why the NAC's uniquely free structure was geared toward the community.

A group of siblings wanted to go to the circus, but their family's circumstances impeded this desire. Dunkley explains:

There is one interface that I remember with a family of three brothers that use to come regularly . . . and they were really wild. They use to come through that place with great intensity. And they span the ages, I would say, between five and maybe nine . . . I became a surrogate mother in a very odd way and they obviously had challenges with their parents. It may have been substance abuse, alcoholism. I don't know what, but I do recall them coming in one afternoon and asking me to take them to the circus. They wanted to go to the circus real bad and they didn't have any way to

³⁰ Kellie Jones, "In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture in the 1970s," in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*, Kellie Jones, with contributions by Amiri Baraka, Hettie Jones, Lisa Jones, and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., 297-304. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 301.

get there . . . I took them. . . . It was a challenge actually because they were not necessarily clothed and cared for, I thought, in the way that you know. . . . There was only one request that I had. I asked them if they would just go home and ask their mother to provide some clean clothes, because I didn't care if they were ironed or not just [clean].³¹



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 6.3. Jim Alexander, *Tina Teaching*, 1979

Neighborhood Arts Center artists took on the challenges of applying their art forms to the needs of their Mechanicsville and Atlanta communities, inside and outside of the classroom, regardless of socioeconomic class. Sometimes the lessons were on form and technique; other times the lessons were on personal hygiene.

As instructors, the Neighborhood Arts Center artists fulfilled the motto of “Art for People’s Sake” by exposing audiences to various arts disciplines and cultures. Sometimes the instructor-student relationship grew to resemble that of a surrogate parent.

Unfortunately, when a fee structure was implemented after public funding diminished, the intended audience, the “neighborhood” of the disadvantaged class dissipated.

³¹ Ibid., 15-16.

Lessons of independence were also part of the unofficial curriculum. Dancer Sharrone Mitchell recalled how important having her own *space* was to her as an artist traversing between the black and white worlds of dance. She shares,

I was so grossly submerged in my own little world because I had my *own* studio, pretty floors and I mean glass all the way down and it allowed me the opportunity to develop my art form which back then was like a *rare* thing to have your own studio. So coming from a very disciplined dance atmosphere, very rigid atmosphere, I was able to then break out and pull up what came from *me*, from what I had been learning, you know from dance theater. . . . I don't think I had ever had an experience like that. It was extremely, extremely hard. But it allowed me the discipline that I still apply in my life today. With the Atlanta Ballet, [it] was like being on the white side of town in the morning time, and then [I would] go to the black side of town in the evening time.³²

Her example of being in and between both worlds was an expression of the double-consciousness Du Bois initially identified in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). For this artist, the transition was challenging, but not insurmountable.

Mitchell started her own dance company, called "Three's Company," made up of two male dancers and her, and performed, as she describes it, "inside, outside, uptown, downtown, and everywhere, all over the place."³³ She also remembered that the NAC's Jim Alexander was never far away, photographically documenting her work.

Teaching about "classless societies," without distinctions between genders, was another of the many lessons these women instilled. Lovelace recalls how a group of young girls in an African dance class wanted to drum, a role traditionally reserved for

³² Sharrone Mitchell, Panel #2 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 7; Mitchell's emphasis.

³³ Mitchell, Panel #2 interview with the author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 7.

men in African societies. After listening to their dilemma Lovelace encouraged the girls to challenge the gender barrier. The group of girls refused to dance until the instructor acquiesced. Lovelace remembers,

That's the kind of lessons that were taught constantly [at the Neighborhood Arts Center] and all the lessons were not by lecturing to people. We tried our very best to live what we believed in. To live a quality, classless society, a society where there were no distinctions between the roles that the women and men played, where children were equally welcomed and empowered, and where our art itself *was* our activism.³⁴

Whether taking art to the people in performances, or practicing to perfect talents at the Neighborhood Arts Center's facility, artists were activists providing life lessons, such as gender rights, that "empowered" all ages and sexes.

The center's first one woman ceramic and fabric design exhibit in 1980, titled *Improvisations*, featured the work of former NAC artist-in-residence Debra Attiya Melton in the Romare Bearden Gallery. A reporter shared, "[Melton's] appealing big ceramic balls with surprising notched designs are distinctive."³⁵ Melton worked at the NAC from February 1979 to October 1980, before leaving to teach at a private school.

Women also excelled in the area of theater. In the spring of 1981, Lovelace and Louise Runyon presented a two-woman show titled *Women at Work* using poetry and dance. Lovelace was, at the time, the administrator of the pilot program Job Development in the Arts titled Arts Skills Project. Runyon was a former steelworker, and

³⁴ Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, 17-18, transcript; Lovelace's emphasis.

³⁵ Standalone Photo, "Improvisations," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 19, 1980, 3. Also see Sylvia Harmon, "Diary of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 9, 1980, 3.

performed a dance, called *Night Shift*, about working the midnight shift. Runyon read poems dealing with her experience in the factory and as mother. Lovelace explained, “The piece shows the experience in all its drudgery but also expresses the strength and resistance of the women and men working in those conditions.”³⁶

The Women's Project was another collaboration between theater, creative writing, dance, and music. It accepted poems, prose, and songs that celebrated the courage of all women, including Euroamerican, with no age limitations. The call for work stressed the themes of respect, self love, family, and things Mama and Daddy told you. The selected pieces were used in the NAC's upcoming summer production and dedicated to women in all their glory.³⁷ The sponsors of *Interarts Month* included the Atlanta Women's Art Collective funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the City of Atlanta's Department of Cultural Affairs.³⁸ In the fall of 1981, auditions for *The Women's Project* were held at the NAC for actresses, dancers, musicians, and vocalists. “The Women's Project mark[ed] the first time in Atlanta that a broad cross section of women would join together, utilizing their creative talents.”³⁹

The NAC, along with the GCA, sponsored *The Women's Project's* event where six local women writers came together to script a play. Included were Pearl Cleage (then Lomax), Sarah Goodwin, Louise Runyon Brath, Roanog Seaburg (wife of NAC artist

³⁶ Lovelace in “Women's Group Seeks Works,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 31, 1981, 3.

³⁷ “Women's Group Seeks Works,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 31, 1981, 3.

³⁸ “‘Women at Work’ at Neighborhood Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 2, 1981, 7.

³⁹ “The Women's Project Holds Auditions,” *Atlanta Daily World*, September 21, 1981, 3.

Steve Seaburg), C.P. Woods, and Chini Collins. Lovelace observed, “[They] fused poetry and prose by these writers into the play about seven women from different ethnic and social backgrounds. The play also contains song and dance to help express the joys and sorrows of the characters.”⁴⁰ The play’s director Rae Williams stated, “The play is about the choices every woman has to make in life. It’s about the conflicts they face, the problems and the triumphs they have to confront as they grow up.”⁴¹ While the BAM historically was accused of being gender biased, at the NAC there seemed to be more findings of empowering women and their artistic productions and aesthetic content. The NAC had several instructors who were Euroamerican, but the cultural center’s programming remained consistently Afrocentric. This 1981 aesthetic exploration represented another transition to the acceptance of multiculturalism.

Theme IV – Summary/Analysis Women/Gender

What makes a black woman tick tock? This query is the title of a poem written by theater participant Sandra Dunson Franks. In this fourth theme of research findings on women and gender, the NAC’s programs met the Black Arts Movement motto of “Art for People’s Sake” by offering more opportunities for women than are traditionally described during this period often characterized by scholars as chauvinistic.

Women had their own classrooms and dance studios, their own exhibitions, and led the NAC as directors, which Sandra Swanns exemplifies, and as deputy directors as in

⁴⁰ Lovelace in “Women’s Career Weekend Scheduled for Saturday, Nov. 7,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 11, 1981, 3.

⁴¹ “Women’s Career Weekend Scheduled for Saturday, Nov. 7,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 11, 1981, 3. The final presentation was held at OIC Atlanta’s Sullivan Hall.

the case of Glenda McGee Phillips. Pictures of black people from a positive perspective were presented theatrically. Depictions of historic figures like Harriet Tubman as well as modern plays portraying women working in traditionally male roles were all part of the NAC's programming.

The entrepreneurial spirit of running a dance company was encouraged, as were the characteristics of independence, courage, resistance, and self-respect. Many female artists were trailblazers in their own right, breaking barriers at majority institutions such as the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, researching black artists in art schools, or through an exhibition on black hair as a traditionally female creative sphere. There were regional conferences for writers, both male and female, but there were also lessons on gender rights and personal hygiene taught at the individual level. It appears to be the women's sense of commitment to the role and responsibility of the artist, female or male, which births and regenerates the community. Alice Lovelace states it best, "Our art itself was our activism."⁴² As surrogate mothers of black culture, the women of the NAC faced their double-consciousness from a different perspective, struggling for black consciousness as much, if not more so than a feminist agenda.

Theme V – Social and Political Consciousness

The final fifth and most prevalent theme uncovered in the findings of this research is that the NAC had a specific mission to elevate the social and political consciousness of black people. In the words of musician and activist Joe Jennings, "*All* of us were going

⁴² Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, 17-18, transcript; Lovelace's emphasis.

through transitions”⁴³ Writer Alice Lovelace notes how another writer, Toni Cade

Bambara, stressed the importance of the responsible artist:

[Bambara] constantly talked to us about the artist’s responsibility. She was constant that *you* have a responsibility, and she would constantly call us back to the fact that you didn’t raise yourself. A community raised you, and if a community raised you, whatever you get, whatever you earn, you *owe* it to that community.⁴⁴

Social consciousness during the Black Arts Movement was akin to an umbilical cord to the community and it was the responsibility of the artist to commit to giving back, as is the case when a mother and child bond.

Joe Jennings used John Riddle’s art as an example of the “Art for People’s Sake” movement. Riddle came to Atlanta in 1974 from Los Angeles, California where he had been an artist activist during the Watts Rebellion of 1965.⁴⁵ The artist and his family joined Reverend Albert Cleage’s Shrine of the Black Madonna shortly after arriving in Atlanta. Riddle explained,

That’s the first time I ever heard that God was black and Jesus was black and it scared the hell out of me at first, but then it made sense. I mean, because all the happenings in the Christian era, the time of Jesus’ happening, there was black people. And then when they were telling you about he had skin of copper and hair of lamb’s wool, that don’t sound like no white folks.⁴⁶

⁴³ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, 11A. Jennings’ emphasis.

⁴⁴ Lovelace. Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, January 23, 2009, transcript, 16; Lovelace’s emphasis.

⁴⁵ Bruce M. Tyler, “The Rise and Decline of the Watts Summer Festival, 1965-1986,” *American Studies* 31, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 63. Cultural Nationalist M. Ron Karenga was also active in Los Angeles with his US Organization and among the founders of the Watts Summer Festival.

⁴⁶ Karen Anne Mason, interview with John Riddle on September 5, 1992, “African-American Artists in Los Angeles” (California: University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), transcript, 22-23.

He was commissioned to execute several Afrocentric murals on the sanctuary ceiling in a Michelangelo-inspired fresco technique.⁴⁷ He then became Executive Director of the NAC in 1976, replacing founding director Sandra Swanns, and was later honored with the “Citizen of the Year Award” in 1979 as a painter, sculptor and a veterans’ rights advocate having served in the Korean War.⁴⁸

Throughout his tenure in Atlanta, many exciting transitions manifested in his artwork. These included the installation of murals around the city and various commissions such as the State’s Capitol (1976) and the NAC’s participation in the city’s Arts Festival of Atlanta (1978-1981). Riddle left the NAC in 1981 and became assistant director of the Atlanta Civic Center in 1984, but he remained connected to the NAC family of artists and continued to receive tremendous support and accolades. He completed four sculptures for the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) Tenth Street Midtown station (1984), ten lithographs for the Governor’s Art Award Program (1985), a painting commission at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport (then Hartsfield Airport) for the 100th Anniversary Olympic Games (1996), and a Seagram’s Company award for the *Spirits at the Gate* sculpture.⁴⁹ He served as Program Manager of Visual Arts from 1999-2002 of the California African-American Museum, and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 166-68, specifically 167. These murals remain intact underneath the Shrine of the Black Madonna sanctuary ceiling renovations. The church changed aesthetic and did not want to alienate membership with the harsh, pro-black visual rhetoric.

⁴⁸ “Vietnam Veterans will be Honored at AJC March 28,” *Atlanta Daily World*, March 27, 1979, 2. Kellie Jones, “Black West, Thoughts on Art in Los Angeles,” in *New Thoughts*, Collins and Crawford, ed., 52. Jones notes that Riddle fought in the Korean War.

⁴⁹ Karen Anne Mason, interview with John Riddle on September 5, 1992, “African-American Artists in Los Angeles” (California: University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), transcript, vi.

maintained connections with Atlanta throughout his career. He died in March 2002.⁵⁰

While at the Neighborhood Arts Center, the poster *Year of the Bird*, signed June 27, 1976 and honoring musician Charlie Parker, was created by a collaboration with NAC musician Joe Jennings who posed as the saxophone player. Jennings recalls, “I modeled this [pointing to the musician] for him, and then he imposed this over a regal picture of [Charlie Parker].”⁵¹ Jennings elaborates on his recollections of the impact the Black Arts Movement had on artists.

*All of us were going through transitions at the time. . . . The Art for People’s Sake that we were talking about, we are talking about the people. I mean like John Riddle’s work . . . it can be abstract in dealing with that and some could be addressing issues in a fashion that anybody can immediately see what it is and what it’s talking about.*⁵²

As Jennings’ critique explains, Riddle’s approach was seen as “abstract” where other artists’ works communicated more straightforward messages. Black artists were not monolithic but varied in their approaches to black aesthetics. These variations, or “going through transitions” as Jennings described, embodied this final program theme of raising social and political consciousness. The additional examples will elaborate.

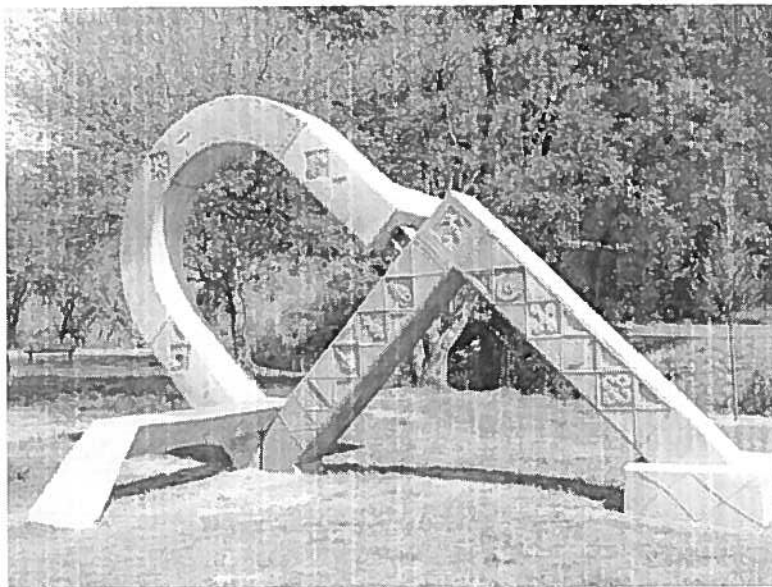
For instance, Riddle’s *Spirit Bench*, 1976 (fig. 6.4) is a large, concrete sculpture

⁵⁰ Jan Meadows, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 3, 2010, transcript, 14. Meadows recalled that she and her husband were very close to Riddle; they visited him at the hospital the night before he passed in Atlanta. He was visiting his children, and had a heart attack on the plane but did not realize it. Also see Elaine Woo, “Obituaries—John Riddle, Jr.: Artist and Curator,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2002: B17. Tina Dirmann, “Artist-Teacher Turned Trash Into Treasure,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2002: <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/08/local/me-riddle8> (accessed February 19, 2012). Also see “A Tribute to John T. Riddle, Jr.,” Los Angeles: California African American Museum, March 22 – April 24, 2004, <http://trio.caamuseum.org/> (accessed February 19, 2012).

⁵¹ Jennings, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, 19B-20A.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 11A. Jennings’ emphasis.

with Ghanaian Adinkra symbols molded onto its concrete surface. Installed in Arthur Langford, Jr. Park (then Joyland Park), the bench is meant to be sat on and walked under, through and around. With its sturdy material, it is also tough enough to be climbed on by youth and adults in Arthur Langford, Jr. Park.⁵³ The more abstract, or conceptual, aspects of Riddle's work are the decorative motifs; simple for a black conscious observer aware of the symbolism but complex for a viewer unaware, not as knowledgeable, or unconscious of the ancient African symbolism and the communalism with ancestral spirits it might evoke.



[Source: Office of Cultural Affairs]

Figure 6.4. John Riddle, *Spirit Bench*, 1976

The U-shape, indicative of a magnet, might pull the form to the left, while the inverted V-shape, a more abstracted pyramidal form, grounds that force. A third, ramp-

⁵³ Office of Cultural Affairs, Public Art Program, <http://ocuatlanta.com/riddle-bench> (accessed June 8, 2010). The park is named for former Atlanta City Councilman and Georgia State Senator Arthur Langford, Jr. who passed in 1994, and the sculpture is located on 211 Thorton Street, Atlanta, GA 30315, District 12.

like perpendicular piece joins the previous two at their intersection, offering another plane on which to commune with the spirits and functionalizing the art for service as a bench. Alexander recalled that Riddle used the assistance of a NAC security guard to install the work, as the image shows that a large crane was required (see fig. 6.5). Riddle was as versatile with small projects as with larger art commissions.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 6.5. Jim Alexander, *Untitled (Spirit Bench)*, 1978

Riddle's concrete sculpture is steeped in African and African-American abstracted iconography embodying the "Art for People's Sake" motto of the organization. The geometric shapes simplify the work, while the African symbols make it more complex. This sculpture is only one of many black aesthetics Riddle investigated.

The Riddle sculpture at Georgia's State Capitol, titled *Expelled Because of Color* was captured in 1978 by Alexander in a photograph titled *Unveiling* (see fig. 6.6). It memorializes the state's first African-American legislators using more figural representations to portray identifiable black aesthetics. This bronze piece, originally commissioned by the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus in 1976, uses figurative imagery to exude black iconography from the bottom to the top. Riddle memorialized thirty-three African-American state legislators who were elected during the Reconstruction Era, but expelled from the Georgia House in 1868 because of their color. From 1901 to 1962, no African Americans would be allowed to hold state office until Senator Leroy Johnson desegregated the Georgia General Assembly.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 6.6. Jim Alexander, *Unveiling*, 1978

The sculpture, rich in black aesthetic iconography, was celebrated at an unveiling on February 16, 1978 where Alexander captures Riddle standing immediately to the right

of the statue.⁵⁴ A bronze plaque, signed “John Riddle, Sculptor,” situated to the left of the monument, describes the work as follows:

The cinder block forms at the base of the sculpture symbolized the building of Black political awareness and self-representation in Georgia, our enslavement, our role in the Revolutionary War, the Black church, our labor and the right to vote are components of these Black Georgian’s struggle from the slave ship to the State House.⁵⁵

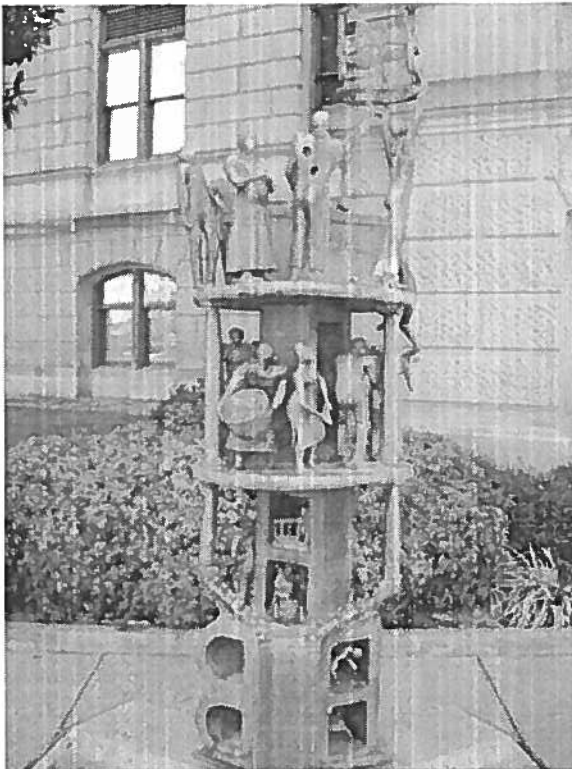
Riddle’s artwork incorporates history, politics, and religion into a visually identifiable piece, but conceptual energy and consciousness are still required to completely appreciate the artist’s creativity.

Riddle organized the work with a base and five registers, similar to how the level motifs of African masks are not meant to be portraiture or show individuality but to celebrate the community. The names of all thirty-three expelled black legislators are equally divided and listed on the three bronze placards that decorate a three part concrete base which represents the foundation laid by these trailblazers.⁵⁶ From its base, the details of *Expelled* (see fig. 6.7) reveal bronze cinder blocks and circular gears representing the “building of Black political awareness.” Figures leaning forward or climbing up using another’s back for support or being given a hand up to reach the next level give the statue a sense of spiral motion. These incorporate the sentiments of layers, progress, and reaching new heights.

⁵⁴The statue was rededicated on February 22, 2012 by the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus in an effort to have it included in the tour of the Capitol.

⁵⁵ John Riddle, *Expelled Because of Color*, 1976, Georgia State Capital (corner of Hank Aaron Drive and Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard).

⁵⁶ Robert A. Holmes, conversation with the author, February 19, 2012.



[Source: Clyde Bradley © 2010]

Figure 6.7. John Riddle, *Expelled Because of Color*, 1976 (detail)

A ship disembarks faceless, enslaved African human cargo, hands bound behind their backs and some naked, onto the second level. Viewed in the round, figures seem to stride in the same direction, but clothing attributes signal the movement of time. Nude enslaved figures change to clothed figures with hats, jackets, and holding weapons, all symbolic of the Revolutionary War period. Another faceless figure, a woman in a skirt, holds a gun in one hand while her other hand is positioned over her eyes as if to be a scout on the lookout. On the third level, there are male and female laborers, one holding a basket and others farming tools; all characterize the slave labor system employed that helped build Georgia's economy.

Atop the piece, on this fourth level, is a large ballot box encircled by figures attempting to cast a vote in the ballot box. These figures include a pregnant woman to the left of a man with two holes through his torso. He places his left hand on the ballot box and his right touches the outlined shape of the state of Georgia. Riddle uses this image to denote the danger and southern struggle for blacks to vote while simultaneously supporting the state's economy.

A belt with a buckle going through the middle of the state's outline serves as the crown for the work as it references the bible belt of the South and how black labor built the state of Georgia. If a viewer looks to the sculptures crowning outline, the gold dome of the state capital, where all this history transpired, is in plain view. The politics of Georgia was rendered by Riddle to forever reside on the capitol's grounds, and Alexander remembers Riddle's personal protest including a well-endowed, nude, male enslaved figure on one of the second level in fulfillment of racist fears around black masculinity.

While Riddle shared his versatility in sculpture with the community, other conscious expressions of his genius were the numerous mural projects meant to bring art to the masses and place art as central in importance to the responsibilities of an artist, as Bambara had impressed upon the local artists. The *Wall of Respect* mural and the mural on the Peter James Bryant building were among the NAC Mural Team's more significant public creations to elevating social and political consciousness. Eaton referred to managing artists like "herding cats" because the original CETA artists did not get along.⁵⁷ However, he found it easier to work with the performing artists because theirs was a more

⁵⁷ Eaton, Molette-Eaton interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, transcript, 41B.

collaborative art form, and as Eaton shares, “they had a common language.” Visual artists, on the other hand, seldom collaborated spending more time alone painting or sculpting in a Western, “art for art’s sake” model.

The NAC mural projects, however, were collaborative ventures among visual artists that exuded black consciousness. The mural team was comprised of several visual artists at the NAC, responsible for several creations in and around the city. As part of their outreach component, artists worked with students who assisted them with creations on city walls, in schools, and in community centers.

The *Wall of Respect* (see fig. 6.8) was a seven panel, multi-color mural located at Auburn and Piedmont Avenues which decorated what was the east wall of then Henry’s Grill. The mural was a tribute to black history, past, present, and future. The artists responsible were Amos Ashanti Johnson, head of the mural outreach program, Nathan Hoskins, another artist at the NAC, and Verna Parks, a senior from Spelman College and an art intern.

The murals were financed by the Inner City Corporation, a non-profit group funded to lay out a plan to redevelop Auburn and Hunter Streets. The timing of black community revitalization also coincided with the nation’s Bicentennial celebrations. As NAC’s director, John Riddle optimistically expected that the murals would generate a high “art energy level” of blackness.⁵⁸ Even Atlanta’s High Museum of Art hosted a touring exhibit, curated by African-American artist and historian David Driskell, for the

⁵⁸ “Auburn Murals to Depict Black History,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 15, 1976, 3. Nate Hoskins left the NAC to go west but mysteriously vanished never arriving to his destination. Alexander, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA.

country's Bicentennial titled *Two Centuries of Black American Art*.⁵⁹



[Source: Jim Alexander © 2006]

Figure 6.8. Jim Alexander, *Wall of Respect*, 2006

The panels created by the NAC mural team that comprise Atlanta's *Wall of Respect* (see fig. 6.9)⁶⁰ contained, in order from left to right, jazz great Sonny Rollins adjacent to a young male enslaved African breaking his chains of bondage. A monochromatic rendering in blue and white is made up of four black heroes, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B. Du Bois. The next panel is an historic look back to Kemet with an African child's portrait to the left of the mask of Tutankhamen, and both supported underneath with portrait and profiled West African masks. The fourth contained an opened black hand reaching for the sun atop a closed fist representing the Black Power struggle, and a boxing pose of the great Muhammad Ali is

⁵⁹ David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York: Knopf: distributed by Random House, 1976. The exhibit traveled to the High Museum from January 8 to February 20, 1977.

⁶⁰ Isaac, "Whitewashing Black History," *Solidarity*, May 11, 2008, <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/1490> (accessed December 22, 2011). The Atlanta mural was purposely defaced some time in 2007.

in the fifth panel. A central portrait of Angela Davis in her signature afro, with John Coltrane to the right, and an anonymous youth on the left, are all silhouetted against the red, black, and green stripes of the Pan-African Union flag comprise the sixth. Lastly, a painted scroll frames a poem that gives the piece its name, *Wall of Respect*.



[Source: Isaac © n.d.]

Figure 6.9. NAC Mural Team, *Wall of Respect*, 1976 (detail)

In describing the inclusion of the poem, Kanita Poet explained,

It all happened quite by accident. A friend of mine asked me if I'd like to go to see this guy doing a mural on a wall on Auburn. When I got there and started talking to him, I asked him if I could write some poetry for the wall. I think he thought I would come back in a couple of weeks with some pieces, but I sat down right there and wrote a piece, he liked it, and I PUT IT ON.⁶¹

The exact words on the mural read:

"Wall of Respect"
 To honor, to love,
 ~ to cherish ~
 Our strong ones alive
 and those who have
 ~ perished ~
 While fighting for truth
 Our souls to protect,
 we love you, we give you
 A Wall of REPECT

⁶¹ "'Evening of African-American Culture' at Junior College Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, 14 February, 1980, 6.

signed Sis. Kanita Poet⁶²

Atlanta's *Wall* is a direct legacy of the original *Wall of Respect* (see fig. 6.10)⁶³ created in Chicago in 1967. Artist Jeff Donaldson and *The Black World* editor Hoyt Fuller were instrumental in OBAC's mid-West creation. The original 1967 *Wall of Respect* was meant to involve the community and the artists, visual arts, dance, music, and creative writers, with performances in front of the wall and even neighborhood kids soliciting funds to give tours and explanations of its iconography.⁶⁴ The black art group African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA) was created from this community concept, and not having individual artist's signatures on the mural was an intentional philosophical statement against art for art's sake.⁶⁵

Ebon Dooley was a part of this effort as Secretary for the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) at the time of the mural's creation and, as one of the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee members in Atlanta, was among those who championed a similar mural concept in Atlanta. He shares,

So under the influence of the OBAC thing with the *Wall of Respect* and all of that, I was on a mission. I was going to help spread this whole notion of putting murals up throughout the black community wherever I went. Build institutions so we could have a cultural base where we could begin

⁶² "Wall of Respect," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 5, 1976, 6. Photo Caption of the three artists pictured.

⁶³ "Wall of Respect," <http://backspace.com/notes/2005/06/wall-of-respect.php> (accessed March 31, 2010).

⁶⁴ Jeff Donaldson, "The Rise, Fall and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 1 (1998), 22-26. Also see Dave Potter, "Crowds Gather As 'Wall' Is Formally Dedicated," *Chicago Daily Defender*, 2 October 1967, 3.

⁶⁵ Terry Thomas, "AfriCOBRA: A Black Revolutionary Art Movement and Art for People's Sake," MA Thesis, Clark Atlanta University, 2012.

to talk about our own history, the contemporary manifestations of our situation and all of that.⁶⁶

Dooley and other members of the Neighborhood Arts Center used the public art mural as a platform for discussing black history and contemporary legends, for combining art forms, visual and literary in Atlanta's case, and for connecting the past with future generations.



[Source: <http://backspace.com/notes/2005/06/wall-of-respect.php>]

Figure 6.10. *Wall of Respect*, Chicago, Illinois, 1967-1971

Where Chicago's artists wanted to remain anonymous, Atlanta artist Kanita Poet signed her work, representing the transitional times of the Black Arts Movement Jennings spoke of in his quote for this section. Clearly, having a public display of historical greats from the black community was a clarion call to anyone who viewed the *Walls* to continue the legacy of greatness. Just as it motivated youth and adults in the mid-West, Dooley and other NAC artists, well aware of Chicago's cultural display, wanted the same for

⁶⁶ Ebon Dooley, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, 3. For more on Chicago murals, see Olivia Gude and Jeff Huebner, *Urban Art Chicago: A Guide to Community Murals, Mosaics, and Sculptures*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000) and Claire Wolf Krantz, "Art's Chicago Public, Part One: The Mural Movement," *New Art Examiner* (May 1996): 23-29.

Atlanta.

The themes of black music, sports heroes, women, and community leaders are repeated in Atlanta's rendition, but in a distinctive fashion. The Martin-Malcolm, Douglass-Du Bois dichotomies are well documented.⁶⁷ Knowing black history and the biographies of these great men, "who have perished," would make the meaning of the artists' juxtaposition of these figures even deeper. The remaining panels offered additional evidence of black greatness.

In America's original music form, jazz saxophonist Rollins births from his horn an image of a young, male captive grimacing from the weight of a heavy chain around his neck. In sports, the image of "the greatest boxer of all time," Muhammad Ali, is included on the mural as a sports legend, but also for his cultural consciousness; refusing to participate in the Vietnam War, his conversion to Sunni Islam, and the rejection his slave name. Another great mind depicted on the mural, "still fighting for truth," was activist Angela Davis. She fought her firing from a University of California school in 1969 on the basis of her political affiliation with the Communist Party and was acquitted of aggravated kidnapping and first degree murder charges in 1972.⁶⁸

The visual rhetoric espoused on the wall for the people by the NAC artists was clear. A *Wall of Respect*, on an historically significant street such as Auburn Avenue, important during Jim Crow segregation for being a hub of black entrepreneurship, was a

⁶⁷ Robert Michael Franklin, *Liberating Visions: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African-American Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁶⁸ Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* (New York: International Publishers, 1975).

long overdue memorial and catalyst for inquiry by future generations at a historic moment on the country's bicentennial. Afrocentric figures from history to modern day were integral to the making of America, and the mural raises them to a prominent public position.

Where Atlanta's artists signed the mural, the intention of the Chicago project was to not single out any one creative type, as in Eurocentric "art for art's sake" mentality where artists sign their names. Instead, art of the BAM was meant to be communal, collective, and committed. The multidisciplinary arts aspects of OBAC and the BAM concepts of institution building in the black community were thus perpetuated by the creation of the Neighborhood Arts Center.⁶⁹

Riddle understood the impermanence of art so murals were for him but a season.

He stated,

. . . Nothing is permanent in the world, so art shouldn't be considered as permanent either. It might last four hundred years, a thousand years, two thousand years, or as old as cave paintings. But, eventually, there won't be any. So I never think of it like that. I mean, if you put some murals on a wall, you know that wall isn't going to stay up forever. When the wall goes, the art goes. That's just the way it is.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ "Auburn Murals to Depict Black History," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 15, 1976, 3. Inner City Corp., a non-profit group funded to lay out a plan to redevelop Auburn and Hunter Street, commissioned the murals. Riddle taught art in Los Angeles, prior to joining the NAC in March of 1976. He spoke of there being a second mural designed to share Auburn Avenue's story in four parts. One mural was to be boarded with consecutive black hands passing money, the rhetoric was that money should remain in the black community. Riddle felt that money was being passed from whites to blacks, but it did not stay in black hands. The researcher was not able to find evidence that the mural was ever done.

⁷⁰ Karen Anne Mason, interview with John Riddle on June 26, 1993, "African-American Artists in Los Angeles" (California: University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), 166.

While Chicago's *Wall* was damaged by fire to the building and the structure demolished in 1971, adding to its urban wall legend status, the Atlanta mural was unceremoniously whitewashed in 2007 due to the gentrification of Auburn Avenue.⁷¹

There were additional NAC murals on Auburn Avenue, around the city, and in local schools. David Hammons, Ashanti and Truman Johnson, and Steve Seaburg worked together on the mural, titled *Black is Art, Music, Light, Since the Beginning*, 1978 (see fig. 6.11), that graced the primary entrance of the Peter James Bryant building. Riddle created the phrase "Black is art, music, light, since the beginning," painted on the building underneath the mural.⁷² Eaton recalls, "They laid [the mural] out on the floor. They worked on it that way, and they got in a big physical fight . . . [We] had to call the police."⁷³ So even in collaboration, there were artistic struggles.

From top to bottom, the imagery is harmonious. The Kemetic sky and earth gods, Nut and Geb, are female and male complements, respectively, in the belief system. They are twins/spouses and parents of Ausar, Auset, Set, Nebt-het, and Heru-ur.⁷⁴ Nut's feminine body arches over Geb with her hands and feet touching the ground line, thought to be the four cardinal points of the horizon. She is believed to swallow the sun each

⁷¹ Isaac, "Whitewashing Black History," *Solidarity*, May 11, 2008, <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/1490> (accessed December 22, 2011). The Atlanta mural was purposely defaced some time in 2007.

⁷² Alexander's annotations to image #22 "John Riddle and several other artists created the Mural at the Formwalt Street," *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander's Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library Information*, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/anac_information.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

⁷³ Eaton, Molette-Eaton interview with author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 43A.

⁷⁴ The names of gods were changed to more commonly used Greek translations (respectively Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephtys and Horus the Elder). Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. revised (Oxford: Published on behalf of the Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University Press 1964).

night causing darkness; it passes through her body as she gives birth to it as a new day, in the morning sun on the horizon. In the NAC's rendering, the gods both wear white garments, but Nut is typically portrayed nude with stars on her body. The celestial figures look downward directing the viewer to the next scene of the mural.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 6.11. NAC Mural Team, *Black is Art, Music, Light, Since the Beginning*, 1978

In the mural's center scene, a male African drummer holds his instrument as his hands appear to beat out sounds. The female dancer in red is opposite him, a colorful solar burst separating the two. The final, lower scene depicts a seated female wearing a yellow hooded garment with her arms outstretched from her sides suggesting wings with drapery folds. She cradles a nude black child in her lap, expressive of the mother and child iconography prevalent in many cultures. The triptych of female and male principles is balanced by decorative floral, lotus-type elements in the four corners and repeated semicircles patterns framing the images. The green ground color, synonymous with life

and grass graced with repeating triangular pyramids also unifies the Afrocentric iconography.

Lastly, the words painted on the building under the mural, “art, music, light since the beginning,” further share the meaning of the artists’ visual rhetoric. The Kemetic and African elements reference “since the beginning,” where Western art takes its inspiration but does not often credit its source. The drummer and dancer refer to “music,” and the mother and child imagery, her yellow clothing, and the solar sphere all connote “light.” Where the visual artists’ method of collaboration was less than harmonious, none of the creative strife emanates from the harmonious finished product. From Riddle’s sculptures to his work on murals, his iconography encapsulated and perpetuated the Black Arts Movement tenet of “Art for People’s Sake” by “raising black consciousness.”

Riddle’s work in printmaking, a skill he developed at the NAC as Michael Simanga referenced earlier, was no exception to his conceptual demand to raise consciousness. Interestingly though, Riddle spoke of the individuality present with Atlanta artists, and shared this experience about learning printmaking:

. . . Lev Mills was the classic. I asked him to show me how to silk-screen, and he said, “I don’t have time to show you how to silk-screen.” So I went and learned it somewhere else. But if somebody had asked me and I had the knowledge, I would have said, “Yeah, come on by and the next time I screen, I’ll let you sit in and you can check it out.”⁷⁵

While Mills, noted in the historical context for creating the poster for Mayor’s Day, did not share his knowledge of printmaking with Riddle. As a Black Arts Movement artist,

⁷⁵ Karen Anne Mason, interview with John Riddle on September 5, 1992, “African-American Artists in Los Angeles” (California: University of California, Los Angeles, 2000), transcript, 134-35.

Riddle exemplified a collective consciousness Bambara stressed, of giving back to the community that created you.

The Neighborhood Arts Center community continued to claim Riddle as their own when he received an exhibit in 1982 at the High Museum of Art, becoming one of the first local African-American talents to exhibit there. *Making Plans: Five Silkscreens by John Riddle* received coverage in the community papers as well as the mainstream *Atlanta Constitution*. The prints were displayed in the museum's South Lobby where they received this review from Peter Morrin, Curator of 20th Century art:

[Riddle] compositions, typically, place an emphasis on action through the use of flattened, silhouetted figures. Riddle's brilliant use of color and strong pictorial rhythms show the influence of contemporary black artist Jacob Lawrence, but Riddle also acknowledges debts of inspiration to Rembrandt's light, Van Gogh's emotion, Impressionist color, the composition of Japanese woodblock prints, and the social commentary of Ben Shahn.⁷⁶

Riddle shared that the primary purpose for his art was "raising Black consciousness." Included in the exhibit was Riddle's *Harriet Tubman Carrying Out the Plan*. His art was said to use African and American folk myths, as well as making reference to African-American historical figures and events.⁷⁷

The creative energy that was the NAC also allowed for collaborative ventures, such as photographer Alexander joining with Riddle on another silk screen print titled *The Ballot, or Cast Down Your Bucket*, 1986. Several of Alexander's documentary photographs from *Spirits/Martyrs/Heroes* were used as the basis of this political work.

⁷⁶ "Silkscreens by Riddle Exhibited at Museum," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 16, 1982, 3.

⁷⁷ Ozeil Fryer Woolcock, "Social Swirl," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 12, 1982, 3.

The Bucket Brigade was Mayor Jackson's organization to continue mobilizing black voters. The two artists came up with the piece as a limited edition fundraiser. Some of the images were from the effort to make King's birthday a national holiday, the first African-American artist for the military, and African Liberation Day Rally.

Riddle added to the historical consciousness of the piece, first by screening all the names of black legislators at the time of Reconstruction, listed by state, and second with the work's title referencing an important part of Booker T. Washington's 1895 speech labeled "The Atlanta Compromise." Riddle's prints exemplify refinements of his black aesthetics over time during this transitional period, constantly building on knowledge and incorporating this knowledge into new works to elevate the community's consciousness. In a memorial article, Eric Hanks, owner of M. Hanks Gallery in Santa Monica, shared, "[Riddle] understood that for black people, it's important to embrace all of our experiences in the past and not sweep everything under the rug."⁷⁸ The visual arts findings support that the Neighborhood Arts Center fulfilled its specific mission to elevate the social and political consciousness of black people.

As with visual artists, the findings on the discipline of dance reveal similar allegiance to black aesthetics. In 1977, Taylor's performances were described as offering the "roots" of dance infused with the black aesthetic, ranging from the continent of Africa, ragtime and the St. Louis Blues, to the Bessie Smith story.⁷⁹ The dancers were regularly accompanied by NAC musicians playing African rhythms and often wearing

⁷⁸ Tina Dirmann, "Artist-Teacher Turned Trash Into Treasure," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2002. <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/apr/08/local/me-riddle8> (accessed February 19, 2012).

⁷⁹ "Fred Taylor Co. to give 'Roots' of Dance Show," *Atlanta Daily World*, June 26, 1977, 3.

colorful costumes under Taylor's direction, inspired by the innovative Katherine Dunham style of dance. Peggy Ludaway, a dancer with Taylor, remembered being the seamstress for the group.⁸⁰

The African Dance Ensemble was another resident dance troupe following Taylor's that benefited from the place and space created by the NAC. The group, directed by native Ghanaian King Farouk Brimah, consisted of seven female dancers and eight male drummers. As cultural ambassadors of a sort, performances were usually free, and African dance classes were also made available for free to the community as was the case with their predecessor.

Two HBCU graduates, Jackie Reese and Chandra Prue, took classes at the NAC and shortly thereafter joined the African Dance Ensemble. In a 1979 article, Reese, an engineering data clerk, said this of the experience:

I enjoy dancing because I'm able to express my personal feelings through the dance because each dancer has a different style, even when they're all dancing to the same music. I especially like African dancing because that's my heritage; it seems more natural to me. . . . By natural, I don't mean easy. It requires a lot of discipline because African dancing is about the isolation of different parts of your body. One part of your body is doing one thing while another part is doing something else. You can't do that without discipline.⁸¹

Prue, the second student, added that "audiences don't understand the spiritual expression or the physical event that can be translated into dance."⁸²

⁸⁰ Peggy Ludaway, Eaton et al. interview by author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, transcript, 9.

⁸¹ "Two A&T Long Liners Join Dance Ensemble," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 18, 1979, 6. The article included a photograph of the women.

⁸² Ibid.

Both dancers felt they were there as teachers more than as performers. Their performances incorporated “Art for People’s Sake” because they shared with audiences’ knowledge of African and Caribbean cultures and included a history of each dance, the country from which it originated, and a description of the costumes. The NAC helped the community as well with its cross-generational atmosphere because women brought their children to dance classes and performances. The college students said that their daughters got excited, told their friends, and then friends wanted to be taught by the girls’ mothers.⁸³

The African Dance Ensemble performed that June to “a standing-room-only crowd” at the NAC, described by Clark as “one of the strongest cultural centers in the city.” The program included African and Afro-Caribbean dance. “Fuga” was a welcome dance from Liberia attributed to the Kpelle people who performed in the television movie “Roots.” A “Stick Dance,” attributed to the Wall people of Senegal, was a ceremonial dance, and the “Limbo” was described as popular as always bringing crowds to their feet when a performer went under a burning stick less than a foot from the ground.⁸⁴

Fabian, one of the many versatile artists at the NAC and principal African Dance Ensemble dancer, is pictured in one of Alexander’s photographs, titled *Limbo Stick*, 1980 (see fig. 6.12). Fabian was a NAC staff member, a dancer, and a talented steel drum player. Clark shared that NAC’s artists told the audience that the Limbo was brought from Africa to the West Indies, where it was originally a dance of honor. Fabian

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Rozell Clark, “Entertainment Tidbits,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 19, 1980, 6.

explained in the interview, “The West Indian slaves, caught performing it in the woods, were punished with their own creative art by being made to perform it before crowds at the cracks of whips from their white slave masters.”⁸⁵ By sharing their dance knowledge of African history, the NAC’s “Art for People’s Sake” motto is embodied in their choreography.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1980]

Figure 6.12. Jim Alexander, *Limbo Stick*, 1980

Photography was another medium the Neighborhood Arts Center used in fulfillment of its motto. The winter exhibit in February 1979 titled *Spirits/Martyrs/Heroes* was a show, for Black History Month, of Jim Alexander’s body of work. Alexander was director of the NAC’s professional training program in photography, and an article gave him the title “photojournalist of the Black experience.” He was noted in an *ADW* article for traveling over 500,000 miles, since 1968, photographing marches, rallies, conferences, meetings, and more: “From stark photos of antiwar demonstrations and

⁸⁵ Fabian in Clark, “Entertainment Tidbits,” *Atlanta Daily World*, June 19, 1980, 6.

panther rallies of the sixties to the most recent confrontation with the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi, the collection speaks with an authority and authenticity that is characteristic of Alexander.”⁸⁶

Alexander explains how he got into documentary photography as follows:

My documentary photography started because when Dr. King was assassinated in 1968, I was the general manager of a newspaper delivery service and then I did a little photography on the side in my community and when the newspapers came in that morning from the different cities, I was looking at the various photographs that they had that were related to Dr. King and the photographs there that they had—no photographs of him as a minister, as a husband, as a father. There were photographs of the people throwing bricks at them and the hosing of the people and all those types of things so I got really mad. I called one of the people at the *New York Times* and asked them. These pictures don't give a true picture of who Dr. King was. The movement was the movement and Dr. King was Dr. King. The guy told me, 'Well Jim, I'm going to tell you the truth. These were all the pictures that we had of him. You know the nature of what we do.' And so my thought right then was well if they don't have any positive pictures of black people then I'll shoot them myself. I'll shoot us from a positive perspective and that's how I got into documentary photography.⁸⁷

Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement had profound influences on many artists, directly and indirectly. They sparked Alexander's documentary passion for portraying positive images of black people, and the NAC was a synergistic space for the energy he planned to initially capture.

Alexander was noted for turning down a potentially lucrative commercial career to become as he stated, “a political artist to teach and inform Black visual artists of the

⁸⁶ “Neighborhood Arts Center Sets Black History Month,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 21, 1979, 5.

⁸⁷ Alexander, interview with the author and CAU undergraduate student Kristin Phillips, Atlanta, GA, April 16, 2006, transcript, 4-5.

need to document and portray the Black experience from a positive perspective.”⁸⁸ Oral history research reveals how his *Spirits/Martyrs/Heroes* collection was actually influenced by a conversation with nationally-known photographer Gordon Parks:

It was either late 1969 or early 1970. I went to Gordon’s office at *Essence* magazine, and he and I were talking and I was telling him that I had decided that I wanted to do this documentary project on black people for ten years. He said that’s a good idea but you have to feed yourself so I said I’ll manage. I’ll do whatever. I said, “I can be a magazine photographer like you,” and he started talking about somebody who wanted him to do an exhibit. He said but he has to find a way to get the negatives to do the pictures. I said, “What do you mean find a way?” He said, “Well, all the things that they want to use [are] owned by *Life* magazine.” So he explained to me about why *Life* magazine had all of his negatives and right. Then and there I decided I wasn’t going to ever be a magazine photographer because if I was going to do a documentary project then I needed to own my own negatives and so that was the advice I got from Gordon. I went out and purchased this book called *Photography and the Law* and I read up on it and decided then and there that I would never work for any publication that I would just find another way to take care of myself and my kids and be a freelance photographer.⁸⁹

Always an activist, Alexander studied photography and the law, and set a new course in his career as a photojournalist documenting *Spirits/Martyrs/Heroes* and mentoring generations of culture workers. Even Michael Simanga’s thoughts on arts activism pointed to Alexander as an exemplar, “I think that’s the other part of it is that the willingness to, as an artist, to participate with other people who were not artists in continuing to try to make social change and I know Jim [Alexander] was there on almost

⁸⁸ “Neighborhood Arts Center Sets Black History Month,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 21, 1979, 5.

⁸⁹ Alexander, interview with the author and CAU undergraduate student Kristin Phillips, Atlanta, GA, April 16, 2006, transcript, 5.

every occasion we were there.”⁹⁰ Alexander’s idea created a body of work more than sixty years old and growing.

He used his group of aspiring adult documentary photographers, “The Photography Workshop,” to record a confrontation with the Klan in 1978. *Shooting Klansmen*, 1978 (see fig. 6.13), is as moving to look at now as it was to hear about the incident Alexander shared when it was captured. He explains how he got this shot:

What happened there was I [went to an] anti-Klan march in Tupelo, Mississippi in 1978, and we were photographing. After the march some people said there were some Klansmen down by the police station, so we went down there and we was shooting pictures, and we were shooting pictures of them there. Somebody else rode by . . . they added, “The Klan got a rally up by the police, up by the post office also yeah they . . . got the whole corner blocked up,” and this one guy was standing there. He said, ‘cause he and I were talking, we didn’t even exchange names, and he’s said, “I was going over there to cuss them out.” I said, “Well, I’m going to take your picture.” So we left everybody else there, and we went on up to where they were, and I had taken some of my students down.⁹¹

Alexander actually met with a lot of resistance from the board for engaging NAC students in protest activities, but he defended his activism because they were consenting adults, as seen between Alexander’s students and the Klan.

He continues to describe the experience:

[W]hen we went up there, I took pictures of him you know once we saw the Klan and I took pictures of him walking across the street and walking over there and then we went on over to where they were and he went on over, and he started cussing them out, and I started taking his picture and then this one guy who was supposed to be the security guard there at the post office, he’s standing out there with a security coat on and stuff, and

⁹⁰ Simanga, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, January 23, 2009, transcript, 13.

⁹¹ Alexander, interview with the author and CAU undergraduate student Kristin Phillips, Atlanta, GA, April 16, 2006, transcript, 7.

he came out where I was standing in the street and came out to tell me, “You’re not allowed to take pictures on federal property.” I said, “Well, I’m taking them and you gone be in them with the Klan.” He turned around and went back, but if you notice in that picture right there you see him walking towards me on this end and so I took a whole lot of pictures of one guy. Well, a couple of them had guns, one had a rifle, one had a pistol down in his pants. He pulled it up enough for me to see. I said, “Pull it all the way out. I got it on camera.” He pushed it back down in there. So that’s how that particular picture happened.⁹²

The photograph’s title is an ironic play on the word “shooting,” especially since cameras, not guns, are the weapons of choice. It is also interesting that several white photographers, closer to the described action, did not seem to be challenged to stop their documentation. As a result of his first hand experiences as a participant observer, Alexander influenced many with his socially conscious and politically challenging images in his arsenal.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 6.13. Jim Alexander, *Shooting Klansmen*, 1978

Many of the relationships developed at the NAC among artists still exist.

⁹² Ibid.

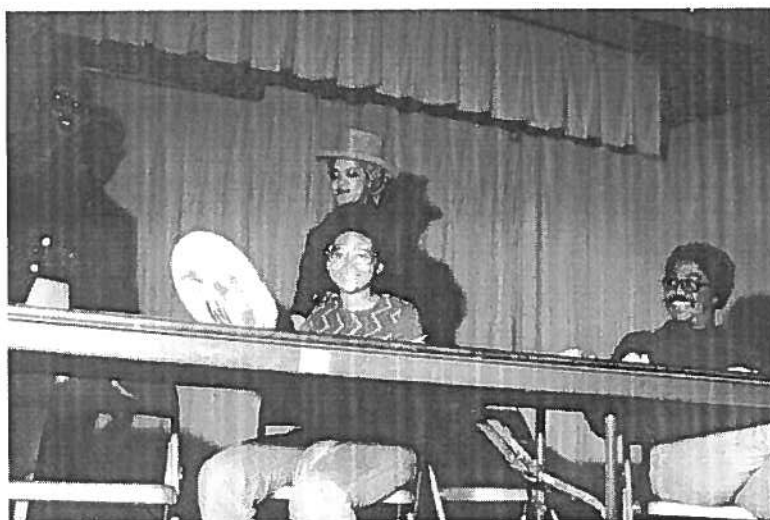
Alexander is called on by many to this day, as he continues to mentor artists “for People’s Sake.” He was influenced by the Civil Rights Movement, which gave cause to his life’s work. He came face-to-face with racism and used his art as a non-violent tactic, shooting with a camera and not a gun. His documentary commitment to raising social and political consciousness has left an historical collection worthy of chronicling. It enriched all of these research findings with the ability to visualize cultural politics and conceptual strands of the Black Arts Movement.

In the visual arts, black aesthetics took form in posters, murals, sculptures and prints. Dance choreography had an African expressivity, and photography documented black Africanness. Creative writing at the NAC was no exception. Poet Alice Lovelace organized the Southern Conference of African-American Writers (SCAAW) in 1978, with Toni Cade Bambara (in a hat) and Ebon Dooley. Dedicated to promoting the future of black writers, SCAAW met weekly, accepting memberships, and hosted several national conferences, between 1979 and 1981, using the NAC as its base.⁹³ Some of SCAAW’s writers (see fig. 6.14) captured by Alexander’s lens include Calvin Kenley, Lovelace, Bambara and Dooley.

As part of its inception, SCAAW planned the 1978 Writers’ Workshop, the first of its kind in the South, to be held at the NAC and the John Kennedy Community Center. Support from *First World* writers included Hoyt Fuller, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Jerry Ward, with Fuller, who was part of Chicago’s OBAC, as the keynote speaker.

⁹³ Greg Huskisson, “Black Writers Must Become ‘Long Distance Runners’,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 29, 1978, 3.

Other 1978 participants included: local poet and columnist for the *Atlanta Gazette*, Pearl Cleage Lomax, a columnist for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Chet Fuller, the Managing Editor of *Black Enterprise* magazine, Phil Petri, with NAC poets James Lee and Ebon Dooley. The aim of the conference was “to encourage the promotion of Black writers residing in the South.” Workshops included: “Beginnings: Developing the Writer,” “Dealing with Major Publishers,” “Independent Publishing: Problems and Advantages,” “The Writer and Community Institutions,” “Publishing in Atlanta,” and “The Writer’s Social Responsibility.”⁹⁴ These titles identify the issues black writers were facing, and the conference organizers’ plans to address them.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 6.14. Jim Alexander, *SCAAW*, 1978

Fuller’s keynote address to a capacity audience advocated a higher consciousness with respect to Africa, a focus of *First World* that was abandoned by its own black publisher. Fuller used the analogy of Black writers becoming “long distance runners”

⁹⁴ “Black Writers Plan Meet in City Friday,” *Atlanta Daily World*, vol. 51, no. 44, October 17, 1978, 1. Also see Portia Scott Brookins, “High School Beat,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 20, 1978, 3.

because their interests tend to fade over time and not finish what they started. In the mid 1960s and 1970s, if blacks wrote from their own experiences white publishers and editors traditionally would “edit and sometimes virtually destroy the content of a piece.”⁹⁵ Black Arts Movement writers at the conference were part of a continuum attempting to make changes and transition from the old ways Fuller described.

Fuller also pointed a finger of blame towards black writers who strove for autonomy, but in essence were getting degrees and being “busy trying to become equal to their white [sic] peers.”⁹⁶ He had harsh remarks for these blacks he termed “negroes,” and their selfish educational goals stating it has traditionally been to get them prepared to stand beside their Euroamerican peers. Educational attainment was a class distinction, particularly if it was not being used to uplift the “people” in “Art for People’s Sake.”

A new black aesthetic was emerging through divisive factions, some accepting of African vernacular, while traditional voices adhered to the King’s English. The term “negro,” among conscious minded, was an insult and synonymous with aligning with westernized, or European, aesthetics, a form of self-hatred. Many “negroes” did not support the new literature, such as Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972) discussed in the literature review, which promoted the new black consciousness. Dooley was among the featured artists in the work.

The Black Arts Movement did not have the support of the entire community, and Fuller felt the Renaissance died. He explained that the resultant circumstance was that

⁹⁵ Fuller in Greg Huskisson, “Black Writers Must Become ‘Long Distance Runners’,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 29, 1978, 3.

⁹⁶ Ibid. A number of black scholars left the academy though to work for community struggles.

Black writers returned to their old problem of how to get their works published, and he felt that the goals and dreams of blacks and Euroamericans were dissimilar: “Blacks must bend their visions to be more consistent with the visions of the editors and publishers.”⁹⁷ Fuller said that writers could not brood over the difficult situation: “A writer doesn’t complain about what he can or can’t do – he writes. He (she) reads, writes and researches, because if we want a particular kind of world, we’re going to have to create it.”⁹⁸ As a strong voice of the Black Arts Movement, Fuller captivated the NAC’s audiences by raising social and political consciousness among southern writers.

The Second Annual Regional Conference of SCAAW was held at Clark College in 1979 in cooperation with their Mass Communications Department. SCAAW President and conference coordinator Lovelace was quoted saying, “We have had an overwhelming response from area writers. In addition, the word has gotten out around the country and people are asking about it. Last year, 150 attended the event, and we are expecting over 300 this year.”⁹⁹

Continuing to attempt to address the issues of the day, the second conference was aimed at the difficulties black writers faced getting published and effectively distributed. SCAAW saw the ability to fill that void. Nine workshops were offered featuring local and out-of-town writers and those interested in the arts. A fundraising benefit for

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Lovelace in “Black Writers Plan Southern Conference,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 7, 1979, 3.

SCAAW and *First World* was also held on the opening night at the West Hunter Street Baptist Church with Haki Madhabuti (Don L. Lee), Mari Evans, and Toni Cade Bambara among the guests. The issues with the publishing industry were national, if not larger, making such a conference, headlined by Third World Press, a black publisher, and female writers who were able to be published by mainstream publishers, so important. “Art for People’s Sake” was about networking within the Black Arts Movement community.

Collaborative programs using music also increased black consciousness. As the NAC established itself over time on Georgia Avenue, Sundays became the preferred day of the week for house performances. “Serious Music for Serious Times” was the NAC’s Sunday Jazz Concert program during the summer of 1980. It was hosted by an Institute of the Black World (IBW) rally and multi-media “Teach-In” as part of the Sunday series.¹⁰⁰ The tribute to Dr. Walter Rodney, scholar and activist, and program detailed the African Diasporic struggles of the Caribbean.

Held in the auditorium of the NAC, the event was a “joint effort” of the IBW, SCAAW, and the NAC’s house band, the Life Force Ensemble. Some of the topics included “The New South,” “Jamestown,” “Crises of Black Leadership,” and “How Wrightsville and Miami Should be Viewed.” Wrightsville in 1980 was of particular note because J.B. Stoner openly spoke there at a Ku Klux Klan rally calling for the mass murder of Blacks. This was also the at height of Atlanta’s Missing and Murdered Children crisis. The program featured poets, musicians and independent film makers. Its purpose was “to address social and economic issues as only serious people can. The

¹⁰⁰“‘Teach-In’ set at Institute of the Black World,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 18, 1980, 3.

Ensemble introduced compositions written to concur with the topics and related to the mood of the speakers.”¹⁰¹

The multi-arts facility capitalized on the BAM’s “Art for People’s Sake” motto of changing minds, and of being conscious, functional, and committed. By using a classical black music form such as jazz, crowds were brought in and not disappointed. There was dialogue about historic figures of the African Diaspora and expanding the consciousness of Atlanta audiences. Even when the CETA funds expired, Glenda McGee-Philips, as director for the NAC, expresses the NAC’s “Art for People’s Sake” motto remained a constant thread throughout:

Expose the artist, create artists, get people interested in the arts, getting people to *participate*, . . . really getting the community, the local community, involved in some of the programs and classes that we provided, and basically try to showcase the opportunities of the artists . . . Our thing was always being able to make the arts *happen* for people’s sake.¹⁰²

Programming at the NAC, whether dance or music, visual arts, creative writing, or theater, or some combination of all of the above, perpetuated their “Art for People’s Sake” motto.

Theme V – Summary and Analysis Social and Political Consciousness

There were multitudes of findings around the theme of elevating social and political consciousness. Jennings’ quote that “all of us were going through transitions” characterized the spirit of black aesthetics present during the Black Arts Movement. The

¹⁰¹ “Neighborhood Arts Center Offers Jazz,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 25, 1980, 3.

¹⁰² Phone interview with the Author. Glenda McGee Philips, June 5, 2010. transcript, 10; McGee Philips’ emphasis.

movement of the mind from the margins to the center of Afrocentricity is a framing concept of this research, and here in the fifth theme it prevails. From Toni Cade Bambara impressing that artists “owe” their communities, to Fred Taylor’s Dance Theatre and the African Dance Ensemble enthusiastically paying their debts by sharing their knowledge on African dance technique and history, the goal of “Art for People’s Sake” was an awareness of self. The placement of Africa at the core, or “location centering,” is what the NAC’s motto did for artists, students, audience and board members.

Raising the consciousness of a community and the southern region, the Southern Conference of African-American Writers served the masses by offering keynote addresses by Hoyt Fuller on the African Diaspora and workshops on the nuts and bolts of getting published. As individual artists, John Riddle and Jim Alexander created a body of work that still raises the consciousness of the people, whether visiting Georgia’s State Capitol to see *Expelled Because of Color*, or attending an exhibit that includes *Shooting Klansmen*, audiences are brought into direct contact with African-American history.

Dooley says it best when asked of what he is most proud regarding the NAC’s programs:

Many [programs] were quite successful. To do that, to utilize resources at hand, to develop cultural institutions within neighborhoods and communities that had traditionally been looked upon as being incapable of doing these various things . . . that’s what I’m most proud of. Is what we were able to accomplish with what we had and provided a platform for the flowers in the community to bloom and reveal themselves.¹⁰³

There were five thematic areas that the NAC program findings: 1) The NAC provided juxtaposition between the individual and the community; local and national; 2)

¹⁰³ Ebon Dooley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, 13.

The NAC reached out and extended the arts to the masses, rather than just an emphasis on the black middle class and white supporters; 3) The NAC was distinctive in space and location; 4) The NAC seemed to provide more opportunities for women artists than other BAM organizations; and 5) The NAC has a specific mission to elevate the social and political consciousness of black people. The Neighborhood Arts Center was a platform for the flowers, the people in the community, to come to a cultural center that located African Diaporic consciousness, not at the margins, but center stage in its programming.

“Art for People’s Sake” was more than a motto at the NAC. The reciprocity that existed was a fundamental principle of the BAM. It was a mission engrained in every program. The cultural workers’ art relied on the community, and the community depended on the NAC to provide a place where cross pollination could take place. The spirit of the NAC encouraged high productivity as exemplified in the artists’ work ethic and black consciousness was present in their aesthetic multidisciplinary products, whether they were dance, music, creative writing, theater, or visual arts. There was never a more accurate statement of the Neighborhood Arts Center’s programs than “our art itself was our activism.” It was all “Art for People’s Sake,” and thus continued the impact of the Black Arts Movement well into the 1980s.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS: ATLANTA CULTURAL POLITICS

In 1977, Mayor Maynard Jackson said, “The ARTS are the very highest expression of urban life; and the cultural enrichment that is possible in an urban setting is the highest and most eloquent justification of the city itself; the ARTS and the city are inseparable.”¹ A year later, in 1978, he stated, “The ARTS represent the vitality and, perhaps the very identity of the city itself.”² More than thirty years later, in 2010, former Mayor Shirley Franklin shares of the same earlier time period: “We were looking for a way to be a catalyst.”³ Jackson’s statement on the inseparability of the city and the arts and Franklin’s comment both show examples of the city’s hopes that the arts would “be a catalyst” for many changes in Atlanta in the 1970s and 1980s and foreshadow what was to become a union of art and cultural politics. In this chapter, the following findings collected from oral history interviews and archival resources provide insight into the second research inquiry: how did Atlanta’s cultural politics enable the Neighborhood Arts Center to become a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement? These

¹ Maynard Jackson, Letter to Secretary Patricia Harris, “Livable Cities—The Corner Stone of the Urban Policy,” November 4, 1977, 3. See “The Taxpayers’ Revolt and THE ARTS,” A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, 2 and 10, fn. 6 in “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [1 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Box 47.

² “Cover Letter, 1978, September 20,” in “The Taxpayers’ Revolt and THE ARTS,” A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [1 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Box 47, ii.

³ Shirley Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2010, 17.

findings have been organized in three thematic areas: politics, race, and class. The first will be addressed in this chapter, while last two will appear in the chapter seven.

These three theses are an effort to elaborate on the city's particular southern regional dynamics. Since this project is methodologically based in oral history, the voices of board members, artists, and students have been synthesized within each theme. While variations and discrepancies with archival materials have been noted, the conceptual principle of simultaneity of location, meaning that where art is produced has a great influence on the art itself, ties these themes together.

Politics

Considering the theme of politics, the findings are organized chronologically beginning with the creation of the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts in 1974. Next, the first Mayor's Day for the Arts and the politics of location will be presented. Lastly, the politics of funding the arts and paying for excellence will further enlighten this theme.

The Politics of Creation: The Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts

Several participants recalled the creation of the Neighborhood Arts Center and all of the political hurdles that had to be overcome before its creation. Oral histories, including Michael Lomax, Dr. Carlton Molette, the initial chairman of the Neighborhood Arts Center board, Shirley Franklin, Joseph Jennings, and John Eaton (former deputy director), all contributed to the full picture of visualizing the cultural politics of "our art was our activism" in Atlanta. Lomax was Mayor Jackson's director of research, having volunteered with his 1973 campaign and having made connections in the Atlanta

community from Lomax's ties with Morehouse College as an alumnus and then as a teacher at the Atlanta University Center (AUC). In 1974, Jackson pledged his administration "to the enhancement of the city's cultural life through active governmental support of the arts."⁴ According to Lomax, Jackson's commitment was reinforced when one of his aunts, Mattiwilda Dobbs, performed *Villa Lobos* with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (Atlanta Symphony Orchestra) at his Atlanta Civic Center mayoral inauguration. This was a notable development and significant to the history of the city as she had, up until 1962, refused to perform in the south because the audiences were segregated.⁵

Molette noted that Jackson's strong interest in the arts was derived from his family influences, noting that several of his aunts were involved in the performing arts. The accomplished opera singer, Mattiwilda Dobbs was an internationally renowned performer, and Millicent Dobbs Jordan, another aunt, served on Spelman College's theater faculty for many years, coincidentally teaching Molette's wife Barbara as a student. Dobbs Jordan was still at the school when the Molettes returned as faculty members in 1969. Speaking with authority on their relationship, Dr. Molette emphasizes,

Mattiwilda and "Millie" were very much in Maynard's consciousness before he became mayor about the significance of the arts in any civilized community, and he had talked about that during his campaign and had contacted several people who were considered leaders in the arts

⁴ Michael Lomax, "Neighborhood Multi-Purpose Arts Centers," Concept paper attached to memo from Lomax to Governing Board of the Neighborhood Multi-Purpose Arts Center, January 30, 1975, 1.

⁵"Mattiwilda Dobbs Janzon Biography," <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=1009> (accessed December 21, 2011). It was 1962 before Mattiwilda Dobbs performed in her hometown of Atlanta because of segregated audience requirements.

community at that point about the fact that he wanted to change the sort of perception of the arts in Atlanta once he became mayor.⁶

The “perception” he wanted to change was that the arts were not accessible to all Atlantans, particularly the economically disadvantaged.

Jackson was not long in office before a bi-racial art delegation visited Atlanta. According to several participants, the meeting that Aunt “Millie” initiated precipitated the creation of the Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts. Lomax recalls,

[T]here [was] interestingly a delegation that came to see Maynard right after he got elected. It was an interesting, bi-racial delegation. His aunt, Millicent Dobbs Jordan, was the African-American ring leader and actually got the meeting set up. But Robert Shaw came, the head of the Symphony; a guy named David Goldwasser, who was a businessman, Jewish community leader, but at the time was chair of the board of the Symphony; a guy named Joe Perrin who was head of the Art Department at Georgia State . . . and Millie was there. They asked Maynard to consider taking a leadership role in city government becoming supportive of the arts. And that might sound like that wasn’t such a big deal. It was still a very big deal for things to happen interracially in the community, given ’74, to say that they wanted the local government to take an active role in the cultural life of the community. And it wasn’t entirely embraced . . . There wasn’t this embrace of African-American leadership or necessarily the city taking an active role but Maynard agreed. [He] wasn’t sure how he was going to execute that, but he assigned me [Michael Lomax] the job.⁷

Government taking an active leadership role in the cultural life of the community was new to Atlanta.

Lomax remembered a visit to Seattle, Washington, a city distinct as a trailblazer in public arts at the time. He visited John Blaine, head of the Seattle Arts Council, which

⁶ Carlton Molette, Carlton Molette and John Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, transcript, 8A.

⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, transcript, 4.

supported a major festival called “Bumbershoot.”⁸ This western city incorporated the arts in urban design using one percent of the hotel tax for the arts, and they focused on individual artists.⁹ From this visit, Lomax came back with the ideas to create a Bureau of Cultural & International Affairs (BCIA) through the creative use of federal and city funding in addition to the creation of community arts centers, the Neighborhood Arts Center stood as a model for others that worked with individual artists.¹⁰

John Eaton recalled that author and playwright Pearl Cleage was Jackson’s press secretary at the time. Cleage was married to Lomax, whose position in the Mayor’s office was funded by CETA. It was Lomax’s idea, according to Eaton, that Jackson go forward with an arts initiative. Eaton remembered that Lomax met with Rob Rivers, another CETA employee and graduate of Georgia Institute of Technology who worked in the Water Department/Architecture Department, and these ideas were often discussed in the cafeteria of City Hall. Lomax took their ideas to Jackson, and together they began to assemble the Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts which made community-advised recommendations to the Mayor.¹¹

Molette remembered that Millicent Dobbs Jordan stayed in the background but

⁸ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, 5. See <http://bumbershoot.org/history/> (accessed July 31, 2011). “Bumbershoot,” another name for umbrella, started in 1971 as an art and music festival called “Mayor’s Art Festival” in hopes of boosting the local economy after the National Endowment for the Arts collapse of the Boeing Corporation.

⁹ Under “Seattle Arts Commission, Part 1, ‘For Art: 1 percent’,” http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&file_id=9684 (accessed December 21, 2011).

¹⁰ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, 5–6.

¹¹ Eaton, Carlton Molette and John Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, transcript, 7B-8A.

was nonetheless very instrumental in the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee. “She was working hard to get things done but never took any public credit for it because at the time the local news media . . . had a sort of cronyism watch going on.”¹² Molette’s memory of the events corroborated those of Lomax. Eaton added that Dobbs Jordan later joined the board of the Neighborhood Arts Center, and he remembered her as a key figure committed to the success of arts in Atlanta.

The Atlanta University Center, a major education consortium representing Atlanta’s middle-class African-American community, played a significant part in the development of the arts. Morehouse College’s Wendall Whalum and Georgia Allen, who was a noted actress affiliated with the Atlanta University Summer Theater, were highly influential.¹³ Shirley Franklin, a graduate of Spelman College and a colleague of Lomax for ten years dating back to Atlanta University, chaired the Mayor’s arts committee. She recalled being a housewife married to David Franklin, an entertainment lawyer, and having young children at the time. She became the board chair for the Advisory Committee to the City of Atlanta’s BCIA and vice-chair of the City’s Grant Committee.¹⁴ “One of the platform issues,” Franklin recalls “was working spaces and living spaces for working artists.”¹⁵ Joe Jennings, who taught jazz music at Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University), was another African-American on the biracial committee. Molette,

¹² Molette, Carlton Molette and John Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 4B-5.

¹³ Ibid., 6. Allen played the octogenarian in Tyler Perry’s *Madeia’s Family Reunion*.

¹⁴ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2010, transcript, 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

representing Spelman College's theater interest, was also present.

Getting the old guard arts organizations of the city on the Ad Hoc Committee was acknowledged to be an integral part of the cultural politics of making the group work. In addition to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Georgia State University's Joe Perrin, Ouida Canady was included because she had established a visual arts school in the suburb of Decatur. Susan Hunter, wife of Woody Hunter, then dean of Emory Law School, directed Dance Atlanta, served with the Mayor's committee, and ultimately joined the Neighborhood Arts Center's board.

Franklin remembered that Gudmund Vigtel, director of the High Museum of Art, and Vincent Anthony, who founded and directed the Center for Puppetry Arts, were also among the first thirty people convened. The committee eventually grew to some sixty people who represented a cross section of the arts stakeholders in discussions with Mayor Jackson, the city council, and the broader community. The two groups, one white and one black, were very influential politically. Some of the Mayor's original Ad Hoc Committee became Neighborhood Arts Center board members, but Molette reiterates that others were put on the board for political reasons "to make the thing work, because if it had not been a broadly based board, [the Neighborhood Arts Center] would have failed."¹⁶

The local political climate of the day was that the city's major institutions, the High Museum of Art, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and the Alliance Theater, all part of the Memorial Arts Center (now the Woodruff Arts Center), were line items in the city's budget receiving designated funding. This type of financial status quo left other arts

¹⁶ Molette, Carlton Molette and John Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 19A.

(individual artists and grassroots organizations) and communities lacking. Jennings remembers the need to help the “grassroots arts community,” or black community, this way:

[Jackson] formed this committee and we debated issues, some of the best ways to service what he called “the grassroots arts community,” and I always thought that the grassroots focus was Black arts. I mean trying to bring parity because you had all these organizations [in the] Woodruff Arts Center getting tax dollars and supporting their arts forms. The Symphony was getting money. The Arts Center was getting money, but no money was coming to the black community. . . I think this was grassroots, was one way to say . . . help these other folk out here who are struggling and their arts are as meaningful as others.¹⁷

So the AUC Ad Hoc Committee members hoped to bring parity to grassroots arts in the city.

Molette remembered Ted Mastroinni, a New York transplant to Atlanta, as another instrumental figure in city government helping the Ad Hoc Committee to function. Mastroinni was formally part of the New York Mayor John V. Lindsay’s administration (1966-1973), and came south as Atlanta’s Director/Commissioner of Parks, Libraries and Cultural Affairs.¹⁸ Molette remembers him for being an excellent community organizer: “[Mastroinni] could bring a group of diverse people into a room and get them into an agenda and move forward.”¹⁹ Molette shared that the first group of people brought together represented two divergent groups that were not accustomed to working with each other. By the end of that meeting, a “we’ve got to get this done”

¹⁷ Joe Jennings, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 3, 2010, transcript, 4.

¹⁸ See www.allusa.com/classmates/autobiographies/MASTROINNIted.htm (accessed July 31, 2011).

¹⁹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, transcript, 17A.

sentiment emerged, according to Molette, and Mastroinni had moved them past the old suspicions and issues about “why, way back when, someone was keeping the other from getting things done.”²⁰

Lomax recalls that the committee was charged with determining, “What would the blueprint be for the city’s engagement in the arts?”²¹ The Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee had several initiatives, including: 1) increased grants programs, 2) neighborhood arts centers, and 3) community outreach for existing major institutions. Franklin shares that the Neighborhood Arts Center initiative “was thought to be a way to institutionalize the engagement of local community grassroots people in understanding the arts whether they were going to be artists or not, but also to just expand their horizons.”²² Lomax’s remembrances of a new arts blueprint for Atlanta materialized into what Franklin foresaw. These imperatives made racially balanced representation necessary.

Lomax and Rivers added details to the Mayor’s concept for the arts. According to Molette, “It’s easy to say ‘we’re gonna make the arts better,’ but those two guys got together and started identifying a place where the Symphony could give a free concert outdoors [and] downtown, for example.” There were also negotiations with the Musician’s Union and the Symphony’s administration to create an environment in which they were willing to give concerts. Molette remembered that GSU’s park at Hurt Plaza was selected because its beautiful white marble retaining wall was acoustically

²⁰ Ibid., 17B-18A.

²¹ Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, transcript, 5.

²² Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, February 15, 2010, transcript, 17.

appealing.²³ Maneuvering through Atlanta's cultural politics was difficult at best but necessary. The scouting done by the biracial duo of Lomax and Rivers became the basis for "Mayor's Day for the Arts," inspired by Lomax's Seattle visit.

The two communities came together for "The Mayor's Day for the Arts on May 9, 1975. Molette's remembers, "All sorts of artsy things [were] going on that day."²⁴ Mayor Jackson spoke to a forum on media and the arts to open the inaugural festivities.²⁵ "*Art for the People* is a major goal of my administration and this day is one step in that direction." The event was positioned at the intersections of Central City Park, Hurt Park, and Edgewood Avenue in the heart of Atlanta's central business district. It was an effort to bring citizens back to the downtown district after work hours. Jackson's purpose of Mayor's Day was to "turn over [the park area] to artists of all kinds so that they [could] demonstrate and perform their art with and for the people of Atlanta."²⁶ Not only major institutions, but multiracial, grassroots arts organizations were on the city's streets.

Jackson impressed upon the media that it was one thing to look around and enjoy sculpture on the streets, artists performing, and artwork on the walls, but quite another to commit to paying for it. He said, "Art was not a frill to be put on the back burner while the city deals with 'other problems'." His commitment was to find the resources

²³ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, transcript, 9A.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Forum on Media and the Arts, 1975, May 9," "Speeches Subseries," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center Special Collection, Box 7, 1.

²⁶ "Mayor's Day, 1975, April 24," "Speeches Subseries," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center Special Collection, Box 7, 1.

necessary to regard the city as a “regional cultural center.” Mayor’s Day was embraced for its utilitarian social value of bringing citizens back to the downtown area, revitalizing the city, and increasing citizen involvement. It thus combined two of his administration’s goals, cultural activity and citizen participation.²⁷

Clark College art faculty member Lev Mills supported Jackson’s project by designing the original Mayor’s Day poster. Jackson explained the artist’s importance:

[Mills’] work hangs in the National Library of Scotland, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Library of Congress and the High Museum. Mr. Mills’ willingness to translate his art into poster form is one indication of the enthusiastic support of the Mayor’s Day among members of the City’s arts community.²⁸

Mills’ participation was also another instance of AUC involvement with the Mayor’s Office.

The group of concerned citizens that planned and initiated Mayor’s Day was wide-ranging. Commissioner Hope Moore, whose Department was involved with the total effort; Lomax as Director of the BCIA, Franklin, Chairperson responsible for the entire Mayor’s Day project; and Rob Rivers as Program Coordinator for Mayor’s Day.²⁹ Key figures to the memory of interview participants were thus corroborated by archival records.

While Molette said “artsy things [were] going on,” Lomax describes the day as a

²⁷ Ibid., Box 7, 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 1-2.

²⁹ “Forum on Media and the Arts, 1975, May 9,” “Speeches Subseries,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center Special Collection, Box 7, 1.

“ragtag parade” of sorts because he felt it had a “make-it-up-as-you-go-along quality.”³⁰ Sidney Poitier and Bill Cosby happened to be on location in Atlanta shooting the movie *Let’s Do It Again* (1975) and they accepted invitations to appear in the parade. Performances were held on makeshift stages, and Lomax remembered “both white and black organizations” were represented. Franklin’s memory of the event was that Jim Alexander took a picture of her with the Poitier and Cosby on the steps of City Hall.³¹ Humored, Lomax shares that today’s movie star Samuel L. Jackson and wife LaTanya Richardson Jackson performed pantomime on a downtown street corner as representatives of the Neighborhood Arts Center.³²

Molette’s summarizes that “a lot of very important, but very small, quiet breakthrough moments” occurred while serving on the Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts.³³ Mayor’s Day achieved its objectives, and Jackson’s commitment showed that there could be positive incremental changes to cultural politics through the arts. Lomax states, “It was one of the few spaces in the city where black and white came together because artists were always marginalized. Black people were marginalized, so that the two communities came together.”³⁴ By degrees, forming a biracial advisory committee and presenting the arts on the streets for people’s sake became Atlanta’s brand of cultural politics.

³⁰ Lomax, interview with the author, 5.

³¹ Franklin, interview with the author, 16.

³² Lomax, interview with the author, 6.

³³ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, 10A.

³⁴ Lomax, interview with the author, 5.

The Politics of Location: Creating Community Arts Centers

The second charge of the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts was to create community arts centers, and the concept of a multi-purpose arts center was formally proposed on October 31, 1974 in a letter to the Mayor. Finding a location for the center became a decision fraught with political ramifications, particularly given Jackson's new Neighborhood Planning Unit (NPU) system. Many of the city's cultural anchors were on the northern, mostly white, side of town. Several members of the Ad Hoc Committee desired a black community presence. Franklin imparts,

I became particularly interested in opening a center on the Southside of town . . . [T]he Woodruff Arts Center played an anchor role on the northern side of the city and that on the Eastern side was the Nexus initiative . . . [I]t seemed that in order to have geographic bounds and also easy access to this center that we needed to have some geographic boundaries in the Southside.³⁵

Franklin remembered proposing the use of vacant school buildings and the search for a location ensued.

Molette recalled thinking that the big political hurdle he had to overcome for the Neighborhood Arts Center's creation was getting the Atlanta School Board to approve the use of a "mothballed" school building for the center's physical location. Benjamin E. Mays, former president of Morehouse College from 1940-1967, was Atlanta's school board chairman for twelve years, the first African American to hold the position.³⁶ Its board composition was also evenly composed along racial lines just as the Ad Hoc

³⁵ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, transcript, 2-3.

³⁶ For more information on Benjamin E. Mays, see Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).

Committee for the Arts. Molette said that Mays was able to get the motion approved to rent the facility for \$1 without its being an issue.³⁷

The Capital Avenue School in NPU-X was originally leased for the Neighborhood Arts Center, but arts administrators quickly found that the heating system was not repairable. Sandra Swanns, the first Neighborhood Arts Center director, and the board began working with community contacts to find a new location. It was Mrs. Rosa Burney, known as the “Mayor” of Pittsburgh/ Mechanicsville in NPU-V, who approached the Southside Daycare about the Neighborhood Arts Center’s use of the upper level spaces that were vacant in the old Peter James Bryant School. With all the children in the neighborhood, referred to by Alexander’s photograph as *The Neighborhood Arts Center Challenge*, 1979 (see fig. 7.1), it was an ideal, though challenging, location.

Whereas the school board’s approval was a non-issue, Molette remembered an issue emerged between him and the city’s legal department over the contract for janitorial services with the daycare because city authorities said he had no authority to sign on their behalf.³⁸ The Neighborhood Arts Center was a government entity initially and not yet a separate 501(c)3 organization. The Neighborhood Arts Center’s model of securing a mothballed building from the school board would become the formula for other grassroots art groups. Artists secured the Forest Avenue Elementary School for Nexus, which is now the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, and in 1978 the Spring Street School,

³⁷ Molette, interview with the author, 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 13-14.

formerly used by the Center for Puppetry Arts, were secured in a similar fashion.³⁹



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 7.1. Jim Alexander, *The Neighborhood Arts Center Challenge*, 1979

Another BCIA program that benefited the Neighborhood Arts Center was having arts organizations perform around the city and “in the community.” The BCIA sponsored an Atlanta Symphony Orchestra performance “for the first time on the Southside of town to all-black audiences,” Lomax says proudly. They staged them at John A. White Park in an African-American neighborhood. There were also performances in Central City Park (now Woodruff Park) in the downtown business district. Lomax shares they drew “very large, integrated crowds into the city because people were leaving the city.” All of these cultural events were politically motivated actions. In Lomax’s words, the concerts were efforts toward “making people comfortable coming back into the city.” The Atlanta

³⁹ “History,” <http://www.thecontemporary.org/about/history/> (accessed December 21, 2011).

Symphony Orchestra ultimately gravitated to the Piedmont Park where the majority community typically gathered.⁴⁰

The Neighborhood Arts Center's music program also performed around Atlanta with the BCIA's support, bringing art to the people but remaining true to its community by going into public housing projects and parks in the African-American community as well as Central City Park. Jennings remembered that the Neighborhood Arts Center's Mobile Jazz Atlanta program, discussed in the previous chapter, used its connections with the BCIA to secure venues run by the City's Parks and Recreation Department. The BCIA, working with both the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the Neighborhood Arts Center, demonstrated that cultural politics of Atlanta initially dictated making conscious attempts to perform for both racial audiences.

The BCIA also mobilized to make Mayor Jackson's desire come true to transform Atlanta into "the jazz capital of the world," a political link to tourism.⁴¹ The Neighborhood Arts Center facilitated his cultural agenda for promoting the city's art locally and nationally. By 1978, Franklin was director of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs (BCA, changed its name), and Lomax had moved on to become Commissioner of Parks and Recreation.

CETA workers from both the BCA and Neighborhood Arts Center approached Franklin about establishing an Atlanta jazz festival. "Gary [Wendell] and Sherman [Golden] were these twenty-year olds who convinced me to do a jazz festival," Franklin

⁴⁰ Lomax, interview with the author, 6.

⁴¹ Letter to Joe Jennings from Maynard Jackson, September 6, 1978. Personal Collection of the artist.

remembers. She continues, “They had me traipsing around New York asking million dollar talent,” and talent came to Atlanta for free “the first year.”⁴²

Mayor Jackson explained his commitment and connection to jazz for the City of Atlanta as follows:

Jazz is the only authentic American gift to the world of music. Jazz had its origins here in the south, growing out of the spiritual strivings of African-Americans as well as Americans with European backgrounds. Jazz perhaps more than any other music in America, reflects our rich culture – religions, feelings, social life, political moods, economic conditions and human aspirations.⁴³

Black art thrived with municipal government support. A jazz festival on “our rich culture” placed a unique spotlight on the value of black art.

The Neighborhood Arts Center, an integral part of Atlanta’s jazz scene, made a name for itself with its Afrocentric programming. The same people who supported the Neighborhood Arts Center were in favor of mounting the Atlanta Jazz Festival. Franklin remembers, it was a “good partnership.”⁴⁴ Jim Alexander, who has documented all thirty-two years of the Jazz festival since it began in 1978, remembers fondly that it is a mainstay for the city’s culture and tourism. The festival has grown over the years, and Alexander recalls,

[I]t wasn’t just the named people that [were] out in [Piedmont Park]. We had people all over the city out in the plazas and out in the streets,

⁴² Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, transcript, 19. Sherman Golden, Gary Wendell, Lamar Renford, Willis Barry, Balogi and Joe Jennings (Neighborhood Arts Center Music artist-in-residence) were the initial instigators. Some of these musicians had jazz shows locally on WCLK’s radio station and volunteered to make the festival a reality. See Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, 9-10.

⁴³ “Mayor Hosts Jazz Reception,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 19, 1978, 10.

⁴⁴ Franklin, interview with the author, 8.

different people with their groups. Whoever signed up and they had a group, they could sing or whatever. So it went on for a whole month. So now they actually use that name “Thirty Days of Jazz.”⁴⁵

Franklin and Alexander explained that the jazz festival “catalyst” also fueled the start of middle school jazz bands and competitions up to the collegiate level.

As a jazz musician in the community, Jennings benefited from the Atlanta Jazz Festival. A native of Natchez, Mississippi and schooled in musical performance at Southern University in Louisiana and at the University of Illinois in Chicago, he shared the mayor’s ambition for “jazz capital of the world” status but found the politics of Atlanta’s culture troubling. Jennings explained that in New Orleans, their festival concept was the promotion of local talent, whereas Atlanta’s was not. He felt having a local focus also aided New Orleans’ budget in not having huge transportation and boarding costs for outside artists.⁴⁶ Atlanta’s desire for international recognition ultimately got in the way of promoting local arts assets.

Atlanta’s Politics & Cultural Appeal

Franklin referred to the Neighborhood Arts Center as a “catalyst” in the earlier epigraph. Lomax saw it similarly, stating “[The Neighborhood Arts Center] was one of those foundation pieces that established Atlanta, not just as an artistic and cultural city, because that was part of what that delegation [Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee] had wanted the Mayor to do, but it became a city that was attractive and important for African-

⁴⁵ Alexander, interview with the author, 20.

⁴⁶ Jennings, interview with the author, 14.

American artists.”⁴⁷ The diverse cultural and artistic life of Atlanta that is a tourism draw for African Americans to the city thus started with the election of Maynard Jackson as mayor in 1973 and his administration’s initial commitment to arts initiatives in 1974.

Jackson’s commitment to the arts continued with this 1977 reference to the Neighborhood Arts Center:

[C]ity government has been able to make a real difference in the kind of cultural life all segments of this community enjoy. It has meant, for example, a greater variety of cultural activities that would not exist otherwise. It has meant that not only does the black artist and institution have, for the first time, a chance to survive and eventually prosper but so do the numerous white non-establishment artists and cultural institutions. It’s meant that cultural institutions which serve working class neighborhoods and public housing projects and which are obviously vulnerable to economic hazards are protected.⁴⁸

Locally, serving public housing projects and working class neighborhoods were integral to the Neighborhood Arts Center’s programmatic thrust. Jackson’s “non-establishment artists and . . . institutions” referred to grants to individual artist grants and institutions such as the Forest Avenue Consortium. The political significance of the Neighborhood Arts Center as a cultural institution in Atlanta was not only local; its impact was also national and international.

The Politics of Funding the Arts

The city received \$30 million from the Federal Government’s Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) to assist with funding as the hard economic times

⁴⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, 9.

⁴⁸ “1977, June 2, Associated Council of the Arts Annual Conference,” Maynard Jackson Collection, Speeches, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 12, 1-2. Jackson’s emphasis.

during the recession of the 1970s created significant unemployment. Molette worked with Lomax on the initial grant proposal that received the federal funding from CETA. The Neighborhood Arts Center received a portion of that funding, which paid for many jobs.⁴⁹ Eaton noted that staffing Jackson's new branch of government, the BCIA, happened as a result of CETA.⁵⁰

Lomax shares that Atlanta's portion of the tax was "for the promotion of tourism, and art and culture were considered part of the promotion of tourism."⁵¹ A hotel/motel tax, similar to Seattle's, was passed by the Georgia legislature awarding the city a portion of that revenue. Coupled with CETA funding, the state tax allowed the city to allocate public dollars to arts funding. With the creative use of federal and city funding, the hotel tax provided the BCIA with an operating budget, and CETA funds made it possible for the City of Atlanta to staff the new department.

The purpose of the BCIA, Lomax explains, was to "support artists, arts activities, and arts institutions, but it would also sort of help to give a sense of the creative vitality of the city."⁵² Visual artist Julia Fenton shares, "[When] the original Bureau of Cultural Affairs was started, one of the major things was to bring in artists and teach them how to write grants, how to access money from the federal government and other places and that

⁴⁹ Molette, interview with the author, 17B-18A. Molette also notes that Lomax and Tobe Johnson were integral to the AU Program Ford Foundation money that created the undergraduate and Master's African-American Studies Program.

⁵⁰ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, June 11, 2010, transcript, 9B.

⁵¹ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 5.

⁵² Ibid.

was probably one of the best services that they had.”⁵³

Lomax recalls,

We thought about a number of projects that would put artists to work on behalf of making the downtown livelier and attracting tourism was one thing, but also where arts and artists would have a positive impact on the community, and when you say “the community” you meant the black community.⁵⁴

Franklin remembers, “It was 1% for the arts that grew out of the same movement. That was really Maynard’s initiative. We were one of the early centers – cities with 1% for the arts. It’s primarily the visual arts and the city has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars.”⁵⁵ The one percent for the arts idea, borrowed from Seattle by Lomax, not only helped create a budget for the BCIA, it later created a presence for public art throughout the city. City officials hoped that municipal support for the arts would have a similar, albeit smaller scale, effect on the visibility of local artists as the New Deal Federal Writers Project of the 1930's, which nurtured some of the America's best known writers from obscurity.

Both Molette and Eaton remembered parks and the arts, such as Chastain Park, being part of Mayor Sam Massell’s administration, Jackson’s predecessor. Others spoke of the lean years for the arts prior to Jackson’s administration stating, “[B]efore Maynard Jackson became mayor, municipal support for the arts was virtually non-existent. There was no Bureau of Cultural Affairs; there were no public grants for artists or art

⁵³ Julia Fenton, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, April 27, 2010, transcript, 3.

⁵⁴ Lomax, interview with the author, 6.

⁵⁵ Franklin, Franklin and Alexander interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2010, transcript, 21.

organizations. There were no publicly funded performances, and the City did not buy works of art.”⁵⁶

Molette shares, “It wasn’t an integral part, because Chastain Park, for example, existed before somebody in city government was responsible for Chastain Park at a time when black folks didn’t go to Chastain Park.”⁵⁷ However, Jackson and the BCIA were thought to have taken the arts to the next level. Opinions in the archival records concur, “Jackson set a standard of public support for the arts which endures to this very day.”⁵⁸

Lomax strongly believed, and shared Jackson’s vision, that without government involvement in culture and cultural politics, Atlanta would not become the international city the administration envisioned. Lomax explains the “fertile foundation” of cultural politics started in the 1970s:

[T]he fact that government took a role and said that as it reinvigorates the artistic life of the community, it is going to have impact for African Americans as well. And so that when you think about Atlanta today, [what] you think about is a vibrant, artistic city, a vibrant cultural city with a powerhouse of entertainers, which is the commercial side of this, but a very respectable foundation of not-commercial artists, and that . . . fertile foundation for that, soil for that, a lot of that got started in the ’70s . . . there was stuff here before that, but I don’t think if the political had gotten involved⁵⁹

⁵⁶ “Fuster, A., Maynard Jackson and the Arts in Atlanta, 1989, February 17,” Jackson Mayoral Records—1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Speeches (Other), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 28, 1.

⁵⁷ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 9A-B.

⁵⁸ “Fuster, A., Maynard Jackson and the Arts in Atlanta, 1989, February 17,” Jackson Mayoral Records—1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Speeches (Other), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 28, 1.

⁵⁹ Lomax, interview with the author, 10.

Without Jackson's administration creating the BCA to direct arts funds, there would be no festivals, no public art, no airport art, and no community arts centers such as the Neighborhood Arts Center.

While these oral remembrances of Jackson share a glowing record of support and commitment to cultural politics, archival findings detail Atlanta's struggle for arts funding both locally and nationally. As a result of his local commitment, Jackson became known nationally as the "cultural mayor," and he did not take this title lightly. When he spoke at the Associated Council of the Arts Annual Conference in June of 1977, his introduction took a somewhat historical tone. He referenced the fact that government's support of the arts could be seen as early as the Great Depression and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, but admonished that public support should not just appear when economic times were hard and go away as the economy recovered.

The creation of the National Endowment for the Arts was noted by Jackson as "a turning point in the development of our national commitment to public support of the arts." His position was that not only should there exist public support for the arts, but the private sector should also recognize the potential of community investment in the arts. Jackson stressed, "Business will respond because the public which business serves wants and demands cultural enrichment. A business which attempts to go against deeply held public values runs the same risk as an elected official who does this."⁶⁰ Lomax believed little of Atlanta's cultural progress would have happened without Jackson at the helm: "[I]f there hadn't been a black mayor, if there hadn't been black politicians, if there

⁶⁰ "Associated Council of the Arts Annual Conference, 1977, June 2," Maynard Jackson Collection, Speeches, Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 12, 2-3.

hadn't been a black arts institution, none of [Atlanta's cultural progress] would have happened.”⁶¹

Jackson noted that in his past year as Chair of the Task Force on the Arts, he appreciated how arts organizations and individual artists used “alternative art spaces” (abandoned and sometimes deteriorating buildings) in urban centers such as Seattle, Buffalo, Portland, Chicago, and Atlanta that seemed to be close to the central business district.⁶² The Neighborhood Arts Center, the Atlanta Ballet, and the Forest Avenue Consortium were noted for using this model of transforming former school buildings into galleries, exhibition spaces, theatres, and performance, workshop, class room and studio spaces. The Neighborhood Arts Center's Fred Taylor Dance Theatre performed on the main stage for the conference, and the Life Force Jazz Combo with the Neighborhood Arts Center's Joe Jennings also entertained convention audiences.⁶³

Jackson created a national audience for Atlanta by promoting to other city mayors the arts' ability to attract people:

Now, people who have for so long regarded the central city as merely a commuter stop are seeing it as the cultural treasure chest that it really is. And those artists who were searching for space to work and to show their art have unwittingly created dynamic, effective, economic development tools to revitalize poor areas, making these inner city neighborhoods more

⁶¹ Lomax, interview with the author, 19.

⁶² “Speech by Mayor Maynard Jackson, USCM Arts Task Force, 1978, June 18,” in “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [2 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47, 5.

⁶³ Memo from Gail Centini to Cecelia Hunter, “RE: USCM – June 19 – Peachtree Center,” Bureau of Cultural Affairs Correspondence [Lomax Commissioner], June 9, 1978, Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47.

attractive and viable to commercial investors.⁶⁴

The experiment of using art and culture to boost local economies was successfully working with Jackson as its spokesperson and Atlanta and the Neighborhood Arts Center as a model.

Jackson took part in the 1978 National Endowment for the Arts and Ad Council's media campaign with the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM). His public service television announcement on the importance of the arts states:

In something as complex as a community, sometimes we don't see how much one part affects all the others. Take the ARTS, for example. You probably appreciate how the ARTS bring people together. And you already know how they open our minds to all kinds of new experiences. But the ARTS not only create beauty, they create jobs. Businesses prefer to locate in communities with a rich cultural life. Try to imagine your community with no music, no dance—no poetry, no theater—no sculpture, or painting. You have to imagine, eventually, industry and jobs gone, too. And, after that, the people. You enrich your community when you support the ARTS, and you have a good time doing it.⁶⁵

Connecting the arts with economic stimulus during recessive times was a brilliant political tactic.

Jackson stated to the Arts Task Force that the arts were seen as a “luxury” in urban planning and considered only “if anything was left over, we’ll do something about the arts.” The USCM, for Jackson, had to be the exception: “We [USCM Arts Task

⁶⁴ “Speech by Mayor Maynard Jackson, USCM Arts Task Force, 1978, June 18,” in “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [2 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Box 47, 6.

⁶⁵ Mayor Maynard Jackson, Ad Council/National Endowment for the Arts, T.V. Spot, National Endowment for the Arts 8160. In “The Taxpayers’ Revolt and THE ARTS,” A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, 9 and 11, fn. 30. See “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [1 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47. Jackson’s emphasis.

Force] . . . recognized early on that the arts are an effective tool in solving specific urban problems, in meeting basic city needs.” Atlanta was Jackson’s shining example of this exception. His report took pride in the BCA, which initially had a budget of \$40,000, but grew to \$400,000 in its second year of operations, the time of this speech, and anticipated potentially as much as \$1 million in material resources for arts activities in its third year.⁶⁶

Jackson’s strong commitment to the arts locally, and his national advocacy, demonstrated that his statements were not merely rhetoric and pressed other city leaders to do likewise because of his personal record of success in Atlanta with arts and politics. Speaking further, he confidentially espoused on the positive economic impact the arts could have on a city.

For Jackson, making culture support good government at the local level was just as important as President Carter’s administration supporting the arts through federal agencies and programs. Nationally, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Department of Labor and CETA, the Economic Development Administration, the Department of Housing, and the Department of Transportation stimulated the economy with arts support through cooperative design projects. Jackson’s beliefs carried out what the National Endowment for the Arts requested of its federal programs in the report entitled *Livable Cities*: “[E]very federal government program designed to aid the cities and their residents

⁶⁶ “Speech by Mayor Maynard Jackson, USCM Arts Task Force, 1978, June 18,” in “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [2 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47, 2.

should make systematic use of the arts in carrying out its purpose.”⁶⁷ Jackson felt that the urban city’s role should be “to complement these [federal] efforts on a municipal level and to encourage private investment and support of the arts in our own communities.”⁶⁸

Jackson also directed a paper, issued in 1978 and titled *The Taxpayer’s Revolt and THE ARTS*, in which he advocated that the arts were an investment that generated further revenues for cities, and not “an unnecessary, easily cut expenditure.” This public stance on the arts was spurred in part by the passing of Proposition 13 in California where a sixty percent budget cut to \$1.4 million dropped the state from twenty-second to forty-fourth nationwide for arts funding. This West Coast cut adversely affected the East as performances by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Chamber Orchestra, which had both scheduled at California colleges, were canceled as a result of these drastic political measures.⁶⁹

Jackson’s letter of introduction to the issue paper, addressed to all U.S. mayors, clearly noted that he was leading by example: “As a Mayor of a major urban center, I have strongly endorsed the use of the ARTS as a significant tool for the restoration and revitalization of the central city.”⁷⁰ Appealing to other city mayors, Jackson concluded,

⁶⁷ “Speech by Mayor Maynard Jackson, USCM Arts Task Force, 1978, June 18,” in “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [2 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47, 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Stephen J. Sansweet, “Proposition 13’s Impact on the ARTS,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 1978, 11. Also see “The Taxpayers’ Revolt and THE ARTS,” A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, 1 and 10, fn. 3.

⁷⁰ “Cover Letter, 1978, September 20,” in “The Taxpayers’ Revolt and THE ARTS,” A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978

[The ARTS] represent the vitality and, perhaps the very identity of the city itself. The ARTS show us who we are and where we are going, whether as a neighborhood, a city, or a nation. Taken in their totality, the ARTS—ambience, design, enrichment, and opportunity for expression—are more than an isolated set of events or activities. The ARTS are the essence of our civilization and our hope.⁷¹

His philosophy of the arts as “the essence of our civilization” reiterates his aunts’ early teachings.

The report showed that cutting funding for the arts to have an impact on two major factors of the urban social landscape, those being the immediate economic consequences and effects on the quality of life in a city. To counter these effects, the eleven-page report categorically detailed how cities might counter the assault.⁷² While the report elaborated on the many advantages the arts bring in the way of economics, the less quantifiable elements of quality of life for the people and the politician were duly noted.

Happy city hall faces could be achieved as follows:

[A] “good” city government demonstrates a sensitivity to ARTS and design in public places; it encourages performances at city facilities; it makes available to all people opportunities to experience the beauty of life. . . . America’s cities have begun to recognize, without a federal mandate, this necessity to expand the scope of their own traditionally restricted service delivery concerns to include the ARTS as an essential part of the local government ‘governance’ responsibility.⁷³

[1 of 7],” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47, ii.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The sections of the comprehensive report included: “A New Kind of Currency to Be Spent in Pursuit of a Sound Urban Economy,” “A Key to Future City Vitality and Competitiveness,” “A Uniquely Urban Industry,” “The Happy Face of City Hall,” “Helping Build Hope and Life . . . Neighborhood by Neighborhood.”

⁷³ “The Taxpayers’ Revolt and THE ARTS,” A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, 7. Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), “United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1977-1978 [1 of 7],” Box 47.

Jackson exemplified the belief that the arts improved quality of life with his administration's creation and support of the BCA. Art services delivered by the BCA and the Neighborhood Arts Center were important elements of "'good' city government," comparable to education, fire, and police services.

Lastly, to improve infrastructure and neighborhoods, the report highlighted,

[N]eighborhood ARTS programs have become a focus of neighborhood identity, neighborhood pride, and a sign, often the first step, of emerging neighborhood identity. . . . This frequently translates into the development of plazas, or facilities where community interchange can take place. It means encouraging cultural forms which are the authentic expression of individual communities."⁷⁴

Jackson's model was Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center and its many programs presented in chapter three. They allowed him to "walk the talk," exemplifying a city in which support for the arts had positive economic effects and improved the quality of life for the metropolitan area overall as well as at the neighborhood level.

Due in large part to Jackson's national "cultural mayor" personification, Atlanta and the Neighborhood Arts Center were even on the radar of the Office of the President of the United States. Jimmy Carter, former governor of Georgia, was president at the time Jackson served on the National Conference of Democratic Mayors. A visit from Vice President Walter Mondale's wife Joan to the Neighborhood Arts Center in 1978 was a grand occasion.⁷⁵ The City's First Lady Valerie Jackson, Neighborhood Arts Center

⁷⁴ "The Taxpayers' Revolt and THE ARTS," A U.S. Conference of Mayors Position Paper, 1978, 8.

⁷⁵ Joan Mondale visited the Neighborhood Arts Center on March 8, 1978.

Board representative BCA director Franklin, and many artists were present that day, and some vividly remembered that important occasion.

It was a rainy day and the Neighborhood Arts Center's roof leaked according to Eaton. Peggy Ludaway, the Neighborhood Arts Center's office manager and dancer for Fred Taylor, remembered with a chuckle that not everyone met security clearance. Available staff had to put out containers to catch the water, but that was of little importance. They recalled that Mrs. Mondale graciously stepped around the buckets without comment.⁷⁶ They may have been in the national consciousness, but admittedly there was room for improvement.

The Politics of Funding: Paying for Excellence in Atlanta

Franklin had to fight to maintain the Bureau's budget in 1979 and remind city leaders that if Atlanta was to remain competitive with other "sunbelt cities" for convention and tourism dollars, it would need to support the arts. Atlanta politics were not immune to the economic pressures against arts funding. In Franklin's *Culture and the Budget* report, she argued that cultural affairs made the city competitive and attractive to visitors and that the majority of funding for the BCA was from a local hotel-motel sales tax and not actually coming from taxpayers' pockets. She was well aware that the city was competing with Houston and Phoenix for convention and tourism dollars, and if all factors were equal, "the key element in this competition is the perception that business leaders have of the community's cultural resources." In order to win the competition, Franklin stressed to Jackson that there was indeed the need to keep funding BCA. Stating

⁷⁶ John Eaton and Peggy Ludaway, Eaton et al. interview with the author, transcript, 24.

public opinion in her end-of-the-year budget report, Franklin quipped, “Look, it’s difficult enough to find money to pay the police. Why is the city in the business of cultural affairs anyway?”, showing that she was well acquainted with the political fight for public dollars in hard economic times.⁷⁷

Franklin offered the following as the Bureau’s record of achievement:

We have become the City’s lead agency in historic preservation, administering community development funds for the restoration of historically significant structures, publishing walking tours of historic neighborhoods, and coordination the preservation efforts of other agencies. We produce a yearlong series of concerts and festivals, including for example, our well-attended Symphony in the Park series and the Dance Festival. We provide financial support and technical assistance to community groups who sponsor cultural activities, and to artists and arts groups in Atlanta who wish to perform public services. We have an extensive program for commissioning works of art in public places throughout the City. The public and private dollars leveraged by these activities far exceeds their cost to local government.⁷⁸

Franklin noted that the local media reported that the BCA spent \$2,000,000, but the bulk of that went to operating the Atlanta Civic Center and the Georgia World Congress Center, while \$450,000 was actually spent on cultural activities. Also noteworthy was that half of the \$450,000 figure was the result of the city’s hotel-motel tax, and did not come from local taxpayers.

To strengthen her argument for continuing cultural financial support, Franklin directed attention to the fact that in spite of the fact that the average rate of inflation had reached in double figures, the number of public programming from the BCA had

⁷⁷ “Franklin, Shirley C., Culture and the Budget, 1979, December 19,” Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Speeches (Other), Box 28, 1.

⁷⁸ Ibid., Box 28, 2.

doubled. She also explained, “We have inaugurated the Jazz Festival, cinema festivals, Shakespeare in the Park, administration of the One Per Cent for Art Program, support for the New Play Project, and Art at the Airport.”⁷⁹ While the BCA was extremely successful in attracting federal dollars for local cultural programs, such as the Neighborhood Arts Center, Franklin was not naïve to the fact that federal dollars were shrinking and far from continuous.

Considering Jackson’s “cultural mayor” persona had reached national proportions, the pressure point for the city was one of reputation. Franklin’s report stated it most clearly:

We [the City of Atlanta] have to decide whether we are really serious about competing with cities like Houston, Dallas, New Orleans and San Francisco for new business and industry, for more tourists and conventioners. . . . Budget decisions are tough decisions, but this is not the time for us to lose our nerve. Nothing is automatic about a city’s cultural life, and nothing is easier than to become stagnant and mediocre. That’s not what Atlanta wants. I believe that we are a great city, that we want excellence and that we are willing to pay for it.⁸⁰

The city upheld its national stature of continued support for the arts, even in tough economic times, but cultural support would continue to struggle for each dollar at every level of government with each budget cycle.

As urban cities faced decreasing employment, increasing poverty, and increasing crime rates, funding for the arts was never a given. The next year was no different for Franklin. In a 1980 memo to Jackson for the United States Conference of Mayors in Washington, DC, she explained the history of government involvement in employment

⁷⁹ Ibid., Box 28, 2-3. These programs were initiated between 1977 and 1979.

⁸⁰ Ibid., Box 28, 4.

for artists. The record of public support dated back to 1935 with President Roosevelt's WPA, which grew to include a Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Art Project. Artists such as Richard Wright, Jackson Pollock, Ralph Ellison, John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, and Romare Bearden were some of the beneficiaries over the years until the program faded in the 1940s.⁸¹

Franklin noted that it was not until 1974 that government got back into the business of supporting artists and workers. The City of Atlanta began a program to employ artists through the City's CETA program and listed the BCA, the Neighborhood Arts Center, and the Forest Avenue Consortium as owing their existence to this federal support, confirming oral history recollections. Atlanta's CETA program assisted twenty-five arts organizations and employed 200 artists, while nationally 6,000 artists and other arts support staff benefited from CETA, making the U.S. Department of Labor's CETA Division "a larger contributor to the arts than the National Endowment of the Arts."⁸²

Salary support has traditionally been the largest part of an arts organization's budget. Michael Reagan, then director of the Forest Avenue Consortium, was quoted by Franklin stating that the problem of survival many arts organizations face was funding staff:

[P]resently, money for salaries is the most difficult thing to secure in the arts. Unfortunately, before you can be in the position to raise salary money, you have to be a viable organization and have paid professionals on staff. This illustrates the catch 22 of the arts organization, since most

⁸¹ "Franklin, Shirley Memo, 1980, January 23," in "United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1980 [7 of 7]," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47, 2.

⁸² Ibid., Box 47, 1-2.

organizations are organized without large endowments or broad public support.⁸³

In August of 1979 at the Department of Labors' *Putting the Arts to Work* Regional CETA/Arts Conference, Jackson called for a separate CETA title for artists. Unfortunately, for Atlanta and other cities with CETA-sponsored art programs, the Department of Labor's emphasis was shifting to youth employment. Jackson was elected president of the United States Conference of Democratic Mayors in 1979. The art of politics at the federal level included championing H.R. 5518, a bill to amend the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965. It would have established a program of Federal assistance to individual artists for employment in community-oriented and locally supported projects. The National Endowment for the Arts was recommended as the agency that would channel the funds to local, state, and regional organizations. The proposal would have employed 6,000 professional artists over the three year period, thus replacing CETA.

Franklin, as the BCA Commissioner, noted that the National Endowment for the Arts' position was not to manage a "Jobs Bill" but rather to serve as a conduit. Shrinking federal dollars put pressure on Jackson to maintain his financial commitment locally, and Franklin was enthusiastic in reminding Jackson that he said, "I am committed to the principles of this bill [H.R. 5518] and recognize the benefits to artists, and Atlanta if passed." It would fill the void. Unfortunately, every indication pointed to the fact that CETA funds were quickly evaporating. The question of where these heavily salaried,

⁸³ "United States Conference of Democratic Mayors, 1980 [7 of 7]," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 47, 2.

non-profit arts organizations would turn to replace large federal support had to become a top priority for their boards.

Atlanta's Cultural Appeal: National and International

Atlanta was not only a home for black arts; the Neighborhood Arts Center provided a place and space for established artists, emerging talent, and students. Kanita Poet commented on how difficult it was as an emerging artist to get established in cities like Los Angeles, but Atlanta was noted for offering fertile territory as “a young cultural city.” She shared with a reporter, “I’m beginning to build a reputation among poetry lovers. People in the city seem to be opening up to poetry and other forms of art. I’ve lived in cities like Los Angeles where the competition is so stiff that it’s hard to get anything established, but in a young cultural city, things are looking up.”⁸⁴

Visual artists such Romare Bearden, dance legend Alvin Ailey, and international organizations such as the National Dance Company of Senegal, as well as artists from Martinique, all made it to Atlanta, and once here saw The Neighborhood Arts Center as an attractive destination, as detailed in the previous chapter.

The appeal for this southern location was a direct result of Atlanta's black political leadership. Atlanta's unique delineation as the first major southern city under minority leadership brought opportunities that the city had not previously enjoyed. Lomax recalls that the work of African-American photographer James Van Der Zee was being “rediscovered” and Atlanta was “in the mix.”⁸⁵ The Harlem Renaissance photographer's

⁸⁴ Kanita Poet in “‘Evening of African-American Culture’ at Junior College Here,” *Atlanta Daily World*, February 14, 1980, 6.

⁸⁵ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 19.

work came to the High Museum of Art, and Lomax shares this observation about the museum:

[B]eginning recognition on the part of the High and not grudging that if they were going to be cosmopolitan, they weren't just going to be showing European artists, that they were going to be embracing artists of African descent and so they [stuck] their toe in the water with James Van Der Zee.⁸⁶

Just as the majority cultural institution responded with a black art exhibition, so too did the grassroots organizations. Nexus, the Neighborhood Arts Center's counterpart, held a photography exhibition by African-American artist Prentice H. Polk, and worked with him to publish a book of his work.

International Impact of Atlanta

Atlanta received the attention of the world stage with the South's first elected African-American mayor. Representing Jackson's office, Lomax ushered Léopold Senghor, founder of the Négritude Movement, around the city for two days during Jackson's first administration. He remembered that it was the unprecedented fact that a black man was the political leader of a major southern city that brought Senghor to town.⁸⁷

A visit to Martinique in 1979 was another unique international opportunity for Atlanta. Aimé Césaire, also instrumental in the Négritude Movement and founder of the Parti Progressiste Martiniquais, was Martinique's Mayor.⁸⁸ Eaton remembered that artists

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 19.

⁸⁸ Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock, intro. by Mazisi Kunene (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1939/1969). Césaire provides an explanation of negritude, the

from the island, captured in an Alexander photograph titled *The Coordinators*, 1979 (see fig. 7.2), visited the Neighborhood Arts Center and saw artistic capabilities reflective of their own island's work. The BCA was invited to attend Martinique's cultural festival, and many Neighborhood Arts Center representatives joined the city's delegation. Lomax recalls,

I think we [City of Atlanta] were dealing at a pretty heavy level there . . . so the connections are not just with a Romare Bearden, post-Harlem Renaissance, but of national stature of course by the '70s . . . Aimé Césaire who is connect[ed] to the Négritude Movement that was throughout the African World.⁸⁹

The Neighborhood Arts Center's artists also realized that their work in Atlanta's Mechanicsville community was on par with works being produced internationally.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 7.2. Jim Alexander, *The Coordinators*, 1979

black consciousness of Africa and its West Indian diaspora. Psychiatrist Franz Fanon later analyzed the mentality of the French West Indian in *Black Skin/White Mask* (1952), trans. 1966.

⁸⁹ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 18.

Eaton remarks, “Our standards were as high, or higher than just about anybody there, but [the Martinique artist] saw that ahead of time. That’s why he selected *us*.”⁹⁰ Thirty representatives, including Joe Jennings’ Life Force Jazz band, Neighborhood Arts Center’s Theatre Department artists, and photographer Jim Alexander, traveled there on behalf of the Neighborhood Arts Center and the City of Atlanta. The BCA used the cultural exchange as an opportunity to fulfill the international goals Mayor Jackson had for the city.

Lastly, Atlanta’s ability to secure the National Dance Company of Senegal was another example. A sold out concert at the Atlanta Civic Center was held April 1, 1980 to benefit the Neighborhood Arts Center. This was another cultural and political collaboration with the BCA, and Mayor Jackson is pictured in an Alexander photograph thanking the managing director of the international company with Neighborhood Arts Center director John Riddle and board chair O.T. Hammonds, seated from left to right, appearing to savor the accomplishment in the photograph titled *Thanks*, 1980 (see fig. 7.3).

The Politics of Local, State, and National Funding Dynamics

The purpose of the Fulton County Arts Council was primarily funding, not programming, as with Atlanta’s BCA. With support for the Neighborhood Arts Center at BCA from Franklin, and the new Fulton County Arts Council with Lomax at the helm, funding this black institution was integrally tied to the cultural politics of the city. Over time, however, funding began to wane at the city level because it was intentionally tied to

⁹⁰ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 47B. Eaton’s emphasis.

the federal CETA program.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1980]

Figure 7.3. Jim Alexander, *Thanks*, 1980

Lomax did not think that the Neighborhood Arts Center's vision was "ambitious" enough as time progressed. With aspirations of making an even bigger imprint for black arts and the city, Lomax and the new Fulton County Arts Council became the conduit, not the BCA and the Neighborhood Arts Center, for the creation of the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF) in 1988.

While 1989 saw the closing days of the Neighborhood Arts Center, the arts in the city had been transformed over the decade and a half since its opening in 1975. With Jackson at the helm, the City of Atlanta "quickly became one of the leading public supporters of the arts in our nation." Terms such as "courage" and "vision" were used in the speech describing Jackson's conviction to cultural politics:

Maynard Jackson understood early on that, without a thriving arts community, no city can be truly successful. And he had the courage to invest the public dollars required by that vision at a time when our nation was suffering a major economic recession and his critics accused him of

wasting tax payer's money on what they derisively called "municipal frills."⁹¹

For Jackson, and the City of Atlanta, the arts were never "municipal frills." Instead, they ranked high among the city's priorities, with police and fire services, for making the city "richer, more humane, more livable."

Lomax surmises, "I think that all of us shaped [the arts], that there were people in [Jackson's] administration who were knowledgeable about the arts and had a point of view about it and were prepared to put time and effort into building on that."⁹² Together, Jackson and Lomax along with Franklin and the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts, took their initial interest in the arts and built on it to advance cultural politics. The shaping of a southern city's art form, however, must also take into consideration race and class, the next themes to develop from the findings.

⁹¹ "Fuster, A., Maynard Jackson and the Arts in Atlanta, 1989, February 17," Jackson Mayoral Records—1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Speeches (Other), Box 28, 1.

⁹² Lomax, interview with the author, 10.

CHAPTER 8

FINDINGS: RACE & CLASS

How did Atlanta's cultural politics enable the Neighborhood Arts Center to become a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement? The previous chapter of findings on the first theme to develop by answering this second research question was Atlanta's cultural politics. This chapter will present the findings around the themes of race and class. Michael Lomax shares his perception of the times: "The '70s was a period when blacks and whites were *just* learning to work together as equals"¹ Together, all three themes reveal that the conceptual framework of simultaneity, location and cultural formation, for this research support regional dimensions of the Black Arts Movement.

Race

While the findings concerning the theme of politics shed light on the successful use of art by this southern municipality, cultural politics in Atlanta were also influenced by the theme of race. The premise that what was being done for one race must be done for the other permeated the period. This section of findings points to Atlanta as a city straining to appease the major racial groups, white and African-American constituencies, in the mid- to late-1970s. This effort, described as "accommodationist" by Lomax, was similarly implied by other participants:

¹ Michael Lomax, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 14, 2010, transcript, 14-15.

This has always been somewhat a more accommodationist community. So I don't think it had that hard, hard edge to it, and certainly this isn't the . . . same kind of revolutionary ideology that was in the East Bay. . . . [A]rtists who have found a home [in Atlanta] . . . found a home here because it was a politically powerful community for people of color and African Americans, but they also found a community where people were open to and embraced arts and culture and commerce.²

The following findings reveal that the theme of race in Atlanta is almost the story of two distinct cities.

One must consider that these early efforts occurred on the heels of the struggles for civil rights and black freedom, with Atlanta being the epicenter of the former and the exemplar of the latter. Taking an historic view of Atlanta's cultural status, Jan Meadows concludes that integration played a significant role in where Atlanta is today:

I think probably integration has played a role in this. . . . There's not the . . . necessity to have the black arts like it was in the 40s, 40s/50s/60s when you had no other [options]. . . . The black community [also] relies so strongly on people . . . contributing to support, meaning organizations, or the government, to contribute. . . . We haven't become benevolent enough [ourselves].

So I think in some sense integration may have interfered with that. I mean, to say that we have access . . . that we're no longer segregated, is wonderful, but at the same time it hinders the overall necessity of a cultural responsibility that they have to maintain this. See I don't think that commitment is there. We're losing some of that.³

As CETA and other government and foundation funding disappeared for the Neighborhood Arts Center, the black community was not in a position to replace what federal dollars had provided. Meadows believed that integration inhibited cultural responsibility to maintain black organizations such as the Neighborhood Arts Center.

² Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 11.

³ Jan Meadows, interview with the author, transcript, 9B-10A.

Several participants made the point that race relations of the 1970s were very different from the Atlanta at the time of the interviews some thirty-five years later. Lomax shares the following sentiments of different times in several places throughout his interview:

[P]art of what you have to remember is this was still a southern city and the '70s was a period when blacks and whites were *just* learning to work together as equals. And it was a period where whites [had] to come to terms with blacks being in charge. I mean this was *traumatic*. I mean this is painful and so . . . challenging at so many different levels. And everybody was wearing their racial identities on their sleeve, and everybody was very sensitive about things.⁴

This “sensitivity” at times acted to hinder the actions of the city’s leadership, both in the areas of social responsibility and politics. Leaders were forced to weigh heavily the potential ripple effects of every decision, and especially those that involved race relations in the city.

Lomax emphasizes again,

[I]t was real and people were *leaving* the city. There was a lot of white flight and at the end of the day that was not good economically for the city. And of course now that’s reversed. People have matured and they’ve come to terms with living in a diverse community where people of color *share* power, economic and political, but in the '70s, it was just . . . that was certainly not the case. So the arts played their role.⁵

Two additional statements included “there were two communities, and they were very separated,”⁶ and “there was a sense back in the '70s that it had to be separate and pure.”⁷

⁴ Lomax, interview with the author, 14-15. Lomax’s emphasis.

⁵ Ibid., 17. Lomax’s emphasis.

⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁷ Ibid., 21.

Lomax found that the cultural politics of arts funding tended to be the common ground that mediated racial expectations. It seemed that the arts and their important contributions to the city as a whole were one of the few items both factions could agree upon. He shares:

The [FCAC] was a good strategy because it was another one of those occasions where you had something that you could get black and white people to agree on . . . I can't underscore that there were very few spaces where that kind of [collaboration] could occur and particularly in the '70s.⁸

Lomax juxtaposed the Atlanta of then and now. He realized that the arts could “play a role” in bringing races back to the city, thus stimulating local economies. Maynard Jackson's administration also knew intimately that the arts could also inspire tourism through an improved public image of post-Civil Rights Atlanta.

Carlton Molette shared life experiences on the changes in race relations over time which are similar to those described by Lomax, and further includes the variances within geographic boundaries. Molette stressed that philosophically it was a wonderful concept to do something for the arts, but initially it was a dangerous venture politically for a lot of reasons. Primarily it forced a certain level of integration on the streets of downtown Atlanta during tense racial times. Surrounding counties, such as DeKalb, that have a significant black population in 2012 were not that way in the early to mid-1970s. “There was still a serious comfort level issue for black folks, for example, going to Stone Mountain Park,” he remembers as he contemplated taking his young daughters there. Continuing, Molette reminisces, “This was a time when you really had to stop and think

⁸ Ibid., 17.

about it.”⁹ He felt there was a lot of “denial rhetoric,” or in other words, “I’m not part of it so therefore it doesn’t exist.”¹⁰ Progressively-minded whites that worked in the AUC with him were not the problem. His concerns, and the concerns of many others, were with racism in outlying, less urbanized counties.

Racial Balance on the Neighborhood Arts Center Board

Earlier discussions referenced the perceived need for a racially balanced oversight committee to make recommendations to the mayor’s office regarding arts initiatives and funding for them. The balanced committee was successful, but each faction was not without preconceived suspicions. However, after sitting in the meetings with African Americans and whites, Molette remembers,

I would say the thing really galvanized people to think that we can work together We can change Atlanta, not just change how outsiders perceive of Atlanta, which was very important to the business community . . . but the sweat equity to make all this stuff happen was coming from people who had been saying, “we’ll do our art over here; you do your art over there,” and then all of a sudden, we can make this happen. We can come together. We can do this stuff together . . . and it worked.¹¹

The conscious mingling of the races thus paved the way for this transformative period in Atlanta’s cultural politics.

Maintaining a racial balance was also important to the initial makeup of the Neighborhood Arts Center board in order to strategically balance voting. Molette explains,

What we ended up with was a board that essentially if folks voted along

⁹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, June 11, 2010, 11B.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 25B-26A.

racial lines, it was a tie It was deliberately set up that way so that unless racial lines are crossed, this thing will fail If all black folks are for something, and you can't get at least one white person to vote for it you're out. You can't do it.¹²

When Vincent Anthony, a white board member, resigned to on the larger responsibility of becoming president of the Arts Festival of Atlanta board, it appeared as though the NAC could not keep a racially balanced board. Filling his position and maintaining a voting balance became Molette's big task as NAC's board president.¹³

Racial balance benefited the city, not just the NAC. Susan Hunter, a white board member connected with Dance Atlanta, was instrumental in bringing dance groups, such as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, to the city that had not previously been attracted to the South. Lomax remembers these thoughts on dance and black artists coming to Atlanta:

You know everybody takes for granted that Alvin Ailey tours here. Alvin Ailey *didn't perform in Atlanta* until '74 or '75 He performed at the Civic Center. Dance Atlanta brought him, but brought him with the strong support of the Bureau of Cultural Affairs (BCA). So all of that has sort of taken what was the original notion "art to the people" and we don't view things quite that way anymore, but it has created a kind of cosmopolitan, artistic landscape in this city where the work of African Americans isn't marginalized and it's viewed as part of the character of the city.¹⁴

The BCA's support exemplified the importance of the public sector's role in taking chances culturally by bringing black arts to Atlanta as a central attraction. This political support moved black art from the fringes, and made it part of the city's "cosmopolitan,

¹² Ibid., 26B.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Lomax, interview with author, 14; Lomax's emphasis.

artistic landscape” as Lomax contends, not a segregated or marginalized event.

As a NAC dancer, Peggy Ludaway recalls how Ailey remembered her from the center years later during the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games: “[Ailey] said, ‘Where is your sister?’ [Velma] didn’t know. She wasn’t making the connection. I’m like he remembered *me*! And when I came up he [was] like, ‘Oh there you are!’ And I’m like . . . uh [couldn’t speak] . . . [Ailey said,] ‘I know your sister.’ . . . That was one of my moments.”¹⁵

It was the BCA and the Neighborhood Arts Center, public and private institutions being racially sensitive as they worked together, that made a way for national African-American talent to come to the South. These incremental changes made an impact on local audiences and local artists such as Ludaway. As the findings demonstrate so many times, the NAC attracted national and local artists, bringing them together around the “Art for People’s Sake” motto of the Black Arts Movement.

There was more racial balancing locally concerning the Neighborhood Arts Center and Nexus, which was first the Forest Avenue School Project. Lomax recalled that when the NAC was created, it was at a time “when you did one thing in the black community and another thing in the white community.”¹⁶ Jan Meadows remembers that the center’s exhibition policy “feature[d] various African-American artists that otherwise museums or galleries would not exhibit, or didn’t know anything about [and] would not

¹⁵ Peggy Ludaway, John Eaton et al. interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, Part 2, 16-17, transcript. Ludaway’s emphasis.

¹⁶ Lomax interview with the author, transcript, 15.

exhibit.”¹⁷

Using the community arts center model derived from the creation of the NAC, the Forest Avenue School Project was approved for the white artist community according to a “do for one/do for the other” philosophy.¹⁸ This school project, under the direction of Michael Reagan, was unique in that a group of arts organizations joined together to use the Nathan B. Forest School, which had been vacant for a year and only needed heating system work. The project’s mission was to serve the arts community, not the general public as was the case for the NAC. The initial consortium included four groups: Nexus, a photographic organization; the Dance Unit, a contemporary dance company; IMAGE, Inc., a resource center for independent film and video artists; and the Atlanta Art Workers Coalition (AAWC). AAWC dropped out, and Pynyon Press and Foundry and WRFG, a non-profit radio station, negotiated spaces later.¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, the consortium later became Nexus, which was primarily a photographer’s studio, but performing artists, visual artists, and writers were present there as well. Lomax remembered their ideological bent was less “art for the people” and more “arts for artists.”²⁰

Even though the NAC was ideologically attuned with the Black Arts Movement,

¹⁷ Meadows, interview with the author, transcript, 3B.

¹⁸ Nexus, founded in 1973 as a grassroots artist cooperative, moved into the Forest Avenue School building located on the corner of Ralph McGill Boulevard (formerly Forest Avenue) and Glen Iris Street. It later became the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center (www.atlantaccontemporary.org) which still exists.

¹⁹ Jamison, “Art in Atlanta: the BCIA,” n.p.:n.d., 47.

²⁰ Lomax, interview with the author, 8.

it had strong support from the white community.²¹ Julia Fenton, the founding editor of *Art Papers* and an early female graduate of the Atlanta College of Art, confirms the dual system stating:

Looking back, it was a pretty color-divided world, even back then, and I'm sure that's not what Maynard Jackson wanted and I seriously doubt that's what Michael [Lomax] wanted, but that's what was happening, but not just in Atlanta. It was happening in DC, in New York. There were separate organizations. They got equal funding but they were separate organizations, and nobody was questioning why.²²

Jim Alexander's photographers' workshop went on a field trip to the Nexus print shop in 1980 (see fig. 8.1). While there was cooperation between the two groups, remaining aesthetically identifiable by race was the norm as can be seen in the figure.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1980]

Figure 8.1. Jim Alexander, *NAC Photo Workshop at Nexus*, 1980

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Julia Fenton, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, April 27, 2010, transcript, 2.

Board seats were already mentioned as a point of racial maneuvering, and there were also several white community members who taught and took the center's free classes. White artists such as Steve Seaburg, Susan Loftin, and Susan Thomas participated as NAC instructors, and Seaburg recalls fondly how he got his job:

When, after about a year, somebody quit as the painting instructor and I got their job They were also a white person and they got angry because they found a poem or something written on the blackboard of their studio that was anti-white and got angry And when I came in to take over, that poem was still there and of course it was something by . . . I can't remember which poet but a well-known black poet in 30s. . . . That's how I got my job.²³

The group of interview participants helped him recall that the poem was Claude McKay's piece, *If We Must Die* (1919).

Seaburg and his wife Roanog had moved to Atlanta from New York to raise adopted interracial children, and hoped to teach art at the AUC. He ended up working at Clark College on a government-sponsored grant to bring African-American culture to predominantly black colleges and universities in the South. He taught there for three years, before happening on the NAC, which given his personal story, was not an uncomfortable environment for him.

The Neighborhood Arts Center's African Village in the Arts Festival of Atlanta

By the time of the NAC's creation in 1975, the Arts Festival of Atlanta (AFA) had existed for some twenty-five years without any significant African-American presence. Lomax and Molette made inroads to the AFA by virtue of their seats on the festival's board, and it was actually the festival that was the center's initial fiduciary

²³ Steve Seaburg, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 7.

entity until the center received its non-profit designation. The findings reveal that when the NAC created a significant space for black arts in Piedmont Park in 1978, the center's impact radiated from the physical place on Georgia Avenue in the Mechanicsville community throughout the city and beyond.

The center's presence at the festival was extremely important and a galvanizing project.²⁴ All artists interviewed recalled the center "integrating" the city's festival.²⁵ The first musician in residence at the NAC was jazz pianist Ojeda Penn in 1975, but he left the following year to teach at Atlanta Metropolitan College (then Atlanta Junior College). Penn would return to perform for the NAC in events such as the AFA, which Alexander captured in *Ojeda Penn & Friends* (see fig. 8.2). The Ojeda Penn Experience, featuring Penn on piano, became a sought-after group for jazz, America's classical music tradition.

By 1979, Grammy-recording artist Peabo Bryson, who practiced at the center, was honored at the park with a plaque of appreciation. Titling the image *Thank You Peabo*, 1979 (see fig. 8.3), Alexander posed the group in front of one of the NAC vending booths. Bryson is in the center holding the award, and flanked by John Riddle, Shirley Franklin, and John Eaton on the right, and Michael Lomax and Ebon Dooley on the left.

According to playwright Alice Lovelace, when the NAC first applied to the AFA in 1978, the center was given what she believed to be a second hand, or less than

²⁴ "Awardees Announced at Arts Festival Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 21, 1978, 10. The Neighborhood Arts Center is listed among the May 14-21 festival exhibitors.

²⁵ Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, and Steve Seaburg, Neighborhood Arts Center Panel #1 interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 20-21.

desirable, location on the lake at the park. She states, “[The Arts Festival of Atlanta] thought that they were dismissing us because when we applied they said, ‘You can have this little strip of land down by the little lake’.”²⁶



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 8.2. Jim Alexander, *Ojeda Penn & Friends*, 1978



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 8.3. Jim Alexander, *Thank You Peabo*, 1979

²⁶ Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 20.

John Riddle was remembered by many participants for working to transform the “little strip of land” into an unforgettable “African Village.” It was complete with fabricated huts adorned with African Adinkra symbols. A colorful, tie-dyed parachute covered the boardwalk lined with racks of exhibited artwork. There was a concession area for selling African foods, and a stage where Afrocentric dance and music performances continued into the night. In *Shaking the Pier*, 1978, Alexander’s captured dancer Sharonne Mitchell (see fig. 8.4) in hot pink shorts leading children in a dance while accompanying the NAC’s percussion ensemble with a shekere.²⁷



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1978]

Figure 8.4. Jim Alexander, *Shaking the Pier*, 1978

The center artists worked together for months ahead in preparation for their festival début. The original concept of an African village included Riddles’ drawings on paper for the huts, and cutting out the parts in the NAC’s theater space with the help of artist Attiya Melton, but the huts were never assembled until all the pieces were at the

²⁷ A shekere is an Adenkum gourd calabash instrument, where the dry, hollow gourd is covered with a netting of beads or cowry shells.

park. This was no simple task. Lovelace states, “On paper, it looked so simple,” but Michael Simanga interjects, “It was simple to John! It wasn’t simple to anybody else.”²⁸ The fabricated huts became artist vendor spaces, but they were just the beginning of Riddle’s Afrocentric vision for the park.

John Eaton remembers going to the Army surplus store with Riddle to purchase a parachute. Elaborating on the memory, Eaton continues,

It was just all John’s vision and we had a whole work crew of [CETA] Title VI carpenters who did stuff for us. They built the thing under John’s direction. Me and John went downtown to this Army surplus store and we bought this huge parachute, the kind that they drop tanks with . . . [H]e got all of these trashcans and he put different color dyes in all of them. He tie-dyed this parachute in all these different colors . . . He gets that thing finished and we take it out there to the park, and we put it over the pier and it’s still halfway wet and stuff. It dries out. And then the evening of the thing, the wind gets up under that thing with all these lights on it.²⁹

Apparently, it was an unforgettable experience for all. The impressive statement the colorful parachute made as it billowed in the Atlanta wind served as a visual calling card for the NAC’s African Village. The artist Zenzele was also remembered for her help with tie-dying the parachute and engaging a series of women who were involved in arts and crafts. The village reinforced the importance of making an Afrocentric statement at the festival.³⁰

²⁸ Lovelace and Simanga, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 20.

²⁹ Eaton, John Eaton et al. interview with author, Atlanta, GA, February 15, 2009, transcript, 19-20.

³⁰ Tina Dunkley, Neighborhood Arts Center Panel #2 interview with the author, transcript, 5. Zenzele worked with arts and crafts until December 1979. Alexander’s annotations to #26, “Atiya Melton with Zenzele’s Daughter,” *Community Art in Atlanta, 1977-1987: Jim Alexander’s Photographs of the Neighborhood Arts center from the Auburn Avenue Research Library Information*,

Conceptualized by Riddle, the village stood out in several participants' recollections as one of the most memorable places for NAC programming to have created a space for black art beyond its four walls in Mechanicsville on Georgian Avenue. Lovelace notes she felt that "[the Village] became the center point of that festival."³¹ Meadows, a board member, recalls,

Every year the Neighborhood Arts Center had a booth. I mean a huge booth at the festival. The white community expected that, even though we had to sometimes protect our presence there meaning that we would *have* a booth. They may not have . . . want[ed] us there so there was some of that going on . . . [Y]ou had people like John [Riddle] and Kolé, who's John Eaton, who really had a sense of a strong cultural identity . . . I mean if it had not been for their leadership too, it wouldn't have happened. So, the Neighborhood Arts Center was one of *the* organizations to be a part of back then.³²

Even with the impressive African Village installation, having a place in the festival was not always a given, and some years the Neighborhood Arts Center had to advocate for black arts' inclusion. Remembering the racially tense times, Fenton remarks, "You know I don't think at that point the white artist community was very accepting of an African-American view, aesthetic. I don't think that was there yet. There were certain art stars that kind of crossed over, but not very many. After all it was its own part [the African Village] right?"³³

If the colorful parachute and fabricated huts were not unique enough, the NAC

http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/CollectionsA-Z/aNeighborhoodArtsCenter_informatin.html (accessed December 15, 2008).

³¹ Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 21.

³² Meadows, interview with the author, transcript, 8B. Meadows' emphasis.

³³ Fenton, interview with the author, 3.

provided a stage for the call of Africa with drummers, African dance performances, fashion shows of African dress, and jazz performances. Jennings remembers the sense of pride this way:

You have, out on the lake, where we're playing and people start gathering all around the lake, and it's about *Africanness*. People coming down with their African garbs on and not afraid, white folks coming down in it, and you feel . . . it's a proudness. In the first place here we are, and people are enjoying it and it looks like it's suppose to be, like real art and it's just as impressive as all the other stuff you have, and in many cases, more impressive, with all those African materials, African folks, African Americans showing their *Africanness*, you know, proudly!³⁴

Alexander recalled that the drummers would never stop, and Lovelace shares that she was told at 2 a.m., “you *have* to go home, and you have to tell those people to go home.”³⁵ All of the programs were signature Neighborhood Arts Center cultural formations not replicated anywhere else in the park.

Glenda McGee-Philips' took over as director of the NAC after Riddle left to head the Atlanta Civic Center in 1981. Her memories of the impression the NAC made on the festival were more mixed than the artists above. She recalls that over the years a lot of people came out, but points out that “basically, we sold food [fish sandwiches]. We had a tent of artists that were showing and exhibiting and that sort of thing . . . [S]ee that was a fundraiser for us but it wasn't necessarily an exposure of our art or anything.”³⁶ Her perspective as an administrator was very different on the same event that artists' gave glowing reflections of in the initial years of the NAC's inclusion in the Arts Festival of

³⁴ Joe Jennings, interview with the author, 13A-B.

³⁵ Lovelace, Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 23, 2009, transcript, 21. Lovelace's emphasis.

³⁶ Glenda McGee Philips, phone interview with the author, Atlanta, GA. June 5, 2010, transcript, 14.

Atlanta.

Lomax's recollections of festival participation also contradict artist participant memories. He shared that there were a couple of "raps" on the festival: "One was it wasn't very good, and two was that it was not a place where black artists and black artistic expression could have a full throated opportunity."³⁷ Fenton corroborated Lomax's first sentiments on the festival's status among professional visual artists as it changed over the years to separate craft from juried fine art.³⁸

Lomax felt that the NAC was ambitious at one level. All praised Riddle as the visionary for moving black arts from the margins to the center at a mainstream cultural event such as the AFA. However, Lomax feels "at another level, . . . [the NAC's] ambitions were not so much to broadcast to the world. Back then the ambition was to build a bond and a link artistically, culturally, and creatively, with the community."³⁹

The community perception of the NAC, however, was not viewed favorably in mainstream art circles. Fenton confirms, "We were not teaching children . . . we were not community outreach organizations, and I think we did not give as much status or credence to organizations that were in terms of the kind of art that was produced."⁴⁰ On the other hand, Lovelace remembers the NAC's position regarding the community this way, noting how writer Toni Cade Bambara stressed the importance of the responsible artist:

³⁷ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 15.

³⁸ Fenton, interview with the author, transcript, 3.

³⁹ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 15.

⁴⁰ Fenton, interview with the author, transcript, 3.

[Bambara] constantly talked to us about the artist's responsibility. She was constant that *you* have a responsibility, and she would constantly call us back to the fact that you didn't raise yourself. A community raised you, and if a community raised you, whatever you get, whatever you earn, you owe it to that community.⁴¹

Getting inspiration from the Neighborhood Arts Center's black community, instead of "airtime" at Piedmont Park, Lomax reiterates, "*that* was the most important" for the center.⁴² His comparison of broadcasting to the world would be a goal that he, through the creation of the FCAC and the National Black Arts Festival, would aspire to attain. Unfortunately, many of Atlanta's artists were left out of the national vision.

Theater and Race Relations

Tom Jones also gave his thoughts on how the NAC "helped to integrate" the biggest cultural happening of the city, while simultaneously becoming an incubator for black theater in Atlanta. Jones explains,

The Piedmont Arts Festival was just the big party. The Neighborhood Arts Center's presence certainly helped to integrate it, helped to bring all kinds of people of color into the parks. That festival during the course of the week [to] ten days was just an amazing kind of [experience] at the beginning of the summer and it just brought thousands of people.⁴³

There was an energy created in the summer at the Arts Festival of Atlanta. It continued throughout the year among theater companies and audiences, as Jones elaborates,

We had thousands of people and when we did the big main festival our big Charles Mann musical that LaTanya Richardson, Sam Jackson, Samuel L. Jackson's wife, directed . . . Mann who had written a song called *Be Real Black for Me* that was recorded by Donny Hathaway and then Roberta

⁴¹ Lovelace. Panel #1 (Jim Alexander, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, Steve Seaburg) interview with the author, January 23, 2009, transcript, 16; Lovelace's emphasis.

⁴² Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 15. Lomax's emphasis.

⁴³ Tom Jones, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 12, 2009, transcript, 18.

Flack, . . . we had 50,000 people out watching, watching theater. It was *our* version, in a certain sense, of what happens with theater, Joe Papp's Theater, in [New York's] Central Park.⁴⁴

This comparison of Atlanta to New York references a transformational point in the South's cultural scene coming of age, of its reaching a renaissance with other ethnic groups and sharing culture with diverse audiences in the same park.

New Play Projects Festival Bring Races Together

The NAC quickly became an incubator for black theater in Atlanta, and the BCA helped to spawn interdisciplinary opportunities across the city in 1978. It was a time when there was a lot of play sharing, audience sharing, and unique collaborations. Over the years, the Atlanta New Play Project was made up of as many as thirty-two theater companies from around the city of all sizes, shapes, and colors. These theater companies sponsored new or emerging playwrights in a festival context supported by the BCA. While integrated companies were not novel in the North, Atlanta's Academy Theater, under the direction of Frank Wooddoux, was the third largest professional company in the northern hemisphere, according to Jones. Wooddoux committed that his repertory company would be integrated, giving birth to black actors such as Carol Mitchell Leon, Kenny Leon, and Donald Griffin.⁴⁵

The purpose of the New Play Project was "to provide an opportunity for performances of new works, to enhance the communication between theater companies

⁴⁴ Ibid., Jones' emphasis.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

working in Atlanta, and to improve the opportunities for all of the theaters.”⁴⁶ The Proposition, The Just Us Theatre Company, and the People’s Survival Theatre were three of the major black companies who used the NAC’s facilities and presented works in progress in 1979 at the Academy Theater. During the New Play Project, artists had to go from institution to institution, including the Academy Theater, the Peachtree Playhouse, and the Neighborhood Arts Center. The latter served as the incubator for Atlanta’s black arts for much of this theatrical exploration of black aesthetic topics described below. Jones emphasized how important it was having “a place to sit and talk and share ideas, laugh and joke and realize walls kept getting broken down.”⁴⁷ This type of collaboration and conversation was particular to Atlanta, due in part to the BCA’s festival being a forum for interracial communication. According to Jones, it was not happening anywhere else to the same degree.

Lovelace’s play, *The Year of the Snake*, was entered in the New Play Project by The Just Us Theatre Company, and Jones was its guest director.⁴⁸ It was a dramatic representation of a black family’s entanglement with the issues of 1965, such as the American involvement in the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the mental problems of a veteran, and the women’s movement as it involved a black woman.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Adele Newson, “New Play Project Seen Boosting Local Theatre,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 5, 1979, 6.

⁴⁷ Tom Jones, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 12, 2009, transcript, 20.

⁴⁸ Adele S. Newson, “‘Year of the Snake’ Ignites Audience at Peachtree Playhouse,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 16, 1979, 6.

⁴⁹ Adele Newson, “New Play Project Seen Boosting Local Theatre,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 5, 1979, 6.

Power #9 was a new work by Walter Dallas and Proposition Theatre Company. Described as a “highly symbolic play,” it was characteristic of Dallas’ company. The NAC was again used for casting.⁵⁰

Rapid Transit by the People’s Survival Theatre was directed and written by Billups’ under the pseudonym Eddie Willinsky. The play took place aboard a bus and examined the lives of twelve different passengers and how they had been changed by the society of the 1970’s.⁵¹ The urban city provided Billups with fertile material for creative types, and the NAC served as a conduit for black arts to reach majority theater stage opportunities.

Artists were able to take advantage of the BCA’s support of events like the New Play Project. Robert Crawford, former chairman of the Theater Endowment for the National Council of the Arts, moderated a works-in-progress discussion during the festival. He explained, “The project is good in that it provides an opportunity for Atlanta Theater Companies to get together and share and be supportive, critical, and helpful of each other. No single person can take credit for its organization. It was already an idea whose time had come. It evolved very naturally.”⁵²

The third annual New Play Project of cooperative ventures among several Atlanta companies ran from May 29 – June 8, 1980. Presentations of new work were again followed by discussions with playwrights. Just Us Theatre’s *Sparrow Don’t Sing Here*

⁵⁰ “Just Us Theater Holds Auditions,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 18, 1979, 3.

⁵¹ Adele Newson, “New Play Project Seen Boosting Local Theatre,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 5, 1979, 6.

⁵² Ibid.

No More, by local playwright Valerie Thomas Osborne, was about the relationship of a black couple falling dangerously out of love. It was presented at Studio One Theatre of the Alliance. *The Riddle* and *Regression*, one-act plays workshopped by the People's Survival Theatre early in the year, were performed during the summer at the NAC.⁵³

While all these theatrical community productions were occurring at the center, The Just Us Theatre Company presented the Negro Ensemble Company in *Nevis Mountain Dew* at the Peachtree Playhouse. Byron Saunders, general manager of Just Us, and Don Bryan, production manager, were praised for "mak[ing] Atlanta the cultural capital of the south."⁵⁴ Black theater blossomed during this period of racial collaboration and integration in the arts. However, without the Neighborhood Arts Center as the place in the community for finding theatrical talent, Atlanta would have found it difficult to receive such titles as "cultural capital."

Creative Writers Explore a National Black Aesthetic

In 1980, when Emory University hosted a conference on Black South Literature, the NAC's Southern Conference of African-American Writers was one of the co-sponsors. The conference was designed "to emphasize the important role of the Black South artist in the development and sustainment of a national black aesthetic, founded by those who work to produce literature and art as well as those who practice these arts, thus keeping the folklore tradition alive." Other sponsors included the Southern Black Cultural

⁵³ Rozell Clark, "Entertainment Tidbits," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 18, 1980, 6. Also see "Briefs," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 3, 1980, 3.

⁵⁴ Rozell Clark, "'Nevis Mountain Dew' gets Standing Ovation," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 30, 1980, 3.

Alliance (SBCA) and the Committee on Black South Literature and Arts. Documenting a Black South aesthetic was apparently on the minds of many, as more than 3,000 artists, writers, actors, critics, teachers and students were involved, according to the *ADW*.⁵⁵

The keynote event, featuring U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young, playwright Ozzie Davis and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist James Alan McPherson, was held at Emory University. There were workshops and panel discussions with educators Lorenzo Thomas, Tyrone Wilkerson, and Gloria Mimms. The NAC hosted activities on Friday, including panel discussions, workshops, and experimental theater with dance. Major readings were held on the campuses of AUC and Emory University, and the day ended with a dinner theater banquet and dance.⁵⁶ The conference was organized by Emory's Dr. Sondra O'Neale.⁵⁷

Young expressed his enthusiasm for the art stating, "Share your life. Share your joy. Share your fears. Share your very integrity. Share whatever you are with the rest of us. Paint it, write drama about it, sing, dance and we will produce great art."⁵⁸ Georgia-born Ozzie Davis said, "the human spirit is frail We must become right universal artists. We must become universal by particularizing the extreme but the content within

⁵⁵ "Emory to Host Conference on Black South Literature," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 20, 1980, 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3.

⁵⁸ Andrew Young in Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3.

one's self. That's the challenge for us."⁵⁹ Dr. Margaret Walker, novelist, critic and commentator stated, "Our strength is in our moral and spiritual values. We should look to our heritage."⁶⁰ Former NAC artist-in-residence Toni Cade Bambara, having authored of *The Salt Eaters* by this time, felt "we may well be in the next phase of the Neo Black Art Movement," and she stressed that blacks must "develop, maintain, and protect Where are our armies and our navies? . . . The power of the pen must be used as weapons."⁶¹ All of the above remarks reiterate the black aesthetic tone of their day, and motto for the NAC to provide "Art for People's Sake," to rally the collective minds beginning with literary artists.

Other opening program speakers included Albert Murray, Critic/Author of *Train Whistle Guitar*, Patricia Funderburk, founder of the North Carolina Arts Coalition, and Wendell Narcisse, president of the SBCA.⁶² There were four exhibits around Emory's campus during the conference: 1) *Paintings and Sculpture of Black South Artists*, which included sixteen artists, among them Joseph Halston, Lovett Thompson, Christopher Gonzalez, Ed Hamilton, C. A. Young, and Elizabeth Catlett; 2) *Black Folklore*, at Emory's Asa Griggs Candler Library; 3) *Prints and Drawings*, in the Woodruff Building, which featured eighteen selected works by black artists; and 4) an exhibit of ten pen and

⁵⁹ Ozzie Davis in Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3.

⁶⁰ Margaret Walker in Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3.

⁶¹ Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3. See Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters* (New York: Random House, 1980).

⁶² Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3. See Albert Murray, *Train Whistle Guitar* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1974).

ink drawings by Benny Andrews and nine acrylics by Nelson Stevens, in the Alumni Memorial University Center.⁶³

Visual artist and educator Terry Thomas worked on Emory's campus after graduating with a degree in Fine Art from Morris Brown College. Thomas recalls these memories of the conference, "[Professor Bob Tomlinson] was hanging a Bennie Andrews show and I was a janitor, and I told him about my background in art and he said, 'Help me hang the show,' and I said, 'no problems'."⁶⁴ Thomas' artwork, which was heavily influenced by Egyptology, was also exhibited for the conference at the NAC.⁶⁵ He remembered Dr. Walter Palmer, of Morris Brown College's Education Department, first exposing his mind to black consciousness through literature. Thomas explains,

I wrote this paper and [Palmer] read it, and he thought that I had a talent in the area of interpretation of history. So he gave me a list of books to read and included along those was *The African Origins of Civilization* and *The Souls of Black Folks*, *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*. In other words, he was giving me a "Black List."⁶⁶

The AUC was a foundational resource for sparking black aesthetic curiosity and consciousness lessons. By 1980, the racial theme of black consciousness was finally being analyzed on Atlanta's majority campus, Emory University, and the southern region.

⁶³ Sylvia Harmon, "Dairy of an Artist," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3.

⁶⁴ Terry Thomas, interview with author, Atlanta, GA, March 3, 2010, transcript, 9.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4. See Cheik Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Westport, NY: Lawrence Hill, 1974); W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903); Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1933); and Chancellor Williams, *The Destruction of Black Civilization: Great Issues of Race from 4500 B.C. to 2000 A.D.*, illust. By Murry N. DePillars (Chicago: Third World Press, 1974).

Reporting on the conference, journalist Sylvia Harmon vividly recalled, “The sound of drums as African Dance Ensemble performed drew [me] into the dance studio. An inspired artist sat on the floor busily sketching the drummers.” She also remembered that poet Sterling Brown, author of *Southern Road* was at the NAC.⁶⁷ Brown had retired from Howard University and was writing his memoirs at the time of the conference. In the same room were Hoyt Fuller and Dudley Randall, director of United Detroit Artists. Other notable NAC visitors during the conference mentioned by Harmon included Alice Walker, Haki Madhubuti, Tom Dent, Tom Jones, Sonya Sanchez, Barbara Sullivan, Kalamu Ya Salaam, Ishmael Reed, along with local talent such as artist Joy Peters, Calvin Kenley, Tom Cullen, and NAC board member Jan Meadows.⁶⁸

Atlanta’s Position as an Arts Center in the Black Arts Movement

Scholar Richard A. Long considered Atlanta a top secondary center for the Black Arts Movement. He felt the BAM, like many other national movements, had concentrations, and he describes them as “highly localized with a few municipalities and the rest of the country was an audience. The most profound expression of [the Black Arts Movement] was probably New York, Chicago and Los Angeles . . . some considerable activities in places like Detroit . . . but Atlanta definitely was not itself a primary center for it.”⁶⁹ Long continues, “Therefore . . . the orientation of anything that is black consciousness, African-American consciousness, would have to hold the South in great

⁶⁷ Sylvia Harmon, “Dairy of an Artist,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3. See Sterling Brown, *Southern Road* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974, © 1932).

⁶⁸ Sylvia Harmon, “Dairy of an Artist,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 25, 1980, 3.

⁶⁹ Richard Long, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, February 26, 2010, transcript, 10A.

importance. So Atlanta would naturally be in that position.⁷⁰

Atlanta was then a primary center for the South as an urban metropolis for BAM precepts of “Art for People’s Sake,” but secondary in that many BAM participants involved with the NAC had emigrated South from cities such as Chicago (Ebon Dooley), Los Angeles (John Riddle), and New York (Toni Cade Bambara). Many artists explained making connections with other artists in the area was an outstanding asset the NAC provided. Molette remembers that Bambara decided, “I’m going to be part of this thing in Atlanta.” She was already well known and “just wanted to be in Atlanta.”⁷¹ Bambara was not at Spelman College yet when she made her way to the South and decided to become involved with the NAC. Local artists did not seem to invent a black aesthetic as much as respond to the BAM’s national trends with a southern flavor.

Visual artist and former NAC student Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier’s observation below also placed Atlanta as a major center in the “secondary” tier of BAM centers. When speaking of the Black Power Movement, she notes the difference between the North and the South, and urban and rural, as follows:

[B]y the time of the Black Power Movement came in, we were involved in but it was always on the fringe because you were so far away. I wasn’t in New York. I wasn’t in Atlanta. We were in North Carolina, so what we got was what we could get from people who would leave and go out of town. They would come back and bring books like *Die, Nigger, Die!* so I remember passing books around. We would learn the poems and then we would pass things around so that everybody that was in the school got to read. We had *The Last Poets*. We had all that but it wasn’t like it was in an urban area where you were surrounded by people who were kind of involved with that . . . So by Amos [Ashanti Johnson, a Neighborhood

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Molette, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 41A.

Arts Center artist] kind of being interested in that, and having a name like Ashanti of course, you know you're going to get a lot of African history. So a lot of our work shifted back during that time. I was painting Africans. I was painting different tribes of Africans. That became a big part of my work.⁷²

Marshall-Linnemeier also noted how formal the art classes were with Ashanti Johnson, who required students to pay attention to details. More impressive for her were the Afrocentric lessons. She shares, "by the time I got to the Neighborhood Arts Center that's when I started to learn about Africa, the role of Africa, black life. The 70s being what they were, I think a lot of black people just didn't know anything about that. Not to mention if you were in a rural area. You had no idea."⁷³

After leaving the NAC, Eaton's experience as a national site evaluator for the Southern Arts Federation made his appreciation grow for what NAC artists accomplished in Atlanta. "I really understood where we stood," Eaton shares. He said to himself, "Hey we were just a bunch of people trying to manage, [to] herd cats down here managing these artists, and now these people are ruling New York! Maybe we did something."⁷⁴

According to Tom Jones, the center helped spawn the "second generation of African-American theaters as institutions." The heart of the BAM and creating institutions and cultural centers were at the heart of economic development, according to

⁷² Lynn Marshall-Linnemeier, John Eaton et al. interview with the author, February 15, 2009, Part 2, transcript, 5-6. Also see H. Rap Brown (Jamil Al-Amin), *Die, Nigger, Die!* (New York: Dial Press, 1969), and *The Last Poets: Vibes from the Scribes, Selected Poems* (London: Pluto Press, 1970/1985). The poets included: Abiodun Oyewole, Alafia Pudim (a.k.a. Jalaluddin Mansur Nuriddin), & Umar Bin Hassan).

⁷³ Marshall-Linnemeier, John Eaton et al. interview with the author, February 15, 2009, Part 2, transcript, 5.

⁷⁴ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 40B.

Mayor Jackson. Jones shares,

[The Neighborhood Arts Center] was a part of that grand social experiment that came out of *those* activist artists that had found their ways down into the political fabric that were now in positions of authority – the A.B. Spellmans, . . . the Michael Lomaxs, the Maynard Jacksons, who had been well exposed to art or come through some kind of an art movement that now . . . were decision makers. [They] said okay now, how do we make this part of public policy? How does this become a part of the political landscape?⁷⁵

In answer to Jones' last two questions quoted above, Jackson not only made art public policy, he made “art for the people” his mantra, and infused cultural politics into the social landscape of Atlanta. His commitment to making art part of the political landscape can be visualized in the new branches of municipal government, the BCIA (BCA), the Neighborhood Arts Center and its programs, as well as festivals and conventions. Art was integrally woven into Atlanta's cultural fabric to improve the quality of life for the city.

Class

In addition to the political and racial themes previously described this last section of findings for the second research question also supports the presence of the theme of class. Classism has had a long history in the South, particularly interracial, so it was to be expected especially in an elite field such as the arts where money is required for lessons, education, equipment, supplies, and admission. However, the findings uncover evidence of intra-racial classism in Atlanta, a topic not often elaborated in history.

Where this project is concerned, intra-racial classism manifested in two distinct areas. One was externally between the NAC and the AUC, and the other was internally

⁷⁵ Tom Jones, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, March 12, 2009, transcript, 27. Jones' emphasis.

between the NAC'S board of directors and its artists. These two areas of intra-racial class dynamics also reflect a long-standing history of class distinctions present within the African-American community, and which further distinguish some of the southern characteristics unique to this region of the Black Arts Movement.

The Politics of Interracial Class

Lomax explains that politically with Atlanta arts, "The strong base of support [was] with the white arts community, which was not a middle class. It was an upper class. It was Buckhead."⁷⁶ This district of Atlanta is an affluent suburb of the city. In 1978, when Lomax moved from the City of Atlanta to Fulton County to assume an elected commissioner position, he found himself winning without a runoff, "get[ting] sixteen percentage points and I got more than that from the white community and it was inside the city."⁷⁷ Lomax felt that the way to "acknowledg[e] and hol[d]" that affluent political constituency was "to create another arts institution."⁷⁸ He formed the Fulton County Arts Council (FCAC). Arts and culture appealed to the Atlanta affluent majority community, but a look at the Neighborhood Arts Center reveals that a similar allure and status was attached to the arts in the African-American community.

The original NAC board was handcrafted to balance the races. Former chair of Spelman College's Music department Joyce Johnson mentioned that Beauchamp Carr, from the Woodruff Arts Center was on the NAC's board. She recalls, "I felt honored to

⁷⁶ Lomax, interview with the author, transcript, 16.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

be on the board. It was a very important young institution and a lot of promise at that time.”⁷⁹

Intra-Racial Classism

Having so many historically black colleges within the AUC naturally created a large, educated, black middle class for Atlanta and a more affluent black class within the race. Eaton shared that there were not the “AU attitudes,” generally defined as elitist, at play in the creation of the NAC.⁸⁰ This admission reveals that attitudes of distinction actually existed. With Atlanta University as the graduate division for all the AUC schools, hierarchical rivalries traditionally existed among the four undergraduate institutions. Morehouse College being all male, and Spelman College being all female, were both Baptist-affiliated schools charging the highest tuition in the center and seen as brother-sister institutions. Clark College had a Methodist affiliation, accepting primarily children of professional and working class families. Morris Brown College was operated by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church with many of its student being the first in their families to attend college. These racial class distinctions created class politics of their own, supporting Eaton’s comment.

Having attended Morehouse College and Howard University in Washington, DC, artist and art historian Michael D. Harris noted that neither school appreciated the arts legacies they had in Hale Woodruff, Carlton Molette, or Joe Jennings in Atlanta, or Lois Mailou Jones, Jeff Donaldson, Donald Byrd, Tony Brown, or Peter Broadwell in DC.

⁷⁹ Joyce Johnson, James Patterson and Joyce Johnson, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, May 25, 2010, transcript, 4.

⁸⁰ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 47A-B.

Instead, the socialization at HBUCs was “always about the integration into society, getting people into businesses, getting our students to have doctorates and all of that” The larger problem, according to Harris, was that “African Americans have been pushing against these walls that kind of quarantined them from society.”⁸¹ The Jackson administrative atmosphere was definitely a transition.

Dunkley concurred that the issue of leadership being exposed to the arts is a critical component to its valuation: “[P]eople in the leadership being . . . informed or having been exposed in their experience, their education experiences to art, to the value of the creative process and how that really functions in this society.”⁸² She used the president of Hampton University and Lomax, and their exposure to art early in their college careers as an example:

[I]n the case when I discovered that Harvey, William Harvey, president of Hampton University’s collection was actually a student of [visual artist and historian] David Driskell at Talladega. It was where *he* was exposed to art and its value. And when one looks at how that collection was presented and preserved and all that, and . . . what’s he put into it, it really . . . [and it the case of] Michael Lomax. We have people who are in significant positions to make certain kinds of things happen, because when that is not the case, be it visual literacy or the performing arts, they somehow can’t get the whole posture [of] how they can bring support resources to keep that creativity going. That to me I think is a huge drawback for the arts.⁸³

These “high art” attitudes were found to adversely affect the NAC in a variety of ways. Then a Morris Brown College art student, Terry Thomas remembers that he found

⁸¹ Harris, Panel #2 interview with the Author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 26.

⁸² Dunkley, Panel #2 interview with the Author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 25-26.

⁸³ Ibid.

out about the NAC on his own and shares, “interestingly enough, while I was at the AU Center art program, no one encouraged me to go to the Neighborhood Arts Center.”⁸⁴

AUC professors tacitly expressed a preference for academically trained professionals and did not refer art students to the NAC, seen as a creation of commercial, working artists. Long, an Atlanta University Center emeritus professor, confirms this observation. He remarks, “[A]s a member of the faculty of Atlanta University, I [did not] see any great involvement of any faculty member from the institution with the Neighborhood Arts Center even the people who were in the arts field in the college faculty were not terribly involved with the Neighborhood Arts Center.”⁸⁵

On the other hand, some of the positives of having the AUC in Atlanta, according to Eaton, were that it brought the “standards of the academy to the people in the community and the streets in terms of artistic quality.” Artists at the NAC were by and large university-trained, and there were “standards” though not perceived. Eaton explains, “This is the level that we operate on, and you can’t operate on that [lower] level.”⁸⁶ Molette agreed that just sharing dialogue on a paper did not a playwright make; therefore bringing the benefits of the “academy” to the people became a Neighborhood Arts Center hallmark. Unfortunately, several AUC professors, particularly in the visual arts, did not seem to share the same assessment, leaving students to find the NAC on their own.

⁸⁴ Thomas, interview with the author, transcript, 3.

⁸⁵ Long, interview with the author, transcript, 5B.

⁸⁶ Eaton, Molette and Eaton interview with the author, transcript, 47A-B.

Over the years, the AUC community of students, faculty and alumni became the NAC's audience more so than the Mechanicsville community. The growing middle-class, educated, black elite found more interest in the arts center. On the other hand, the immediate community was not tapped as much post-CETA, as the programming of the arts center was found to be less appealing. McGee-Philips recalls, "We had a hard time trying to reach out to get people interested . . . if they had not interest in it [already or], no exposure."⁸⁷

Internal Intra-Racial Class Dynamics

Meadows noted that everyone on the NAC board was either an artist, a patron, or had some affiliation with the African-American community to some degree: "You had people on there like Millicent Dobbs, you had Barnie Sims, Anita Whatley, you had Brenda Thompson, Delores Shelton, Henrietta Antoinin, Gee Gee Dickens, Sandy Tippen, oh my goodness, Victoria [Durant] Gonzales. I mean it was a real cross section of the city."⁸⁸ In *O.T. and the Board*, 1979 (see fig. 8.5), Alexander has several board members pictured together at a social: NAC's director Glenda McGee (seated), with Anthony Riddle (John Riddle's son), O.T. Hammonds (board chair) gesturing with his left hand, Sekou (wearing glasses) who was affiliated with the Shrine of the Black Madonna, and Jan Meadows.

Unfortunately, Alexander recalls that the doctors' wives on the NAC board were particularly problematic. He states:

⁸⁷ Phone interview with the Author. Glenda McGee Philips, June 5, 2010. transcript, 5.

⁸⁸ Meadows, interview with the author, transcript, 6A.



[Source: Jim Alexander © 1979]

Figure 8.5. Jim Alexander, *O.T. and the Board*, 1979

They offset some of those other “doctor” types, because that’s what a lot of the Board was made of. I don’t mean the PhDs. I don’t mean even actual doctors, medical doctors, but mostly their wives [laughter] who were on the Board. Everything that was done that was supposed to be of some *value*, were things that they did or ideas that they came up with that never produced what it was supposed to produce. It was supposed to raise money for the Neighborhood Arts Center. Of course, which it didn’t on any level. It was something that they could get their name on, or something that they could present for their friends. But it didn’t serve *us*.⁸⁹

Conversely, Meadows remembered other board members favorably, such as Victoria Durant Gonzalez and gallery owner Crystal Britton, who she said “helped curate some of the exhibits that we did.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Alexander, Panel #2 interview with the Author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 14; Alexander’s emphasis.

⁹⁰ Meadows, interview with the author, transcript, 6B.

The Neighborhood Arts Center's Board and Fundraising

The findings show that the tension between the artists and the board often involved fundraising. Meadows shared that they would meet Saturday mornings in the Bearden Gallery at the Odd Fellows building to set fundraising plans.⁹¹ It was the board's responsibility to raise money, and she acknowledges, "Oh yeah! There were big struggles . . . owing the IRS. In fact, we had to liquidate our collection. We had an art collection that had Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Van Der Zee. We had some nice pieces in that collection. And we had to liquidate and sell some of those pieces to pay/satisfy the IRS."⁹²

Ebon Dooley wore many hats over the years with the NAC, both as an artist and as a board member. Unlike Alexander, Dooley provides a more balanced description of the challenges the board faced:

We had some instances where there were some questionable judgments made in terms of . . . the best utilization of resources and the furtherance of the goals of the organization. We had an old, dilapidated building obviously not in the best of shapes. It would have required the tightest maintenance of resources and the utilization of those resources to keep it going. And sometimes the best judgment wasn't made in terms of fixing the roof, fixing the boiler, those little nuts and bolts kinds of things. They come back to haunt you because we ended up with the roof having the Community Development Block money that could have been used in a better way to stretch it and didn't. So we really didn't get the roof fixed right. We had a boiler where the water was left in [it]. It froze. Little nick picky stuff like that, but they were crucial. And it was not utilized the best way it could be.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., 6A-6B.

⁹² Ibid., 4B-5A.

⁹³ Ebon Dooley, interview with the author, January 28, 2005, transcript, 12.

Maintaining the space obviously cost more than the \$1 rental fee from the Atlanta School Board. It required savvy physical plant management. Dooley's explanation also sheds light on Meadow's description that the organization was constantly "struggling." As wonderful as the programs described in chapters 5 and 6 may have been, leaving lifelong impressions, they required the facility that was a continuous financial drain.

While there was an artist representative on the board, such as Dooley, it appears the artists were often less forgiving of the unfortunate decisions and "big struggles" to pay the bills. Alexander remembers the tension this way:

We are going to give you a space to work. We are going to give you a small budget for supplies. We are going to give you a small salary, very small. In return, you are going to teach at least two classes a week in-house and then you are going to have an external project that you have to work on . . . The tragic part of it is that we did not have a board that was conducive to that. The board was chosen or selected or volunteered for a whole 'nother reason . . . so, [the artists] made it work for as long as it could work. And when the CETA things fell in one day, the board had never put anything in place to fill the gap.⁹⁴

The board did have gala fundraisers such as presentation of the National Dance Company of Senegal at the Atlanta Civic Center discussed in the politics section above and in chapters 5 and 7. They just seemed to fall short of the financial demands of the organization.

Reminiscing about the "Midnight Jazz" program for the exhibit, titled *Selma Revisited*, Meadows shared several distinguished names associated with the NAC's event. Some of those agreeing to serve as hosts included: Hamilton E. Holmes, M.D. who first integrated the University of Georgia, Thomas Houck of WGST Radio, John Calhoun of the Auburn Avenue Revitalization Committee, former Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson,

⁹⁴ Alexander, Neighborhood Arts Center Panel #1 interview with the author, transcript, 12.

Vivian Malone Jones, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, who integrated UGA with Holmes, Mayor Richard Arrington of Birmingham, Alabama and Councilman Joe L. Reed of Montgomery, Alabama. The list of local honorary hosts included civil rights activists Coretta Scott King, Jesse Jackson, Rev. Dr. Joseph Lowery of SCLC, Rev. C. T. Vivian, Atlanta City Councilman John Lewis, Georgia State Senator Julian Bond, and Rev. Dr. Ralph Abernathy.⁹⁵ Meadows remembers, “It was a *cultural* happening.”⁹⁶

The fundraisers did not, however, bring in the large amount of money the organization required. Some NAC artists experienced concerns around class issues including being asked to set up art for fundraisers, then being excluded from attending. Alexander remembers, “The board use to have . . . guess this is going to piss some people off, when they see or hear. I don’t care . . . but, the board used to have events that the artists weren’t invited to.”⁹⁷

Other concerns by artists were philosophically political but rooted in class difference. Alice Lovelace explains,

[There were] a lot of political struggles because this was an entity where the artist’s frame of reference was the community and the artist’s politics were quite often left and unashamedly . . . and unapologetically left politics and that did not at all reflect the board, which was more or less a handpicked board that Maynard had put in place which represented an entirely different frame of reference for the world. So there were a lot of conflicts between [the artists] and the board, and I usually spearheaded

⁹⁵ “Leaders Named Honorary Hosts for Arts Center,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 22-23, 1984, 8; also see “‘Selma Revisited’ to Open Sat.,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 29, 1984, 1.

⁹⁶ Meadows, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, March 3, 2010, transcript, 13A; her emphasis.

⁹⁷ Alexander, Neighborhood Arts Center Panel #1 interview with the author, transcript, 12.

them a lot of times.⁹⁸

Having a “different frame of reference for the world,” the board’s focus on class was juxtaposed to artists who were described as focusing on black aesthetics and the community, specifically Mechanicsville which was a working class, blue-collar neighborhood.

Alexander brewed over the philosophical differences artists had with board members, including chair O.T. Hammonds, concerning visiting artist David Hammons, from California and a personal friend of Riddle. Alexander explains Hammons’ *Homage to Naps*, exuding black aesthetic sentiments the board disapproved of:

David came through and did a show one time. Boy I will never forget it. And this is how we talk about how *detached* the board was from the artists. David Hammons came through one time and did a show where he went around to all the barbershops and swept the floors and got the hair . . . , and then he went to different places and got records, 78s and 45s records, from people. And then he went and got these little wreaths, and he put this piece together up on the wall in the gallery there that people came through and are still acclaiming this today. Because he later did the same thing in the airport. OK, got a big grant and did it in the airport, and three of the board members came in one day and told John Riddle to get it off the wall. John told them he wasn’t taking it off the wall.⁹⁹

Michael D. Harris spoke of southern conservatism as an aesthetic tendency referring to a preference for the figurative or a narrative approach to art.¹⁰⁰ Many artists gravitated to the figurative, according to Dunkley, but when they went outside the lines, as in the case

⁹⁸ Alice Lovelace, Neighborhood Arts Center Panel #1 interview with the author, January 29, 2009, transcript, 6.

⁹⁹ Alexander, Neighborhood Arts Center Panel #2 interview with the author, January 29, 2009, transcript, 10; Alexander’s emphasis.

¹⁰⁰ Harris, Panel #2 interview with the Author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 12.

of Alexander taking students to photograph a Klan rally or Hammons' *Naps*, board members represented this southern conservative voice calling out against black aesthetic adventurousness.

The larger voice of mainstream galleries and museums represented in New York or California was not present in Atlanta. The largest arts institutions locally were at the Woodruff Arts Center, comprised of the High Museum of Arts, the Atlanta Symphony, and the Alliance Theatre. They tended to set Atlanta's artistic standards. With only a few galleries of note, and even fewer representing African-American artists, the Black Arts Movement's connection to a communal responsibility in their work prevailed over what Harris further described as a pull "toward the mainstream expressive conditions."¹⁰¹

Riddle made entre to the High Museum with art that had unapologetically black themes. Although his roots were in the west coast, he is considered a "home grown" artist and this exhibit venue was a major accomplishment. Ironically, Atlanta's mainstream art scene became more supportive of artists outside of the southern region than local talent, with Radcliffe Bailey's 2011 exhibition, *Memory as Medicine*, some twenty-five years later being an exception.¹⁰² This external-over-local sentiment was also used to describe the relationship experienced with the National Black Arts Festival.

Historically and sociologically, however, there has been a legacy to the South's conservatism as well. Harris explains:

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *Radcliffe Bailey: Memory as Medicine*, Essay by Carol Thompson; contributions by René Paul Barilleaux, et al. (Atlanta, GA: High Museum of Art; Munich; New York: DelMonico Books/ Prestel, 2011).

The AU shows were contained within this educational setting There was segregation here [in the South] so you didn't have that [access to symphony, etc.] and then you have an agrarian society that is gradually urbanizing, so just generally art is not playing the same role as it did in these Northern urban centers where they had major philanthropist who helped and developed in the 30s. . . .¹⁰³

The creation of the BCA with Jackson and Lomax, Harris continues, “began to lay the groundwork for that kind of sensitivity to the arts.” The NAC was thus, a “log cabin” on the pioneer arts frontier and the artists were “missionaries.” For Harris, “The Neighborhood Arts Center [was] part of a larger vision, and it set up some structures.”¹⁰⁴ Contextualized as a “cabin” with “missionaries, the uniqueness and importance of the NAC more than thirty-five years later can now be acknowledged. It provided a spark, or catalyst, to Atlanta’s cultural growth.

Classes taught at the center were open to all with topics that explored black aesthetics. Just as Dunkley in visual arts shared her encounter with class and the family wanting to go to the circus, and Lovelace described the gender classism corrected in the dance program, Tom Jones in theater and John Eaton in music share their experiences. These examples also reveal how concerned NAC artists were with the community regardless of class.

Jones explained how theater brought art to the people. There was a bit of classism to the extent that he described a middle- to upper-class mentality of “I’m going to the AU

¹⁰³ Harris, Panel #2 interview with the Author. Jim Alexander, Sharrone Mitchell, Tina Dunkley, Michael Harris, January 23, 2009, transcript, 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 28.

Center to see a *play*.”¹⁰⁵ Joe Jennings expressed a similar status concerns, sharing that one of the real battles was the minds of the black elites,

. . . to stop thinking about . . . all the kids should be trying to get into the Atlanta Symphony, and to think about what we’re going to do to, to protect the performance, the preservation and the projection of *our* culture, . . . or do we really think its worthy? . . . [T]he highest goal we could achieve as a musician as far as [the black elite are] concerned, was to play in the Atlanta Symphony.¹⁰⁶

The community atmosphere, in comparison, was that anyone, young or old, with little or no background in the arts, could enjoy the NAC. As a community institution, the center did not operate under the “high art” misperceptions of exclusivity, even though instructors had impressive professional credentials.

Many community members were students involved in NAC classes. Jones remembered the population being extremely diverse. Art classes were free or very inexpensive (\$3-5), so any and everyone could attend. He recalls how “diverse” the theater participants could be:

I remember my first acting class. We had a woman (now I can look back, she was bipolar; she was on medication) who had been laid off, a working class woman. She had four teeth in the front, no teeth there, no teeth on the bottom. She wanted to be an actor because she felt she had something to say. She was a single mother who was on disability because of the medication that she was on so she was able to work sometimes and not able to work taking care of four kids . . . She was next to another guy who was a security guard for the Neighborhood Arts Center himself who happened to lock up when we left . . . and next to somebody else who was a young artist. It was as diverse as you could possibly get. There was no profile because the net they cast was a wide one. So anyone into being an artist, or whatever discipline was their flavor of choice, you could go to the Neighborhood Arts Center and you could take classes with that person

¹⁰⁵ Tom Jones, 21. Jones’ emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ Jennings, 22B. Jennings’ emphasis.

and they were free or they didn't cost much.¹⁰⁷

Economics circumstances were not meant to deter disadvantaged communities from exposure to the arts at the NAC. Jackson's "community arts" model was meant to fill the city's void. For a theater company to survive, finding a paying audience was equally important. Jones explained that the majority of his Jomandi audience was "white," and he felt he worked hardest to build a black clientele.¹⁰⁸ Jones' example reveals how all three themes (politics, race, and class) were often intertwined.

Theater companies quickly found that they had to do what they did best to find and create a "niche." Jones remembered that Theater of the Stars, located in Atlanta's downtown Peachtree Street arts district, had a reputation for bringing in big names such as Esther Rolle or Melba Moore. They produced a Philip Hayes Dean play and cast local actors. With Walter Dallas, Proposition Theatre Company started at the NAC, but his popularity forced him to move to downtown's Memorial Arts Center district, using the Alliance Theatre as his studio space for attracting paying patrons.

Jones recaps the state of theater in Atlanta this way:

You had to do really, really well. So it *forced* you to find your own niche and your own hook and to find that audience that would support that. So you didn't change your work necessarily to accommodate the audience. You had to find the audience that wanted to avail themselves to what it is you did.¹⁰⁹

In alignment with black aesthetic principles, artists workshopped productions at the NAC

¹⁰⁷ Tom Jones, 22-23.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 22. Jones' emphasis.

and charged minimal admission fees before presenting them to larger audiences paying higher box office prices. There were economic challenges to serving the “neighborhood” of the center, such as vandalism, break-ins, equipment and even art theft. However, the NAC was a place where life lessons were part of the community’s curriculum, not just lectures on art when they entered the center.

This last example summarizes best what roles NAC artists played in their community. Eaton encountered a former student during the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. He details their emotional reunion this way:

[T]here are thousands of people walking around during the Olympics and everything. This young man comes up to me and he says, “You’re Kolé right? That’s my African name. I said, “Yeah. Who are you?” He said, “You don’t recognize me do you?” I said, “Nah.” He said, “Let me sit down for a minute.” So he sat down next to me. He said, “I’m Junior.” . . . I said, “Yeah, I remember you . . . man you look good.” He’s got on a three-piece suit and he is all buttoned down and everything. Junior! He said, “Let me tell you something . . . since I have last seen you . . . I have been homeless. I have been strung out on drugs. I have been incarcerated and when I was at the very bottom, I remembered what you all had taught us as children and . . . I realized that I could do something positive.” He says that was the first rung on the ladder of me climbing out of that hole. When he got finished, we both were sobbing, with thousands of people around. Junior.¹¹⁰

Life lessons instilled in children at a young age remained with them even when teachers are no longer present. Eaton taught percussion at the NAC, but his collective responsibility to the arts having an impact on the community as much greater. “Junior,” a grown man who went from rock bottom to top salesman at a car dealership, remembered and implemented the lessons learned at the NAC. The effects of the arts may not be immediate, but examples after examples show their lifetime rewards.

¹¹⁰ Eaton, Eaton et al., Part 1, interview with the author, February , 15, 2009, 11-12.

Summary – Research Question #2

Where archival records lent the most evidence to the NAC's programs as examples of "Art for People's Sake," the oral history evidence was the most beneficial for the second research question. Namely, how did Atlanta's cultural politics enable the NAC to become a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement? The findings in the areas of politics, covered in chapter 7, and race and class issues, covered herein, all weighed heavily on the types of cultural forms produced and perpetuated in the city by the center.

From Jackson's inauguration commitment to the arts, to putting funding behind his words with the CETA and the BCA when other public pressures could have caused politicians to bend, Atlanta was the national exemplar of public dollars stimulating local economies with the arts. The NAC was integral to the politics of starting the city's jazz and theater festivals, all in an effort to bring constituents back into the city for more than employment objectives. From a racial and class perspective, Atlanta cultural politics were specific in their desire to bring the races together. The intra-racial and class dynamics, however, made some of the altruistic efforts of "Art for People's Sake" less than effective. Where in principle it was good to provide art for the masses, from an economic and political perspective, it did not seem to yield the rewards for the required efforts. As the city changed and the races became more comfortable interacting, having a dedicated space for Afrocentric programming, similar to the AUC Art Annuals from 1942-1969, was less essential particularly given the vast number of other political priorities.

The Neighborhood Arts Center's impact was grand during its run. Its legacies are even more numerous than first imagined. They are still being counted. "Art for People's Sake" can be derived from all of the multidisciplinary programs and from its intimate working relationship with the political structure that made art and culture propaganda central for the administration. Both artists and board members benefited from making an impact on Atlanta's cultural politics and the southern expression of the Black Arts Movement it typified.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The symbolic value in Ebon Dooley's closing interview remark, that "we provided a platform for the flowers in the community to bloom and reveal themselves,"¹¹¹ best embodies the lasting cultural relevance of the Neighborhood Arts Center. The art itself was the center's activism, and the facility provided an incubator, or catalyst, with a place to call home and space to grow black arts. The research has been a cultural history of a unique, multidisciplinary arts venture guided by the Black Arts Movement principle of "Art for People's Sake." Through this effort the research has also been able to present an historical chronicle of the cultural politics of a city and a region within the Black Arts Movement.

Atlanta was attractive to newcomers because of its new African-American leadership and its progressive politics compared to other southern cities. Dooley, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Lovelace, Michael Simanga, and a host of other writers and artists made the city their new home because Mayor Maynard Jackson took a lead in cultural politics, providing financial support in the city. His motives were political in as much as placing public support behind arts and culture bolstered the local economy, however Jackson also realized the value to the citizenry in general provided by cultural programs.

The findings for the first research question of how the Neighborhood Arts Center

¹¹¹ Ebon Dooley, interview with the author, Atlanta, GA, January 28, 2005, transcript, 13.

met its Black Arts Movement motto of “Art for People’s Sake” continually reinforced artists’ responsibility to the community that nurtured them, be they dancers, musicians, creative writers, actors, or visual artists. The free component of CETA classes enabled the NAC to have an exceptional calling card, attracting large numbers of student audience members from across the city to their Mechanicsville community. There were several professionally-trained dance teachers to emerge through the center, creating the Fred Taylor Dance Company or Sharrone Mitchell’s Three’s Company. There were also master classes offered. Several former students and teachers have since gained acclaim in their disciplines.

The Neighborhood Arts Center itself, however, suffered greatly, simultaneously a victim of a shortage of funding and loss of the strong political support it once enjoyed. Its Black Arts Movement programs proved very appealing to national and international visitors, and though the NAC helped to put Atlanta on the world map as a cultural city, the center did not prosper. An aesthetic class rift appeared between the center artists and its board that proved insurmountable.

The Neighborhood Arts Center, as a grassroots art organization in the Southern region of the Black Arts Movement, functionalized the concepts of black consciousness through its “Art for People’s Sake” motto embedded in the plethora of programs that cross-pollinated the various arts disciplines as detailed in chapter three. HBCUs may have been the original hosts for Atlanta’s black aesthetic cultural gatherings, from the AUC’s Summer Theatre presentations and the Atlanta University Art Annuals for visual artists, to the regular music programs for segregated audiences, but grassroots-arts ventures created a place, and space, in Atlanta as well. The Neighborhood Arts Center

and its SCAAW's regional writers' conference, for example, was welcomed to the campus of Clark College. While colleges primarily served an academic function and occasionally reached out to the community, it was the NAC's continued grassroots, community presence that nurtured arts activists such as Dooley, Lovelace, Simanga, Jim Alexander, and Kanita Poet, who became cultural workers in the sense the Black Arts Movement intended. In fact, Lovelace's impact on the Atlanta community and beyond is still being felt as past executive director for the Arts Exchange, an inner city artist's colony in Atlanta, for Alternate ROOTS, a regional artist's service organization, and most recently administrator for the Southeastern Regional office of the American Friends Services Committee.

Lovelace's words in the oral history interview actually provided the research's titled, "Our art was itself our activism." Many NAC artists expanded their activism to the AUC, leaving the center to assume various faculty and administrative positions, such as Joe Jennings, Tina Dunkley, and Alexander. Many of the NAC's board members were also AUC affiliates, either on faculty, or as alumni. Carol Mitchell Leon taught theater at Clark College and collaborated with the NAC. The ongoing AUC-NAC relationship is best categorized as one of reciprocity more so than one of beholding to the other as scholars have previously indicated. Conservative campus environments needed a community outlet for cultural radicalism, and the grassroots community benefited from academic standards conveyed through professional artistic instruction.

The Neighborhood Arts Center was also the place for the deliberation of aesthetic concerns of individual artists; for the intersection of local, regional, and national forms; and for the hosting of national conferences and international guests. The local-national

amalgamation of aesthetic forms is especially evident given the creative writing findings. “Providing a platform,” as Dooley shares above, the NAC allowed the community to bloom like flowers and realize its essence, the soul of Atlanta’s African-American culture through dance, music, creative writing, theater, and visual arts. The cultural essence of the regional was analyzed at the Black South literary conference. It was also embedded locally, in Mechanicsville, in the form of the center’s newsletter titled *Pot Likker*, meant to portray the essence of the people like the liquid from collard greens.

As a physical place, the NAC was essential to black theater in Atlanta. It was an incubator, serving such companies as Proposition Theatre, People’s Survival Theatre, and Jomandi Productions, Inc. It was a meeting space, a rehearsal space, and a performance venue. Most notably, the research revealed that the NAC was the conduit and catalyst for black theater and actors to gain access to majority venues and make career moves beyond the South.

The center served as the networking space moving careers forward such as actors Samuel L. Jackson, and even Spike Lee, a noted film producer, found himself at the center as a Morehouse College student. Carol Mitchell Leon went on to greatness in the Atlanta theater community. Kenny Leon, who is a Clark College alumni and networked at the NAC, served as director of the Alliance Theatre for many years before starting his own company True Colors.

Tom Jones remembers Tyler Perry being in the audience at Jomandi productions. Akbar Imhotep, who continues to entertain Atlanta audiences as a storyteller, puppeteer, and author, got his artistic start at the NAC. Lovelace, Sandra Dunson Franks, and Elisabeth Omilami still keep creative writing and theater as passions while managing

other careers. Many of Atlanta's actors, at some point in their young artistic development, found the NAC to be their place and space for black aesthetic programming, or "Arts for People's Sake" that inspired their careers. All of their art was their activism.

Atlanta visual artists that intersected with the NAC have a history too of blazing new trails by integrating southern art schools and initiating black visual art organizations. Jewel Simon with the National Conference of Artists, or Alma Simmons leading Gallery I in the Atlanta Public School system, are just a few examples. The NAC would serve as the institution for the visual arts offering regional support, similar to what it did with SCAAW for Southern writers, providing exhibition space and curating shows, and managing numerous special events at the Romare Bearden Gallery. Emerging, mid-career, and nationally-known talent benefited by having the location to intermingle with other like-minded artists of all disciplines. Attracting such national talents as Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, David Hammons, Paul Goodnight, and Varnette Honeywell, locally-based artists at varying stages in their careers, like Riddle, Harris, Alexander, and Attiya Melton, were able to further their network with the NAC serving as this catalyst. Independent gallery owners such as Crystal Britton, a board member and author, and Marion Langley, a framer and NAC supporter, thrived with the increased attention and market demand for black art in the 1980s. Over time, the center focused more on the visual arts, shifting away from performing arts as it matured under the board's leadership with O.T. Hammonds, an avid art collector.

Initially, the mural team's outreach was the most visible product. Its *Wall of Respect* for black history garnering the most impact around Atlanta situated on Piedmont and Auburn Avenue, the street of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth home. Today, all that

remains of the mural is the whitewashed wall and a sense of disrespect for African-American culture by city entities that allowed such an overt attack. As the center continued, exhibition collaborations developed drawing more and more star-power, and audiences “trekked” to the old Peter James Bryant building by the hundreds to see national names as Bearden, Catlett, Goodnight and Honeywell. The local talent also benefited from the exposure.

The political climate for funding ethnic arts inspired local efforts during the NAC’s existence. Atlanta’s black cultural center created a fertile atmosphere for the exploration of black aesthetics in all arts disciplines. Artists commented that the competition was not as stiff in Atlanta as in the North or on the West coast. Ultimately, though, the responsibility of the artist to his/her community was constantly reiterated at Atlanta’s Neighborhood Arts Center. The mindset of “our art itself was our activism” permeated, exuding a spirit of responsibility to the community with every artistic program. As much as Maulana Karenga desired the black aesthetic to be functional, collective, and committed, holdovers from the Black Arts Movement, NAC artists demonstrated an almost effortless approach to repaying a community debt in the form of the art they developed, in the presentations they exhibited, as well as in the life lessons they instilled. This was the essence of the Black Arts Movement’s “Art for People’s Sake” philosophy, a motto Atlanta’s center embodied in its numerous programs.

How did the city’s cultural politics enable the NAC to become a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement? The answer to this second research question was best stated by Atlanta’s Mayor Jackson, “The arts and the city are inseparable.” Art became a catalyst for cultural change as the findings for the second research question

support. Three thematic areas (politics, race, and class) emerged from the findings. For the theme of politics, Shirley Franklin's synopsis of the period that "we were looking for a way to be a catalyst" also confirms the research's title of "Our art itself was our activism." The center's "Arts for People's Sake" programs radiated through the cultural politics of the city.

Starting at the top with Jackson's administration, there was a commitment to the arts as a "catalyst" for cultural change. Many NAC participants remarked that his family upbringing around the arts was foundational. From these strong family roots, he committed to making the arts a part of Atlanta's political agenda for improving tourism and trade, as well as the quality of life for the local citizenry. He followed through on this promise with the creation of a branch of municipal government, the BCA, and with supportive services such as community arts centers, the NAC initiative in this case. With the numerous city festivals in theater, dance, and music, specifically the Atlanta Free Jazz Festival, Jackson was the embodiment of his title "cultural mayor" in words and in deeds. His local agenda for municipal arts support, even in lean economic times, was fundamental to his national stance among the U.S. Conference of Mayors which he chaired. Visualizing the arts as a catalyst for cultural change was a key political item for Jackson's mayoral success, and his stance supported the arts as far from frivolous. They were proven to have positive economic impact, as well as to improve a community's quality of life. Michael Lomax and Franklin reiterated this point with the Neighborhood Arts Center was Atlanta's initial cultural catalyst.

With any movement, however, change occurs with the help of many, not just one person at the top. The "cultural mayor" may have been the public face nationally for arts,

culture, and a new South. It was the grassroots efforts within Atlanta's local African-American community, however, that shaped and created the place and a space that became black arts' catalytic force, the Neighborhood Arts Center.

The findings for the second research question also confirm that race was a second theme to Atlanta's cultural politics having an impact on the NAC being a southern expression of the BAM. Starting with the biracial balancing of the Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee for the Arts, the Atlanta School Board, and even the Neighborhood Arts Center's boards, and continuing through further racial integration on the city's streets with arts festivals, all were particular to Atlanta's tradition of "accommodationist" politics. First, racial accommodation existed with the white population determining benefits, but "regime politics" saw real change with the election of Atlanta's first African-American mayor.

The need for racial balancing and inclusion was equally, if not more, of a factor as it became the mode of success for politically appointed advisory committees, school boards, and non-profit boards. Jackson's commitment to the arts eventually crowned him the "culture mayor." Program initiatives included cultural arts festivals in dance, music, theater, and the visual arts, to bring the citizenry back to the city. They also included Mechanicsville's community arts center, the NAC, as a model of what the arts could accomplish in underserved neighborhoods. Ethnic expressions manifested in the form of an African Village on the pier of Piedmont Park during its annual arts festival, and in the form of a regional conference on Black South Literature, both started in 1978. The southern expression included arts support from the top down, and the responsibility of the artist was to the community that was the source of inspiration.

This confluence of factors all worked together to make the NAC a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement, and Atlanta a city squarely rooted in the second tier of urban centers constituting the spread of this national movement. The research findings on the center offer an in-depth look at its institutional model and supportive infrastructure. Further research on other important urban manifestations of the movement is also warranted.

While southern conservatism existed on boards, both within black and in mainstream institutions, there had to be that “thing” that pushed against it. In the arts with more progressives in leadership like Jackson, Lomax, and Franklin, and organizations such as the Neighborhood Arts Center continuing the black art show legacy of the Atlanta Arts Annuals, a true grassroots art movement can thrive. The NAC provided venues for black art to move from the margins of society to the center of consciousness and aesthetic preference, component elements of the conceptual framework of this research based on Molefi Asanti’s criteria for Afrocentricity.

The NAC was created in Atlanta as a model for urban community arts centers delivering services to underrepresented populations of its constituency, stimulating the economy and improving the quality of life in the urban center. Having a building and paid staff supported by public CETA funding, instead of privately solicited support, was critical to the NAC’s success. The NEA’s Expansion Arts division provided another critical funding piece of the puzzle. While ideas for ethnic programming abound, having a branch of government dedicated to its support, such as Expansion Arts, made sustainability feasible without compromising aesthetic principles from the findings the

NAC's programmatic activities were most prolific during these periods of funding strength.

The causes of the NAC's demise could have been the absence of funding at a time when the social and political climate demanded more aggressive outreach and funding diversity for survival. Supporting the maintenance of the physical structure took a disproportionate amount of funds which precipitated a move to a smaller location. Auburn Avenue, the new "neighborhood" for the NAC, was not without issues of its own as community block grants were slower to develop this historic section of downtown, and thus the audience for "Arts on Auburn." Changing from "free" to "fee" did not help matters either. Its constituents were not in the habit of paying for art services.

Diversifying funding sources is an essential take away learned from the NAC's mistakes as a non-profit arts institution. Having a financial model that supports the organization through a consortium of organizations is also fundamental. In Atlanta, public support for the arts models has improved the quality of life for areas of the community that have community arts centers. For example, the Southwest Arts Center, created in 2001, has a performance space for theater and dance, an exhibit space for visual arts, a paid staff funded by the Fulton County Arts Council (FCAC), and offers a full schedule of fee-based instruction for all ages. Hammonds House Museum also receives the majority of its support from the FCAC, but as an independent non-profit, it depends on memberships, arts sales, and fundraisers. The local community is slowly coming to understand and appreciate its part in the political continuum that supports the arts in Atlanta.

This research on the NAC as a BAM institution significantly adds to the academic

scholarship by offering explanation as to the specific circumstances causing the end of the movement in Atlanta and its correlation with the end of federal CETA funding. The study supports regional assertions for the movement with the Atlanta's NAC being placed squarely in the South, but it seems to hold a top spot in the second tier status among community art centers nationwide. The institution was productive and effective, as well as functional, collective and committed, all components of Maulana Karenga's criteria. The NAC's art was its activism, and having a physical place facilitated artists making a space for the centrality of Afrocentricity. The simultaneity of art form and social location made for the center's uniqueness. The research rectifies the omission of Atlanta's Neighborhood Arts Center as a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement.

Further Study

The most prominent institution to come out of the research as a predecessor to the NAC was the Atlanta Center for Black Art (ACBA), created by SNCC activists Cynthia Saiddie Washington and Brice Smith. Some interviews allude to the NAC model being a product of the SNCC Freedom Schools and the BPP's Breakfast Program for Children. The initial interview conducted with Ebon Dooley shed light on this connection, but a follow-up to review his personal connection to the ACBA went unfulfilled due to his death.¹¹² His archives are rich with information on the ACBA, an unpublished volume of *Rhythm* magazine, and his work creating Radio Free Georgia (WRFG FM89.3), in addition to his time in Chicago with OBAC.

The history of a continuum of cultural predecessors supported in Atlanta, with the

¹¹² Dooley's collection was just beginning to be processed by the AARL at the time of this research.

ACBA and the AU Art Annuals as examples, has not been chronicled. Other early institutions such as the National Conference of Artists (NCA), began in Atlanta to give artists of color a platform, have a national presence with active chapters in the North, primarily in New York. Institutional legacies of the NAC abound in Atlanta as well. A biography of Lomax's cultural career in Atlanta would reveal his hand in the creation of the cultural climate of the city. The creation of the FCAC, modeled after the BCA and led by Lomax, link with a close progeny. The Hammonds House Museum, founded by Edward Spriggs in 1988, was created for the presentation of African-American fine arts in a nineteenth century Victorian home in the West End neighborhood. Renovated by NAC's board chair O.T. Hammonds, it was to present his personal collection of Romare Bearden's, Haitian art, and other works acquired during his lifetime. The FCAC support developed as result of the collaboration between Spriggs and Lomax. The Auburn Avenue Research Library also owes a debt to Lomax as does the National Black Arts Festival (NBAF). This history is yet to be documented.

With assistance from the professionals at the NAC, the Atlanta Life Insurance Company created an Art Annual competition in 1981 when they moved into their new corporate headquarters on Auburn Avenue. It was an effort to honor the annuals done by the AUC from 1942-1969. The company amassed a significant corporate collection using this vehicle, but it was only able to maintain the initiative for a relatively short time. Neither catalog nor history of this initiative exists.

As NAC's executive director, John Riddle made a significant impact in Atlanta, yet no retrospective has been coordinated nor has a catalog of his work been produced. Many individual theater artists were able to establish themselves in the city and on the

national art scene because of the NAC, including actors Samuel L. Jackson, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Kenny Leon, Carol Mitchell Leon, Spike Lee, and Bill Nunn. Their careers and foundations in Atlanta have not been recorded.

The arts served as a catalyst to unify the races in the city during the Maynard Jackson administration, a potentially a risky venture at the time. The NAC became a model for publically supported community arts programs. Independent of city politics, it espoused a black aesthetic agenda of “Arts for People’s Sake” rooted in the Black Arts Movement. With its multidisciplinary platform, art was activism: from African dance performances in Mechanicsville and big band jazz in the housing projects and local schools, to theatrical productions of Harriett Tubman and the *Wall of Respect* mural. The city’s cultural politics, clustered around themes of politics, race, and class, reveal how the NAC transcended the customary boundaries to become a southern expression of the Black Arts Movement.

Although the Neighborhood Arts Center is a fallen leaf from the movement’s tree, many oral histories came together to honor its historic programming and legacies. The southern branch of the Black Arts Movement that produced the center spans in width, from a broad, dominant CETA-funded platform for the arts to a thin twig of its original existence by its unceremonious conclusion on Broad Street. It produced many flowering leaves in the individual and institutional legacies that continue as NAC babies furthering the Black Arts Movement into the twenty-first century.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS CENTER

	DATE	TYPE	FIRST	LAST	GROUP	ART DISCIPLINE
1	4/13/2006	Indiv.	Jim	Alexander	Artist	Visual
2	3/13/2011	Indiv.	Zachariah	Anderson	Artist	Visual
3	1/28/2006	Indiv.	Ebon	Dooley	Artist	Writer
4	6/3/2010	Indiv.	Joe	Jennings	Artist	Music
5	3/12/2009	Indiv.	Tom	Jones	Artist	Theater
6	6/4/2010	Indiv.	Glenda	McGee- Phillips	Artist	Theater
7	4/7/2006	Indiv.	Lovett	Thompson	Artist	Visual
8	3/22/2011	Indiv.	Samuel O.	Williams	Artist	Theater
9	4/13/2006	Indiv.	Marquettea	Bell- Johnson	Audience- Student	Student
10	4/12/2006	Indiv.	Raymond	Cody	Audience- student	Visual
11	4/21/2010	Indiv.	Abby	Drue	Audience	Visual
12	4/9/2006	Indiv.	Arthur (Art)	Eubanks	Audience- student	Visual
13	4/27/2010	Indiv.	Julia	Fenton	Audience	Visual

	DATE	TYPE	FIRST	LAST	GROUP	ART DISCIPLINE
14	4/4/2006	Indiv.	James	Few	Audience	Visual
15	2/26/2010	Indiv.	Richard	Long	Audience	Visual
16	11/15/2004	Indiv.	Dann	Moore, Sr.	Audience	All
17	4/11/2006	Indiv.	Charlotte	Riley-Webb	Audience	Visual
18	2/3/2010	Indiv.	Janice	Sikes	Audience	All
19	11/29/2004	Indiv.	Edward (Ed)	Spriggs	Audience	All
20	3/3/2010	Indiv.	Terry	Thomas	Audience	Visual
21	11/22/2004	Indiv.	N. Louise	Willingham	Audience	All
22	5/14/2010	Indiv.	Michael	Lomax	Board	All
23	3/3/2010	Indiv.	Janet (Jan)	Meadows	Board	Visual
	2/15/2010	Group 4	Jim	Alexander	Artist	Photography
24	2/15/2010	Group 4	Shirley	Franklin	Board	All
25	3/4/2010	Group 5	Juliet	Blackburn- Beamon	Audience	Visual
26	3/4/2010	Group 5	Georgianne	Thomas	Board	All
27	5/25/2010	Group 6	James	Patterson	Audience	Music
28	5/25/2010	Group 6	Joyce	Johnson	Board	Music

	DATE	TYPE	FIRST	LAST	GROUP	ART DISCIPLINE
	6/11/2010	Group 7	John	Eaton	Artist	Music
29	6/11/2010	Group 7	Carlton	Molette	Board	Theater
	1/23/2009	Panel 1	Jim	Alexander	Artist	Visual
30	1/23/2009	Panel 1	Alice	Lovelace	Artist	Writer
31	1/23/2009	Panel 1	Michael	Samanga	Artist	Writer
32	1/23/2009	Panel 1	Steve	Seaburg	Artist	Visual
	1/23/2009	Panel 2	Jim	Alexander	Artist	Visual
33	1/23/2009	Panel 2	Tina	Dunkley	Artist	Visual
34	1/23/2009	Panel 2	Michael D.	Harris	Artist	Visual
35	1/23/2009	Panel 2	Sharrone	Mitchell	Artist	Dance
36	2/15/2009	Panel 3	John	Eaton	Artist	Music
37	2/15/2009	Panel 3	Rika	Eaton	Audience- student	Dance
38	2/15/2009	Panel 3	Sandra Dunson	Franks	Artist	Theater
39	2/15/2009	Panel 3	Peggy	Ludaway	Audience- Student	Dance
40	2/15/2009	Panel 3	Lynn	Marshall- Linnemeier	Artist- Student	Visual

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Neighborhood Arts Center Participants

1. All of you here participated with the Neighborhood Arts Center. As a way of getting started let's talk about the factors that influenced your decision to get involved. [if not raised by the group, probe for the importance of each of the following:]
 - a. Getting paid
 - b. Having a space
 - c. Its location
 - d. Because of the arts
 - e. People it was supposed to serve
 - f. Other - explain
2. Let's discuss how you feel about the NAC experience. Was it a pleasant or unpleasant experience? [Probe: Why? What factors were most important in making the experience positive or negative?]
3. If you could have changed the NAC in any way, what would you have changed? [Why? Why would this change make a difference?]
4. Some of you were involved with Music, some with Visual Arts, some with Theater and Dance. What differences in these interests existed? [Probe: Why do you think these differences existed?]
5. Have any of you had any contact with students/audience since the NAC closed? [Probe: What kind of contact? Was this contact pleasant or unpleasant?]
6. What were your expectations for the NAC? [Probe: How many of you feel these expectations were met?]
7. Is there anything else about your NAC experience you would like to share that we have not yet touched upon?
8. When and why did you and your family move to Atlanta?
9. Do you have any memories of Maynard Jackson's interest in the arts?

10. How does politics affect your art?

11. Focus Group Questions -

Board members will be asked:

- What was your position on the Board?
- Why were you asked to join the NAC board?
- How long were you involved (from when to when)?
- What do you remember as successful/not successful about the NAC during your board tenure?
- Were there any benefits to you by being on the Board?
- What did you see as NAC's the limitations? Successes? Failures? Greatest challenge?

Artist Instructors/NAC Administrators will be asked:

- What's their medium?
- How did you see yourself fulfilling the "Arts for People's Sake" mission of the NAC?
- How did they perform public arts (classes, instruction, etc.)?
- What was their studio/private production?
- How was the NAC beneficial to their art?
- What were the challenges?

Funders will be asked:

- What about the NAC made you fund their programs?
- Why do you believe funding was reduced or cease?

APPENDIX C

CHRONOLOGY NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS CENTER

- 1974 Maynard Jackson Atlanta's first African-American Mayor; Mayor's Ad Hoc Committee on the Arts
Neighborhood Multi-Purpose Arts Center was formally proposed on October 31, 1974 in a letter to the Mayor
Located on 252 Georgia Avenue in the Mechanicsville Neighborhood; Southside Daycare Association shared building with the NAC
- 1975 Mayor's Day for the Arts (May 9) – Samuel L. Jackson pantomimes
NAC created with Sandra Swanns as Director and John Kole Eaton as Deputy Director; located facility on Georgia Avenue in the Mechanicsville Neighborhood
- 1976 John Riddle, NAC Director, commissioned to create *Expelled Because of Color* for the Georgia Black Legislative Caucus (GBLC)
NAC Mural Team (Amos Ashanti Johnson, Nathan Hoskins, and Verna Parks) created *The Wall of Respect* with a contribution by Kanita Poet (July)
Proposition Theater (created in Sept. 1976) and Walter Dallas house company for the NAC
City of Atlanta implements one percent levy for art formula on all capital construction projects; became part of annual building program¹
- 1977 *Olio* (salute to Paul Laurence Dunbar) performed in multipurpose room of the NAC; Proposition holds first auditions (Oct.)
- 1978 Jackson participates with the National Endowment for the Arts and Ad Council's media campaign with the U.S. Conference of Mayors (June).
Lomax moves to Fulton County as elected commissioner of Parks & Recreation; Franklin takes over BCIA
Atlanta Free Jazz Festivals began
The Seagull premiered on NAC's new Stage One.
New Play Project (with BCA) started

¹ "National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, 1976, September 19," Series D: Speeches and Speaking Requests," Maynard Jackson Collection, 1st and 2nd Terms (1974-1982), Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library, Box 9, Folder 33

- 1978 NAC creates African Village at the Arts Festival of Atlanta
 Joan Mondale, Vice President's wife visits NAC (March 8)
 National Conference of Artists at the NAC (March 22-23, 1978); Romare Bearden visits artists in studios; NAC named visual arts gallery the "Romare Bearden Gallery"
 Multi-Purpose Room – Joe Jennings and Lifeforce performed jazz; production of Olio (room renovated short time after April 1978 production)
 Southern Conference of African-American Writers (SCAAW) started with Alice Lovelace; Hoyt Fuller was the first keynote speaker; held at the John Kennedy Community Center (October)
 Jomandi Productions starts as the second resident theater company (October)
- 1979 New Play Project (with BCA)
 SCAAW's 2nd Annual Regional Conference with guest speaker Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee)
- 1980 National Dance Company of Senegal at the Atlanta Civic Center (April 1)
 3rd Annual New Play Project (with BCA)
 3rd Annual Atlanta Free Jazz Festival (August)
 John Eaton resigns (August 20)
 Glenda McGee, accepted Deputy Director position Sept. 22, 1980; moved to Atlanta Nov. 14, 1980² (1981-1882)³
- 1981 *Endangered Species* exhibition honoring Atlanta's "Missing and Murdered Children Cases," featuring Paul Goodnight, Joseph Holton and Varnette Honeywood (February)⁴
 Tom Jones wrote "Summer Green and Jazz" (March)
 "Last Breeze of Summer" Children's program (Aug 17-22)⁵
 Paul Robeson Performance and Lecture Series (October)⁶
 Linda Ibezue, Office Manager (10/1/81- 9/30/82 grant period)⁷

² Letter from Glenda McGee to NAC Board, NAC 91-009-36.014, n.d.

³ NAC 91-009-02-011.

⁴ "Neighborhood Arts Center: An Endangered Species," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 20, 1981, 3.

⁵ "Final Report: 'Paul Robeson Performance and Lecture Series 1981 – Synthesis,' National Endowment for the Arts, 1980-1981, NAC 91-009-36.012.

⁶ "Final Report: 'Last Breeze of Summer' The NAC summer program for children, 1981" National Endowment for the Arts, 1980-1981, NAC 91-009-36.012.

⁷ "Neighborhood Arts Center, Inc., Final Descriptive Report, Grant #22-5322-228," NAC91.009.13.005, 1.

- 1981 Marsha Jackson, Program Coordinator (10/1/81- 9/30/82 grant period)
Joseph Horton, Financial Manager (10/1/81- 9/30/82 grant period)
CETA funds end and staffing reduced from thirty to three members
- 1982 Andrew Young elected Atlanta's second African-American Mayor
Writer/Producer/Filmmaker Monty Ross reads to summer youth theater program,
"The Children's Readers Theatre" taught by Carol Mitchell Leon (September)
Gallery I, started at Douglass High School, renamed the Alma Simmons
Memorial Gallery in honor of arts educator and NAC board member
- 1984 NAC selected historic Oddfellows Building (built in 1913) (July)
Offices moved to Auburn Avenue (December 15)⁸
Ms. Georgia Allen served as Interim Director (Jan); Ebon Dooley had been
released⁹
- 1985 Board Chair Otis T. Hammonds died from Leukemia (June)¹⁰
NAC reopened with slogan "Art on Auburn" including a multi-purpose Romare
Bearden Gallery on first floor (June)
Three artists-in-residence studios opened (November)
3,500 sq. ft. of space leased¹¹
- 1986 Fire at Georgia Avenue location
Summer Arts Camp, Outreach Program and Youth Theater – 10 artists, 450
attendees¹²
TaRessa Stone begins serving as Executive Director (June)¹³
Juanita Essa, Administrative Assistant
Finley Nix, Program Assistant
Arts Festival of Atlanta (September)
Residency Artists: Kevin Hamilton, Eddie Granderson, Charlotte Cameron, Akbar
Imhotep (September)¹⁴

⁸ NAC 91-009-06-023-"General Report on the Management of the Neighborhood Arts Center, July 1987," 6.

⁹ "O.T. Hammonds to National Endowment of the Arts," January 9, 1984, NAC 91-009-13.022.

¹⁰ Lenn Sisson, "Otis T. Hammonds Dies; was Doctor, Art Patron," Atlanta Journal and Constitution, June 16, 1985, 7B.

¹¹ "History of the Neighborhood Arts Center," NAC 91-009-13.001, NEA nd c. 1986.

¹² "Final Report, Georgia Council for the Arts, Project 7/1/86-6/30/87," 2, NAC 91-009-13.014.

¹³ "Biographies of Key Staff People," NAC 91-009-13.001, NEA.

¹⁴ "Final Report, Georgia Council for the Arts, Project 7/1/86-6/30/87," 2, NAC 91-009-13.014.

- 1986 Exhibit: *Black Artists Living in Mid-Atlantic States*, Willie Birch, Vincent Smith, Gilberto Antonio Wilson (October)¹⁵
Board Member George Howell, Esq. serves as acting president (November)
“Acting President”¹⁶
- 1987 Michael Simanga serves as Executive Director at the Art on Auburn location
- 1988 National Black Arts Festival starts with the leadership of Michael Lomax
Anita Thomas-Whatley part of the NAC when it moved to Board Street location¹⁷
- 1989 Angela Brown serves as Executive Director (on 1989 board list)¹⁸
- 1990 Neighborhood Arts Center closes

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Grant: NEA Special Exhibition ‘Women in their Prime’,” NAC 91-009-13.010.

¹⁷ Name on report submitted 5/23/85 as Director.

¹⁸ “Neighborhood Arts Center, Inc. 1989 Board of Directors,” NAC 91-009-13.016.

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