

The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. By James Edward Smethurst. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 471 pp.

In *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*, James Edward Smethurst examines the connections and ruptures between old left and old Black nationalist movements with the Black Arts movement. Smethurst points to the ways that Black artists and intellectuals of the Black Arts movement rejected and incorporated older political and cultural radicalisms to create new meanings of nation. Although the author examines regional aspects of the Black Arts movement, he notes that the local aspects cannot be separated from the national discourse of the movement. This trans-regional approach illustrates not only the ways that Black cultural and political activists of the Black Arts and Black Power movements engaged with one another, but also the ways these two movements engaged with other political and cultural movements.

Smethurst points to the debates, ideologies, institutions, and aesthetics of the Black Arts movement. The author examines African-American culture and politics during the era of the Cold War, civil rights, and 1950s decolonization. He outlines the rise and fall of Popular Front aesthetics and its influence on Black nationalist cultural production. Popular Front aesthetics mixed “high” and “low” art and also took interest in American identity, race, and ethnicity, in which Black nationalist writers were particularly interested. Smethurst further investigates the interrelated school of New American Poetry, in which early Black Arts writers established a provisional home, and other ideological and institutional debates within the Black Arts movement. For instance, some African-American activists combined Maulana Karenga’s perception of neo-African history with African-American and popular culture in ways that countered Karenga’s cultural nationalism. The author outlines the impact of Black Power ideology on artistic practice. He also briefly examines the oppressive gender dynamics within the movement.

Smethurst pays particularly close attention to the unique regional aspects of the movement. New York City and the greater Northeast were cultural hubs for Black Arts and Black Power activists, artists, and ideologies. Smethurst argues that this region was the center for Black diasporic cultural radicalism during the late 1950s and early 1960s. He then turns to the significance of the Midwest in the movement. Cities such as Detroit and Chicago housed some of the most influential Black Arts institutions and also contributed to the expansion of the movement nationally. Next, the author examines the emergence and contributions of the Black Arts movement on the West Coast. The movement was also highly affected by other cultural movements, such as the Chicano movement and Asian-American literary nationalism and multiculturalism. Finally, the author describes the Black Arts movement in the South and notes that this region had tremendous influence on the movement nationally due in part to the large number of historically Black colleges and universities and the high population of African Americans residing in that region. Smethurst focuses on the regional aspects of the Black Arts movement to illustrate the ways it functioned differently throughout the United States. Although the movement contained various cultural hubs geographically, Smethurst posits that because these centers were in constant communication with one another, there was a sense of national belonging within the larger movement.

Smethurst uses an interdisciplinary approach to present his argument by combining literary criticism, artistic analysis, and history. The author provides a compellingly detailed account of the regional aspects of the Black Arts movement. Although his analysis of the emergence of the Black Arts movement and its influences are thorough, Smethurst could have devoted more attention to the hyper-masculine, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric of the movement and how it varied across regions. However, the author does at least allocate a few pages to these debates. This book fits strongly in the fields of African American Studies and Cultural Studies due to its multi-methodological approach and interdisciplinary analysis. In the end, the author argues that the Black Arts movement had significant influence not only on debates over what signifies culture and art, but also on contemporary debates involving public funding for the arts. Overall, he contends that the various regional aspects of this movement created new understandings of the arts, culture, and nationalism.

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