

Craig Werner : On "The Boy Died in My Alley"

Ralph Ellison . . . defines the blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism." Langston Hughes . . . is in basic agreement when he writes: "sad as Blues may be, there's almost always something humorous about them--even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying." . . .

This resigned lyrical attitude toward experience has, however, come under heavy attack recently [in the 1970s] from some militant Black critics. While praising the lasting beauty of the blues, Ron Karenga asserts that "the blues are invalid; for they teach resignation, in a word acceptance of reality--and we have come to change reality." [Amiri] Baraka, conversely, presents a strong defense for the blues tradition. . . . Baraka, presenting an "organic" theory of Black music, argues that "the songs, the music, changed as the people did." The blues, Baraka continues, "is, it seems, the deepest expression of memory. Experience re/feeling. It is the racial memory. . . . The Blues (impulse) lyric (song) is ever descriptive of a plane of evolution, a direction." The specific content of the blues, in this scheme, is a function of a fluid reality rather than a determinant of attitude, making them much more adaptable to a militant Black perspective.

Brooks' recent poems support Baraka's contention. For without sacrificing any of her characteristic lyrical emphasis on painful past experience, she has put an increasingly greater emphasis on Black pride and assertion. . . . A Black youth has been murdered in the alley behind the speaker's home. When asked by a policeman if she heard the shot which killed him, the speaker's first reaction is a feeling of historical inevitability and resignation. . . . When pressed further by the policeman's questions, however, the speaker begins to recognize her own involvement in the youth's death, an involvement stemming from exactly the passive attitude Karenga associates with the blues tradition. . . . But the act of realization is also an act of dissociation from the passivity of the tradition. At the poem's climax the speaker perceives the essential bond linking all Black people, while maintaining the lyrical blues attitude toward the immediate generative experience. . . . The final lines quietly endorse the blues' confrontation of the past painful experience, but at the same time hold the promise of the transformation hinted at in the immediately preceding lines. Implicitly they promise that the insight derived from the blues can be transformed into a direct form of resistance: "The red floor of my alley / is a special speech to me."

Werner, Craig. "Gwendolyn Brooks: Tradition Black and White." *Minority Voices* 1.2 (1977): 27-38.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Criticism Target:

Gwendolyn Brooks [2]

Author:

Craig Werner [3]

Poem:

The Boy Died in My Alley ^[4]

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[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/craig-werner>

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