

# MEETING LEROI JONES AND OTHER REFLECTIONS

By Judy Juanita

**Guest Editor’s Note:** The following are two important and historic selections from the work of Judy Juanita. Ms. Juanita is a powerful Black female voice from the late 1960s Black Power and Black Arts Movements. Her work is archived in the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture at Duke University. The first selection, “Meeting LeRoi Jones,” is an essay that recounts the first time she met and worked with LeRoi Jones (aka Amiri Baraka), one of the pioneers of the Black Arts Movement. The selection concludes with her poem “(not) forgotten man [A tribute poem for Amiri Baraka].” The second selection includes excerpts of her essay “Black Womanhood: #1,” published under the pseudonym Judie Hart. In this essay, Ms. Juanita explores a few challenging issues: the state of Black female and male relationships and the impact of White racism and middle-class values; Black womanhood; and the redeeming power of poetry. Due to the graphic content and adult themes of the original, only excerpted sections of the original essay are included here. The complete essay can be found in her anthology, *De Facto Feminism: Essays Straight Outta Oakland* (2016).<sup>1</sup>

## Meeting LeRoi Jones

I transferred as a junior psychology major to San Francisco State in Spring, 1966. That semester, the Negro Student Association transformed into the nation’s first Black Student Union. I liked it far more than the status-conscious Greeks and color-struck sororities and got involved pronto. The entire college turned radical when a group of students returned to campus from the Freedom Bus Rides in the South that summer (1966). I began tutoring at an inner city tutorial center and going to all kinds of arts and poetry events. As a poet, I fell in with the Black Arts Movement and fought for the student body funds to bring LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks and Don L. Lee (later Haki Mathubuti) to campus. I was given the task of finding LeRoi and his pregnant wife Sylvia (later Amina) an apartment for \$250/mo. That was enough money back then, but I was inept at the task. I was mortified when they had to stay at a downtown motel while someone else secured an apartment. However, the cities were aflame, the nation was at war, and I was smack dab on the front line of revolution and resistance. As a black activist, I advocated for change in the black community in Oakland and San Francisco. The two factions split—the artists and the activists—and I had to choose. I became the editor-in-chief of the Black Panther Party newspaper.

I first saw LeRoi Jones in the flesh, at his vociferous best, at the student body funding debate. I was . . . surprised that he was even there. I mean I thought of him as a Big Important Writer from the East Coast in a Tweed Coat with Books under His Arm squirreled away from us except for class. I knew he was due to teach a class; I had even been assigned by the BSU prez to find him and his wife Sylvia an apartment at which task I failed after two weeks of walking up and down the hills of the Fillmore and the Haight with \$250 in cash in my purse. They ended up having to stay at the Travel-lodge on Market St. until someone else, more on the ball, found them a pad; some other soul got them from the airport. Forever after when I passed the Travel-Lodge situated on the street leading to the Bay Bridge I felt mortification at failing the test. And here he was, not in his book-lined study, not surrounded by Balzac, Genet, Ionesco, or Brecht, not hunched over a Smith-Corona portable as inspiration poured from his fingertips, not on the phone long distance with some big bubba tubba negotiating another run of “Dutchman.” Nope, he had left beat nihilism for black nationalism, He was with us, giving much lip to the . . . white boys who controlled the student body budget and wanted, for some perverse reason that I’m sure would never have occurred to them in their native Stanislaus or Siskiyou counties to pick a fight with the BSU over our altogether legitimate and defensible hiring of LeRoi. We packed the classroom for the meeting with students—black, white, Hispanic, Asian—and community people, all black and formidable. Academia’s cherubs, goodbye. We drowned them, washed over them in a wave of derision. . . . The white boys got tired real quick of beating their heads against a united front and they grudgingly agreed to give it up. Yea-us.

LeRoi immediately set the BSU to rehearsing and performing his play “Black Mass.” We were the Black Arts and Culture Troupe, we got a van, we ran up costumes at the pad, we put on shows within a matter of days, I was the warm-up act, reading poetry, our prez wrote a play, “Night-time is the Right Time,” and we were gone, black train down the black track, LeRoi was the engine; we had an array of talent in the BSU, actors, singers, modern dancers, to supply motive force, the cars, if you will, and I, as usual, was the caboosie. The prez, saying I was the quintessential naysayer, even gave me a part in the play, the last line which I delivered and even changed if I chose, since the clapping and the right-ons started just before it and nobody could hear me say squat. We took the show to colleges, centers and anyplace they’d let us in-East Palo Alto, West Oakland, Western Addition, South Berkeley, Marin City, Seaside, Hunter’s Point.

The prez’ play was big fun to perform. No Romeo and Juliet here; no boy-gets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets her back stuff here. We improvised a riot, more like man gets mad, man gets Molotov, woman throws it. The play, as written, was a one-page set of instructions like this:

### **PROLOGUE –“Night-time is the Right Time”**

A single light shines on a man off to the side mad, making a Molotov cocktail. Across the stage, dancers rise from the floor, reaching upward; lighting goes from shadowy to bright. A voice projects:

Nighttime is the right time	Dance in the streets (Play “Dancing in the Streets”)
for riot, for love	in the streets
for surprising the man	Fight in the streets
Evening is our spring	Run in the streets
If all we got is one day	Throw a Molotov cocktail
Then we only have one night	in the streets
Not a winter night	Die in the streets
lonely bleak	Live and Die in the streets
desolate	Bring this society
Spring in the night	to its knees
Wake up	in the streets
Bloom into blackness	Bring LBJ to his Texas
brothers and sisters	cracker barrel knees
Burst wide open	in the streets
Be/come	Bring all the traitors
be/come	in the ivory towers
Yeah come hard	into the streets
and then come out	Move into the streets
Come out	Reclaim society
Into the streets	in the streets

### Scene One

Fat mama and a sister carrying sorrow like a ball and chain beg their brethren not to throw his Molotov cocktail.

### Scene Two

A younger brother watches as he throws it, the police came looking for him, He hides, and the mother deliberates on whether to turn her son in.

### Scene Three

The police get vicious and kill him. The younger brother announces he's going to join the army. The mother approves until she finds out it's the Black Militia.

### Scene Four

The mother decides she has nothing left to lose, she joins up too. A neighbor comes as she's leaving and says (my line): "Some people join church, I see you joined the world."

Sometimes I threw in my grandma's old favorite, "Don't let no man drag you down," changing it, if people could hear me, to "Don't let the man drag you down," or the old standby, "You can do bad by yourself." But the point of the naysayer, as LeRoi explained it to us in class, was to show that quality of self-doubt in blacks that would always accompany liberating actions, but which would be drowned out by the exulting of the people at the moment of liberation.

Once, driving back from a show, I stood in the back of the van towering over LeRoi; I held onto the rail and observed him. He had a nice funny cackle of a laugh; he was a little guy who hunched; even standing here in my head, he's hunched in his little finely embroidered dashiki. A compact man. A nice man. Even a gentle man. He bantered, for heavens' sake. I liked him and not at all in a sexual way. Thank goodness, he didn't give off that vibe. He was short, anyway. His vibe was let's get going, let's do business, let's put on a really good show. Onstage, on podium, he became the ferocious, shrill, harsh, demanding killer, scary.

The one time I saw him mix the two personas was his last night in town, our crowning performance at the Black House in the Fillmore district. The old Victorian that we all called the Black House was the portal to black fineness. LeRoi ranted, raved, screamed; he also talked soft and tender about his wife and the baby on the way. I got the shock of my life when he pointed her out. LeRoi Jones' wife! She had foreboding eyes and was taller than I was! I had to force myself not to gape. He married up not down! But I couldn't help staring. She was pregnant, nearly due.

Her belly bloomed out so perfectly pregnant you could see her enlarged belly button sticking out through the African cotton like a pacifier. I felt bad I was the cause of her and the unborn child staying in a motel. Her hair surrounded her proudness like so many twisted branches of a tree. Even with the baby blooming, she retained a feminine slim curve to her dancer's figure. And she talked about California like it had a tail. She did not like California, San Francisco, the Bay Area, and by extension, us. California \_\_\_\_ are out to lunch, I heard her say loudly several times that night. She insisted on dancing and did a solo bit. We gave each other the elbows. So supple she looked boneless, she rolled over on her bloomy stomach as if it were a bag of raked leaves. When she finished her dance, she got up and went upstairs. I heard her say, These San Francisco . . . are trifling . . . Zora Neale says language is like money. Well, Sylvia Jones paid us . . . wage that night. Grandma's old rose-jumping, hide and seek rhyme came to mind: honey in the bee ball/I can't see y'all /all ain't hid/caint hide over. There was no hiding from her. The applause at the end of "Night Time's the Right Time" was prolonged. While they were making thunder, I mimicked Sylvia Jones:

don't wanna struggle, don't wanna work, don't wanna  
make real change  
humph, California, humph  
a place with a whole lotta people who wanna do nothing  
white folk here cuz they made it  
..., what's your excuse?  
Of course, people saw my grumble-face but they heard  
only the last few words.

### (not) forgotten man

#### [A tribute poem for Amiri Baraka]

whassup, roi, quixotic nobody  
on life's big hand. Are you a little finger yet?  
a historical New Jersey atrocity  
mimeographing *YUGEN* in a booklet?  
your honeymoon with fame lasted decades,  
you and dick gregory like opposable thumbs  
working it coast to coast [though poorly paid  
save the acolytes feasting on your crumbs].  
you were compact but never an everyman.  
you blasted the bridges between black and white,  
then witnessed the new century, the Taliban,  
Afghanistan, not afraid to be tagged anti-Semite.  
for an instant you were the black oracle at Delphi.  
is that nostalgia or wisdom in your darkening eye?

## Black Womanhood: #1

[This essay by Judie Hart was published in the *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, July 1967]

At this stage in the black revolution, the relationships between black men and black women are taking on new and crucial meanings. We need to constantly analyze and evaluate our position and direction, in relations to each other, to ourselves, to the black community, and to our enemy. With the black revolution being no more than the fusing of separate frustrations, desires, convictions and strengths toward a common liberation, the black man and his woman cease to be simply a couple, two lovers, a man and his mistress, a pairing of looks or a sparring match, but a fusing, a deepening of two black minds, souls and bodies passionately involved not only in each other in “the movement,” in the black community, in the Third World, in black liberation, in life itself.

One significant change taking place and at a remarkable speed is the move of the black bourgeois-oriented female into black womanhood. To understand the full implications of this move is to understand the forces stimulating it, the background and orientation of the bourgeoisie and the changes to which the move leads.

The first and foremost stimulus is and will be the black man. Women are attracted to men and black men are, in this moment, the only men on the scene. Women gravitate toward life, and the black man holds within the strength and the fiery passion of his struggle, his own life, the life of his people and his posterity. His total commitment to his life is an invitation to the black woman to join with him in the pursuit of a life together, removing the shackles of White Racist America [WRA] and establishing a solid foundation of blackness from which to build.

The second formidable stimulus is WRA. As it becomes increasingly apparent that whiteness means business when he tells, in his many ways, “\_\_\_ ain’t \_\_\_,” the repetition of history becomes an overt and pressing danger.<sup>2</sup> Concentration camps are no longer a part of world history exclusively [Check out the chilling King Alfred Plan in John A. Williams’ *The Man Who Cried I Am*]. And with their increasing possibility comes the black woman’s intuition that her strength is needed as never before . . . her strength, not her will, her leadership, her domination, but her strength. And she comes, from all levels of Negro life, bringing with her the heritage of her mother, 400 years of

bearing the burden of two families [the white man’s and her own], discarding the stench of his foul body, his foul morality, his foul domesticity and his foul, disillusioning, glorified mainstream. In its place she brings her belief in the black man, her own sensuality and her strong back. She comes to the black man from this to this.

The actual move comes at the end of a process of disintegration of those values of WRA, which the black bourgeoisie strives hardest to emulate. The most dominant value which bourgeois embrace is materialism and/or the great American dream. Wrapped inextricably with this is American (im)morality and individualism or alienation.

Toward men this materialism is ingrained in the attitude of bourgeois women, sexually, socially and economically. The bourgeois female, i.e., young, [loose], working, extremely well-dressed [on \$350 a month] and as near in simulated looks and makeup, stance and blandness as possible to the Glamour-Mademoiselle-Vogue image [which changes with age to Ebony-Ladies Home Journal-McCall’s image], uses and emasculates her man as a social coat-hanger, a bill-payer, a dude, a vehicle to further her own confused self-image . . .

. . . There was no Black Womanhood #2. I was 20 years old when I wrote Black Womanhood #1. I customarily signed my name, Judie Hart, with a © over the i. A virgin when I started my junior year, my deflowering was a humiliating experience that took several nights for my then-boyfriend to accomplish, amid the seemingly campus-wide peanut gallery of “concerned” brothers (hence the *Virgin* in the title of my novel *Virgin Soul*).

The upside was that I began writing poetry then and never stopped. My mentor at the New Jersey State Arts Council, Stephen Dunn, would ask later, “What are you going to write when you run out of personal stuff?” I couldn’t answer him and still can’t, I just keep writing. I tackle various “others” as often as I scrutinize my inner woman.

My mentoring poet in college was Sonia Sanchez. In *Virgin Soul*, I created a Sonia-like figure named Mali. I wrote a lot of poems for Mali and included them in the early drafts of the novel. I knew they weren’t great. It took one sarcastic comment in a writing workshop to give me the wisdom to junk them. Another lesson learned: Do you, not somebody else. The you that Stephen saw was the tip of the iceberg of self. I had to put on my night goggles and

go underwater to find out more about *her*. This *her* was so unlike poets that I encountered, including the late great Jayne Cortez and Wanda Coleman whose work was fierce and militant. I met them, and they were even fiercer in person. I worked alongside Toi Derricotte, my master poet at the arts council, and looked up to Lucille Clifton. Both had mellow personas, and I read them without my guard up.

Sonia Sanchez commented on the tempering of her work: “You must remember, in the time that we were writing, all the death and dying that happened and how we had discovered how much we’d been enslaved in this country... We came out hitting and slapping and alerting people to what had happened.”<sup>3</sup>

Instead of another manifesto on black womanhood, I wrote poetry.

### old love

old love  
when I approach you  
even on paper pandora boxes  
three thousand miles away  
memories thrust in  
to saturate my gaping  
womanwound  
rectifying urges surface  
drown *dowopdowop* blues  
I refuse him chocolate cake

infatuations transgress  
saint mammy syndrome  
salt pork shoppers starve  
inward eyes slow graying pubes  
albert ayler recorded our song  
*heartloveheartlove* died young  
circular indecencies  
exhume loud grapplings  
in two family houses  
our matrix held  
we were synonymous

who believes it when it happens  
babies scream in the night  
people just want the bottle  
*why do I care if the sun don't shine*  
*as long as I know he's mine*  
archie shepp lives on  
off the radio  
love plays  
midcentury rage  
loving eras record  
paper love crumples



**Judy Juanita:** Her debut novel, *Virgin Soul* (Viking, 2013) is based on her experience in the Black Panther Party in the '60s. Born in Berkeley and raised in Oakland, she met fellow Oakland City College students Huey Newton and Bobby Seale when she was a freshman. As a junior at San Francisco State, she joined the Black Panther Party (BPP). When Eldridge Cleaver was jailed after the 1968 shootout in West Oakland, Huey appointed her editor-in-chief of the BPP Intercommunal News Service. She worked on the newspaper and the BPP Breakfast for Children program while finishing her BA in psychology at SF State. In 1969, at the age of twenty-three, she became the youngest faculty member of the nation's first Black

Studies program at SF State, teaching Black Journalism and Black Psychology. Her poetry and fiction have been published widely, and seventeen of her plays have been produced in the Bay Area and NYC. Juanita's collection of essays, *De Facto Feminism: Essays Straight Outta Oakland* (EquiDistance Press, 2016) looks at the gap between Black and female empowerment. It was Book-of-the-Month at African Americans on the Move Book Club (AAMBC), and garnered a starred review and Book-of-the-Month from *Kirkus Reviews*. Ms. Juanita can be contacted at [whoknewyouknew@gmail.com](mailto:whoknewyouknew@gmail.com).

### (Endnotes)

1. Judy Juanita, *De Facto Feminism: Essays Straight Outta Oakland* (EquiDistance Press, 2016).
2. Although this essay was originally published in the *Black Panther Party Newspaper*, some of the language has been edited for young and/or sensitive readers.
3. Sonia Sanchez, *The Writer's Chronicle*, February 2014, 29.