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The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry

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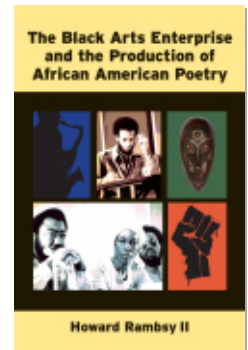
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A Preface

“We Will Change the World Before Your Eyes”

At some point during the late 1960s, black poetry reached a tipping point. No fewer than sixty anthologies featuring African American verse appeared between 1965 and 1976 alone. This flourishing of black poetry was Harlem Renaissance 2.0 and then some. A large number of African American poets enjoyed unprecedented popular and critical success—their images regularly appeared in magazines, their words were frequently published in periodicals, and their voices resonated alongside the sounds of jazz musicians and gospel choirs on albums. Their poetry and pronouncements were sometimes forceful, sometimes outrageous, and often infused with a militant, black nationalist ethos. “We are building publishing houses, and newspapers, and armies, and factories,” wrote Amiri Baraka. “We will change the world before your eyes.” An explanation of the forces that created an environment for the display of these kinds of provocative statements constitutes the major focus of this study.

The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry illuminates the often underexamined publishing factors that facilitated one of the most decisive moments in American literary history. In particular, this book explains how a diverse range of writers, editors, publishers, illustrators, and musicians collaborated to enact a dynamic cultural movement. The central argument of this project is that the coordinated and innovative efforts of black artists and their supporters greatly increased the visibility and implications of African American poetry. An examination of the production—not merely the composition—of black verse from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s reveals what made the Black Arts Movement such an enduring cultural enterprise.

Acknowledgments

Years ago, I informed the people in my circles that I was writing a book. They somehow misheard me and thought I said I was building a house. So for some time now, they have been offering all kinds of assistance and materials for a project much larger than a study of poetry and publishing history.

First, my mom and dad, my siblings, Kenton and Phillis, and my extended family gave invaluable support when I was laying my earliest groundwork. Later, at Pennsylvania State University, Bernard Bell, Keith Gilyard, William Harris, and James Stewart—all wonderful builders—provided me with formal direction on developing a solid foundation. Later still, Aldon Nielsen, Lovalerie King, Earleen Patterson, James Smethurst, Vorris Nunley, Stefan Bradley, and my big sister Alondra Nelson gave me stimulating and diverse models for envisioning the types of structures that I wanted to create.

I have benefited from a broad range of building support, including grants from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) and assistance from Julie Hansen in tracking down rare materials. Emily and Scott VanDette, my friends and colleagues at SIUE and in the College Language Association, and my fellow travelers with the SIUE Black Studies Program, were tremendously supportive at all stages of the process. LeAnn Fields and the good people at the University of Michigan Press have generously provided a platform for what I produced.

At a crucial moment in the project, I met Psyche Southwell, and her generosity and intellectualism inspired me to think and then build in new and exciting ways. Finally, I could never say enough about all I have gained observing and tracing the workings of that wonderful East St. Louis, world-traveling architect Eugene B. Redmond.