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The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry

Howard Rambsy

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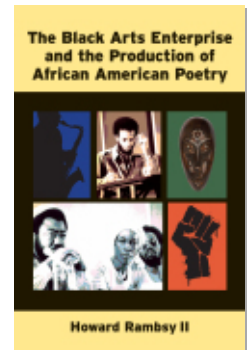
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Introduction

“A Group of Groovy Black People”

In the June 1965 issue of *Liberator*, Larry Neal described the arrival of the Black Arts School in Harlem, which opened on April 30 with “an explosive evening of good poetry.” According to Neal, however, the most memorable event of the black arts weekend was the parade held that Saturday morning in Harlem. “Imagine jazz musicians, African dancing, and a group of groovy black people swinging down Lenox Avenue,” wrote Neal. “It was Garvey all over again. It was informal and spontaneous and should illustrate something of the potential for creative encounter existing in our community.” Just in case readers needed help envisioning the scene, a photograph accompanied the story showing two men leading a group down the middle of the street, carrying a large flag that read, “The Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School.” The caption for the photo identified “LeRoi Jones and Hampton Clanton leading the Black Arts parade down 125th Street, New York City.”¹ They were on a mission, on the move. As a result, when Neal assessed the activities of these groovy black people a few years later, he defined their efforts as a movement, a Black Arts Movement.

The operation of the Black Arts School in Harlem was relatively brief; however, the spirit of activism and explosiveness expressed by those black artists “swinging down Lenox Avenue” typified the vitality and outlook of African American writers and organizers across the country during the time period. Those writers who ventured to take literary art to the people in such dramatic fashion suggested that they wanted to expand and transform conventional notions about what it meant to be artists. Not content with being only composers of verse and prose, they sought to become active on multiple fronts in the processes of artistic production. In fact, given Larry Neal’s abilities

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crafting insightful essays about the nature of black art, Amiri Baraka's talents constructing compelling artistic productions, and Hoyt Fuller's and Dudley Randall's significant work designing sites of publication, there is little wonder as to why observers often refer to these figures, among others, as "architects" of the Black Arts Movement. Their collective artistic activities and organizing efforts were integral to the construction of an extensive series of interconnected cultural productions.

During the 1960s, a large number of poets achieved unprecedented levels of exposure in the literary marketplace and academy. This is not to say that the Harlem Renaissance was anything less than a crucial moment in American and African American literary history. The New Negro Movement of the 1920s certainly paved the way for the New Black Poetry of the 1960s. Yet the tremendous body of writings produced by and about African American poets between 1965 and 1976 was unparalleled. Even if we accept the assessment of critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. that the Black Arts Movement "was the most short-lived of all" African American literary movements, we would be hard-pressed to identify a moment in literary history with such a remarkable and memorable attentiveness to black poets and poetry.²

But of course, the characterization "most short-lived" is untenable, especially since the legacies of the Black Arts Movement are continually unfolding. Consider, for instance, that the first edition of Gates and Nellie McKay's *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) presents "The Black Arts Movement: 1960–1970," while the second edition, released in 2004, presents "The Black Arts Era, 1960–1975." The shifting views of the Black Arts Movement (or is it the Black Arts Era?) testify to the substantial yet elusive power of a diverse range of artists and cultural activists to affect the shape of literary history. An investigation into the series of smaller movements—of poets, of poems, of books, of magazines—that comprised the Black Arts Movement reveals what made it such a fascinating and apparently difficult to define artistic enterprise. In particular, an examination of the transmission of poems and the socialization of poets illuminates the operations of the larger cultural movement.

The publishing history of Amiri Baraka's now well-known poem "Black Art" indicates the importance of transmission and socialization in the production of poetry during the era. At the time that "Black Art" was composed, Baraka was known as LeRoi Jones, and his poem initially appeared in 1965 on jazz drummer Sonny Murray's album *Sonny's Time Now*; the album was released under the imprint of Baraka's publishing

company, Jihad Productions. In January 1966, “Black Art” was published in *Liberator* magazine; consequently, the cover of that issue featured a photograph of Baraka. “Black Art” was subsequently printed in Baraka’s volumes of poetry and in such anthologies as *Black Fire* (1968), *Black Poetry* (1969), *The Black Poets* (1971), *Modern and Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* (1972), and *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), becoming one of the most widely circulating poems of the era. In recent years, the poem has appeared in *The Amiri Baraka Reader*, *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*, and *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. The appearance of “Black Art” in multiple sites over the years has helped solidify the poem and Baraka’s centrality to the canon of African American literature.

The militant tone and profane use of language in “Black Art” and its message that “poems are bullshit” unless they advance political interests are hardly the only factors that give Baraka’s poem significance. Instead, the different forms and sites in which the poem circulated, the relationship of the poem’s title to the cultural activities known as the Black Arts Movement, and the status of the poem’s author also contributed to why “Black Art” appeared so frequently and became such a regularly cited poem. Baraka composed the poem, but a range of editors, scholars, and general readers ensured its broad circulation. In order to account for the increased rotation of Baraka’s “Black Art” and several other writings that circulated widely during the time period, including Nikki Giovanni’s “Nikki-Rosa,” Larry Neal’s “The Black Arts Movement,” Margaret Walker’s “For My People,” and Robert Hayden’s “Runagate Runagate,” we must pursue close readings of publishing venues and consider how factors such as poets’ participation in literary activities and their social standing affect the reception of their works. Analyzing the circulation of literary texts and the ways that poets access various, interrelated modes of publication to engage distinct readerships enhances our understanding of what made the production of African American poetry during the 1960s and 1970s such a special moment in American literary history.

Transmitting Poetry, Socializing Poets

The most notable contribution of this project to the study of African American literature is the focus on factors of transmission and socialization in the presentation of black verse. Definitions of transmission

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and socialization actually overlap, but for the purposes of this study, *transmission* refers to the material production and circulation of writers' compositions. *Socialization* connotes how writers interact with fellow writers, audiences, and various discourses. Processes of transmission and socialization ultimately shape the visibility and value of poets and their works. These processes are also fundamental yet underexamined factors that often influence what gets classified as "African American literature," "black poetry," and "the Black Arts Movement." The publication of spirituals in Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets* (1971) and the appearance of folk songs, spirituals, and blues lyrics in Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973) may have anticipated the now established practice among editors of presenting song lyrics in poetry anthologies. Transmuting aural forms of expression to words on a page expands views of what constitutes black literary art and at the same time underscores the connections between auditory art forms and print-based compositions. Highlighting the connections between musical and literary forms was especially important for black poets, many of whom preferred to align themselves and their work with African American sonic traditions as opposed to what they perceived as the more restricting conventions of white or Eurocentric literary traditions. Of course, aural and print-based forms are integral to a wide range of literary traditions, but the social dynamics of the 1960s often led black artists and observers to encourage the auditory and performative features of African American verse.

The perception that there were culturally distinct roles and select methods of writing that progressive, socially committed black writers must address in their work was a pervasive force within African American artistic communities. "Black art must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution," declared Maulana Karenga, one of many observers to weigh in on what black art and artists *must* do (Ron Karenga, "Black Cultural Nationalism," 6). Ultimately, such prescriptive declarations were limiting and failed to adequately acknowledge the innumerable functions of black artistic production. Nonetheless, even prominent writers who resisted the idea that their creative works should correspond to a particular agenda had a hard time avoiding the prevalent influence of the politically charged movements that determined the shape of African American literary culture of the era. Drawing on the spirit and rhetoric of Black Power and nationalist ideology, leading African American writers fashioned themselves as fiery artist-activists who were willing to advance a wide array of political interests.

Poets discovered that fashioning themselves as artists and activists could be liberating. For one, those poets who viewed themselves as artists felt freer to cross genres and compose plays, prose, and audio recordings as well as verse. As self-proclaimed artists and not simply writers, poets were more inclined to celebrate and emulate a wider range of subject positions such as performers, musicians, and streetwise orators as opposed to only literary models. This poet-as-artist model also prompted writers to actively seek collaborations with musicians, visual artists, dancers, and other writers working in a variety of genres in order to produce mixed-media black art. The conception of poets as activists equipped writers with a presumably higher, purpose-driven calling than those poets who seemingly wrote poetry for its own sake. Unlike those so-called nonpolitical poets who wrote flowery verse, militant black poets advocated the use of “words as weapons,” a proposition that Richard Wright, a respected figure among the writers, had advanced decades prior to the 1960s. Formulating words as weapons gave poets the opportunity to envision themselves “like little black spears,” to apply Henry Dumas’s phrasing, hurling militant critiques at barriers of injustice. Finally, the poet as artist-activist would, at least in theory, increase the likelihood of changes in literature and society that black arts participants were calling for.

The shifts from writers to black artists and from artists to artist-activists represented crucial social transformations adopted and adapted by African American poets. Beyond these distinct social transformations, however, what gave the poets’ works a definite place in literary history related to the nature of their transmission. What served as the indispensable links between the poets and a variety of readerships were a select group of influential literary magazines and a wide assortment of anthologies. Nonetheless, few studies have analyzed the roles and implications of these particular modes of transmission, despite their historical and continuing importance for the display and distribution of poetry. The prevalence of black poetry and the Black Arts Movement in general, this study contends, was predicated on the activities of African American literary magazines and collections featuring black writing.

Magazine editors and anthologists, along with support from publishers, offered increased publishing opportunities for emergent poets and for earlier generations of poets such as Phillis Wheatley, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. *Liberator*, *Negro Digest/Black World*, *Freedomways*, the *Journal of Black Poetry*, and *Black Dialogue*, to name a few of the magazines, created the occasions for the

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publication of hundreds of poets, as well as reviews of volumes of poetry and essays on poetics. Arnold Adoff's *I Am the Darker Brother* (1968), June Jordan's *soulscript* (1970), Gwendolyn Brooks's *Jump Bad* (1971), and Woodie King's *Black Spirits* (1972), along with the dozens and dozens of other anthologies produced during the time period, brought together several diverse poets in a common setting, and publishers, such as Broadside Press and Third World Press, further expanded the prospects of poets circulating their works among African American readerships. Based on shared editorial and publishing practices, these magazines, anthologies, and publishers represented interconnected sites of publication, and the strong ties between the various publishing venues assisted in generating the perception that the varied literary activities among black writers constituted a collective enterprise.

Textual scholars and editorial theorists such as Jerome McGann, George Bornstein, D. C. Greetham, Peter Shillingsburg, and Robin Schulze have developed a useful vocabulary and body of ideas for explaining the significance of editorial practices in literary production.³ Particularly pertinent is McGann's notion that we must interpret a text's "bibliographic codes," such as its price, dedication, page format, and typeface, in order to gain a fuller understanding of how the text conveys meaning among readers and in the marketplace. Generally speaking, textual scholarship offers important frameworks for investigating the transmission and material production of African American writings, especially since so much editing, reprinting, and anthologizing has occurred over the last several years.⁴ For the most part, however, leading textual scholars have focused their analyses on white writers. But there are exceptions. James D. Sullivan's *On the Walls and in the Streets: American Poetry Broadside from the 1960s* utilizes aspects of McGann's methodology in order to show "how graphic design and text interact to produce literary meanings" in relation to the broadsides produced by Broadside Press.⁵

In addition, in his essay "Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks's *Riot*," Sullivan applies concepts relating to editorial theory to explain the importance of what occurred when "Brooks materially removed her work from a white context and placed it into a black context," as she began publishing her works with Broadside Press.⁶ Following the lines of thinking established by textual scholars, Sullivan observes how issues such as price, book design, and the back-cover author photo factor in the overall implications of Brooks's *Riot*. According to

Sullivan, “The challenge here for the criticism of African American literature is to recognize that literature always appears under the name not only of an author, but also of a racially marked publishing institution whose mission always inflects the work” (568). Consequently, black poetry of the 1960s and 1970s appeared under the names of racially marked publishing entities, and more important, the poetry appeared under the banner of a larger racially marked cultural movement.

The recent scholarship on writers and writings of the black arts era covers considerable ground. Margaret Reid, Kimberly Benston, Cheryl Clarke, Aldon Nielsen, Lorenzo Thomas, and Tony Bolden, to name a few, have produced studies that analyze stylistic and thematic features of poetry during the time period.⁷ My study complements these studies, as I explain how the design and circulation of texts, as well as the production of a cultural movement, influenced how readers viewed poetry and poets at a particular historical moment. My objective of treating the literary histories of the black arts era makes my work especially congruent with Melba Boyd’s *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (2003) and James Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005), two studies that chart the literary activities of principal figures. I do, however, take the material production of black poetry and its distinct socialization as my main areas of concern. My project explains how Broadside Press, to take one example, fashioned literary products to appeal to the nationalist sensibilities of its audiences and at the same time to display a sense of black solidarity among its authors.

Smethurst’s book represents the most thorough treatment of 1960s artistic productions and organizing efforts among writers and creative intellectuals. His book pays special attention to the “regional variations” of the Black Arts Movement “while delineating how the movement gained some sense of national coherence institutionally, aesthetically, and ideologically, even if it never became exactly homogeneous.”⁸ My understanding of the local developments of the movement draws on Smethurst’s work, but at the same time, I take a somewhat panoramic view, or macro approach, to examining the time period. Rather than focus in detail on developments taking place within particular geographic locations, as Smethurst does, I concentrate on sites of publication and publishing practices that brought the work of several poets from across the country and from historical time periods together in common settings. My focus allows me to pinpoint how writ-

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ers, editors, and publishers utilized particular modes of transmission to popularize poetry and to elevate the status of black poets in literary history and the marketplace.

My interest in the popularization of poetry means that my study, more so than many modern literary histories, recognizes the ascent of Nikki Giovanni as a notable achievement worthy of scholarly consideration. Relatively few poets, especially African American women poets, ever received substantial national acclaim. Yet Giovanni achieved famed status (she was often referred to as “the princess of black poetry”) and became one of the movement’s most iconic figures. Her poetry remains in print, and her work continues to appeal to large, diverse audiences. Indeed, Giovanni stands as yet another counterpoint to the charge that the Black Arts Movement was short-lived.

Despite Giovanni’s prominence, however, she is routinely excluded from critical examinations. Her distancing from the movement’s most visible political groups and grassroots organizations, her striking independence, her decision to publish with a mainstream press, and the view that her poetry does not meet certain criteria of literary sophistication might explain why critics have relegated Giovanni to the margins of academic discourse. In the context of this study, though, Giovanni’s ascent and wide appeal reveal the significance of transmission and socialization in the popularization of an African American poet. The widespread presentation of her poems in numerous anthologies, the publication of her volumes of poetry by Broadside Press and the large corporate publishing entity William Morrow and Company, the release of her poems on audio CDs, and her extensive national public reading appearances accounted for Giovanni’s extraordinary popularity as a poet. Her popularity among audiences and general readers gave her a special place in African American cultural history, regardless of the fact that her poetry has generated little critical acclaim. As suggested by Giovanni’s career, scholarly indifference does not necessarily impede a poet from attaining widespread appeal.

At the same time, public expressions of disdain for a writer do not automatically translate into literary exclusion, a point made most apparent in the career of Robert Hayden, a seemingly unpopular poet whose publishing record flourished during the black arts era. During a black writers’ conference at Fisk University in 1966, Hayden was quoted in *Negro Digest* as telling his audience, “Let’s quit saying we’re black writers writing to black folks—it has been given importance it should not have.”⁹ Hayden’s sentiments opposed the proponents of black racial

affirmation and cultural pride, thus making Hayden a target of militant black writers' countercritiques. In a 1968 issue of *Negro Digest*, for example, the editors observed that "Mr. Hayden does not hesitate to speak harshly of those militant writers who do not share his—and the Literary Establishment's—idea of what constitutes art in literature."¹⁰ The editors' comments, which were congruent with those expressed by many, presented Hayden as a harsh critic of black arts writers and an ally of the presumably white "Literary Establishment."

Although Hayden was viewed with derision by several militant writers, anthologists did not always show contempt toward the elder poet, at least not when it came to selecting his works for inclusion in their collections. In fact, Hayden became one of the most widely anthologized poets of the period; his works appeared in as many anthologies as those of leading militant poets. Even though he had published poems prior to the 1960s, his writings began to enjoy their widest circulation during the Black Arts Movement. Similar to the varied dissemination of Amiri Baraka's "Black Art," the publishing history of Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" illustrates the consequential role that transmission plays in the production of poetry.

"Runagate Runagate," which presents episodes from the first-person perspectives of a group of runaway slaves being led by Harriet Tubman, was initially published in Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps's *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949). During a visit to Fisk University in 1963, anthologist Rosey Pool read "Runagate Runagate" to an audience where Hayden was also in attendance. For years, Hayden had put "Runagate Runagate" aside, viewing it "as another of my many failures." However, when Pool read the poem at Fisk, Hayden changed his mind and concluded that his poem "was not so bad as I'd thought." Accordingly, he made revisions to the poem and sent the new version to Pool. In the June 1966 issue of *Negro Digest*, Pool published a laudatory assessment of Hayden's poetry; her essay was followed by two different versions of "Runagate Runagate."¹¹ This same issue of the magazine, by the way, contained the Fisk writers' conference report that portrayed Hayden as an adversary of militant black writers. Thus, whereas *Negro Digest* raised the visibility of Hayden's disapproval of activist writers, it may have also increased the visibility of the second version of "Runagate Runagate," which editors began to frequently reprint in their anthologies.

The increased circulation of Hayden's poems during the late 1960s and early 1970s—despite his disagreements with militant poets—illus-

trates the abilities of anthologists to accommodate multiple, seemingly conflicting interests among poets. Similarly, although Phillis Wheatley was thought to be totally dismissed for her supposed conservative ideology, the publishing record suggests otherwise, as her poems appeared in several collections during the period. Along with Hayden and Wheatley, a number of other older poets, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Margaret Walker, benefited from the new and expanded channels for presenting African American poetry.

Establishing a Black Arts Discourse

Amiri Baraka's "Black Art" and Larry Neal's essay "The Black Arts Movement" are among the most frequently referenced texts associated with the movement. The very titles of Baraka's poem and Neal's essay have come to represent foundational phrases and concepts in the vocabulary created and utilized to describe the cultural activities enacted by African American artists during the 1960s and 1970s. The development and use of distinct terms, names, phrases, symbols, and images in common sites of publications associated with artistic productions of the era constitute what I refer to as "black arts discourse." This discourse gave a sense of cohesion to a rather large and diverse network of literary artists, cultural workers, and readerships interested in topics relating to African Americans and artistic productions. That writers utilized a common discourse does not mean that they held the same values and agreed on a common set of goals. They did, however, draw on loosely interrelated modes of communication, and their creative works regularly appeared in common publishing venues.

The development of a black arts discourse was an empowering process for writers and their audiences. In her essay "Black Power Is Black Language," the sociolinguist Geneva Smitherman explains that "the power of the word lies in its enabling us to translate vague feelings and fleeting expressions into forms that give unity, coherence and expression to the Inexpressible. The process of composing becomes a mechanism for discovery wherein we may generate illuminating revelations about a particular idea or event."¹² Smitherman views the abilities of black people to create and adapt their own approaches to communication as significant acts of self-determination. Consequently, the frequent appearance of words and phrases like "Black," "Black Art," "the Black Arts Movement," "Black Artists," "Black Aesthetic," and "the

New Black Poetry” functioned to “generate illuminating revelations” about the activities taking place among African American artists.

The publication of striking images and photographs further conveyed the spirit of a militant nationalist ethos in the context of literary art. A photograph of LeRoi Jones speaking angrily into a microphone on the cover of the January 1966 issue of *Liberator* magazine visually communicated the idea of the poet as activist, a popular conception in black arts discourse. The cover of the Spring 1969 issue of the *Journal of Black Poetry* includes drawings of Malcolm X, along with excerpts from some of his speeches regarding self-determination, such as, “You get freedom by letting your enemy know that you’ll do anything to get your freedom.” Most notably, *Negro Digest/Black World* regularly presented photographs of black writers and images of African artifacts as a way of appealing to the visual and cultural sensibilities of black readerships.

Generally speaking, black arts discourse was characterized by expressions of militant nationalist sensibilities, direct appeals to African American audiences, critiques of antiblack racism, and affirmations of cultural heritage. With anthologies bearing such titles as *Black Fire*, *New Black Voices*, *soulscript*, *I Am the Darker Brother*, *We Speak as Liberators*, and magazines *Black World* and the *Journal of Black Poetry*, editors and publishers highlighted the racial and cultural imperatives of their contributors. Poets of the era frequently composed poems that advanced their commitment to militant sensibilities. In his poem “Let’s Get Violent!” published in *Negro Digest* in 1969, Ted Joans utilizes violent and nationalist rhetoric to encourage his presumably black audience to liberate their minds from the hegemony of whiteness. He urges readers to “ATTACK THE WHITEWASH / ICING CAKED / ON OUR BLACK MINDS / LETS GET VIOLENT THAT WE LEAVE that white way / of thinking / IN THE TOILET BENEATH OUR BLACK BEHINDS.”¹³ Similarly, Giovanni displays the aggressive approach to liberation discussed among African Americans in her poem “The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs. Negro.” In the poem, she raises the questions, “Can a nigger kill / Can a nigger kill a honkie / Can a nigger kill the Man / Can you kill nigger / Huh?”¹⁴ She closes her poem by asserting that the possibility of African Americans becoming “Black men” rests on whether “we learn to kill WHITE for BLACK / Learn to kill niggers” (319). Magazine editors, anthologists, and publishers, of course, determined that poems promoting militancy would be recurrent features of the discourse.

The poets often expressed the viewpoint that important battles for

black liberation and social justice would occur along cultural fronts. From this perspective, poems could be used as viable means for inspiring African Americans to become more politically conscious and active. In Calvin Hernton's "Jitterbugging in the Streets," Hernton writes that there will be no typical Fourth of July celebration this year. In its place, "the rage of a hopeless people" will be their dancing or "jitterbugging in the streets." They will jitterbug in the streets across the country "To ten thousand rounds of ammunition / To waterhoses, electric prods, phallic sticks / hound dogs, black boots stepping in soft places / of the body."¹⁵ Hernton predicts that African Americans will respond to the "TERROR" of impoverished living conditions with a powerful cultural form, a black dance. More precisely, they will counter the terror with fierce, erratic, and expressive movements.

Hernton's "Jitterbugging in the Streets" was published in *Black Fire* (1968), along with several other poems that emphasize the idea that black people could and should utilize cultural practices to liberate themselves from forms of oppression. While many political activists certainly would not have offered music and dance as methods for achieving freedom, there were large numbers of artists and creative intellectuals who believed that distinct African American cultural practices were essential to how a group of people would attain degrees of freedom. In June 1964 in Harlem, for instance, Malcolm X read the "Statement of Basic Aims and Objective of Organization of Afro-American Unity." Section 6 of the document focuses on culture and states that African Americans "must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people." The document goes on to state, "Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle."¹⁶ Accordingly, it becomes clear, as in the case of Hernton's poem, how a black dance might serve as a viable weapon in struggles for freedom or why poets viewed music as a powerful force for combating injustice.

Amiri Baraka had expressed the idea that black music contains hidden radical messages in his 1964 play *The Dutchman*. Toward the end of the play, the main character Clay explains that a musician such as Bessie Smith was really telling white people to "kiss my black unruly ass" and that Charlie Parker would not have needed to play another "note of music if he just walked up to East Sixty-seventh Street and killed the first ten white people he saw."¹⁷ In his poem "Don't Say Goodbye to the

Pork-Pie Hat,” Larry Neal observes that “all over America black musicians” are picking up their instruments and “preparing to blow away the white dream. you can / hear them screeching love in rolling sheets of sound.” In her “liberation / poem,” Sonia Sanchez explains that the blues are “sounds of / oppression / against the white man’s / shit.” But, upon hearing the “soft / soul / ful / sighs” of Billie Holiday, the poet is no longer blue; instead, “i’m blk / & ready.”¹⁸ As these poets suggested, black musicians served as models for enacting progressive change.

In the process of combining militant agendas with affirmations of black cultural practices, several militant writers abandoned what they saw as the Eurocentric idea of the genteel poet, disconnected from the masses. As Nikki Giovanni observes in her poem “For Saundra,” she would prefer to “clean my gun / and check my kerosene supply,” rather than write poems about nature.¹⁹ The poets actively sought to construct new possibilities for their roles and responsibilities as literary artists. Askia Toure’s “Notes from a Guerilla Diary (for Marvin X and Che Guevara),” for example, asserts that the social and political conditions of black and Third World peoples demand that African American poets avoid becoming conventional isolated writers and pursue more militant goals. “I wanted to be an artist,” writes Toure, but that was “before revolution turned me / towards / Islam and Malcolm’s eyes glowing with compassion over / dope- / infested ghettos of our fears.” He goes on to note that “dreams are beautiful,” yet “Reality’s blonde / wig smothers the Afros of our souls.” As a result of the harsh conditions confronted by black people, Toure decides to forgo his initial wish to become an artist in any traditional sense. Instead, he will go “back to cutting throats and cleaning guns; even / *that* / can be a form of art!”²⁰ Similar to Giovanni’s “For Saundra” and Baraka’s “Black Art,” Toure’s poem promotes the idea that poets must do more than simply write poems if they are to realize their fullest potential as black artists.

What gave the militant, nationalist spirit of the poems such wide visibility was the strong support that they received from magazine editors, anthologists, publishers, and a select group of literary and cultural critics. As I discuss more thoroughly in chapter 1, the editorial and publishing activities of *Negro Digest/Black World*, edited by Hoyt Fuller, were indispensable to the increased prominence of black poetry. Under Fuller’s leadership, the periodical became a defining force for the circulation of poetry, as the magazine published hundreds of poems, essays,

and reviews of poetry volumes. The magazine consistently publicized poets' activities and printed images of writers interacting with fellow poets and diverse audiences. Overall, *Negro Digest/Black World* amplified dominant themes in black arts discourse and consolidated the interests of a wide range of poets by getting them on the same pages, so to speak.

Anthologies served as another invaluable mode of transmission for the dissemination of black poetry and the expression of a common agenda among diverse groupings of writers. The publication and arrangement of anthologies, not simply the content of the poems, shaped how readers would view poetry of the black arts era. As explained in chapter 2, the editorial practices of anthologists, including their publication of a common group of writers and poems, contributed to establishing the defining perceptions of black arts poetry. In addition to publishing countless emergent poets, anthologists kept previous generations of writers in print as well, demonstrating that collections of black writing could serve as platforms for showcasing “new” and “old” black poetry.

Anthologies and magazines were important platforms for the display of black poetry, but they were certainly not the only distinct methods used to transmit verse. Chapter 3 highlights how the formats of books and audio texts expanded the possibilities for presenting and experiencing poetry. Poets and illustrators collaborated to juxtapose images and words in the compositions of texts that appealed to the linguistic and visual sensibilities of readers. For some time now, scholars have discussed the importance of performance in the presentation of poetry, but what about the significance of audio recordings of literary products that could expand and diversify the composition of black arts literature? Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Nikki Giovanni, and a number of other poets produced audio recordings, thus further aligning their poetry with black music and making the sound of verse and the presence of recordings central to the nature of black arts publishing history.

If venues such as anthologies and magazines served as important networks for bringing large numbers of writers together, then certainly poets' decisions to write about overlapping subjects also advanced the impression that they shared a common agenda. The composition of tributes to black historical figures and writings displaying principles of jazz were among the most pervasive kinds of poems written by poets of the era. Not surprisingly, then, there was a proliferation of poetry fo-

cused on Malcolm X and John Coltrane. Featuring Malcolm and Coltrane in their poems enabled poets and editors to popularize their movement more effectively, as those two figures were admired by audiences well beyond the realm of poetry. Malcolm and Coltrane also represented important models for the poets, who frequently projected public personas as political figures and musicians. The discussion of poems focusing on Malcolm and Coltrane in chapter 4 reveals that the poets' concentration on common themes and techniques heightened the interconnectivity of their varied literary activities.

Poets of the black arts era did not wait for literary historians to “re-discover” their works or for critics to assess the value of their writings. Instead, many poets fashioned themselves as artist-critics and actively participated in the critical valuation of black literary art, a subject described more fully in chapter 5. As essayists, book reviewers, literary historians, and theorists, poets influenced the shape of black arts discourse and the conversations about poetry and artistic production. Larry Neal was a particularly important figure in this regard. He was a fairly well-known poet, but his well-placed and illuminating essays amount to his most important contribution to black arts discourse. In addition to Neal, artist-critics such as Carolyn Rodgers and Eugene B. Redmond also produced influential prose on African American poetry and artistic culture and thus further solidified the presence of poets in the forefront of critical discussions.

Topics concerning “black aesthetics” initiated provocative, if not controversial, conversations regarding the valuation and composition of black literary art. Notably, creative artists took leading roles in these wide-ranging conversations about the interpretation, valuation, and production of African American literary art. Addison Gayle's widely cited collection of essays *The Black Aesthetic* (1971) contains works by such figures as Amiri Baraka, Dudley Randall, Keorapetse William Kgosisile, Sarah Webster Fabio, Larry Neal, and Langston Hughes, making it difficult to imagine discussions of black aesthetics without the contributions of poets. The active participation of poets at so many levels in the production and appreciation of African American literature represents an important moment in literary history, especially given the decreasing significance of black poetry in scholarly discourses from the mid-1970s onward.

The final chapter of this book identifies and explains important social forces and modes of transmission that have shaped perceptions of

black arts discourse. An analysis of the first and second editions of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* reveals how these and other anthologies present the movement's contributors to modern readers. A consideration of the decline of the Black Arts Movement indicates that this so-called decline is not as fixed as some commentators have proposed. The production of militant, nationalist poetry certainly has no definite closure, as younger generations of artists frequently fashion themselves as extensions, if not continuations, of the Black Arts Movement's more progressive tenets.

An examination of the methods by which publishing venues and editorial practices advanced an artistic movement is long overdue. *The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry* seeks to make vital, though regularly overlooked, publishing factors central to the operations of Black Arts Movement more apparent. In particular, this study seeks to deepen our understanding of literary art by explaining significant ways that processes of transmission and socialization shaped the rise of black arts poetry. We will gain a broader knowledge concerning the production of poetry when greater attention is paid to roles played by anthologies, literary magazines, and audio recordings, for instance. Our knowledge of the production of poetry will also expand as we examine more closely the ways that writers positioned themselves in relation to one another, their audiences, and literary and cultural traditions.