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The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry

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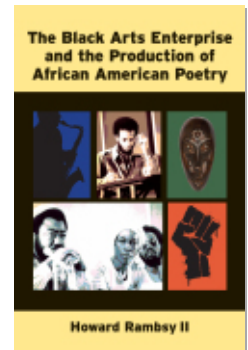
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3 • Understanding the Production of Black Arts Texts

In an article in *Black World* explaining the making of *The Black Book*, Toni Morrison points out that “black people from all over helped with it, called about things to put in it.” Morrison, who at the time was a senior editor at Random House, where the book was published, further reveals that African Americans contributed to constructing the book at all levels. Even the production man and the printer for the book were black.¹ For her *Black World* readership, Morrison clearly sought to underscore the African American dimensions of the book, while downplaying its publication by a white-owned company. The design and promotion of *The Black Book* as a distinctly black artistic composition indicate that the publication directly appealed to African Americans and their interests—core principles in black arts discourse.

The production of publications that highlighted black cultural ideas and appealed to African American interests projected a sense of interconnectivity among black arts texts. The repeated display of popular black words and images on publications and the recurrent uses of culturally distinct sounds on recordings suggested that the writers and their compositions were connected to an interrelated set of core values and objectives. In short, the aesthetics of the writers’ literary products, not only the contents of their writings, indicated their participation in a presumably unified movement. The front cover of the paperback edition of Orde Coombs’s anthology *We Speak as Liberators: Young Black Poets* (1970), for instance, draws on the linguistic and visual discourse of black struggles for freedom in the process of presenting poets as a coalition of liberation advocates.

The cover of Coombs’s book contains red, black, and green stripes in a manner that invokes the pan-African flag and the flag of Marcus

Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA). At the top of the cover, the words "WE SPEAK AS LIBERATORS" appear in black lettering on a red background. In the middle, the words "YOUNG BLACK POETS" appear in white lettering on a black background, and toward the bottom, Coombs's name is shown in black lettering with a green background. Audiences cognizant of black nationalist discourses could easily identify the pan-African aesthetic expressed by the color scheme of Coombs's book cover, and readers interested in black freedom struggles would certainly take interest in poets who, as the book title suggests, comprised a collective of liberators. The front cover of *We Speak as Liberators*, like so many books featuring poetry published during the time period, displays black nationalist ideas, linking the contributors—a group of poets—to a decidedly political agenda.

The frequent publication of anthologies and volumes of poetry with packaging that corresponded to black nationalist discourses seemed to manifest prevailing pronouncements concerning the aesthetic and spiritual kinship between the Black Arts Movement and Black Power, as articulated by Larry Neal and various other writers. The fusion of words and images on the front covers of publications featuring African American verse rendered these important sites for the illustrative articulation of the politicized agendas of black poets. A drawing of the continent of Africa appears beneath the title *think black!* on the cover of Haki Madhubuti's volume of poetry. The declarative directive to "think black," paired with an outlined image of Africa, encourages the book's presumably African American audience to embrace a pan-African perspective. More important, the book's visual display showcases the author's apparent connection to the sensibilities of Black Power ideology and thus promotes the view of the poet as a political activist. At the same time, promoting the idea of Madhubuti as a political activist contributes to solidifying his credibility as a "serious" black poet.

Amiri Baraka's reputation as the leading and most controversial figure among this cadre of poets was also definitely linked to the aesthetics of his books. Most notably, the cover of *Black Magic Poetry, 1961–1967* (1969) is arguably one of the most salient examples of a volume of poetry visually projecting the idea of blacks enacting violence against whites. The cover contains a white voodoo doll with blond hair and blue eyes, needles stuck through its head, chest, and legs. Pairing the image with the words "black magic" sends a controversial message: a black poet will resort to voodoo to inflict pain on white enemies. The

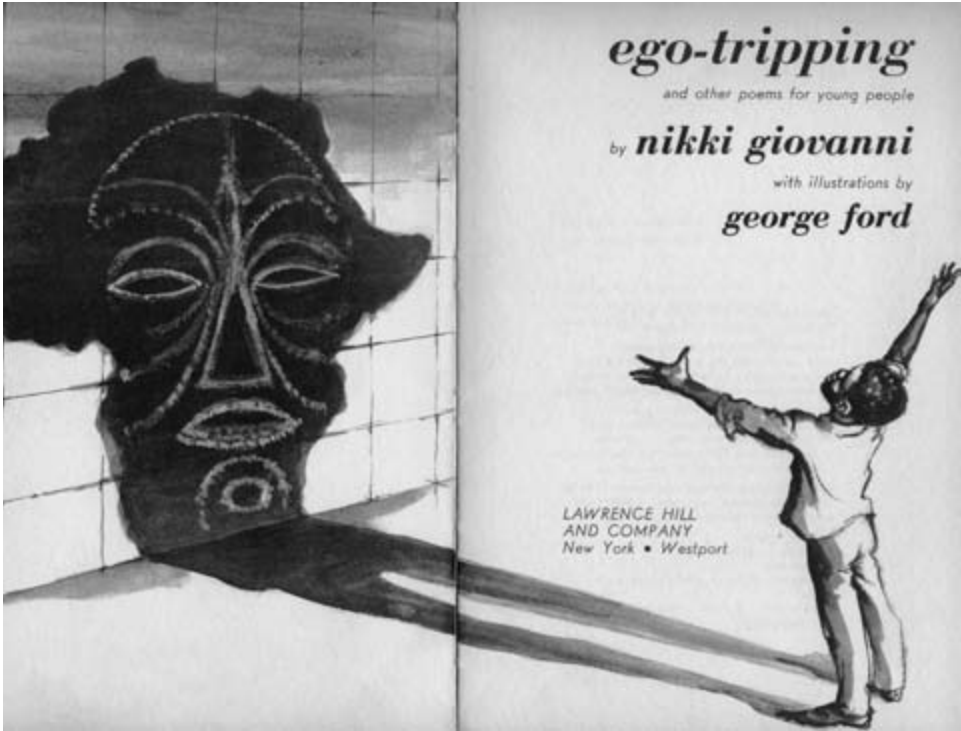
dramatic cover design of *Black Magic Poetry* contributed to Baraka's reputation as a militant figure willing to confront his adversaries by any means necessary. Such dynamic combinations of words and images on the covers of publications could certainly heighten reader interest in the artistic compositions of black poets.

But then, the aesthetics of poets' publications did more than simply heighten reader interest. For one, the appearance and sound of their literary products suggested that the poets were participating in an active cultural network that included poets, editors, publishers, artists, activists, musicians, and communities of general African American readerships. In this regard, individual publications seemed to represent elements of a larger black artistic enterprise. The distinguishing nature of the literary products also revealed that the poets and their supporters were trying to appeal to groups beyond select audiences of poetry readers. The goal of expanding readership prompted experimental or at least alternative approaches to the presentation and circulation of poetry—hence the production of audio recordings of poets reading their works and the packaging of poems in the discourses of social and political movements.

These alternative and expanded approaches to transmitting verse advanced the objective of presenting poets as multifaceted artists, militant activists, and advocates for black pride and liberation. Redefining, or more accurately diversifying, what it meant to be poets often provided select writers with several benefits, which will be elaborated on in subsequent sections. For now, suffice it to say that the presentation of distinguishing identities and expanded capabilities could give individual writers a competitive edge in the field of poetry, which, as always, has contained large numbers of poets and limited publishing venues. An examination of the aesthetics of black literary products reveals how different approaches in the packaging and presentation of verse assisted in giving select poets notable advantages, including increased publishing opportunities and wider appeal among audiences.

Projecting Verbal-Visual Ideas

Some leading poets collaborated with artists to produce books that utilized blends of words and images, or the interplay of verbal-visual ideas, throughout the publications, not simply on the covers. Nikki Giovanni's book *ego-tripping and Other Poems for Young Readers* (1973), which includes



Page from Nikki Giovanni's *ego-tripping*, with illustrations by George Ford. Courtesy of the artist.

drawings by George Ford, reveals how a combination of words and images could enhance the implications of a poet's compositions. More important, *ego-tripping* expanded Giovanni's opportunity to reach a broader audience. Indeed, her book could stimulate young readers and satisfy the interests of parents who sought to expose their children to positive black images. Ford's illustrations in the volume definitely affirm African American and African cultures and project an underlining black nationalist ethos that espouses racial pride. Giovanni and Ford's collaboration demonstrates the possibility of taking ideas associated with black arts discourse and orienting those ideas to young readers.

On the title page of the book, an image of a young black boy appears, his arms spread wide as he faces a wall. His shadow casts the image of an African mask. Another illustration, which accompanies the poem "for the masai warriors," shows a group of fashionably dressed



Page from Nikki Giovanni's *ego-tripping*, with illustrations by George Ford. Courtesy of the artist.

adolescent African American boys staring admiringly at a photograph of Africans, presumably the warriors mentioned in the title. One of the boys, who is apparently moved by the image of the Africans, leaps excitedly into the air.² In the poem, the speaker mentions drawing inspiration from Africa and considers making “a nation for the gods / where I could be the man” (7). The image that accompanies “for the masai warriors,” as well as the image on the title page, encourages young readers, especially young black boys, to take pride in Africa. In fact, the book’s images present boys displaying fascination while gazing at images relating to Africa; these kinds of drawings provide a clear model for young black readers of what it might mean to appreciate a distant yet related black culture and group of people.

Several of the poems in Giovanni’s book contain prominent illustrations of black women and young girls. An illustration of a regal-looking

black woman sitting in an Egyptian-style canoe accompanies the poem “ego-tripping,” which begins, “I was born in the congo / I walked to the fertile crescent and built the sphinx” (2–3). Two drawings of African women appear toward the top of the page; their images are outlined within the continent of Africa. One of the women smiles while looking down toward the woman in the canoe; the other one looks in the direction of the title “ego-tripping” on the adjacent page, as if she is reading. Viewers have a side view of the woman in the canoe, as she stares in the direction that she travels. Incidentally, her gaze is at eye level with Giovanni’s line “I am a beautiful woman” (3). The vibrant and self-assured images of the black women augment Giovanni’s poetic statements regarding the attributes of an extraordinary, supernatural woman.

The images on the subsequent page of the poem present a woman’s outstretched hands, which are adorned with bracelets. Apparently, she has recently released the bird that soars at the top of the adjoining page. Viewers who first see the bird discover its significance as they read through to the poem’s closing lines: “I mean . . . I . . . can fly / like a bird in the sky” (4–5). The illustration of the flying bird provides a concrete vision of Giovanni’s concluding simile, and taken together, the images of the regal black women and the soaring bird offer visual manifestations of the shape-shifting, godlike speaker of the poem, who describes her amazing qualities. The images that accompany “ego-tripping” and “for the masai warriors,” the title page, and the book’s cover, which shows two black children wearing the attire of pharaohs as they ride aboard an Egyptian-style vessel, all serve to orient young readers toward an appreciation of Africa. The larger body of Giovanni’s poems hardly qualified her as a pan-Africanist; however, Ford’s images give Africa a prominent place in *ego-tripping* and thus visibly extend the scope of black pride that appears in Giovanni’s poems. Ford’s artwork, in these instances, situates Giovanni’s work more firmly within the movement of black writers and activists who encouraged African Americans to take pride in Africa.

Ford’s images of young black girls provide vibrant complements to Giovanni’s poems focusing on black girls and childhood memories. In “poem for flora,” Giovanni describes a young girl who is considered “colored and ugly with short / straightened hair” until she gains a valuable lesson in Sunday school. After listening to various biblical stories, what she really remembers is that “Sheba was Black and comely,” and so she decides, “I want to be / like that” (9). The accompanying illustration shows a young black girl standing in the foreground with a larger image

in the background of a black woman with braided hair and a piece of jewelry, perhaps from a crown, on her forehead. The image conveys the promising future possibility of the young girl becoming a queenlike figure such as Sheba. Similar to “poem for flora,” the illustrations that accompany “nikki-rosa” and “knoxville, tennessee” present images of cheerful black girls. All in all, Ford’s drawings, combined with Giovanni’s words, offer captivating, if not empowering, verbal-visual ideas for young readers in general and black girls in particular.

Giovanni’s volume constitutes a fairly unique literary work in the field of African American poetry by popular black writers. For one, few poets produced volumes directed at adolescents. Although Broadside Press published Sonia Sanchez’s *It’s a New Day: Poems for Young Brothas and Sistubs* (1971), the publisher Lawrence Hill had the resources to present *ego-tripping* in higher-quality and larger quantities, ensuring added literary value and greater visibility for Giovanni and her volume. The initial appearance of *ego-tripping* in hardcover, for instance, was a rarity among volumes of poetry and reflected the publisher’s willingness to invest in a poet whose sales were likely to produce worthwhile returns. Giovanni’s volume is also unique among volumes of poetry published by African American writers during the 1970s, as a paperback edition of *ego-tripping* remains in print today. The ongoing circulation of *ego-tripping* contributes to Giovanni’s social and literary value, not to mention her royalties, and suggests that her volume continues to appeal to generations of adolescent readers, a rare distinction among black arts era literary works.

The use of illustrations, of course, is the most distinguishing feature of *ego-tripping*, for the display of Ford’s images transforms a collection of poems into a more dynamic verbal-visual text. The verbal-visual feature of the book increased Giovanni’s ability to effectively appeal to a young black readership, a typically unexplored target demographic for established poets during the time period, and the design of *ego-tripping* also demonstrates the possibility of utilizing illustrations to convey poetic ideas to readers in visually stimulating ways. The covers of volumes of poetry by African American writers, especially those writers associated with black arts, frequently showcase nationalist iconography and ideas. But illustrations were rarely interspersed throughout volumes of poetry, especially to the degree that they were in *ego-tripping*. Giovanni’s book contains more than fifteen of Ford’s images, which further distinguishes this presentation of poems by an already widely popular poet.

Mari Evans’s volume *I Am a Black Woman* (1970), published by

William Morrow, utilizes photographic images throughout the book, which serves to illuminate the overall effect of the poet's words. Evans's volume contains images of black women juxtaposed with the poems as a way of suggesting that the lines of verse represent the women's thoughts. Similarly, Amiri Baraka and Fundi's (also known as Billy Abernathy) collaborative effort *In Our Terribleness: Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style* (1970) blends poetic phrasing and photographic images. Many of Baraka's poems in the book focus on the idea of hip, street-wise black men, while Fundi's photos present suave-looking African American men posing for the camera or coolly strolling along in their urban setting. One image shows a young black boy holding his fist up, gazing off to the side with a serious look, which appears somewhat humorous considering his age. The words beneath the photo read, "Dont ever fuck with me. An emblem of breath. Can you dig a fist, so beautiful??"²³ Baraka's words appear to correspond to the thoughts of the boy in the photo and create a connective display of verbal-visual ideas—the kind of display of verbal-visual ideas that occurs throughout the book.

Taken together, *In Our Terribleness*, *I Am a Black Woman*, and *ego-tripping* offered alternative, mixed-media approaches to how poets could present their literary art. The publication of these alternative volumes assisted in furthering the larger implicit and sometimes overt mission of new black poets to modify the landscape of literature and appeal to a wider, more diverse readership. In the case of *ego-tripping* in particular, the volume's design as a children's book allowed Giovanni to reach a younger and ultimately broader audience in comparison to the majority of volumes published by African American poets during the time. The addition of a children's book to Giovanni's growing repertoire of publications helps to explain her expansive popularity among a broad range of readers beyond the conventional realms of black arts literature and even American poetry. The appearance of Ford's illustrations throughout *ego-tripping* was an integral, if not required, element for Giovanni's volume to effectively appeal to its target audience. The images could usefully assist young, developing readers in envisioning the content of the poet's words. In short, Ford's illustrations serve to frame Giovanni's poems.

Whereas illustrations function to illuminate the poems in *ego-tripping*, Middleton Harris's *The Black Book* (1974) offers a different possibility for juxtaposing poetic verses with visuals. Harris's publication contains an eclectic mix of materials—newspaper clippings, song lyrics, descriptions of cultural practices, and visual images—pertaining to African American culture and history. The assorted collection of texts

gives Harris's book the look and feel of a scrapbook. Most notably for the purposes of the current discussion, the publication adjoins photographs with excerpts from the writings of Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Henry Dumas. The juxtaposition of words and images in *The Black Book* provides a clear example of how an editor utilized poetry as part of a mixed-media approach to amplify and sharpen ideas about African American history and culture. The poetry excerpts in the book operate as crucial framing devices.

One of the most disturbing images in the book shows four black men hanging dead from a tree. The image has no caption, but readers can presume that the photograph is of a lynching. An excerpt from Langston Hughes appears above the photo: "I've been a victim / The Belgians cut off my hands / in the Congo. / They lynched me in Texas."⁴ Hughes's words give voice to the dead men in the image, and the photograph in turn illustrates the poet's statement. Taken together, the contents of the page visually and linguistically present a horrific scene of antiblack racism. Readers are inclined to exercise both prose and visual literacy in order to absorb the implications of the text.

A more calming image toward the end of the book shows two black men wearing white clothing as they stand in a body of water that comes up above their knees. The two men are bowing their heads, and one of the men holds the other man's arm. More than likely, they are participating in a baptism. Above the photograph, words from a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks read, "Believe me, I loved you all / Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, / And I loved, I loved you all" (193). Her words seem to give voice to preceding generations of African Americans. The baptism photograph and the pictures on the subsequent pages present images of black people from earlier generations, as revealed by the tattered appearance of the photographs, as well as by the age and attire of the people pictured. The images do not include captions. The positioning of endearing words (i.e., "I loved you all") at the opening of the sequence of images suggests that these past generations of African Americans are expressing their devotion to current readers and viewers. In particular, Brooks's words are utilized to establish a familial bond between the black people in the images and the presumed black people reading the book.

Excerpts from the writings of Henry Dumas, a frequently anthologized black poet of the era, appear more than works by any other writer in *The Black Book*. Notably, Morrison, as an editor at Random House at the time, was assisting Eugene Redmond in the publication of Dumas's

works. Having access and the publishing rights to his poetry perhaps increased the chances that Dumas's words would appear so frequently throughout the book. One photograph presents a scene from the movie *Honey* (1930), where actress Lillian Roth is shown wearing an evening gown and holding her hands above her head; she is in the midst of a performance. A large group of black people stand behind her. The men wear the attire of ranch hands; the women are dressed as house servants, and they wear handkerchiefs on their heads. An excerpt from Dumas appears at the top of the page: "One of the greatest roles / ever created by Western man / has been the role of 'Negro.' / One of the greatest actors to play the role has been / the 'Nigger'" (167). Dumas's words operate as a biting critique of the minstrel roles performed by African Americans. The next page displays a scene from the musical comedy *A Day at the Races* (1937) and a scene from *Old Kentucky* (1935); both images present black people dancing. Framed by Dumas's words on the previous page, the images on the subsequent pages accentuate the idea of black people playing buffoonish roles. The combination of photographs and words encourages audiences to look negatively upon African Americans who perform simply to entertain whites.

Dumas's words are also juxtaposed with photographs to inspire positive ideas concerning some black personalities. An eye-catching headshot of Lucille Armstrong appears below Dumas's words, "I want you to leap high in the sky / with me until we see / yellow trees and the blue gulf" (175). The photographs on the following pages show groups of black women entertainers, including the Hot Chocolates performing at the Cotton Club in 1936, the Brown Buddies in 1930, and a female chorus. The photographs also show a dance scene from *Harlem Madness* in 1930 and a sharply dressed couple performing a vaudeville act (176–77). These photographs of dignified and elegant-looking African American entertainers rebuff the preceding images of supposed black minstrels. Dumas's words propose that the figures in the photographs are encouraging their black audiences to "leap high in the sky" and join them.

The Black Book closes with the theme of group ascension as the words and images urge readers forward. The final page of the book presents a photograph of an elder black man wearing a worn and dingy suit, as he stares directly at the camera/viewer. Dumas's words appear above the photo: "We have a journey / to take and little time; / we have ships to name / and crews" (198). The words imply that the elderly black man in the photo, and presumably those like him, are encouraging readers to advance a larger mission. Despite the man's shabby appear-

ance, Dumas's adjoining words suggest that the man encourages his allies and mates onward with a sense of urgency. That sense of urgency appears again on the back cover of the book. "I am *The Black Book*," readers are informed. "Between my top and my bottom, my right and my / left, I hold what I have seen, what I have done, and what I have thought." The speaker, the presumable book, closes by adopting and representing from Dumas's words: "I am not complete here; there is much more, / but there is no more time and no more space . . . and I have journeys to take, / ships to name, and crews." The last page and the back cover of the book cast the excerpt from Dumas's writing as a clarion call for an impending journey of African Americans and thus give the poem's lines a prominence and visibility that they did not have in the actual volume of poetry where they first appeared.

The presentation of poetic excerpts as photographic captions and framing devices in *The Black Book* represents yet another innovative possibility for the use of black poetry. Images had often been used to highlight the words of poets; however, in the case of Harris's publication, the positioning of the poetic excerpts reveals that verse could assist in defining the apparent meaning of images. *The Black Book* demonstrates the prospect of interspersing African American verse throughout a publication that is hardly primarily about poetry and thus places poets such as Brooks, Hughes, and Dumas into contact with readers who may not have otherwise encountered the writers' volumes of poetry. In this regard, Harris's book coincided with the larger objective of increasing the potential readership for African American verse, even though *The Black Book*, with its scrapbook-like features, constituted a unique publishing platform. And though unique, Harris's publication and a volume such as Giovanni's *ego-tripping* represent important examples of how photographic and illustrative images might invigorate the implications of black poetry and expand its readership. Although the use of images was important, poets and their supporters devised other mixed-media means of broadening the reach of their literary art. In particular, they began to more fully realize the opportunities available to them by producing audio recordings.

Dealing in Sound

In the foreword to Larry Neal's volume of poetry *Black Boogaloo*, Amiri Baraka suggests that black writers move beyond the page and produce

projects associated with “the post ‘literary’ world.”⁵ He asks writers to distance themselves from conventional practices associated with being “literary.” According to Baraka, the word “literary sound like somethin’ else . . . sound like it ain’t sound. And sound is what we deal in . . . in the real world” (i). The concept of dealing in sound might serve as a useful point of departure for considering the ways that black poets used audio recordings in order to further expand and diversify their literary art, as well as their audiences. The production of audio recordings gave select poets and musicians important opportunities to participate in the transmission of African American verse. Among other notable results, these practices and processes of dealing in sound further highlighted the relationships between black poetry and black music and helped solidify the view of the Black Arts Movement as an engaging mixed-media enterprise.

Audio recordings of poets reading their poems actually represent a relatively small number of works produced by black writers. Despite Baraka’s recommendation that writers move beyond the “post ‘literary’ world,” print-based poetry continued to dominate African American literary culture. Thus, more so than serving as an alternative to print volumes, the recordings provided select groups of poets with additional mediums to expand the range of their approaches to producing poetry. The albums and cassettes of poets reading their works confirmed that the poets were both writers and performers, both authors and recording artists. These expanded capabilities associated with producing audio recordings represent some of the important technological developments taking place among black poets that so far have gained little scholarly attention.

For some time now, literary scholars have highlighted the dynamic possibilities concerning the performance of black poetry and its relationship to music. There has been little, if any, scholarly attention focusing on the technological significance of the poets’ activities. Yet their use of recording devices and their work with instrumentalists contributed to the spirit of innovation so central to the claim that the movement among black poets represented something *new*. The achievement of something new partially relied on poets’ engagement with audio production. Their performances and recordings of verse assisted in expanding the distinct sonic presence of black poetry in literary history.

Among those poets who worked with musicians, Jayne Cortez produced an especially impressive body of work. “Perhaps no black poet whose works began to appear in print after World War II,” writes Aldon Nielsen, “has recorded as many jazz texts as has Jayne Cortez. Indeed,

Cortez has recorded nearly all of her published poems in jazz arrangements.²⁶ On her first album, *Celebrations and Solitudes* (1974), Cortez performs her poetry with the accompaniment of Richard Davis, who offers improvisations on bass. The collaboration between the two artists creates renewed versions of Cortez's poems. The rhythmic and patterned phrasing that Davis provides on "I Am New York City" gives the poem a flowing, moving tempo. Characteristic of her readings throughout the album, Cortez shifts her tone and pitch as she reads and slightly pauses after speaking lines of the poem for more dramatic effect.

On "How Long Has Trane Been Gone," Cortez voices anger and frustration with audiences, club owners, disc jockeys, and African Americans who have neglected to fully appreciate the work of John Coltrane and other black musicians. "You takin—they givin," she says, "You livin—they creating starving dying." Cortez modulates her voice and conveys varying degrees of anger. Throughout the readings, Davis assists Cortez in raising the intensity of her message by adding phrasing and pitches and increasing his tempo on bass to accent her tone and speed of reading. At the same time, Davis's more experimental playing—a mode of playing associated with free jazz—adds a level of abstraction to the overall delivery of Cortez's poems. The complementary phrasing of the bass shapes the surrealist sound that the duo achieves.

Cortez and Davis's collaboration constitutes an important sonic realization of the convergence of poetry and music, the combination of which had long been present in African American and American literary discourses. Blues musicians and their musical forms had been central, for instance, to the writings of Langston Hughes as early as the 1920s. The Beat writers of the 1950s had found jazz musicians especially inspiring, and black arts writers had highlighted the significance of African American music, especially the New Black Music, in both verse and critical prose during the 1960s and early 1970s. Given this backdrop, Cortez's *Celebrations and Solitudes* can easily be read as a continuation of the long-standing interactions between poetry and jazz. Yet in retrospect, Cortez's album was also a signal moment for a woman staking a claim for herself as a jazz poet, a designation often attributed to male literary artists. Thus, the inscription of Cortez's poetic voice onto the sonic discourse of jazz and poetry was a continuation but also a modification of the typical collaborations between musicians and poets.

Giovanni's foray into audio production also represented a modification of the transmission of black poetry. Her first album, *Truth Is On Its Way*, which appeared in 1971, achieves the fairly unique task of

blending gospel and poetry, an especially unusual task since leading black poets tended to align their work with jazz. Whereas gospel music was hardly ever highlighted in black arts discourse, Giovanni's album was nonetheless a remarkable commercial success. Six months after *Truth Is On Its Way* was released, the album had sold one hundred thousand copies.⁷ The fusion of Giovanni's poetry with the choir is not as dynamic and interactive as the exchange between Cortez and Davis, as Giovanni's reading functions as more of a voice-over to the choir. Still, Giovanni's work could appeal to the sensibilities of audiences rooted in black church music traditions.

Many of the selections on Giovanni's album, such as "Great Pax Whitey," "Alabama Poem," and "All I Gotta Do," open with singing and an organ playing; then the music lowers as Giovanni begins reading. The pairing of her poem "Nikki-Rosa" with the gospel tune "It Is Well" creates a remarkable combination. Giovanni's sentiment in "Nikki-Rosa" that she did not have a troubled childhood and that "black love is black wealth" relates to the recurring line in the gospel song declaring, "it is well in my soul." Actually, the pairing of Giovanni's poem with "It Is Well" highlights the spirit of tranquility integral to both pieces.

The presentation of "ego-tripping" constitutes another instance of how the use of black church music enhances the implications of Giovanni's poem. The recording begins with a group of people providing rhythmic clapping, soulful shouts, tambourine playing, and a recurrent drumbeat. A woman in the background shouts, "Right on! soul sister" just before Giovanni begins to read. The congregants shout "yeah," "whew," "hey," and "right on" at various intervals as Giovanni reads. The accompanying shouts and soul clapping resemble the call-and-response practices of African American church services and performances and thus serve to highlight the proximity of Giovanni and her poem to such realms of expressive culture.

Based on the amount of time the choir performs on the album, *Truth Is On Its Way* could be viewed as a gospel album that features a poet reading her work as opposed to a recording of poetry that happens to include gospel. As a result, for audiences interested in gospel music and poetry (in that order), *Truth Is On Its Way* represents a more significant work than the absence of criticism suggests. Collaborating with a gospel choir allowed Giovanni to locate her work firmly within a tradition and site where large numbers of African Americans reside: the black church. Giovanni's album might not reflect the more dominant strains of militancy represented in black poetry and free jazz; nonethe-

less, *Truth Is On Its Way* does tap into an expansive reservoir of black expressive culture and appeals to large number of listeners. The gospel music on Giovanni's album serves the purpose of transporting poetry to broader African American Christian audiences—a group that leading black artists regularly criticized because they felt that traditional African American religious practices were counterproductive to radical forms of liberation. Giovanni's ability to meet gospel music and, by extension, black Christian audiences on their own terms enabled her to make a rare and profitable connection. Moreover, her decision to deal in the sounds of black religious music contributed to her rising popularity. The convergence of gospel music and poetry on *Truth Is On Its Way* extended the possibility that Giovanni's literary art and her voice would reach audiences beyond the conventional discourses of poetry.

Not surprisingly, some of the most dynamic recordings of black poetry were produced by the era's leading artist, Amiri Baraka. Similar to Cortez, Baraka utilized free jazz as a vehicle for transmitting verse. Based on his writings on jazz, as well as his alliances with avant-garde musicians, Baraka served as a vital connector between the developments taking place in poetry and jazz. Interestingly, the appearance of "Black Art" on an album in 1965, before its initial printing in *Liberator* in 1966, reveals Baraka's cutting-edge commitment to utilizing audio production as a means of transmitting verse.

The audio version of "Black Art" is a dynamic interplay between a poet and a group of instrumentalists. Throughout Baraka's reading of the poem, the musicians—Sonny Murray on drums, Don Cherry on trumpet, Henry Grimes and Lewis Worrell on bass, and Albert Ayler on tenor saxophone—produce lively responses, which intensify the poet's message.⁸ When Baraka raises his voice and says, "We want poems that kill," the musicians increase the volume and force of their playing.⁹ The exchanges between Baraka and tenor saxophonist Albert Ayler are especially pronounced on the recording. After Baraka makes statements such as "fuck poems" and "setting fire and death to whities ass," Ayler projects deep and quick-moving phrasings on his horn. Later, when Baraka speaks in a more composed manner to point out a "Negro leader . . . negotiating coolly for his people," Ayler provides soft, low, long notes, thus producing a kind of calming effect. However, as soon as Baraka interrupts the calmness by shouting "Aggh!!!," Ayler responds in kind with a high-pitched squeal on his horn. Finally, when the poet demands, "We want a black poem," Ayler follows up with a trill on his instrument. Next Baraka says, "And a Black World," to which Ayler re-

sponds with a trill in a slightly higher octave. Finally, when Baraka says, “Let the world be a Black Poem,” Ayler trills yet again, this time in the octave in which he began. Ayler’s trilling, squealing responses intensify the implications of Baraka’s words and give the poem distinguishing sonic attributes to complement its powerful message.

The dynamic audio rendition of “Black Art” provides a useful model for what could result from a vibrant collaboration between a militant poet and avant-garde musicians. The recording also orients literary audiences to elements of jazz while at the same time exposing jazz listeners to black verse. Thus, Baraka’s partnership with the musicians creates an important crossroads for a diverse group of listeners. What Baraka’s performance with Ayler, Murray, and company indicated to fellow and emergent poets was that there were indeed new opportunities for producing poetry beyond the page just waiting to be explored. So in addition to serving as a distinguishing audio rendition, the “Black Art” recording revealed the expanding possibilities of African American poetry.

Similar to “Black Art,” the audio version of Baraka’s “It’s Nation Time” merges music and verse in a dramatic fashion. But with this poem, Baraka moves even further into explorations of sonic possibilities. The track begins with African drumming and a slow tempo. Then Baraka announces that “it’s nation time,” which signals a drummer to disrupt the calmness with a drumroll as Baraka begins reading the poem. He reads at a rapid pace, suggesting a sense of urgency. As Baraka shifts from reading words to wordless phrasings, the drummer begins to play more emphatically, as if responding to Baraka’s call. Baraka in turn responds to the drummer’s increasing pace and emphatic playing. Baraka shouts and makes percussive sounds with his mouth. As he continues shouting and wailing, a saxophone joins in and responds to Baraka with screams and screeches on his instrument. The interactions between Baraka’s voice and the instrumentalists are even more energetic than on “Black Art,” and it’s certainly more dynamic than a conventional poetry reading. In fact, rather than being similar to typical literary presentations, Baraka’s methods of delivery on “It’s Nation Time” are actually more akin to the performance styles of James Brown.

Listening to Baraka’s performance on the album reveals that he was innovating his modes of delivery to become a distinctly interactive performer attuned to black musical discourses. In retrospect, the engaging and entertaining reading style that Baraka is known for today was developed and honed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The attention to

newness and stylistic innovation so central to discussions of African American poetry during the era, as well as the declaration that artists should actively embrace and emulate the achievements of black music, gave Baraka and various other artists opportunities and incentives to collaborate with musicians and adjust their methods of presentation to reflect stronger connections to jazz and R&B. The prevalence of militant nationalist discourse prompted writers to view themselves as artist-activists, and in a similar fashion, their interest in music inclined writers to develop their capabilities as poet-performers. Indeed, Baraka's recordings are notable testaments to the possibilities for poets adopting the fiery and entertaining delivery styles of soul singers and jazz musicians.

Poets' forays into audio recordings did not diminish the primacy of print-based verse. Magazines, anthologies, and volumes of poetry remained the dominant venues for the presentation of African American poetry. Nonetheless, those poets who chose to deal in sound, as it were, and produce audio recordings established resonant connections to discourses of music, making it possible for them to diversify the presentation of their literary art and extend the reach of their poetry. The development of diverse repertoires of literary works that could appeal to both reading and listening audiences was especially important to the burgeoning careers of Baraka, Cortez, and Giovanni. After her first album, Cortez went on to make audio recordings and collaborations with jazz musicians a defining feature of her creative output. Baraka and Giovanni still reap the benefits of being known as dynamic performers of poetry; over the last decades, they have been continually called on to present their work to large and diverse audiences.

Beyond the musical and performance implications, the poets' audio productions and interactions with instrumentalists amounted to signal moments in the developing technological and literary histories of poetry. The collaborations with poets and musicians shaped the distinct sounds of black verse, and these sounds were inscribed in literary and cultural discourses through the use of recording devices. Without embracing the technologies of musical production, poets would have been far less successful in establishing distinct sonic qualities for their poetry, and they could hardly have done as well in nurturing a broad and modern listening audience for African American verse. The utilization of recording devices and the pursuit of collaborations with musicians highlighted or further legitimized the possibilities of using auditory approaches for producing literary art. These approaches also expanded

the methods by which poets could deliver their poetry. The technical processes of dealing in sound, then, provided additional opportunities for innovating the nature of black poetry.

Building a Brand: The Broadside Imprint

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Broadside Press functioned as the most influential publisher of African American poetry. Even without the resources and wide distribution capabilities of large, well-funded publishing institutions, Broadside Press symbolized the promise of black self-determination in publishing. But more than just a symbol, Broadside Press published the movement's most notable figures and several lesser-known poets. Literary critic James Sullivan explains 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."¹⁰ Writers who published under the Broadside imprint became linked to a press whose mission was to produce inexpensive, creatively designed literary products that celebrated black culture. Under the leadership of its founder, Dudley Randall, Broadside Press secured a visible role in the circulation of African American poetry in general.

Several literary historians, including Melba Boyd, James Smethurst, James Sullivan, and Julius Thompson, have charted the history of Broadside Press and remarked on its significance as a publisher of black verse.¹¹ Their writings further validate the important contributions that Randall and Broadside Press made to the promotion of African American poetry and the formation of a movement among a wide-ranging group of writers. On the one hand, Randall demonstrated a commitment to veteran poets. As James Smethurst notes, "The first wave of Broadside writers," such as Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks, "were all veterans of the cultural and political milieu of the Popular Front in the Midwest."¹² Further, explains Smethurst, twelve of the press's first eighteen broadsides were authored by writers born before 1918 (236). On the other hand, Broadside Press also demonstrated its commitment to "new" black poets. As Melba Boyd documents in her biography of Randall, leading poets Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Etheridge Knight benefited greatly from the publishing opportunities made possible by Broadside Press. Overall, Broadside Press published more than two

hundred poets and became one of the most respected and recognizable *brands* in the production of African American poetry.¹³

Thinking of Broadside Press as a brand name means considering how the placement of the company's name or imprint on its products, such as books, broadsides, and tape recordings, gave those products added significance. A consideration of the Broadside brand also means recognizing how leading poets assisted in increasing the overall value and prominence of the press. The appearance of "Broadside Press" on volumes of poetry linked those publications and their authors to a network of African American writers and cultural practices, and consequently, the success of Broadside as a brand was the result of a convergence of writers, literary institutions, readers/consumers, and publishing practices. According to Randall, Broadside Press was "one of the institutions that black people are creating by trial and error and out of necessity in our reaching for self-determination and independence."¹⁴ Indeed, during the Black Power era, an African American-owned press could accommodate the nationalist agenda of literary artists seeking to create and promote their own institutions. In addition to Randall's Broadside Press, Haki Madhubuti's Third Press, Amiri Baraka's Jihad Press, Joe Goncalves's The Journal of Black Poetry Press, and other African American-owned presses allowed poets to publish their works through black channels of publication. "The founding of small African American presses such as Broadside and Third World," writes Sullivan, "made it possible to publish work identified with African American cultural nationalism without that level of irony added to the text by reliance on white cultural institutions" ("Killing John Cabot," 568). Publishing books under a black imprint gave black poets added credibility. Poets who used African American presses as mediums for publication could visibly link their publishing practices with nationalist and grassroots agendas.

Through its distinct methods of transmitting black poetry, Broadside Press created a sense of community among writers and readers. As James Sullivan explains in his book *On the Walls and in the Streets*, the acts of "producing, selling, and buying" Broadside literary products constituted "elements of a material political practice, acts of solidarity with a specific cause."¹⁵ To publish under the Broadside imprint, sell its products, or buy from the publisher was to participate in a decidedly black literary network. Despite any apparent ideological, stylistic, or generational differences among such poets as Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Haki Mad-

hubuti, and Audre Lorde, all these writers and dozens more published their works in some form or another under the Broadside imprint. Thus, the press served as a connector among an eclectic grouping of African American poets, many of whom aligned themselves with black arts activities and some of whom did not. Randall published a distinguished and diverse group of writers, and he thus increased the cultural capital of Broadside Press as an imprint that appealed to the varied interests of African American readerships.

The very name “Broadside Press” signaled readers and potential consumers to the company’s roots and routes to grassroots publishing. “Since broadsides,” writes Randall, “were the company’s sole product, I gave it the name Broadside Press.”¹⁶ Although the company went on to produce volumes of poetry, anthologies, criticism, and recordings, the name “broadside” linked the press to its humble beginnings. Whereas relatively few readers will get the chance to see or own an actual broadside from Randall’s press, our knowledge that the company produced inexpensive texts using a single-sheet format supports the perception of Broadside Press as an institution that operated for the people, so to speak. Certainly the phrase “Broadside Press” constitutes a ubiquitous bibliographic code in black arts discourse, appearing in literary journals, on works cited pages, and on permissions and acknowledgments pages, not to mention on the company’s many products. The pervasiveness of the Broadside imprint meant that its authors and products were rarely viewed in isolation. The imprint linked authors and literary products to an apparent enterprise of African American publishing practices. The design of the press’s volumes of poetry effectively projected the view that the authors were part of a network that catered to black interests.

The titles, cover designs, and formats of the press’s products constituted interactions among poets, visual artists, literary critics, and a publishing company. *Think Black!* by Haki Madhubuti, *Impressions of African Art Forms* by Margaret Danner, *Black Man Listen* by Marvin X, *We a BaddDDD* by Sonia Sanchez, *Home Is Where the Soul Is* by Jon Eckels, and *Jump Bad* edited by Gwendolyn Brooks all foreground nationalist sensibilities and African American verbal styles. The front covers contain images suggestive of African American or African-related cultural symbols, while the back covers of volumes of poetry by Madhubuti, Sanchez, Brooks, and Giovanni, to name a few, contain photos of the writers. In many of the author photos, the poets sport afros or natural hairdos, and some wear dashikis and African jewelry. Presenting the poets wearing clothes and hairdos associated with popular African

American styles and cultural practices further indicated the ostensible social and political allegiances of the authors and the press. More specifically, the front and back covers of Broadside books situated the authors more firmly in black nationalist discourse.

Broadside Press publications often include introductions by poets and literary critics to extol the values of a particular writer's work. These introductions operate as ornaments to the volumes of poetry that could influence how readers might interpret the poet and poems. In the introduction to Lance Jeffers's *When I Know the Power of My Black Hand*, Eugene Redmond writes, "We are blessed and exalted by Lance Jeffers' refusal to simplify the Black Experience. . . . As an Afro-American poet of the front rank, his intellectual passion is expectedly wide-ranging and intense."¹⁷ Redmond's comments reflect a recurring practice among writers and critics of foregrounding poets' cultural identity and ability to represent "the Black Experience" in their works. As a result, the authors of volumes of poetry were praised based on their poetic skills, as well as on the extent to which their writings served the interests of African Americans.

In the introduction to Sonia Sanchez's *Homecoming*, also published by Broadside Press, Don Lee informs readers that "the poems/poetry in this first book of poems are not those of a first book poet. The poet is skilled/confident to the point of oversay."¹⁸ Directing his words to black readers, Lee explains that Sanchez's poems will strengthen an approach to confronting real-world challenges. Sanchez's "poetry helps u face yr/self," he writes. "Then, actually, u will be able to move thru/out the world and face otherpeople as a true blackperson" (7). Although contemporary scholars would question Lee's essentialist notions of "true" black people, what remains important for the discussion here is that he supports claims for the value of Sanchez's poetry by explaining how her poems positively relate to the lived experiences of African Americans. Thus, Lee bases his view of Sanchez on the notion that she is committed to the well-being of African Americans, as she "wants us to/live" (8).

Similar to the valuations of Jeffers and Sanchez by Redmond and Lee, respectively, Gwendolyn Brooks notes in the introduction to Don Lee's *Don't Cry, Scream*, "At the hub of the new wordway is Don Lee. Around a black audience he puts warm healing arms."¹⁹ Here, Brooks, like so many writers extolling the virtues of black poets, emphasizes Lee's commitment to African American audiences: "Don Lee has no patience with black writers who do not direct their blackness toward

black audiences” (9). Brooks’s appraisal indicates that a clear-cut devotion to African American audiences is an admirable quality—a quality beyond the poet’s actual writing that nonetheless contributes to how he should be perceived. The claims in the introductions concerning the commitments of the poets to distinct audiences were further substantiated by their appearance under the Broadside imprint. Surely, readers would likely deduce, poets publishing with a black press were committed to black audiences.

Broadside Press further highlighted the relationship of poets to a larger African American artistic discourse by including the press’s catalog in individual volumes of poetry. The appearance of a catalog in a single volume provided publicity for the other authors and literary products offered by the press. Just as important, however, the catalog of Broadside poets and literary products revealed that an individual poet was actually participating in an extensive, ongoing cultural enterprise. The catalog indicated that the poets were located within “a specifically African American context,” to use James Sullivan’s phrasing (“Killing John Cabot,” 560). And those literary products produced under the Broadside Press imprint and accompanied by the company’s catalog, then, “had to be read as culturally specific rather than universal” (560). The extensive list of poets and publications confirmed that the Broadside imprint was an active facilitator in the publication of black literary products. The seemingly extraliterary components of Broadside’s volumes of poetry—the front and back covers, the introductions, and the catalog—represent integral elements in the overall design and function of the company’s books.

The increasing visibility and success of poets who published with Broadside Press generated more exposure and legitimacy for the imprint. *Negro Digest/Black World* frequently reviewed and mentioned books produced by Randall’s press, providing publicity for the company at the national level. In the Detroit “News” section regarding upcoming events and publications in the 1968 issue of the *Journal of Black Poetry*, Ahmed Alhamisi identifies books that have been and will be published by Broadside Press. Alhamisi informs readers interested in purchasing Etheridge Knight’s *Poems from Prison* or Randall’s *Cities Burning* that the books “should be at all Black book stores,” confirming the press’s relationship to African American cultural sites and institutions.²⁰ The extensive and favorable coverage that Broadside Press received made the imprint more widely known in African American literary history than

most of the poets it published, notwithstanding a few exceptions, such as Nikki Giovanni and Haki Madhubuti.

Actually, Giovanni's and Madhubuti's overall achievements can partly be attributed to their connections with the Broadside imprint. Both writers initially self-published volumes of their poetry; however, Randall provided them with the publishing venue to distribute their volumes on a larger scale. Two years after publishing Madhubuti's *Think Black* in 1967, Broadside Press had brought twenty-five thousand copies of the book into print and had printed the seventh edition of *Black Pride*.²¹ The publishing opportunities offered by Broadside Press, observes Melba Boyd, assisted in taking Madhubuti "to center stage on the black literary scene" (175). Randall's press was also an inspiration for Madhubuti's cofounding Third World Press with poets Johari Amini and Carolyn Rodgers in 1967.²² While Madhubuti benefited from the publishing opportunities made available by Broadside Press, his achievements also increased the success and visibility of the imprint. His success as one of the press's best-selling authors brought impressive financial gains to the company and made poets aware that the imprint could effectively facilitate the publishing careers of aspirant militant writers.

Like Madhubuti, Giovanni benefited from the publishing opportunities provided by Broadside Press and simultaneously contributed to the imprint's reputation as a publisher of leading black poets. Broadside became the distributor of Giovanni's *Black Judgement* in 1968 and published her *Re: Creation* in 1970, the same year that she began publishing with the more established New York publisher William Morrow. Broadside Press was a crucial step in Giovanni's journey from self-publishing to publishing with a large commercial press. Moreover, Broadside validated Giovanni's early association with a network of African American poets and the developing black arts enterprise. Giovanni's success as a poet, on the other hand, generated additional profits for Broadside Press and further solidified the status of Randall's company as a publisher of choice for aspirant black poets.

With a roster of at least two hundred poets that also included Margaret Danner, Audre Lorde, Lance Jeffers, Keorapetse William Kgositile, Marvin X, and Margaret Walker, the centrality of the Broadside imprint to the transmission of black poetry was comparable to the position of *Negro Digest/Black World*. Like Hoyt Fuller, Dudley Randall coordinated a highly visible publishing institution that featured an inter-

generational grouping of poets. Also like Fuller, Dudley Randall enacted editorial practices that were vital to the formation and operations of black arts discourse. Broadside Press published some of the era's leading figures and produced one of the movement's most well-known anthologies, *For Malcolm*. In the process of publishing broadsides, volumes of poetry, anthologies, tape recordings, and a series of poetry criticism books, the widespread appearance of the Broadside Press imprint demonstrated that a black-owned institution could adequately serve multiple interests of poets and readerships. In a *Black World* article in 1975, Carole Parks observed in an annotated directory of African American publishers that Broadside Press "is presently considered the primary outlet for Black poetry, in paper and cloth as well."²³

Ten years after the publication of Randall's first broadsides, his press had secured a reputation as a principal cultural institution in the production of African American verse. The press embodied key values of black arts discourse by promoting self-determination, extending a nationalist agenda, and directly appealing to black readerships. Moreover, Randall's imprint transformed those values into literary products and publishing opportunities for new and veteran poets. The press brought substantial numbers of writers into print and confirmed their relationship to a larger network of African American artistic and cultural activities. Along with *Negro Digest/Black World* and the large number of anthologies featuring African American verse, Broadside Press served as an essential connector between poets and extensive readerships.