

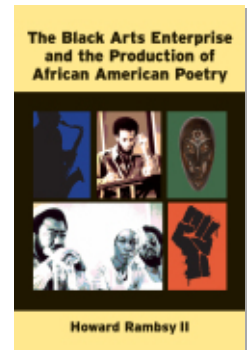


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The Black Arts Enterprise and the Production of African American Poetry

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6 • The Revolution Will Not Be Anthologized

The publication of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in 1997 marked a signal moment in the transmission of black arts era poetry. Poets associated with the movement had been steadily appearing in anthologies since the 1970s, but, more so than most other imprints, Norton could raise the value and visibility of its contributors, particularly in African American literature survey courses on college campuses. The Norton imprint, note Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay, “had become synonymous to our generation with canon formation” and thus offered writers a noticeable, if not definite, place in literary history.¹ The *Norton* devoted a full section to 1960s writings, entitled “The Black Arts Movement: 1960–1970.” Edited by Houston Baker Jr., the section includes poems by Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Etheridge Knight, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, and Carolyn Rodgers, and essays by Addison Gayle, Hoyt Fuller, Maulana Karenga, and Larry Neal. The presentation of these poets and essayists in a collection that highlights two hundred years of writing solidified the presence of black arts discourse in the tradition of African American literature. Anthologies, of course, have a way of concealing even as they reveal. Consequently, the *Norton* and its second edition, published in 2006, illustrate that the more salient features of black arts literature will not be easily anthologized.

Although convincing cases could be made for the inclusion of a number of writers in the *Norton*, the concern here is what the presentation of the current contributors suggests about the challenge of representing black arts discourse in an anthology. Actually, the notable revisions to the black arts section in the second edition confirm that the editors were inclined to reconsider their approach to representing writ-

ings and authors of the era. In the second edition, the section is renamed “The Black Arts Era, 1960–1975” and includes June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, Michael Harper, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Cade Bambara, all of whom are presented in the “Literature since 1970” section of the first edition. Baker includes an additional subsection entitled “Expanding the Black Arts Movement” to his introduction of the section, which serves to explain the editorial changes. According to Baker, 1975 has “representative value” as an end date, and those writers initially presented as post-black arts “were far more ‘of’ the movement—adherents and exemplars of distinctive and distinguishing characteristics and structures of feeling of the Black Arts—than opponents or successors.”² Indeed, 1970 was definitely hardly representative of the decline of the movement, and those writers initially presented as successors were clearly part of the developing discourse. But how does the change from “The Black Arts Movement: 1960–1970” to “The Black Arts Era, 1960–1975” alter perceptions of black arts? To what ends were the aforementioned writers excluded from the black arts section in the first edition and then included in the second? And what view of the contributors might emerge based on the presentation of their particular selections? These kinds of questions attempt to address how the editorial practices of the *Norton* influence the canon formation of black arts discourse and African American literature in general.

First, the designation “The Black Arts Era, 1960–1975” expands the possibilities for viewing the literature of that particular time period. A section on the “movement” would presumably feature writers and texts central to the cause of black arts. Focusing on an era, however, provides greater flexibility for selecting an array of canonical texts that circulated widely during that time period. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X were not black arts participants, but King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1964) and Malcolm X’s autobiography (1965) were widely read and influential documents during the 1960s. King’s essay and an excerpt from Malcolm’s autobiography are reprinted in the *Norton*, along with excerpts from novels by John A. Williams, Eldridge Cleaver, and James Alan McPherson. Presenting these works under the heading “era” as opposed to “movement,” as they are in the first edition, offers more latitude for viewing texts produced and circulated during that period. In addition, suggesting that the black arts era extended at least to the mid-1970s is far more plausible than the earlier designation of 1970. Actually, using 1960 as a starting date obscures the fact that it was not until the mid- and late 1960s that

“black arts” became a popular designation in African American literary history, based in large part on Baraka’s poem “Black Art” and Neal’s essay “The Black Arts Movement.” Whereas 1975 might carry “representative value” as a concluding date, 1976 arguably serves as a more convincing date for the decline of “New Black Poetry,” given the downfall of *Black World* and Broadside Press in that year.

The inclusion of June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Lucille Clifton, Michael Harper, Ishmael Reed, and Toni Cade Bambara in the black arts section produces a more diverse view of the era in comparison to the first edition. The initial placement of these writers outside black arts discourse was in part a result of the first 1970 ending date. Extending that date by five years necessitated the inclusion of six writers. Still, temporal markers do not entirely account for why some of the writers are presented as successors of the movement and not contributors. Ishmael Reed’s poetry, for example, appeared in collections along with poems by Giovanni, Madhubuti, and Sanchez. The initial disassociation of Reed’s work from these writers diminishes both the multiplicity of voices in black arts discourse and Reed’s contributions as a novelist *and* poet. Similarly, although Michael Harper may not have been a vocal advocate of black nationalism in the vein of, say, Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, his allegiance to jazz is comparable to theirs, and all three poets published verse highlighting black music in common venues.

The arrangement of selections in the first and second editions of the *Norton* delimits perceptions of the increased publishing opportunities made available to veteran writers during the black arts era. Although Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker published works prior to the emergence of the movement, they received new and wide exposure during the 1960s. Walker’s “For My People” (1942), Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool” (1960), and Hayden’s “Frederick Douglass” (1962) were, along with Giovanni’s “Nikki-Rosa” and Baraka’s “A Poem for Black Hearts,” among the most widely anthologized poems of the era. Furthermore, similar to younger black poets during the time period, Brooks, Hayden, and Walker published Malcolm X elegies, all of which appear in the *Norton*. The publishing records of these veteran poets reveal that they too were “of” the movement, and not only its predecessors. It was during the 1960s and 1970s, not the 1940s and 1950s, that Brooks, Hayden, and Walker first became widely anthologized. The circulation of poems by these elder poets placed them firmly within black arts discourse.

At the same time, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker

were not as post-black arts as the table of contents of the *Norton* implies. Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* were all published in 1970, during the height of the black arts era. Placing these writers, as well as Albert Murray and Clarence Major, outside the black arts section undermines the links between their works and the body of writings published during the era. If the "black arts" label were removed and the section was simply labeled "black literature produced between 1960 and 1975," the editors would perhaps be more inclined to acknowledge that Morrison, Angelou, Walker, Murray, and Major were in fact contemporaries of Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, and Nikki Giovanni.

Finally, because of copyright and page restrictions, the *Norton*, like any anthology, must minimize the materials that it publishes by contributors. As a result, we are left with a rather limited view. The absence of poems focusing on black music and musicians by Baraka and Etheridge Knight perhaps mutes their notable contributions to jazz poetry. Further, without including poems by Larry Neal and without essays by Carolyn Rodgers, readers may develop a one-dimensional view of these multigenre creative artists. Hoyt Fuller's essay "Towards a Black Aesthetic" appears in both editions of the *Norton*; however, Fuller's most enduring contribution—his editorial work—cannot be reproduced in a single collection. Overall, then, the black arts section of the anthology usefully introduces readers to leading figures of the movement while simultaneously offering a truncated view of the publishing activities that led to the fervent circulation of African American poetry during the time period.

Despite any shortcomings, the *Norton*, which was adopted by "1,275 colleges and universities worldwide," currently stands as one of the most influential texts containing black arts era literature.³ The consequential role that this collection plays in the canonization of 1960s and 1970s African American literature confirms the extent to which anthologies and editorial practices remain defining features in the transmission of black arts poetry. The *Norton* is actually one of several anthologies published during the last ten years that features leading black arts era writers. Jerry Ward's *Trouble the Water* (1997), Patricia Hill and colleagues' *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998), Michael Harper's *Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000), Keith Gilyard and Anissa Wardi's *African American Literature: Penguin Academics Series* (2004), and Arnold Rampersad and

Hilary Herbold's *The Oxford Anthology of African American Poetry* (2005) are some of the more modern collections to also contain black arts era poetry. These modern African American anthologies, similar to the *Norton*, highlight the strong presence of black arts era poetry in the larger context of African American literature. Still, the inability, so far, of a single collection to re-present the hundreds of poems and complementary essays and images published during the era suggests that the movement will not be easily anthologized.

The Decline of the Black Arts Movement

Some observers have noted that the black arts movement began to recede somewhere around the mid-1970s. According to cultural worker and poet Kalamu ya Salaam, "The decline of the Black Arts movement began in 1974 when the Black Power movement was disrupted and co-opted. Black political organizations were hounded, disrupted, and defeated by repressive government measures, such as Cointelpro and IRS probes."⁴ Salaam's reasoning coincides with Larry Neal's comments that black arts and Black Power share a spiritual kinship. Salaam's suggestion that the status of black political culture largely influenced the state of African American artistic production also relates to Houston Baker's explanation of a concluding date for the black arts era in the second edition of the *Norton*. Baker notes that 1975 serves as a useful ending boundary for the era "when one considers the post-civil rights and post-Black Power events on the economic, athletic, political, expressive, cultural, and legal fronts."⁵ In short, Baker's and Salaam's views suggest that the arrival of the post-Black Power era also meant the departure of black arts at least as a coherent enterprise.

Major political trends would certainly affect the resonance of literary art that was so consciously aligned with a militant movement. But is artistic production solely dependent on activism? To what degree did trends in literary discourse affect the decline of the black arts era? Salaam's and Baker's view that political developments and repressions signaled the diminishing force of black arts is partly agreeable. However, factors relating to decreased literary transmission—including fewer anthologies and the closure of major publishing institutions—also account for the diminished prominence of the black arts movement.

By the mid-1970s, anthologies of verse highlighting black militant agendas appeared infrequently. In 1976, the discontinuation of *Black*

World, the *Journal of Black Poetry*, and Broadside Press represented a major decline in the circulation of new black poetry.⁶ The closure of major publishing outlets did not mean that leading poets immediately ceased presenting their work. Indeed, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, and several other poets associated with the movement continued producing their literary art. Nonetheless, without a network of publishing venues to promote the convergence of black poetry and poets on a national scale, the movement lost considerable momentum.

The infrequent appearance of African American anthologies featuring black poetry during the late 1970s could have been a reflection of market forces and not only the breakup of Black Power groups. Publishers may have lost the interest, or better yet, the financial motivation, to continually produce anthologies of black verse. And perhaps anthologists, as Dudley Randall suggests in the introduction to *The Black Poets*, were not finding enough reasons for publishers and readers to support new collections of poetry. By the late 1970s, justifying new collections of black verse may have been more of a challenge, given that African American anthologies had saturated the market during the early years of the decade. Whatever the case, the lack of new anthologies featuring a common group of poets reduced the likelihood that observers would view the activities of poets as constituting a movement.

The termination of *Black World* was particularly detrimental for publishing opportunities among African American writers. More so than any other periodical of the era, the periodical gave African American poets and poetry a national readership. The magazine, of course, was more than an outlet for poetry. In addition to publishing verse, *Black World* presented essays and news on cultural events, and the publication was integral to the operations of black arts discourse. Further, as Melba Boyd observes, “Fuller’s periodical served as the main source for announcements and provided critical space for poets and book reviews.”⁷ The closure of the magazine guaranteed a loss of national publicity for Broadside Press. So the downfall of *Black World* represented a striking blow for Randall’s press and for other poets and small presses.

Black World had also regularly displayed photographs of poets and an array of striking images relating to African American culture. Without *Black World*, readers lost a meaningful site for visualizing black arts and artists. The photographs of black writers, which appeared most frequently and visibly on the pages of *Negro Digest/Black World*, were crucial to the popularization of the era’s leading figures. The photographs

of activists, African artifacts, and African American–inflected images also gave viewers ideas about the visual aspects of black aesthetics. *Black World's* functions as a magazine, in short, gave writings of the era notable visual complements. The closure of *Black World*, then, meant that black arts discourse was losing its major venue for the display of extraliterary images.

Of course, the decline of black arts discourse was not immediate or absolute. If the demise of *Black World*, the *Journal of Black Poetry*, and Broadside Press constituted a low point for the publication of black poetry in 1976, then certainly the appearance of Eugene Redmond's *Drumvoices* that year represents an important occasion in the study of African American poetry from a critical perspective. Redmond's book traces a vast body of verse and confirms the multidirectional routes of black poetry. Redmond brings generations of poets together in one study and pinpoints their relationship to common themes and technical practices. In the process, he addresses the existence of a vibrant and extensive black poetic tradition. His book locates black arts era poetry within the continuum of literary history, and just as important, *Drumvoices* anticipates the increased scholarly attention that would be placed on African American literature in the academy in subsequent decades.

With its impressive identification of approximately a hundred African American poets and even more volumes of poetry and poems, *Drumvoices* can be read as a prototype for the kind of bibliographic studies and biocritical recovery works that would define the careers of such leading scholars as Bernard Bell, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maryemma Graham, Nellie McKay, and Gloria Wade-Gayles. No doubt, *Drumvoices* is a book-length confirmation of what previous essayists had been suggesting and what several subsequent scholars have been continuing to validate: black poetry comprises a long-standing tradition. Similar to Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, Carolyn Rodgers, and several other black arts poets, Redmond was an artist-critic. And so in addition to being an accomplished poet, he was a literary historian and critic whose book impressively illuminates the African and American routes of, well, African American poetry. In retrospect, *Drumvoices* was a pioneering work in the critical treatment of black literature, which would begin appearing at increasing rates in the 1980s. Interestingly, Redmond's work appeared at a crossroads in literary history—at the decline of the black arts era and at the dawn of a major professionalizing era of African American literature in the academy.

“Now that the spectacular Black Arts Movement seems to have run its course,” explained Stephen Henderson in 1977, “the question of evaluation takes on crucial importance.”⁸ As Henderson’s comments suggest, writers and literary critics were looking back on the movement by the mid- to late 1970s. To the extent, though, that leading figures and key issues of the movement did not totally disappear, it might be more accurate to say that black arts discourse shifted rather than subsided. Whatever the case, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, black arts discourse was subsumed by the larger discourse of African American literature, which was quickly becoming more firmly institutionalized in the U.S. academy. An unprecedented number of black scholars were taking faculty positions at leading colleges and universities, and academic presses and scholarly journals began to prominently shape conversations concerning black literature. In the process, recovery work, prose, and literary theory far more than verse and poetics became the primary subjects in the discourse on African American literature. As a result, the scholarship on slave narratives and novels is far more extensive than the work on poetry.

Actually, the decline of black arts poetry is often juxtaposed with the ascension of black women’s novels. In the section “Literature since 1970” in the *Norton*, Barbara Christian explains that black women novelists such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker differentiated their work from works by male writers such as Richard Wright and Amiri Baraka. “Rather than idealizing black communities, as so many writings of the 1960s had attempted to do,” writes Christian, “African American women writers of the 1970s articulated the complexities of African American culture and history; at the same time, they demonstrated how black communities had also deeply internalized racist stereotypes that radically affected their definitions for and expectations of women and men.”⁹ According to Kalamu ya Salaam, the declining interest in black arts era writing was assisted in part by “the upsurge of interest in the feminist movement,” which led “establishment presses” to focus more on the work of black women writers. Christian’s and Salaam’s descriptions, to some degree, overgeneralize the differences between black arts writers and seemingly “post”-black arts writers.¹⁰ One difference, though, is that Salaam identifies the mid- to late 1970s as a major time of change in black publishing practices, while Christian, adhering to the framework offered by the first edition of the *Norton*, pinpoints 1970 as a pivotal year for the shift. Both Christian and Salaam suggest that black women writers took on a more prominent role than black men writers.

To better understand that major shift in black literary history, we would perhaps need to pay attention to genre, and not simply gender.

For the most part, novels carry more value than poetry in the marketplace and in fields of literary studies. In general, novels have the possibility of earning publishers greater financial returns, as novels have the potential of becoming best-sellers, book-of-the-month-club picks, Oprah selections, or the subject of extensive scholarly study. And because they are more likely than volumes of poetry to appear in bookstores and on reading lists in college courses, novels tend to stay in print longer. Of course, in view of the large body of both fiction and verse published each year, relatively little literature receives substantial attention.

Given the position of the novel in the marketplace and the academy, it is not so surprising that novelists would receive a different kind of reception than poets. The increased popular and critical receptions of novels by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker should not be seen as a direct move by audiences away from volumes of poetry produced by Haki Madhubuti and Amiri Baraka. What is more likely is that market forces and literary studies have, over the last decades, maintained and expanded an environment that concentrates more extensively on select novels as opposed to select volumes of poetry. Ultimately, sustaining long-term popular and critical receptions of texts requires tremendous resources—resources that were certainly not largely available for writers who sought to continue a grassroots artistic movement. Whatever the case, the popularity of a few select novelists is common. What is extraordinary was that at one point in modern history, black poets commanded such widespread attention.

The paucity of critical work on American and African American poetry in general over the past few decades further ensured that black arts poetry would receive little attention. Although Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Michael Harper, Clarence Major, Kalamu ya Salaam, Jayne Cortez, and Ishmael Reed continued to compose and publish poetry well after the mid-1970s, the absence of an extensive body of research on their poetic works suggests that their activities as poets merely subsided along with the movement. On the contrary, though, these black arts poets outlived and extended the black arts era. Yet the relatively small body of scholarship on African American poetry makes the multiple connections between black arts era poetry and modern verse less apparent. For this reason, the recent book-length studies by Tony Bolden, Melba Boyd, Cheryl Clarke, Aldon Nielsen, James Smethurst, and the late Lorenzo

Thomas are all the more important. Collectively, the research by these scholars orients readers to the historical and ongoing significance of black arts literature. Ideally, this critical work will lead to a better understanding of the black arts era and to the inclusion of more of its contributors on course syllabi. However, exposing students to a wide range of black arts texts presents a serious challenge, especially since most of the volumes of poetry, anthologies, and magazines produced during that time period are out of print.

Ironically, the idea that the Black Arts Movement declined or ended actually confirms the movement's consequential nature. If the movement had an end, then presumably it also had a beginning and middle, and considerations of the movement's successes and failures imply that its participants had agendas and goals, all of which suggests that its participants did indeed have a noteworthy presence. Scholars have yet to adequately develop and characterize the presence and activities of large numbers of poets who published work during the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the 1980s and 1990s. Conversely, scholars and various commentators have frequently adapted Larry Neal's phrase "The Black Arts Movement" to describe the wide-ranging African American literary art and activism produced during the time period. The phrase "Black Arts Movement," along with the subsequent categorizing of writers, texts, activities, ideology, and artistic productions under this broadly defined concept, provides a rather large group of writers with an identifiable name and a distinct place in literary history.

The Power of Connectors

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell identifies the factors that give rise to popular social phenomena. Among other issues, Gladwell explains that "connectors, people with a special gift for bringing the world together," are integral to the increased circulation of ideas, goods, and services.¹¹ The concept of connectors is useful for understanding how African American poetry reached a tipping point and gained such increased circulation and wide visibility. In many ways, this study has attempted to explain how the power of connectors—in the form of people, institutions, and practices—generated the incredible force known as the Black Arts Movement.

The connection between poetry and activism became one of the distinguishing features of the era. Leading poets composed poems that ad-

dressed African American sociopolitical causes and paid tribute to black activist figures. Poets fashioned themselves as activists in their public personas and thus projected the idea that committed poets have the responsibility to serve the interests of black communities. Poets also aligned themselves with the rhetoric and ideology of nationalism and exhibited strong ties to music. Sure, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and countless other poets had previously celebrated music and musicians in their writings. Nonetheless, the frequency with which poets collaborated with musicians and the centrality of jazz to black arts discourse expanded the possibilities for writers and their readerships. Most notably, poets took a lead from musicians and intensified the art of presentation by transforming poetry readings into performances and converting volumes of poetry into audio recordings. Taken as a whole, music and black nationalism functioned as powerful connectors for the poets.

The writers themselves, of course, embodied a sense of connectivity that significantly determined the shape of their movement. Leading figures of the era envisioned themselves as poet-activists, poet-performers, poet-critics, and multigenre artists in general, and they participated, at various stages, in the composition, distribution, and reception of poetry. In their role as poet-critics, Carolyn Rodgers, Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka, and Eugene Redmond, among others, produced some of the most important commentary on African American poetry and expressive culture during the era. The writers actively reviewed volumes of poetry by their contemporaries and were among the most frequent contributors to discussions of black aesthetics. The ubiquitous presence of poets throughout literary discourse during the 1960s and 1970s guaranteed their defining influence on the production of African American literature during the era and on subsequent generations of writers.

Whereas the black arts enterprise gave rise to publishing opportunities for hundreds of poets, the popularity attained by Haki Madhubuti, Nikki Giovanni, and especially Amiri Baraka was particularly remarkable. In many respects, these writers became icons of the New Black Poetry, similar to the way that Langston Hughes became the most iconic figure of the New Negro Movement. That is not to say that their writings were representative of the entire field of poetry produced during the time period. However, these writers in particular were the most popular poets associated with the movement. Their poetry and images circulated widely, and they were often called upon as speakers on college campuses and at cultural events across the country. Thus, they developed nationwide influence. Not coincidentally, their popularity persists

even today. On the downside, interest in these three writers often overshadows the works of their contemporaries. On the other hand, Baraka, Giovanni, and Madhubuti serve as the most visible contemporary links to black arts poetry. The popular attention and critical conversations surrounding Baraka and his work have created the most vibrant opportunities for considering the ongoing influence of black arts discourse.

As demonstrated throughout this study, publishing venues and editorial practices were among the principal connectors in the far-reaching transmission of poetry during the black arts era. Magazines such as *Liberator*, *Negro Digest/Black World*, and the *Journal of Black Poetry*, publishers such as Broadside Press and Third World Press, and the sixty or so anthologies published during the era brought an eclectic and intergenerational mix of poets together in common sites of publication. Editors highlighted the interconnections among a diverse group of writers by publishing poems that focused on tributes to black historical figures and music, the desire for liberation, and other themes relating to a nationalist ethos. The efforts of anthologists, publishers, and magazine editors to get so many African American poets on the same pages accounts in large part for why we now see the Black Arts Movement as a movement. No doubt, it was the connective power of editorial work, combined with the interest of writers to transform themselves into poets-plus, that made their collective artistic endeavors such a decisive moment in the history of African American and American literature.